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That change sank into my heart's root: Voices of Mental Distress in Medieval Literature

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Preface

The Point of View of the Mad Person

Over the past fifty years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the history of mental illness during the Middle Ages. This growing body of research has brought valuable insights, yet truly understanding and engaging with the lived experiences of individuals who suffered from mental afflictions in the medieval context remains a significant challenge. As we delve further into the past, sources documenting the struggles of these individuals become increasingly scarce, and their personal perspectives are often absent from historical records.

Notably, even in Michel Foucault's seminal work on the history of madness, which spans from the late Middle Ages to the modern era, the voices of those who experienced mental illness first-hand are largely missing. Foucault's exploration of madness heavily relies on secondary accounts, with his chapters on "Experiences of Madness" and "The Insane"[1] offering little direct insight into the experiences of those afflicted. His final chapter, "The Anthropological Circle"[2], briefly encompasses figures like Vincent Van Gogh, however, these mentions are concise and occur only at the very end of a vast study that otherwise overlooks the viewpoints of individuals experiencing madness. This thesis, instead, seeks to focus on the writings of some very individuals in medieval England who suffered from mental afflictions. By examining their works, I aim to investigate and analyse how these writers articulated their experiences and how their afflictions shaped their literary production. In doing so, I hope this study not only contributes to the broader understanding of mental illness in the Middle Ages, but also brings to light the voices of those who have long been prejudiced or even marginalised in historical and literary discourses.

These research gaps, in my opinion, underscore the importance of examining the narratives of medieval individuals who experienced mental illness. To do this, this thesis will focus on autobiographical accounts from mentally ill individuals in medieval England: Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and Thomas Hoccleve. Their narratives, found in *The Book of Margery Kempe, Revelations of Divine Love* and *The Series* (which

[1] Foucault, Michel, *History of Madness*, translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 108–163.
[2] Focault, pp. 512–541.

includes *Complaint* and *Dialogue*), are particularly compelling as they provide profound insights into the experiences of the mentally ill through both religious and secular perspectives. In my opinion, these works are essential for a comprehensive examination of mental health in medieval literature and offer a unique window into the personal experiences that have sometimes been neglected in historical scholarship. Indeed, the absence of cohesive integration of firsthand perspectives, for instance in works like Foucault's aforementioned, reflects a broader trend within scholarly discourse: the voices of those directly impacted by mental illness have often been overlooked or just analysed as subjects of a diagnosis. Recognising this gap, today an increasing number of researchers advocate for a paradigm shift toward an alternative history of psychiatry in literature, "one that includes the patient's view".[3]

The initial significant efforts to address this issue and provide historical context through edited collections of sources from mad people's history began in the 1980s. Dale Peterson's *A Mad People's History of Madness*[4] in 1982 was one of the earliest contributions to this field, followed by Roy Porter's two seminal books in 1987, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*[5] and *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency*.[6] These works underscored the importance of valuing the perspectives of individuals with mental illness—an emphasis that had been largely absent in historical scholarship up to that point. However, it is important to note that the movement to document and share the experiences of those with mental illness did not begin with modern historians. Indeed, especially the first of these works underscores how by the mid-nineteenth century, individuals with mental illness were already self-publishing accounts of their experiences in Europe and North America. However, even before that time, people with mental afflictions have tried to write about their histories and personal perspectives, which are reported in *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*.[7] Memoirs from people with mental health struggles, reported also in *A Mad People's History of Madness* varied widely in style. They expand from religious confessionals like Margery Kempe's account of 1436, which I will analyse in this thesis, and which expressed self-condemnation for straying from divine devotion,

[3] Huertas, Rafael, "Another History for Another Psychiatry: The Patient's View", *Culture & History Digital Journal* 2, 2013, Online at: http://cultureandhistory.revistas.csic.es/index.php/cultureandhistory/article/view/18/81, accessed August 6, 2024.
[4] Peterson, Dale, *A Mad People's History of Madness*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982.
[5] Porter, Roy, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.
[6] Porter, Roy, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency*, London: Athlone, 1987.
[7] Porter, Roy, *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane*, pp. 105–112, 126–135, 169–188.

to protest literature like Alexander Cruden's 1739 account, which among others advocated for justice in cases of wrongful confinement or at least a right treatment of the mentally ill.[8] While I investigate only three authors, Peterson's work stands as a landmark in the academic study of historical writings by individuals with mental illness, the first of its kind to deeply analyse these personal narratives and offer a comprehensive examination of the voices of the mentally ill across five centuries. Beginning with *The Book of Margery Kempe* and extending to Kenneth Donaldson's 1976 memoir *Insanity Inside Out*, Peterson's work spans an impressive range of twenty-six authors. His interest in this subject was deeply personal: as a literature professor, he was inspired by his earlier experiences as an attendant on a large psychiatric ward. His interactions with patients there led him to question the conventional understanding of madness. He observed that, for centuries, experts and authorities had struggled to define and address the concept of madness, often with confused and contradictory results. This realisation led him to propose a novel approach: to listen to those who were most intimately connected to the experience of mental illness—the patients themselves. Peterson's effort to engage with the writings of individuals with mental illness was crucial in research, particularly given the scarcity of historically oriented approaches in this area during his time. His work not only provided a platform for the voices of the mentally ill but also challenged the traditional scholarly focus on external, authoritative accounts of madness. By foregrounding the perspectives of those who lived with mental illness, Peterson's work laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of mental health history.[9]

Following these precious works written by prominent scholars in this field, this thesis will try to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals articulated their experiences with mental afflictions even long before modern psychiatry and memoir writing. Taking this approach, I aim to analyse historical figures without relying on retrospective diagnoses, as such labels often lack the validity necessary for accurately understanding their conditions. Specifically, in my opinion, in the cases of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Hoccleve, the exact medical terms for their illnesses are less important than the profound impact these conditions had on their writings. However, I have sought to present anyway some medical details to contextualise them before discussing passages from their works that I find relevant concerning their

[8] Peterson, pp. 3–18, 39–56, 92–107.
[9] Peterson, "Introduction" in *A Mad People's History of Madness*, p. xiv.

psychological conditions. This was not an attempt to seek out details that might either validate or discredit certain aspects of their writings. Instead, my goal was to let their own words speak about their context and personal experiences, with my translations in modern English, supported by critical readings grounded in the analyses of many prominent scholars who have studied these authors before me.

Moreover, I found that despite the inherent challenges of researching mental illness in the Middle Ages, social and medical sources often provide crucial insights that might otherwise remain implicit. As I will analyse, just as it does today, being labelled a "lunatic" in medieval society had profound practical, moral, and legal implications. This label affected not only the individual but also the broader community, altering perceptions of those deemed afflicted by something that was not entirely understood or easily explained. The complexity of these aspects surrounding the concept of insanity is reflected in its varied manifestations found also in medieval narrative literature. For instance, in this thesis I have briefly analysed the romance *Ywain and Gawain*, focusing on the common themes surrounding mentally ill characters, particularly knights, and how these depictions shaped the concept and image of insanity during that period: something wild, unholy and which excluded the affected from the sane human community. However, rather than focusing solely on fictional portrayals, as I stated this thesis centres on the autobiographical account of Margery Kempe, who suffered from a mental illness, compared to two other individuals who were also affected by some forms of mental afflictions: Julian of Norwich and Thomas Hoccleve. Their narratives are particularly compelling as they offer profound insights into the experiences of the mentally ill from both secular and religious perspectives explained and illustrated with their own words. By examining these autobiographical accounts, this thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of how mental illness was perceived and experienced in medieval society from their perspective. Indeed, it also explores how Margery Kempe, with Julian of Norwich and Thomas Hoccleve, navigated their conditions within the broader cultural and spiritual frameworks of their time. These autobiographies and accounts provide invaluable insights into the nature of their illnesses and, more importantly, into their daily lives and how they were perceived by those around them. Through their narratives, we can explore the social dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and community responses to their psychological condition, shedding light on their personal struggles, coping mechanisms, and the societal attitudes they encountered.

To provide a comprehensive analysis, the first four chapters of this thesis are dedicated to exploring the medieval context of insanity. The first chapter begins with a section that examines the historical origins of medieval beliefs about insanity, tracing how ancient and early medieval theories influenced later understandings. It is followed by a section which focuses on the medical perspective, detailing the prevailing theories and treatments of mental illness as understood by medieval physicians and scholars, with a focus on the humours theory and the specific case of melancholy. The following section delves into societal views, discussing how mental illness was perceived by the community at large, including the legal system's treatment of the mentally ill, their families, and communities. Finally, the fourth section of the first chapter explores the depiction of mental illness in medieval literature, revealing how artistic representations both reflected and shaped societal attitudes toward insanity. To offer a complete perspective I ended this part with a subsection which focuses on the medieval archetypes of mad characters and the aforementioned focus on the romance *Ywain and Gawain* and its main themes. Only after laying this groundwork, I have found it proper to focus on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, covering the biography of its author, her critics and followers, and examining the intersections of gender and religion with mental health in the Middle Ages, an exploration that also illuminates Thomas Hoccleve's perspective. In the subsequent sections, I delved into mental health and gender issues in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, along with key aspects such as voice hearing, patriarchy, motherhood, sexuality, and food within the text. This information was essential, in my opinion, to understand the following chapter, where I compare Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. In this comparison, I analyse them both as mystics and as suffering feminine bodies, draw parallels with St. Brigitta of Sweden, and explore how they situate their narratives within the tradition of Affective Piety. Furthermore, I examine how they differently presented themselves as protagonists of their narratives, including their theologies and the controversies each faced within their respective communities. In the final chapter, I turn my attention to Thomas Hoccleve and his *Series*, with a particular focus on the *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*. I compare Hoccleve's experiences and writings to those of Margery Kempe, exploring how each author navigated their respective challenges. For his case too, to establish a foundation, I begin with sections detailing Hoccleve's biography and his probable diagnosis. I then examine the similarities and differences between Hoccleve and Kempe, particularly in how they and their communities perceived madness. For both, madness was seen as a departure or invasion of the self, a form of martyrdom and something that

disrupted both their public and private lives, leading to prejudice and isolation. The chapter conclude by addressing the problems of interpreting their mental conditions and the distinct gender issues present in their works.

By organizing the chapters in this order and presenting information through the very words of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Hoccleve, this thesis aims to contextualise their autobiographical accounts within the broader medieval worldview. Such contextualisation is crucial to understand the unique perspectives these individuals offer and to recognise the significance of their contributions to our knowledge of mental illness, both in the Middle Ages and in contemporary discussions. To further aid readers, all quoted passages from their works are paired with Modern English translations. These translations were carefully crafted, trying to make them as precise as possible utilising the *Middle English Dictionary*[10] and are noted as "translation mine."

Finally, to conclude the introduction, I find it fitting to explain the choice of the title for this thesis. *'That change sank into my heart's root': Voices of Mental Distress in Medieval Literature* was chosen thoughtfully, reflecting the nature and purpose of this study. The first part of the title is a quote from Thomas Hoccleve's *Complaint*, specifically line 7 of his poem. This verse poignantly captures the profound change that affected each of the three writers I analysed: Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Hoccleve. Each of them experienced something unexpected and uncommon, a change that forever altered not only how others perceived them but also their very essence as individuals, their "heart's root". This transformation compelled them to write and express their experiences through their writings, which nowadays provide a unique perspective both for psychology and literature. The second part of the title reflects my approach to using their own voices and words to convey their feelings, actions, and thoughts. I aimed to present the passages they themselves wrote, only accompanied by a critical reading that complements, rather than overshadows, their autobiographical writings. My goal was to offer different perspectives and insights from various scholars who have analysed these authors over the years. These writers suffered from conditions that neither they nor their communities fully understood, and without clear or objective explanations, they could not be helped clinically and socially. Yet, they made the deliberate and active choice to write about their experiences, providing us with invaluable perspectives on living with mental health challenges in medieval England.

[10] Consulted online at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/ in 2024.

1

Mental Health in the Middle Ages

Across cultures, contentment, harmony, and happiness have always served as fundamental pillars in individual and societal well-being. However, in shaping social, mental, and moral order, many challenges exist, all integral facets of human nature, such as social instability, and physical or mental afflictions. Delving into the realm of medieval health in particular, it is crucial not to confine exploration solely to well-being but, more importantly, to consider mental states and the social codes applied to them. To understand how mental equilibrium was perceived, it must therefore be examined in the light of cultural categories forged within social interactions in different centuries, before and during the Middle Ages. The universal questions on mental stability and physical health transcend temporal boundaries and came well before the Middle Ages. Throughout history, humanity has always maintained a profound fascination with the enigma of mental illnesses. It's possible to find clear echoes of it in Shakespeare's Polonius: "I will be brief: your son is mad: / Mad call I it; for, to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?"[11]. Today, the divergent perspectives within psychiatry regarding the nature of mental illness, whether rooted in reality or convention, underscore the modernity of Polonius. What's the nature of mental instability? This question was relevant in the Middle Ages and is still relevant today.

Nowadays it is possible to get a deeper understanding of mental stability through the examination of its historical narrative, albeit one often fraught with biases. Throughout history, diverse cultures worldwide have grappled with supernatural interpretations of mental illnesses, such as divine or demonic possession, a concept prevalent among pre-literate societies and later integrated into Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek medical traditions and mythology. These beliefs persisted, particularly thanks to Christianity, in Western societies until the eighteenth century, even if increasingly marginalised by advancements in medicine and science.[12] Indeed, classical history reveals numerous discussions and investigations into mental instability, despite the constraints dictated by the available resources and cultural frameworks of that time. The analysis of

[11] Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet: A Norton Critical Edition,* ed. by Miola R.S. (2nd ed), New York: W.W. Norton, 2019, (II.2.92-94).
[12] Jackson, Stanley Webber, *Melancholia and Depression from Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 46-64.

mental health before the Middle Ages reveals a complex tapestry made of philosophical, supernatural, and medical perspectives influencing each other. Across diverse civilisations, from ancient Greece to Mesopotamia, mental illnesses were often perceived through the lens of divine punishment or spiritual affliction. Nonetheless, a more scientific approach was made possible by the development of Greek medicine, particularly with the teachings of Hippocrates, which marked a significant departure from supernatural explanations. The Hippocratic naturalistic explanations paved the way for future developments in medical understanding, laying the groundwork for more scientific research on mental health later during the Middle Ages. By that time, society's views had begun to change, moving from superstitious terror to rational investigation. Nonetheless, societies continued their struggle to understand mental instability, and fundamental questions about its nature and treatment persisted, deeply rooted in the foundational knowledge and cultural frameworks established in the preceding eras. [13]

1.1 Mental Health in Medieval Medicine

In line with Aristotle's perspective, health in the Middle Ages was considered a vital precondition for happiness, but not its sole defining aspect. Reflecting the Aristotelian notion of good life, happiness was frequently synonymous with moral integrity and virtuous conduct. This multifaceted approach to wellbeing highlighted the significance of certain prerequisites such as a healthy life, alongside additional enrichments like wealth and friendship. Nonetheless, central to the concept was the cultivation and expression of virtue. During the medieval period, the widespread acceptance of Aristotelian ideals led to an emphasis on more balanced or "appropriate" emotional responses. The role of emotions in regulating social life was indeed essential. For instance, emotions such as anger and fury were viewed as catalysts for mental instability, while joy and contentment were deemed integral to psychological wellness. There also existed intricate connections between physical impairments, illnesses, and mental afflictions. Despite the prevalent division between body and soul in medical, theological, and philosophical discussions, understandings of the human condition intertwined all these aspects. The idea of the human being was holistic: the mental could not be separated from the physical and the moral. Consequently, health was not solely a somatic state but a crucial aspect of an

[13] Bynum, William, Frederick, Porter, Roy, *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine,* London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 281-291.

individual's overall well-being. Despite considerable efforts to address mental illness as linked to appropriate emotional responses, during the medieval era, the other prevailing belief was that God utilised both body and soul as instruments for discipline and correction, while demons were more likely to afflict those who were physically compromised. Therefore, religious and medical approaches became inseparable, even in environments like monasteries where religious rituals and supernatural interventions were common.[14]

1.1.2 The Humours Theory

As stated above, throughout the Middle Ages, the general belief in the medical community was that controlling one's emotions was crucial to both mental and physical health. Due to the inclusion of these concepts in numerous medical treatises, theoretical, practical, and even surgical, all medical students were familiar with this theory of emotional containment.[15] However, at the turn of the fourteenth century, a significant change in the teaching of medicine in universities occurred. From the twelfth century onward, medical education primarily relied on a handful of key texts. By the thirteenth century, more works by Galen (also known as Claudius Galenus, a prominent Greek physician, surgeon, and philosopher in the Roman Empire) were integrated into the medical curriculum, despite having been translated into Latin as early as the twelfth century. Incorporating Galen's works established the basis for the period discussed in this thesis, significantly advancing the evolution and expansion of medical education before that era. Their delayed inclusion was attributed to their intricate and unstructured nature, but with the establishment of permanent medical faculties in the thirteenth century, interest in Galen's works surged. It became particularly renowned in centres of academic medicine such as the universities of Paris, Montpellier, and Bologna.[16]

The central aspect of the New Galenic approach was the "theory of complexion". This theory, derived from the Latin term *complexion,* a translation of Galen's Greek term *krasis*, referred to the "mixture" of the body's humours. Then, during the later Middle

[14] Rosenwein, Barbara, "Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions", *The American Historical Review* 8, 2010, pp. 828–842.
[15] Horden, Peregrine, "A Non-natural Environment: Medicine Without Doctors and the Medieval European Hospital", in *Hospitals and Healing from Antiquity to the Later Middle Ages*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 133-145.
[16] García-Ballester, Luis, "The New Galen: A Challenge to Latin Galenism in the Thirteenth Century" in *Text and Tradition: Studies in Ancient Medicine and its Transmission Presented to Jutta Kollesch*, ed. by K.D. Fischer, D. Nickel, P. Potter, Leiden: Brill, 1998, pp. 55-83.

Ages, the concept of *krasis* began to be used as a synonym of "temperament", a term rooted in the Latin word *tempero*, meaning "to mix" or "to moderate". Consequently, the "temperament" of a person became synonymous with the idea of a balanced mixture of humours, central to an individual's health and character.[17] By complexion, scholastic physicians schematised the relationship between the primary qualities of hot, cold, wet and dry in the body. These primary qualities, rooted in Aristotelian natural philosophy, were categorised into active (hot and cold) and passive (wet and dry), understood as fundamental forces shaping all aspects of the sublunary world. Human beings, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects were composed of the elements earth, water, air, and fire, each element possessing specific primary qualities.[18] For instance, water was considered cold and wet, but combined with other elements, it transformed into a new substance retaining their primary attributes. This amalgamation of qualities resulting from the combination of elements was termed "complexion".[19] As explained by Bernard de Gordon and others, complexion was therefore the result of the interaction of active and passive primary qualities.[20] Drawing from Galen's *De complexionibus*, scholastic physicians categorised complexions into nine distinct types: one representing a perfectly balanced state and eight variations deriving from it. In the ideally balanced complexion, all primary qualities were evenly distributed and heightened: an ideal state found in nature. The remaining eight complexions were either simple or compound, indicating dominance by either a single primary quality or a pair of primary qualities, one active and one passive. Strikingly, an exact equilibrium of primary qualities within a complexion was not always deemed ideal. Instead, balance was achieved when it facilitated optimal bodily functions. Pietro Torrigiano, for example, argued that the brain's balance of primary qualities was excellent when it facilitated its optimal functions, rather than when the primary qualities were absolutely equal.[21]

1.1.3 Mental Health and the Humours Theory: The Case of Melancholy

[17] Siraisi, Nancy, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 100.
[18] Torrigiano, Pietro, *Plusquam commentum in artem parvam Galeni,* Venice: Apud Iuntas, 1557, I, fol. 13.
[19] Torrigiano, Pietro, *Plusquam commentum,* I, fol. 13.
[20] Bernard de Gordon, *De Prognosticis*, Frankfurt: Apud Lucam Iennis, 1607, p. 933.
[21] Torrigiano, Pietro, *Plusquam commentum*, II, fol. 47.

Since I will explore the case of Thomas Hoccleve, a figure intimately linked with melancholy, in a later section of this thesis, and given that melancholy was one of the most prevalent mental afflictions in the Middle Ages, I have chosen it as a prominent example of humour imbalance to analyse. In Greek, "melancholy" referred to black bile, a concept well known to scholastic physicians and frequently referenced by them. Black bile was one of the bodily humours, the others being blood, yellow bile and phlegm. Humours were created in the liver from compacted food, and they passed into the rest of the body via the veins. Their function was to nourish the body and maintain its complexional balance. Disproportion, lack, or corruption of any humour could lead to health disturbances and potentially result in illness. While an excess of black bile could lead to health issues and ailments, a certain amount of black bile was deemed necessary to purify blood.[22]

The term "melancholy" was also employed to describe a mental state: a potential or actual psychological disorder stemming from an imbalance of humours within the brain. It was often attributed to an excess of black bile, but other humours could lead to various mental disorders; for instance, excesses of blood, phlegm, or yellow bile were associated with frenzy, lethargy, and mania, respectively. Mental disorders were therefore explained by physiological means in Galenic medicine: melancholy referred to a complexion that predisposed a person to different forms of mental disturbances or a non-febrile but chronic mental condition.[23] Too much black bile, which was cold and dry in complexion, altered the normal complexion of the brain, which was cold and moist.[24] Melancholy was identifiable through many signs: in the Hippocratic Aphorisms, for instance, it was stated that melancholy was likely to be followed by convulsions, madness, depression, or blindness.[25] The complexity of the concept of melancholy is thus already apparent in Hippocratic theory. Still, Galen also insisted on the presence of fear, anxiety, misanthropy, and despondency in all melancholic patients.[26] Melancholy could also bring on visual hallucinations and delusions of being somebody else, often a king, an animal or a demon. The patients could also believe that they were able to predict the coming of the

[22] Siraisi, p. 106.
[23] Galen, *De Locis Affectis*, translated by R. Siegel, Basel, New York: Karger, 1976, Book III, Section 10.
[24] Bernard de Gordon, "Lilium medicinae", *De Prognosticis*, Frankfurt: Apud Lucam Iennis, 1607, 2.19, p. 246.
[25] Lloyd, E., R., Goffrey. ed., *Hippocratic Writings*, translated by J. Chadwick and W. N. Mann, London: Penguin, 1978, Aphorisms XXIII, LXVI.
[26] Galen, *De Locis Affectis*, Section 10.

Antichrist. However, in Bernard de Gordon's view, the common feature was hatred of life itself and continuous sorrow.[27]

To find a cure, medical authorities turned to the research of a clear cause, as there were plenty of reasons why black bile might increase or become corrupted. Bernard de Gordon believed that an alteration of humours could also be the result of some types of food, like beans, old cheeses and meat of rare forest animals. On the other hand, black bile could be corrupted as a consequence of digestion problems, bad hygiene or trying to restrain one's evacuation movements. In earlier medieval understanding, and following the theory of complexion, temperaments too were linked with the bodily humours. A person could be born with a temperament characterised by being cold and dry, thus classified as melancholic. Conversely, a hot and moist person was sanguine, a hot and dry person was choleric, and a cold and moist person was phlegmatic. [28]

A scholastic physician employed three main methods of treatment: dietetics, medicinal remedies, and surgery. Dietetics typically encompassed six factors known as the non-naturals: air quality, dietary habits, sleep patterns, activity levels, excretion habits, and mental state. These factors, comprising environmental, physiological, and psychological aspects, played crucial roles in either promoting health or precipitating illness. In contrast, medicinal potions and surgical interventions were primarily reserved for therapeutic purposes. Surgical regimens, such as trepanation, were largely used against melancholy. According to Taddeo Alderotti, an Italian doctor and professor of medicine at the University of Bologna, the surgeon should first bore a hole in the anterior lobe of the skull and then moisten the dry brain material with olive oil. Blood was drawn from the frontal part of the head, but old people, infants, and pregnant women were usually not subjected to bloodletting.[29] Dietetics remained the most used method of treatment. For instance, in addressing melancholy Bernard de Gordon advocated a regimen focused on cultivating joy and laughter to counteract the sorrow associated with the condition. Additionally, he emphasised the importance of maintaining a clean, well-lit environment with pleasant aromas within the home of a melancholic individual. Surroundings were to be made pleasant and comforting, while anything potentially distressing should be avoided. Engaging in music and social interactions with friends were also recommended as beneficial practices.[30] Bernard de Gordon, therefore,

[27] Bernard de Gordon, 2.19, p. 249.
[28] Bernard de Gordon, 2.19, p. 247.
[29] Siraisi, p. 140.
[30] Bernard de Gordon, 2.19, p. 251.

emphasised the importance of the mental regimen. He especially recognised its potential to address both psychological and physiological issues and followed the principle of "contraria contrariis curantur", where opposites are cured with their opposites. Hence, for cold and dry melancholy, a regimen focused on moisturisation was considered the most appropriate. According to De Gordon, an effective regimen in general consisted of sleep, rest, leisure, pre-meal baths, and proper nutrition. This included foods such as chicken, lamb, and clear wine, among others, to promote healing and balance.[31]

Despite the usefulness and modernity of recommendations akin to those for today's depression, many professionals continued to suggest remedies that seem to be more like rituals. Bernard de Gordon, for instance, proposed a rather unconventional approach to treating lovesickness. According to him, the ultimate recourse involved collecting the menstrual blood of the object of affection, having the male patient smell or gaze upon it, and affirming to him, "This is what your love is like". Failure of this method was considered indicative of the diabolical nature of lovesickness, rendering the physician's endeavours futile.[32] Indeed, the noteworthy absence of religious and magical healing methods in the advice provided by scholastic physicians for melancholic patients, should not make us overestimate the modernity of the medieval medical approach. In general, it was still very common to pray God or the saints to obtain a cure, carry amulets or draw magical figures to prevent illnesses or to get rid of them. Moreover, some physicians speculated about the potential of harnessing the healing properties attributed to the stars through various magical techniques. While university-educated physicians typically did not document these approaches in their writings, they did not directly negate the potential for divine intervention or religious healing practices, which were widely acknowledged in the medieval context.[33]

1.2 Mental Health in Medieval Society

The groundwork of mental healthcare across Europe in the Middle Ages has its origins in earlier historical contexts, centuries before the establishment of formal institutions like asylums dedicated to the treatment of mental illness. This does not imply a lack of oversight for those deemed mentally unstable, but rather, societal strategies often relied

[31] Bernard de Gordon, 2.19, p. 251.
[32] Bernard de Gordon, 2.20, p. 258.
[33] Siraisi, pp. 135-140.

on familial or communal care, echoing practices from preceding centuries. Disturbed individuals were typically kept within the confines of their homes, while those deemed harmless might be permitted to roam, despite the strong social ostracism due to the belief that malevolent spirits could emanate from them and possess others. As a result, people with mental difficulties typically remained under domestic supervision, often enduring neglect or mistreatment, confined in cellars and sometimes under the control of servants. Alternatively, they might be expelled from the household, left to wander and beg for sustenance. As mental illness was deeply stigmatised within families, often linked to perceptions of demonic possession or inherited stigma, the imperative to segregate individuals labelled as "lunatics" from mainstream society grew increasingly pressing.[34]

Consequently, towards the latter part of the Middle Ages, a more formalised system of segregation began to emerge, often driven by Christian principles of charity. "Lunatics" were occasionally confined in towers or dungeons under public jurisdiction. For instance, in London, the religious institution of St Mary of Bethlehem, founded in 1247 and colloquially known as Bethlem (or "Bedlam"), began catering to the needs of the mentally disturbed by the late fourteenth century. Similarly, the Flemish village of Gheel, home to the shrine of St Dymphna, gained renown as a therapeutic haven for the afflicted. Asylums, established under religious auspices, also emerged in fifteenth-century Spain, in cities like Valencia, Zaragoza, Seville, Valladolid, Toledo, and Barcelona, potentially drawing inspiration from Islamic medical traditions.[35] Moreover, medieval Europe witnessed the presence of many official and trained practitioners, including university-educated physicians, local barber-surgeons ("chirurgicus"), herbalists, and clergy specialising in medicinal practices or providing spiritual guidance. As previously mentioned, during a time when the modern medical framework was still in its nascent stages of development, individuals frequently resorted to supernatural methods for addressing mental illnesses. However, as the influence of universities grew, the significance of monasteries waned, leading to a shift towards lay settings as primary venues for healing. From the fourteenth century onwards, there was a proliferation of new sources such as health books and personal health guides, catering primarily to the upper middle class.[36] Despite the growing presence of university-trained physicians, clerical

[34] Park, Katharine, "Medicine and Magic: The Healing Arts", in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, London and New York: Longman, 1998, pp. 129–149.
[35] Horden, Peregrine, "What's Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?", *Social History of Medicine* 1, vol 24, 2011, pp. 5–15.
[36] Horden, *Social History of Medicine* 1, pp. 15–25.

involvement was still omnipresent during the late Middle Ages in mental care. The emergence of mendicant orders ensured an increased availability of spiritual guidance aimed at maintaining mental and spiritual equilibrium, emphasising the avoidance of sin and the pursuit of virtue. Common priests too offered moral advice to their parishioners, playing a pivotal role in certain psychological healing rituals, such as exorcisms, very distant from the medical perspective.[37]

The two approaches to mental health, secular and religious, sometimes led to conflict. Physicians and theologians did not always agree on the causes of the disorder or methods of treatment. For instance, Thomas Aquinas claimed that physicians did not always acknowledge supernatural causes, like witchcraft, behind an affliction.[38] Moreover, medical practitioners condemned the mortification of the flesh, which was thought to be the proper spiritual order of purity and harmony in the clerical context, whereas moderation was the ideal in medical guidebooks.[39]

1.2.1 Mental Health in the Medieval Legal System

In the Middle Ages, mental afflictions were not only a medical or religious concern; attention to mental illnesses in medieval times has proven relevant across all domains of society. The widespread impact of mental health extended into the legal system as well, where it held significant implications. For example, mental incapacity was considered an exonerating element in a court of law. However, while this exoneration absolved individuals with mental afflictions from guilt for their actions, it also resulted in a loss of empowerment, as some of their legal rights, such as inheritance rights, were limited. At times, legal measures were implemented to acknowledge and aid those affected by mental illness, such as the appointment of guardians for landowners facing psychological challenges. Efforts were made to safeguard the interests of those landowners, for instance by ensuring that the appointed guardian was not a direct heir. Nonetheless, this system was susceptible to exploitation by guardians seeking profit, who could exploit the revenues from their wards' lands. Building on this context, deeply researched by Kate

[37] Caciola, Nancy, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 236.
[38] Kelly, Henry, Ansgar, *The Devil, Demonology and Witchcraft: The Development of Christian Beliefs in Evil Spirits*, New York: Doubleday, 1968, p. 62.
[39] Philips, Matthew, "Crux a Cruciatu Dicitur: Preaching Self-Torture as Pastoral Care in Twelfth-Century Religious Houses" in *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Ronald J. Stansbury, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 285–309.

Parkin, her examination of 47 cases of "idiocy" (commonly used to describe individuals afflicted by mental illness since birth) in England, revealed that the provisions for mentally ill landowners were largely rooted in customary practices rather than explicit legal codes. Furthermore, families would sometimes attempt to hide an heir's idiocy in the hope that they could avoid jurisdictional interference and simply restore the line of inheritance when the "idiot" died.[40] When delving into the legal landscape of medieval Europe, historians have often turned to England for the best preserved legal records. Significant progress has been made in understanding the legal status of the mentally ill within this context. However, it's important to acknowledge that discussions concerning mental instability and the law are constrained by the availability of source material, which predominantly focuses on the legal rights of wealthy individuals afflicted with mental illness and the treatment of those deemed criminally insane. Unfortunately, individuals without possessions and lacking any criminal involvement were less likely to be documented in legal records. Documentation from the period following the Norman Conquest of 1066 AD is more abundant compared to earlier records. Nonetheless, the early English kingdoms exhibited a certain degree of protection for mentally ill offenders, particularly if it could be demonstrated that the individual had not committed a felony during a lucid interval.[41] Sara Butler examines the potential "leniency" of the insanity defence in English courts throughout the Middle Ages.[42] In her examination of 192 criminal cases drawn from thirteenth and fourteenth-century England, Butler discovered that only 15 were attributed to demonic influence, primarily involving instances of suicide. The overwhelming majority of cases instead depicted instances of violent madness, characterised by frenzy or fury. Medieval juries recognised these manifestations of mental instability as a form of "illness", seldom attributing sin or personal fault to the afflicted individual as a contributing factor. [43]

Concerning the legal aspect of mental illnesses, Canon Law also had to take into consideration this subject. The question of whether the mad could receive the Sacraments was much debated, and reception was largely dependent on the past faith of the mad

[40] Parkin, Kate, "Tales of Idiots, Signifying Something: Evidence of Process in the Inquisitions Post Mortem" in *The Fifteenth-Century Inquisitions Post Mortem: A Companion*, ed. by Michael Hicks, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012, pp. 79-80.
[41] Walker, Nigel, *Crime and Insanity in England*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968, pp. 15–34.
[42] Butler, Sara, Margaret, "Representing the Middle Ages: The Insanity Defence in Medieval England" in *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Wendy J. Turner and Tory Vandeventer Pearman, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2010, pp. 117–131.
[43] Butler, pp. 122–125.

person. For example, they could be baptised so long as others bore witness to their previous devotion.[44] Similarly, while a mentally unstable individual was deemed incapable of entering into a marriage contract, a pre-existing contract made when both parties were of sound mind remained valid even if one party later became mentally ill.[45] Consent was crucial to the partaking of the Sacraments; whilst people with psychological difficulties were not capable of giving consent, proven previous consent was sufficient. However, concerns arose regarding individuals who had been mentally ill since birth, as it was questioned whether they ever possessed the capacity to consent to baptism. While opinions varied on this matter, the prevailing consensus was to treat lifelong mentally ill individuals akin to infants, capable of being cleansed of original sin but exempt from the need for penance due to their inability to commit sins through reasoned actions.[46]

1.3 Mental Health in English Medieval Literature

Modern criticism takes a broad approach to medieval representations of madness in all artistic forms, examining how they both reflected and influenced societal perceptions of mental illness. Throughout the Middle Ages, common knowledge indicated that madness was evident through one's appearance, a view reinforced by many artists of the time. Indeed, in literature and on the stage as well as in common jokes, the insane were depicted as bizarre and often labelled as "wild men". They were portrayed with straw in their hair, wearing threadbare, ripped or fantastical clothing, and sometimes barely clothed at all. Jesters and stage buffoons also conveyed folly through their distinctive attire, including cap and bells, bladder and pinwheel, motley, and hobbyhorse. This visual representation extended beyond the stage; ex-patients of Bethlem Hospital, known as Bedlamites, roamed the highways in similar clothes and were licensed to beg. Additional conventions further cemented these images. For instance, fools were frequently depicted with a stone on their forehead, symbolising the "stone of folly" and visually representing their character flaws.[47] Depictions of the insane are present and relevant throughout the medieval era. In the later Middle Ages, the "Ship of Fools" emerged as a vivid representation of the isolation and tumult associated with madness, illustrating societal

[44] Pickett, Colin R., *Mental Affliction and Church Law: An Historical Synopsis of Roman and Ecclesiastical Law and a Canonical Commentary*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1952, p. 30.
[45] Pickett, p. 41.
[46] Pickett, p. 50.
[47] Harper, Stephen, *Insanity, Individuals, and Society in Late-Medieval English Literature: The Subject of Madness*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003, pp. 11-19.

perceptions of mental illness and the marginalisation of those deemed insane. This allegory, which originated in Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, typically depicted a ship swarming with men in bizarre clothing screaming, drinking, and fighting. The allegory gained widespread popularity, especially in German-speaking regions, following the publication of Sebastian Brant's satirical work *Ship of Fools* in 1494. His work critiqued the follies and vices of his contemporaries, using the ship as a metaphor for society's misguided and directionless nature. This symbol significantly influenced the cultural landscape and inspired many artists, most notably Hieronymus Bosch, whose painting *Ship of Fools* visually captured the chaotic essence of Brant's narrative.[48]

1.3.1 Archetypes in Medieval Mad Characters: The Case of *Ywain and Gawain*

The medieval representations of "mad" characters all share common details, and can be categorised into three types: the "Mad Sinner", the "Unholy Wild Man", and the "Holy Wild Man". Each of these categories was influenced by the biblical figure of Nebuchadnezzar, whose sin and ultimate redemption shaped the notion of madness as both a punishment and a spiritual therapy, illustrating God's agency in the world.[49] However, alongside traditional precedents, the contemporary setting of their text also influenced medieval writers. This can be seen in spiritual and humoral explanations of madness co-existing[50] and wild characters sharing traits with the category of the "wild man", a hairy monster very popular in medieval folklore.[51]

Beyond the similarities among various insane characters, there are also common underlying themes. Notably, these include the concept of madness as rebirth, the depiction of madness reflecting and shaping contemporary societal views, and the motifs of wilderness and alienation from civilisation. A clear example of all these themes is found in the fourteenth-century verse-romance *Ywain and Gawain.*[52] This work is an adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes' Old French romance *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au Lion*. The French original is one of the few romances where the author is known: although precise dating is

[48] Doob, Penelepe Reed, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, pp. 44–47.
[49] Doob, pp. 54–55.
[50] Harper, pp. 20–21.
[51] Bernheimer, Richard, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, New York: Octagon Books, 1979, p. 14.
[52] Friedman, Albert, and Harrington, Norman eds., *Ywain and Gawain*, London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1964.

not possible, it is believed to have been composed around 1177.[53] The narrative opens during a banquet at King Arthur's court, where Sir Colgrevance recounts his failed attempt to seize a magic fountain protected by another knight. His young cousin, Ywain, secretly sets off to succeed where Colgrevance failed. He kills the knight guarding the fountain but falls in love with the knight's widow, Alundyne, and marries her with the help of her servant Lunette. Sometime later, King Arthur visits the newlywed couple with his court. When they leave, his best friend Gawain convinces Ywain to join them. Alundyne agrees to let Ywain go but makes him promise to return within one year. Ywain forgets his oath, and one day a lady arrives on behalf of Alundyne to inform him that his wife has repudiated him. Stricken with grief, Ywain goes mad and wanders in the woods for some time. One day, a lady and her maids recognise Ywain sleeping under a tree and decide to heal him with a magic oil. Restored to sanity, Ywain embarks on a series of quests and adventures to regain his lost honour. He saves a lion from a dragon, and the lion becomes his loyal companion, earning him the name "the Knight with the Lion". Ywain's identity remains concealed until he finds himself fighting with his old friend Gawain. In the end, Lunette again assists Ywain, leading to his reconciliation with Alundyne.[54]

One function of madness in medieval literature is its use as a metaphor for death and rebirth.[55] The mad character "dies" a symbolic death and a new identity is constructed for them, which allows the narrative to take a different trajectory. In this context, madness often served as a form of redemption for characters who then found spiritual renewal.[56] Considering madness as a character's rebirth, literary madness can be seen as a form of "otherness", which triggered in the medieval audience various responses, including fascination, fear, laughter, pity, and revulsion. In this perspective, the role of the insane in literature could be employed both as a figure of comedy and a vehicle of tragedy.[57]

Beyond serving as Ywayn's rebirth, his madness and his journey illustrate how personal crises can impact the broader community, underscoring the societal implications of individual madness in medieval literature. These characters typically follow a consistent narrative trajectory: a dramatic event triggers their mental breakdown, leading

[53] Ménard, Philippe, *De Chrétien de Troyes au Tristan en Prose: Études sur les Romans de la Table Ronde*, Genève: Droz, 1999, pp. 9-13.
[54] Friedman, Albert, and Harrington, Norman eds., *Ywain and Gawain*, London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1964.
[55] Huot, Sylvia, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 136–209.
[56] Huot, p. 180.
[57] Huot, pp. 1-9.

to a period of alienation from society, which ultimately culminates in the restoration of sanity and societal roles. This thematic exploration is particularly significant within the context of medieval society, where knights were esteemed members and symbols of excellence. Their experiences of madness challenged their identities and disrupted the established order, providing both comedic relief and a poignant reflection on the capricious nature of fate. The position of madness in the narrative, representing the lowest point in the knight's career, is crucial both for the protagonist and for the other characters, as it reconciles the presentation of the protagonist as both a nobleman and a self-made man. Before madness, the hero is generally depicted as someone entitled by a right of birth to all the noblest qualities. This vision does not disappear after the experience of madness; rather, it becomes clear that the protagonist must reaffirm his honour through his strength and valour, as Ywayn does. This theme is particularly evident in the narratives of other knights too, such as Tristan and Lancelot. Their ordeals of madness and subsequent redemption underscore the enduring values of knighthood and the transformative power of personal trials.[58]

In both French and Middle English versions of Ywain's story, the episode of madness occupies a central position in the plot and is clearly connected to wilderness. The English translator shortened the episode by 75 lines, but this does not significantly alter the narrative, even including a few changes not present in the original French text. The most important, for analysing mental health in the Middle Ages, is the addition of violent traits, such as the unique detail of Ywain drinking the blood of wild animals. The translator might have wanted his version of Ywain to align with the established standard of wild madness, which by that time implied aggressiveness as a key feature of the insane, as seen in characters like Tristan and Lancelot too. The madness experienced by Ywain shares diverse common themes with the adventures of other mad knights beyond the already cited wilderness, for instance, isolation from society. Apart from being attracted by wild environments, these characters wander nearly undressed, present an aggressive nature towards all the human beings they meet, obey only their instincts and follow a diet very different from the one they were used to, as it consists mainly of roots and berries.[59]

The forest too constituted a crucial archetypal presence in medieval romance, representing many things, for instance, the setting for the chivalric adventure, but also the

[58] Saunders, Corinne, "'The Thoughtful Maladie': Madness and Vision in Medieval Writing" in *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, ed. by C. Saunders and J. Macnaughton, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 70-74.
[59] *Ywain and Gawain*, lines 1669-1670.

place where social conventions ceased to exist. Consequently, in medieval literature the role of the woods extended far beyond its obvious association with darkness and danger, incorporating the themes of wilderness, adventure, love, and spiritual vision.[60] This exile from civilisation can have both a positive and negative valence. Medieval depictions of insane characters known as "Wild Men" can be categorised into two types: the "Holy Wild Man" and the "Unholy Wild Man". In the first case, retirement in the forest is voluntary and aimed at a spiritual elevation obtained through the ascetic renunciation of worldly goods. The hero's self-exile in the woods is different from the hermit's religious retirement, the forest for them is not the setting of moral trials to reinforce their spirituality. On the contrary, all these knights are healed only when they leave it.[61] Ywain recovers his sanity after he leaves the woods and is rubbed with the magic oil by a maid from a nearby castle.[62] Nevertheless, it is not the setting where they live; it's their attitude towards it that determines their characterisation as wild madmen. Ywain for example spends long periods in the forest also after being healed, but his approach to the wood and its inhabitants is different. If during his madness he shoots any "wilde beste"[63] he sees, when he encounters the lion that will become his companion fighting with a dragon, he decides to kill the dragon and help the lion. While during his madness, Ywain is on the same level as the animals he kills, because he is hunting merely for food, in the episode with the dragon he is placed on a superior level because he can decide which beast should be killed according to moral rules.[64] In his wild frenzy, the knight appears to think himself unsuitable for civilisation. The forest, where the rules of civilisation faded away, offers a more suitable habitat for the wild knight, similar to a wild animal seeking refuge in its natural element. Moreover, the untamed setting liberates the protagonist from the constraints of societal norms, allowing for actions unconstrained by conventional rules.[65]

In this chapter, I explored the diverse perceptions of mental health in the Middle Ages, examining interpretations by the medical community, legal system, religious authorities, and writers. This comprehensive overview of the era's societal attitudes lays the foundation for the following sections of this thesis. Indeed, in the next chapter, I will focus on Margery Kempe and her articulation of madness in her writings, providing a rare glimpse into the life of a non-noble woman in early 15th-century England. Additionally,

[60] Saunders, Corinne, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993, p. 9.
[61] Doob, p.139.
[62] *Ywain and Gawain*, lines 1779-1796.
[63] *Ywain and Gawain*, line 1664.
[64] Doob, p.139.
[65] Saunders, p.49

I will compare Margery Kempe's writings with those of contemporary mystic Julian of Norwich, highlighting their commonalities and differences to deepen the understanding of mental health in the Middle Ages and the discourse on medieval female mystics.

2

The Book of Margery Kempe

As stated in the previous chapter, madness has multiple resonances and can be interpreted in diverse and contradictory ways. This is true both for the Middle Ages and our current era: the lived experience of madness poses problems of identity that are difficult to overcome nowadays too. However, for those suffering from mental illnesses, interpretation questions have always been more urgent. In this chapter, I will examine how Margery Kempe succeeded in reaching modern readers translating her experience of madness into text. However, investigating her life and experiences is crucial before analysing her literary work.

Margery Kempe was a fifteenth-century pilgrim and mystic, a highly discussed figure both during her lifetime and in contemporary scholarship. She is honoured annually in the Church of England on the 9th of November[66] and is best known for her work, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. It was rediscovered only in 1934, captivating historians with the exploration of medieval connections between madness, mysticism, gender and psychological issues. Indeed her autobiographical account plays with various ramifications of madness furthering her authorial intent in expressing her thoughts and feelings.[67] Despite being illiterate, Margery Kempe was determined to record all her visions, journeys, and spiritual experiences. She dictated her book to a scribe, providing a unique insight into the everyday life of a mayor's daughter in early 15th-century England, and offering a rare window into the experiences of a non-noble medieval woman.[68]

Often considered the first autobiography written in English, the *Book of Margery Kempe* is narrated in the third person (she humbly calls herself "creatur" meaning "creature") and chronicles Margery Kempe's spiritual journey, beginning with an episode of profound madness. Her choice to open her chronicle with her experience of madness demonstrates its importance to her. Indeed, in a text that, in essence, can be seen as a defence of Margery Kempe's right to class herself as a holy woman, any issue that affects

[66] *Church of England Calendar Holy Days.* 2024. https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/the-calendar/holydays.aspx. Accessed June 4, 2024.
[67] Lawes, Richard, *The Madness of Margery Kempe,' in Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales*, ed. E. A. Jones, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 147.
[68] Porter, Roy, *Madness: A Brief History*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 173-175.

her identity is crucial. Moreover, the account of her conversion from wife and mother to misunderstood holy woman, written approximately forty years after her initial experience of madness, does not proceed chronologically. In this, her experience of madness occupying a small but initial portion of her text makes it even more crucial for her transformation and narrative. Indeed, her experience and struggle with mental health, overturning the social roles of bourgeois wife and mother, which define her at the beginning of her story, provide her with an opportunity to reinvent herself. For Margery Kempe, madness opens a space in which she can rewrite her identity and reposition herself within society. Not only does Kempe's madness create the possibility of a new identity as a mystic, but it also shapes that identity.[69]

Another crucial aspect of her mental health is how her body is presented through madness, bleeding and wounded, mirroring the body of Christ Himself. Nonetheless, Margery Kempe described her madness not as a step towards beatitude, but as a demonic attack leading her to make slanderous accusations against her family, renounce her faith, tear at her skin, and contemplate suicide. This episode set the stage for her spiritual journey, detailed throughout the rest of the book, which includes her conversations with Jesus and God. This perspective positions Margery Kempe's madness as a critical prelude to her spiritual recovery. Her aspirations, including a mystical communion and marriage with God, were legitimate within the beliefs of her times, though they were prone to misunderstanding. Despite modern attempts to diagnose her with contemporary psychiatric labels, her experiences defy a singular interpretation. Margery Kempe herself pondered deeply over whether her voices and visions were madness, a disease, or divine. Nonetheless, her legacy endured through her work and remains a significant historical document for understanding the intersection of mental health, spirituality, and mysticism in medieval England.[70]

Delving into the intricacies of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an autobiographical account that straddles the realms of mysticism and personal confession, necessitates a thorough exploration of Margery Kempe's life, tracing her journey from her early years in Lynn, through her marriage and motherhood, to her eventual embrace of a life of pilgrimage and mysticism. Her lived experiences and self-perception, as well as the way

[69] Torn, Alison,"Margery Kempe: Madwoman or Mystic – A Narrative Approach to the Representation of Madness and Mysticism in Medieval England" in *Narrative and Fiction: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. David Robinson, Pamela Fisher, Noel Gilzean, Tracey Lee, Sarah Jane Robinson, and Pete Woodcock, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 2008, pp. 79–80.
[70] Bale, Anthony, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 11–13.

in which her contemporaries perceived her, form the backbone of her narrative. Understanding the societal, cultural, and personal contexts that shaped Margery Kempe's life is crucial for comprehending the motivations behind her writings and the resonance of her spiritual journey. Indeed, the rediscovery of her book in 1934 sparked intense scholarly debate, revealing the complexity of interpreting her experiences and the diverse perspectives on her truthfulness. By examining her journey as a human being, the analysis of the themes and motifs within her book in the next chapters will be clearer, illustrating how her personal history and spiritual aspirations intertwine.

2.1 The Life of Margery Kempe

As stated in the previous section, to provide a comprehensive understanding of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is essential to first summarise its narrative and key themes. This summary will serve as the foundation for the subsequent analysis and discussion. Often regarded as the first autobiography written in English, although dictated to a scribe rather than written in the first person, the text chronicles Margery Kempe's life, capturing her thoughts and feelings in a deeply personal and introspective manner. In this summary, I will objectively outline the main episodes of her narrative as she reports them, while a critical reading of these events will be presented in the subsequent sections of this thesis. In my opinion, while reading her story, her versions and her perceptions of particular events, we must not forget that we are analysing the writings of a medieval woman affected by mental illnesses and who was not medically helped throughout her life. Therefore, while thoroughly investigating her literary work, we should treat her with the respect and empathy she deserves, without belittling or infantilising her, as many critics have done in the past and as I will show in later sections of this thesis.

Margery Kempe, born Margery Brunham or Burnham in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) in Norfolk, lived from approximately 1393 to 1438. She was the daughter of John Brunham, a prominent merchant who served as mayor and Member of Parliament for Lynn multiple times between 1364 and 1391. Margery Kempe was married to John Kempe, a burgess of Lynn, and bore fourteen children. It was her first pregnancy that led her to severe postpartum depression and a mental breakdown, which lasted eight months. She even tried to commit suicide, but after a profound vision of Christ, she recovered dramatically and reaffirmed her role in her household and community. Indeed, still driven by vanity and a desire for fine clothes, Margery Kempe established a brewery business,

which prospered for four years, followed by a short venture as a miller that quickly failed. In her book she states that, throughout her life, she was always haunted by a secret sin from her youth, making her interpret this last business failure as divine retribution for that and her vanity.

As her religious fervour intensified, Margery Kempe became increasingly repulsed by the flesh and sought release from human suffering. She fasted, performed penance, and constantly wore a hair shirt. Following her visions of Christ and divine punishments, Margery Kempe also sought to take a vow of chastity, a request her husband resisted. Indeed, above all, she strove to free herself from the oppression of sexual intercourse, believing that the pleasures she and her husband indulged in were offensive to God. During this period, Margery Kempe also sought permission to receive communion every Sunday and requested other special religious favours from the Church. Despite her self-imposed mortification, many of Margery Kempe's contemporaries, including pilgrims, clergy members, and fellow townspeople, considered her vainglorious. This perception was emphasised by her own statements, as she states throughout her book, such as her claim that she loved God more than He loved her. Moreover, she was still vulnerable to temptations, for instance when a man expressed romantic feelings to her. Flattered, she gave in to her impulses, only to be rejected at the last moment. Mortified, she sought Christ's forgiveness, which was granted. From then on, she wrote that she began to see her tribulations as signs of her holiness. Indeed, Margery Kempe began experiencing more visions, accompanied by copious bouts of weeping, which persisted throughout her life. Additionally, she took it upon herself to informally absolve penitents, a practice typically reserved for priests. Whenever Margery Kempe heard mention of Christ's Passion, she would swoon in ecstasy and experience divine music, with the Lord calling her His mother, sister, and daughter. Nonetheless, Margery Kempe was still perturbed, wondering if these voices and visions might be temptations from the Devil. Consequently, she consulted an anchorite in Lynn, who affirmed the authenticity of her visions, encouraged her to share them, and gave her his blessing. The same happened in Norwich when she consulted with the vicar of St. Stephens, who received her warmly. During her visit, she also met with Julian of Norwich, an anchoress and mystic renowned for her own visionary experiences. Their relationship will be examined further in this thesis; but in brief, their extensive discussions greatly enriched Margery Kempe's spiritual journey and she returned home with strong endorsements. She hoped support from the clergy would shield her from common

people's criticisms of her visions, weeping, and preaching, but she continued to stir controversies everywhere she went in her life. Nonetheless, Margery Kempe grew more confident of her religious calling, winning a reputation as a woman with a divine vocation and minor prophetic powers.

At Easter 1413, her life changed again when she thought to have received a clear divine sign of her holiness. She was at worship in her parish church when a stone fell from the ceiling and hit her, but she miraculously escaped from any injury and this inspired her to embark on a pilgrimage. She and John travelled the English countryside that summer, visiting shrines, chapels and cathedrals. With these visits, she attracted much attention to herself: she would constantly fall in fits and burst into tears, either offending or impressing other believers there. During the same pilgrimage, Margery and John reached an agreement: she could undertake a journey to Jerusalem if she cleared his debts and ceased fasting on Fridays. After thoughtful reflection and prayer, Margery Kempe consented to settle John's debts before departing and to give up fasting on Fridays, but on the condition that he joined her in a vow of chastity. After this agreement, seeking even more ecclesiastical protection, Margery Kempe travelled to London to visit the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace. There, they talked for a long time, and he was evidently impressed with her so she received his endorsement too.

Once returned to Lynn, she began her preparations for her journey and set out in 1414, navigating the Mediterranean to reach the Holy Land. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was customary for pilgrims to travel in groups and to reach their destination through various stages. The first part of their journey was to sail to Venice and await the galleys to Jerusalem. According to her book, Margery Kempe's tears and sermons were annoying to all her travelling companions, especially at meals, but they tolerated her as best they could for the three-month stay in Venice. Once in the Holy City, they visited many shrines and holy places such as the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Virgin's tomb, the Mount where the Sermon was delivered and places where the Virgin had stood or sat. She also spent an all-night vigil in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, visited Bethlehem and ventured on to Jordan, purchasing or being given many relics. Proximity to the scenes of Christ's Passion intensified her emotional turmoil, leading her to weep and wail more fervently and to engage in many physical acts of penitence. Some observers dismissed her behaviour as mere pretence and hypocrisy, while others speculated she might be suffering from epilepsy or drunkenness. There were even those who believed an evil spirit possessed her. Her incessant wailing and frequent rebukes made her a nuisance

to her fellow English pilgrims in the Holy Land too, who occasionally expelled her from their company. Such adversities were not new to her; she had faced many similar tribulations in England. Moreover, rumours and malicious gossip constantly increased, with many accusing her of being possessed by the Devil himself. Her unconventional behaviour, including her itinerant lifestyle as a wife and mother promoting piety and encouraging wives to abandon their husbands for a devout life, aroused suspicion among authorities, putting her at risk of imprisonment.

Despite these challenges, her devotion to God only deepened with time. Her spiritual focus increasingly centred on Christ's humanity, yet it was the divine essence of God, the Father, that ultimately claimed her in a mystical marriage according to her writings. After this event too, although she had previously struggled with sexual temptations, moral trials were not completely behind her. She occasionally experienced visions allegedly instigated by the Devil, involving male genitals and commands to engage in prostitution. Additionally, she was once overwhelmed by a desire to kiss male lepers, but her confessor advised her to limit such acts of compassion to women only. Even if supported by the clergy, all the malicious rumours followed her everywhere, even during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. When Margery Kempe and her travelling companions made their way back to Venice, she decided to continue her pilgrimage to Rome. She arranged to join a party travelling to Assisi accompanying Dame Margaret Florentine, a noblewoman, arriving in Rome in late August or early September 1414. Once there, Margery Kempe stayed at the hospital of Saint Thomas of Canterbury. However, with her strange behaviour and religious fervour, she alienated her new travelling companions too, who eventually evicted her. Despite this, she found new lodgings and the support of a priest who was her confessor. Also during this pilgrimage, she devoted her days to prayer and visiting shrines, experiencing numerous visions. By Christmas 1414, Margery Kempe's funds were nearly depleted, leaving her jobless and potentially reduced to begging for sustenance. However, she reencountered Dame Margaret Florentine, who invited her to dine every Sunday, providing food and financial support. When her former companions learned of her association and friendship with Dame Margaret, they apologised for evicting her and invited her to return to the hostel, offering her free accommodation due to her financial hardship. In that same period, a new group from England arrived at the hostel, including a young priest who admired Margery Kempe and became her follower. He provided her with enough money to return home, however, she decided to stay in Rome for Easter before departing for England in 1415.

Shortly after returning to Lynn, Margery Kempe fell gravely ill, causing concern for her life. However, she had made a vow to journey to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela if she recovered, regardless of her financial situation. Despite her lack of funds and existing debts, her friends, eager for her prayers for them at the shrine, raised enough money for her pilgrimage once her health improved. In May of 1417, she set out on her journey as promised and eventually came back to England. Throughout her life and during this last pilgrimage too, Margery Kempe frequently found herself in trouble due to her behaviour, often facing accusations of heresy and of being a Lollard. She was imprisoned by the church and put on trial multiple times, yet she always managed to extricate herself from these predicaments. After several more incidents of this kind, she retired permanently to Lynn.

During this period, she experienced various illnesses, but her visions persisted, and she continued attending sermons. Although she still lived with her husband John Kempe for some time, she eventually left their home, even if she still struggled with financial difficulties. However, when her husband fell and suffered a debilitating head injury, Margery Kempe came back to his house and took care of him. One of her fourteen sons (and the only one mentioned in *The Book of Margery Kempe*) visited her with his wife, but he died while in England, followed shortly by John Kempe. Needing to return to her child in Germany, the daughter-in-law asked Margery Kempe to accompany her. Despite being around sixty years old and physically infirm, she agreed and they sailed during Easter week around 1433. Margery Kempe escorted her to Danzig and then embarked on various journeys in Northern Europe, visiting shrines and holy relics. During this time, her health deteriorated significantly, prompting her to return home to Lynn, this time via Calais and London. Margery Kempe spent the remainder of her life describing it as the life of a devout holy woman. During this era, it was common for saints, hermits, and recluses to document their spiritual experiences. Margery Kempe had contemplated writing her own book for some time. Although the exact start date of her dictation is uncertain, *The Book of Margery Kempe* was composed in two parts, each dictated to a different scribe. The first scribe died when the book was two-thirds complete, with John Kempe's death being the last event recorded in the first part. The second scribe likely began to write after 1436, following Margery Kempe's return from Danzig. He took about

two years to complete and produce a fair copy, but Margery Kempe died shortly after. Indeed, Margery Kempe's date of death is unknown, but it is believed to be around 1438.[71]

Her book may have enjoyed some popularity centuries ago, with excerpts printed as pamphlets in the sixteenth century, but it eventually disappeared until 1934, when the only existing manuscript copy was found in the library of Colonel Butler-Bowden. Before this time, Margery Kempe was only known from those selections of her work printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, and again by Henry Pepwell in 1521. The excerpted sections are notable for their exclusion of any of the more problematic aspects of Margery Kempe's life. Pepwell goes so far as to refer to Kempe simply as a devoted anchoress of Lynn, indicating a desire to regularise and normalise her religious life. Notably, this approach was already present in *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the form of the monk who tells her he wished she was "closyd in an hows of ston, that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" ("enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one could speak with you", lines 870-871). The passages Pepwell and Wynkyn de Worde extracted and published only consist of Jesus' words to Margery. Margery herself is relegated to a "comparatively unremarkable and disembodied voice", marginalised within her own text.[72]

As presented in the preceding summary of Margery Kempe's life, she was consistently surrounded by criticism. Despite receiving support from some members of the clergy, she frequently had to defend herself against accusations of heresy, malicious rumours, and charges of being a Lollard. Moreover, she often found herself engaged in theological debates with both clergy and lay critics. In response to these challenges, she employed various strategies to counteract the criticism she faced, whether it pertained to religious, gender, social, or psychological issues. In the following section of this thesis, I will examine these aspects of her life in detail, especially focusing on the intertwining of religious and gender issues during her age, before examining her literary work in detail.

2.2 Mental Health in Medieval Society: Gender and Religion

In analysing mental health in medieval society, it is impossible to ignore the intricate relationship between gender and religious beliefs. Especially before examining how

[71] Kempe, Margery, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. by Lynn Staley, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, line numbers and my modern translation will be inserted in the text.
[72] Liz, Herbert, McAvoy, "Closyd in an Hows of Ston: Discourses of Anchoritism and The Book of Margery Kempe" in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, Cardiff: University of Wales, 2005, pp. 182-94.

Margery Kempe and her writings have been received and critically read over the years, it is crucial to investigate the deep connection between religion and gender issues and their perception in medieval times. The analysis in this section will provide the brief but necessary background to better understand Kempe herself and the critiques of her work, which will analysed in the following sections of this thesis.

In the medieval context, religious and secular approaches to mental health often diverged, with religious institutions significantly shaping societal perceptions and treatments of mental disorders. Moreover, gender emerged as a pivotal factor influencing the diagnosis, treatment, and societal attitudes towards mental illness, with women often bearing the faults of cultural and religious biases. At the same time, religious doctrines, such as notions of demonic possession and divine afflictions, intersected with prevailing beliefs about gender, further shaping medieval understandings of mental health. Furthermore, there was a division between religious and secular approaches to mental health; in the fourth Lateran Council in 1215, for example, surgical operations were forbidden to the clergy.[73]

Despite these two different approaches to treating mental illnesses at the time, individuals undergoing therapies were never treated equally. Factors such as social status, geographical origin, and notably, the patient's gender, influenced both the available treatments and the diagnostic process. Men and women presenting similar symptoms were often categorised as suffering from different afflictions. For instance, men displaying aggressive and violent behaviour were often diagnosed as "raving mad", whereas women exhibiting comparable symptoms were more frequently perceived as being possessed by demons. Beyond these cultural and social factors associated with gender, also physical and biological distinctions played a role in shaping perceptions of mental disorders. According to the humoural theory, men and women were believed to possess different bodily compositions, with women characterised by wet and cold properties, leading to differences in their natural complexion. Additionally, women were considered more susceptible to certain disorders, such as "wandering wombs", which were thought to cause hysteria. Due to their perceived physical vulnerabilities, women, like Margery Kempe, were also believed to be more prone to external influences, such as demonic possession.[74]

[73] Siraisi, Nancy G. *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 178.
[74] Caciola, Nancy, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, 2000, pp. 268–306.

Catherine Rider delved deeper into these medieval medical theories, particularly focusing on the role of demonic influence in late medieval medicine, also emphasising how it involved women more than men. As stated in the previous chapters, demons were not typically cited as the primary explanation by medical authors, and late medieval physicians did not reach a consensus regarding their influence. While doctors did not completely dismiss the notion of demonic involvement, they often framed demons as hallucinations or explanations relied upon by the ignorant. However, authors drawing from earlier Greek and Arabic medical traditions were more open to the idea that demons could be responsible for certain manifestations of melancholy and epilepsy. Furthermore, within the Christian context, Platonic dualistic concepts associated women with irrationality, physicality, and heightened emotionality. Their perceived weaker chastity was believed to render their spiritual state more susceptible, leading to a higher frequency of demonic possession among women compared to men.[75] Moreover, in clerical rhetoric, women's insatiable lust was often seen as a seed for social and spiritual disorder, but the opinion of the physicians was more lenient: sexual intercourse was sometimes recommended as a cure for melancholy, for example. The supposed interconnection between women and sexual lust was widespread and notions of it can be found in much scholarly work on women and gender.[76]

Gender also played a significant role in the selection of a practitioner for treating disorders during medieval times. University-trained physicians and the clerical elite who authored theological treatises for spiritual guidance were exclusively men. However, among traditional healers, the gender ratio was more balanced, but if their practices became increasingly associated with illicit activities such as witchcraft, suspicions were more frequently directed towards women.[77] Religious authorities often faced challenges in distinguishing between genuine spiritual experiences and physical or deceitful behaviours. This was a common issue across different religions, as it could lead to social and political upheaval due to the controversial nature of these claims. Partly because of this reason and partly because in many cultures the role of priest and physician was combined, the care of those we now term the mentally ill often fell upon religious

[75] Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, pp. 108–109. And Tinkle, Theresa. *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 38.
[76] Rubin, Miri, "The Person of the Form: Medieval Challenges to the Bodily Order" in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, pp. 100–122.
[77] Toivo, Raisa Maria, *Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Society: Finland and Wider European Experience*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, pp. 175–180.

communities or spiritual healers.[78] Such tasks were made more urgent as illness was often seen in moral terms. In Christianity, as stated previously, madness could be seen as a divine affliction, demonic possession, physical disruption or mystical grace. Notably, all these conditions were attributed with a striking frequency more to women than to men. Furthermore, disorders were often categorised by theologians and linked with religious deviation. Some scholars within disability studies even claim that the "religious model" was a pervasive way of handling disabilities during the Middle Ages, since the Catholic Church determined how disability was constructed.[79] The Church was also eager to underline the need for religious remedies, especially for women. In the fourth Lateran Council (1215) physicians intending to treat a patient were required to ask for a priest first, since a remedy for the soul was considered a remedy for the body as well.[80]

Disorders and sins too were intertwined in numerous ways during medieval times, always involving women more than men. While sins were ascribed to various causes, the direct correlation between sins and illnesses was not always clear but still suggested. In this context, women were traditionally deemed more susceptible to mental illnesses and demonic possessions due to the prevailing belief that their inherent weakness made them more prone to sin. Indeed as seen previously in this thesis, in theological contexts mental well-being was often linked to the avoidance of certain sins and the cultivation of a virtuous life. For instance, gluttony, considered one of the cardinal sins, was closely intertwined with the nutritional beliefs held by medical practitioners, with drunkenness seen as a manifestation of this vice. Theological teachings cautioned both men and women against indulging in excess, whether it be overeating, eating at inappropriate times, or consuming overly extravagant or exotic meals.[81]

Moreover, individuals often sought health and well-being from the spiritual realm. Many medieval shrines served as centres for healing, where Christians sought remedies for both physical and mental ailments. Notably, a significant portion of miracles documented in the canonisation processes, up to ninety per cent, could be classified as

[78] Weatherhead, Lesley, *Psychology, Religion and Healing*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959, chapter 2, particularly Christ's healing of the Gerasene Demoniac recounted in Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–39, and the possession at Capernaum depicted in Mark 1:23–28 and Luke 4:23–27.
[79] Flanagan, Sabina, "Heresy, Madness and Possession in the High Middle Ages" in *Heresy in Transition: Transforming Ideas of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Ian Hunter, John Christian Laursen, and Cary J. Nederman, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 29–42.
[80] Alberigo, Joseph, Perikle, P. Joannou, Leonardi, Claudio, and Prodi, Paolo, eds, "Concilium Lateranense IV" in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Freiburg: Herder, 1962, ch. 22.
[81] Caesar of Heisterbach. *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. by Joseph Strange. Ridgewood: The Gregg Press, 1966. IV, 2, and IV, 73.

therapeutic.[82] As Catherine Rider shows in her study, various forms of mental disorders can be found in medieval miracle collections: epileptics ("morbus caducum"), the mentally impaired ("amens", "demens", "mente captus"), the raving mad ("furiosus", "adrabiacus") and demoniacs ("obsessus", "demoniacus") were typically listed among those healed by the heavenly remedy.[83] Distinguishing between all these various manifestations of mental disorder posed challenges in medieval contexts. Individuals labelled as possessed, recipients of divine inspiration, or "insane" often exhibited similar behaviours when visiting saints' shrines, characterised by outbursts of shouting and violence, as in the case of Margery Kempe. Consequently, some observers encountered difficulty in discerning between these categories, especially when treating cases in which the patient was a woman.[84] In this context, demonic possession stood out as a unique form of mental disorder due to its non-physical origin and, at times, its atypical symptoms. Historically, possession has frequently been regarded as a separate category of mental illness, while studies on madness and other mental disorders during the Middle Ages did acknowledge possession, especially for women.[85] Recent research on this topic has predominantly been conducted by historians specialising in medieval religious culture. Their primary interest lies not in societal attitudes toward mental disorders, but rather in understanding how clergy navigated the complexities of distinguishing between divine inspiration and demonic possession. Their study is particularly relevant when dealing with visionary individuals, especially women like Margery Kempe, exhibiting unconventional behaviour.[86]

2.3 The Case of Margery Kempe and Her Critics

Margery Kempe, even being a notable figure for many in the medieval clergy, faced significant gender-related issues and criticism throughout her lifetime, embodying the complex intersection of gender and religious beliefs in medieval society. As a woman

[82] Vauchez, Andri, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, translated by Jean Birrell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 547.
[83] Fratres Editores, *Processus Canonizationis et Legendae varie Sancti Ludovici Episcopi Tolosani*, Quaracchi-Florence: Collegium s. Bonaventurae, 1951, tom. VII, p. 214.
[84] Boureau, Alain, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West*, translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 124.
[85] Laharie, Muriel, *La Folie au Moyen Âge: XIe–XIIIe siècles*, Paris: Le Léopard d'Or, 1991, pp. 23–51. Jackson, Stanley W., *Melancholia and Depression from Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 325–341.
[86] Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, "The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims (c. 1347–1396): a Medieval Woman between Demons and Saints", *Speculum 85*, 2010, pp. 321–326.

who claimed direct communication with God and exhibited behaviours considered unconventional for her time, Kempe was often met with scepticism, ridicule, and accusations of heresy. This was common to many women in her context, but it is crucial in her case to explore how she navigated these challenges. Particularly, it is important to focus on two key instances where she defended herself against such criticisms. Through these episodes, it is possible to gain insight into the broader implications of gender on mental health perceptions and religious experiences in medieval culture, illustrating how Kempe's resilience and self-advocacy challenged prevailing societal norms and biases.

Margery Kempe employed several strategies to counteract the criticism she faced throughout her life. One of her primary tactics was to directly challenge and undermine those who sought to exclude or discredit her, turning the criticism back onto her critics. She demonstrated a propensity for employing reversal strategies, a notable example being her insistence on privileging motherhood over virginity in a Christian context. This approach can be traced back to her transformative experience of madness, which led her to a profound realisation: her previous, ostensibly "sane" life had been overly focused on worldly pleasures at the expense of religious truths. This epiphany played a crucial role in shaping her defensive strategies. For instance, when faced with accusations of insanity, she argued that her openness to Christ represented a truer form of sanity than their conventional perceptions of mental health. This created a dynamic where the concepts of truth and falsity became flexible and open to debate.[87] For instance, in response to criticisms that her crying was excessive and hypocritical, Margery Kempe contended that her tears were, in fact, the only rational response to Christ's passion. She maintained that weeping for the sins of the world was a sign of true sanity, whereas grieving over material losses constituted genuine insanity. This inversion of societal norms and expectations allowed Margery Kempe to redefine the parameters of sanity and piety, reinforcing her position and legitimising her spiritual experiences. The real madmen were those who "wyl cryen and roryn and wryngyn her handys as yyf thei had no wytte ne non mende, and yet wetyn thei wel inow that thei displesyn God" ("will cry and roar and wring their hands as if they had no wit nor any mind, and yet they know well enough that they displease God", lines 2286-2288).

[87] Jose, Laura, *Madness and Gender in Late-Medieval English Literature*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/217, accessed June 4, 2024, p. 257.

The madness of which Margery Kempe was accused was rewritten by her as the only appropriate response to a true vision of the crucifixion "than the creatur thowt that sche ran al abowte the place as it had ben a mad woman, crying and roryng" ("Then the creature thought that she ran all about the place as if she had been a mad woman, crying and roaring", lines 6500-6501). And again, when Christ's body was kissed by Mary, her sisters and Mary Magdalene: "And the sayd creatur thowt that sche ran evyr to and fro, as it had be a woman wythowtyn reson, gretly desyryng to an had the precyows body be hirself alone" ("And the said creature thought that she ran ever to and from, as if she had been a woman without reason, greatly desiring to have had the precious body by herself alone", lines 6522-6524). This strategy is consistently employed by Margery Kempe throughout her text in other episodes too, as she reverses and redirects the arguments made against her, redefining the perception of the boundaries between madness and sanity.[88]

She adopted a similar strategy when criticised for wearing white clothes, the colour traditionally associated with virgins. At the urging of her confessor and as a test of obedience, she temporarily switched to black clothes, but was soon confronted by another priest "that was hir enmye and he enjoyid gretly that sche was put fro hir wille and seyd unto hir: 'I am glad that ye gon in blak clothyng as ye wer wont to do' " ("who was her enemy and who greatly enjoyed that she was prevented from doing what she wanted and said to her: 'I am glad that you are going in black clothing as you used to do' ", lines 2774-2776). Margery, in return, insisted that "owyr Lord wer not displesyd thow I weryd whyte clothys, for he wyl that I do so" ("Our Lord was not displeased though I wore white clothes, for He wills that I do so", lines 2777-2778). By insisting on her right to wear white clothes, Margery Kempe asserted that her body was holy, equating its status with that of a virgin's body. The priest, however, refused to recognise her body in these terms and responded sharply to her insistence on its sanctity. "Now wote I wel that thu hast a devyl wythinne the, for I her hym spekyn in the to me" ("Now I know well that you have a devil within you, for I heard him speaking in you to me", lines 2779-2780) and Margery Kempe replied: "A, good ser, I pray yow dryveth hym away fro me, for God knowyth I wolde ryth fawyn don wel and plesyn hym yf I cowde" ("Ah, good sir, I pray you, drive him away from me, for God knows I would very gladly do well and please Him if I could", lines 2781-2783). And then he was:

[88] Jose, p. 254.

Ryth wroth and seyd ful many schrewyd wordys; and sche seyd to hym: “Ser, I hope I have no devyl wythinne me, for yyf I had a devyl wythin me, wetyth wel I schuld ben wroth wyth yow. And, sir, me thynkyth that I am nothyng wroth wyth yow for nothyng that ye can don onto me. And than the prest partyd awey fro hir wyth hevy cher.

(“Was very angry and said many shrewd words; and she said to him: 'Sir, I hope I have no devil within me, for if I had a devil within me, know well I should be angry with you. And, sir, it seems to me that I am not at all angry with you for anything that you can do to me'. And then the priest departed from her with a heavy heart”, lines 2783-2789).

The priest’s efforts to attribute Margery Kempe’s unsettling speech to demonic possession were futile. Margery Kempe, by immediately inviting him to perform an exorcism, challenged his authority. According to biblical teachings, only those with unblemished bodies can perform exorcism. Thus, Margery Kempe shifted the focus away from her own body and questioned the sanctity of the priest’s body. She emphasised that wrath is a hallmark of demonic possession and highlighted her own lack of anger as evidence of her body’s holiness, in stark contrast to that of the priest, leaving him effectively disheartened.[89]

In the next chapter, I will further the exploration of Margery Kempe’s criticism and interactions with her contemporaries, focusing particularly on her relationship with Julian of Norwich. I will propose a reading of Kempe’s literary work through the lens of her struggles with mental illnesses, also interpreted from a modern psychological perspective. This analysis will offer a richer, more empathetic interpretation of Kempe’s experiences and expressions by juxtaposing contemporary understandings of mental health with medieval perceptions. This approach aims to bridge historical and modern viewpoints, providing deeper insights into the complexities of her character and the authenticity of her visionary claims. Furthermore, delving into the dynamics and encounters between Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, their individual spiritual and life journeys can be studied further, shedding light on how they moved inside the broader religious network of medieval mysticism as women and writers.

[89] Jose, p. 255.

2.4 Mental Health and Gender Issues in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers a rich and nuanced depiction of its author. Over the centuries, the reception of this work has evolved significantly. Diagnosing historical figures, especially from a modern perspective, is challenging and often biased. However, by examining the cultural and social contexts in which these individuals lived, we can better understand how they interacted with their environments. Margery Kempe, who claimed to communicate directly with God and displayed behaviours deemed unconventional in her time, faced scepticism, ridicule, and accusations of heresy. Today, when reading her story and personal reflections, it is important to remember that we are interpreting the writings of a medieval woman who likely experienced mental health issues and did not receive medical assistance. Therefore, as we delve into her literary work in this section, it is crucial to approach her with the respect and empathy she deserves. This approach avoids infantilising her or her experiences, a tendency seen in some past critiques, as will be demonstrated in the following analysis. Here, I will investigate some of the major themes of *The Book of Margery Kempe* with a detailed analysis of selected themes. In subsequent sections, other themes will be compared to those in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Initially, Wynkyn de Worde published selections of Kempe's text in 1501, followed by Henry Pepwell in 1521, presenting a polished version of her life and omitting the more controversial elements. Indeed, the complete manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* remained unknown and was presumed lost until 1934. The full text unveiled a far more complex and multifaceted depiction of Margery Kempe, contrasting sharply with the earlier, selectively curated excerpts. This comprehensive version of the book elicited mixed critical reactions, as it revealed the depth and idiosyncrasy of Kempe's spiritual journey, challenging previous perceptions and inviting diverse interpretations. For instance, in his introduction to Butler Bowdon's 1936 translation, R.W. Chambers described Margery Kempe as a "difficult and morbid religious enthusiast."[90] This characterisation initiated a trend in interpreting Margery Kempe and her writings that

[90] Cited in Atkinson, Clarissa W., *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 197.

gained traction among literary critics in the subsequent years. Thomas Coleman asserted in 1937 that Margery "is surely to be variously labelled as eccentric, neurotic and psychopathic".[91] In his 1947 book *Mysticism in Religion*, William R. Inge also offered a critical view of Margery Kempe, describing her as "this hysterical young woman" who calls herself a "poor creature, and a poor creature I am afraid she was." Doing so, Inge continued this trend of attributing medical explanations to Margery's religious fervour, suggesting that "these results of unrestrained emotionalism belong rather to psychology and psychopathy, than to religion".[92] Since Inge, Margery Kempe has been variously diagnosed as "a hysteric, if not an epileptic"[93], "a very hysterical woman"[94], and as "quite mad – an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend".[95] More recently, Richard Lawes instead diagnosed Margery with a depressive psychosis of the puerperium, in conjunction with temporal lobe epilepsy. [96]

Also as a consequence of these varying diagnoses, issues of madness have long been acknowledged as central to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Yet, Kempe's encounter with madness, and how she or her contemporaries perceived it, is most comprehensible through theological rather than medical frameworks. This perspective allows us to see how her madness was intertwined with her spiritual and personal journey, as well as the medieval beliefs and social context of the time. As mentioned in the previous section, Margery Kempe's madness allowed her to redefine herself, transitioning from a bourgeois housewife to a devoted woman. However, before reshaping her identity, her experience with madness endangered it, as can be read in her writings. Indeed, these challenges to Margery Kempe's bodily identity mirrored challenges to her social identity as the demons induced her to forsake her friends, family and religion:

And also the develys cryed upon hir wyth greet thretyngys, and bodyn hir sche schuld forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth, and denyin hir God, hys modyr, and alle the seyntys in hevyn, hyr goode werkys and alle good vertues, hir fadyr, hyr modyr, and alle hire frendys. And so sche dede. Sche slawndred hir husbond, hir frendys, and her owyn self; sche spak many a reprevows worde and many a schrewyd worde;

[91] Cited in McEntire, Sandra J., "Introduction" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Sandra J. McEntire, Garland Medieval Casebooks 4, New York: Garland, 1992, p. X.
[92] Inge, William Ralph, cited in Mitchell, Marea, *The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community, and Criticism*, New York: Lang, 2005, p. 79.
[93] Colledge, Edmund, cited in Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, p. 200.
[94] Knowles, David, cited in McEntire, "Introduction" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, chapter XI.
[95] Howard, Donald R., cited in Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, p. 210.
[96] Lawes, Richard, "Psychological Disorder and the Autobiographical Impulse in Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Thomas Hoccleve" in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, p. 229.

sche knew no vertu ne goodnesse; sche desyryd all wykkednesse; lych as the spyrytys temptyd hir to sey and do, so sche seyd and dede.

("And also the devils cried upon her with great threats, commanding her that she should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, His mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, and herself; she spoke many a reproachful word and many a wicked word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; whatever the spirits tempted her to say and do, that she said and did", lines 206-214).

Social and religious identities, in passages like these, are intertwined in a manner foreign to Margery Kempe's later perspective. Throughout the remainder of the book, she defines her religious identity in contrast to societal norms; however, during her madness, these identities appear inseparable. Her sense of self within her madness still adheres to societal expectations: she has not yet broken free from convention as she later does. Indeed, her position in society significantly influences her encounter with madness. This mental state, by its nature, is an isolating condition that separates the afflicted individual from their community. She not only experiences this isolation but also witnesses a broader disruption of hierarchies[97], as she herself stated:

Evyr sche was turned ayen abak in tym of temptacyon – lech unto the reedspyr whech boweth wyth every wynd and nevyr is stable les than no wynd bloweth – unto the tyme that ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Jhesu, havyng pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur, turnyd helth into sekenesse, prosperyte into adversyte, worshep into repref, and love into hatered. Thus alle this thyngys turnyng up-so-down, this creatur, whych many yerys had gon wyl and evyr ben unstable, was parfythly drawen and steryd to entren the wey of hy perfeccyon...

("She was always turned back again in times of temptation – like unto the reed-spear which bends with every wind and is never stable unless no wind blows – until the time that our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, having pity and compassion for his handiwork and his creature, turned health into sickness, prosperity into adversity, honor into reproach, and love into hatred. By overturning all these things, this creature, who for many years had gone astray and ever been unstable, was perfectly drawn and stirred to enter the path of high perfection...", lines 17-25).

Margery Kempe characterises madness in terms of being an outcast from society, however, to some extent, she is able to use this in her favour. This radical loss of identity allows Kempe, on her recovery, to reposition herself in the social hierarchy, and write herself a new identity. From her declaration, that after she "comen ageyn to hir mende, sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt" ("came again to her mind, she understood she was bound to God and that she would be His servant", lines 253-255), Margery Kempe opens the way to a new role for herself as a holy woman and prophet. However, it is important to state again that, initially, she returns to her former

[97] Lawes, pp. 230-243.

identity as a housewife. Indeed, Margery Kempe's first sane act, after she is "stabelyd in hir wyttys and in hir reson" is to request "the keys of the botery to takyn hir mete and drynke as sche had don beforn" ("established in her wits and in her reason", "the keys of the pantry to take her food and drink as she had done before", line 237 and line 240). By this act, she reclaims her place in the household, and in turn, in her community.[98] By asking for the keys to the buttery, as a free woman she asserts her right to control both her food consumption and household, a theme that will be analysed later in this thesis. Indeed, the legal test to determine madness regularly included questions on economic ability over material goods.[99]

Nonetheless, beside a traumatic experience, Margery Kempe also views her madness as a providential experience. The proem emphasises God's role in both inducing and curing her madness, stating that Margery Kempe was "towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly sekeness, wherthorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace restoryd her ageyn" ("touched by the hand of our Lord with great bodily sickness, whereby she lost reason and her wits for a long time until our Lord, by grace, restored her again", lines 29-31). In fact, Kempe's madness is meaningful because she perceives it as both induced and cured by God: it is her madness and subsequent recovery that inspire her conversion. The moral instability of Margery Kempe's secular existence can only be cured by things "turnyng up-so-down" ("overturning", line 23): from the upheaval of madness, paradoxically, comes stability. Margery Kempe's recovery from madness is described by her as if she "comen ageyn to hir mende" ("came again to her mind", lines 253-254); she is "stabelyd in hir wyttys and in hir reson as wel as evyr sche was beforn" ("stabilised in her wits and in her reason as well as ever she was before", lines 237-238). If madness is movement and instability, sanity is then, in her words, adherence to a fixed point. Madness is an absence, and sanity a "retur" (this expression of madness characterised by movement, which will also recur in Hoccleve's *Complaint*[100], will be subsequently examined in detail in this thesis).

This description of Margery Kempe's experience seems to pinpoint it as half madness, half demonic possession. Indeed, she does not explicitly refer to her experience as

[98] Cullum, Pat, H., "'Yf lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce': Margery Kempe, Lynn, and the Practice of the Spiritual and Bodily Works of Mercy" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, p. 186.

[99] Goldie, Matthew, Boyd, "Psychomatic Illness and Identity in London, 1416-1421", *Exemplaria* 11, 1999, p. 31.

[100] Hoccleve, Thomas, *Complaint and Dialogue*, ed. by J. A. Burrow, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society (Original Series, 313), 1999, line 54. (This is the edition I use throughout the thesis).

madness. Her experience is never given a clear definition in her writings, but is characterised by what is absent: she states to be "owt of hir mende", and has "lost reson and her wyttes" ("out of her mind", line 199, "lost reason and her wits", lines 30-31). Margery Kempe's loss of reason, like everything else in her book, is instead presented in a religious context. Her madness is characterised by demonic temptation and by a renunciation of her Christian identity. Nonetheless, while demons play a large part in Margery Kempe's madness, with our modern knowledge we cannot characterise it clearly as a possession: she is tempted by demons and obeys their instructions, but remains a separate being. There is clearly still a self to be tempted, whereas, in cases of possession, the demon takes over the body entirely and speaks in place of the possessed subject. Additionally, the reaction of Margery Kempe's household accords with madness rather than possession; she is restrained and assigned keepers for her own safety, but no attempts are made to seek exorcism. As a result, and as stated at the beginning of this chapter, Margery Kempe's description and perception of her own madness can be best understood with theological rather than modern medical models. In other words, her behaviours and claims of divine communication should be interpreted in the context of religious beliefs and spiritual practices of her time, rather than diagnosing her with a mental illness by today's standards. This approach respects the historical and cultural context of her life and writings, while also acknowledging her mental health struggles without labelling them.[101]

2.4.1 Hearing Voices in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

In exploring the various facets of Margery Kempe's religious life, it is essential to contextualise her within the perceptions of her era, particularly regarding religion and mysticism. Her religious practice was not merely passive observance but demanded active engagement with many acts of penance. An exemplary illustration of this active religious life is evident in her multi-modal experiences, such as hearing the voice of the Lord, which necessitated her active and receptive involvement. She had "hy contemplacyon day be day, and many holy spech and dalyawns of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst both afornoon and aftyrnoon" ("high contemplation day by day, and many holy speeches and conversations

[101] Jose, Laura, *Madness and Gender in Late-Medieval English Literature*, Durham theses, Durham University, 2010, Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/217/ , accessed June 4 2024, p. 225.

with our Lord Jesus Christ both in the forenoon and afternoon", lines 925–926), but she also pleased the Lord by being "in silens" ("in silence", line 2922) and allowing him to "speke in [her] sowle" ("speak in [her] soul", line 2923), even being at times reluctant to care for her ailing husband because she would have been unable to attend to the Lord praying in church. Narrating the effects of what she describes as a "dalyawnce" ("conversation", line 2187) repeatedly required different sensory metaphors, especially those of taste like "swetnesse" ("sweetness", line 2189), and stimulated other affective experiences: "swet terys of hy devocyon" ("sweet tears of her devotion", line 927), love like a "flawme of fyer" ("flame of fire", line 2060), and physical "fallyng" ("falling", line 2190). Nevertheless, the narrative is also marked by a sense of the impossibility of conveying the ineffable and the gap between language and experience, and this aspect is highlighted many times. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is dominated by the sound of Margery Kempe's cries to the voice of vision, reflecting the impossibility of fully articulating a vision in language. Words never entirely capture the feeling and are always far from her real experiences, as Margery Kempe herself states saying that her experience was "so hy abovyn hir bodily wittys that sche myth nevyr expressyn hem wyth hir bodily tunge liche as sche felt hem" ("so high above her bodily wits that she might never express them with her bodily tongue as she felt them", lines 6793–6795). What she hears is repeatedly characterised as mysterious and mystical, as "secretys of hir sowle" ("secrets of her soul", line 1064) and as "aboven hyr reson" ("beyond her reason", line 62).
Kempe seems to investigate the nature of voice-hearing itself as she describes it to the English friar whom she meets at Assisi:

> Hir maner levyng, of hir felingys, of hir revelacyons, and of the grace that God wrowt in hir sowle be holy inspiracyons and hy contemplacyons, and howowyr Lord dalyed to hir sowle in a maner of spekyng.
>
> ("Her manner of living, her feelings, her revelations, and the grace that God wrought in her soul by holy inspirations and high contemplations, and how our Lord dallied with her soul in a manner of speaking", lines 2575–2578).

This phrase in particular, along with many others, closely matches descriptions by voice-hearers of the voices they seem to hear inside their mind. However, the voices Margery Kempe hears are not exclusively inner. Her writings suggest an acute awareness of different kinds of hearing: lying in bed, she hears "wyth hir bodily erys a lowde voys clepyng: 'Margery'" ("with her bodily ears a loud voice calling: 'Margery'", line 4381), and God speaks directly to her calling her "Dowtyr" ("Daughter", line 4386). She is also alert to different identities of the voices she hears. When she is sinful, the Lord's speech

is denied her, replaced by demonic voices and "horybyl syghtys and abhominabyl" ("horrible and abominable sights", lines 4863–4864), with the devil himself who "bad hir in hir mende" ("bid her in her mind", lines 4869–4870) to choose which man she would prostitute herself with. However, her prayer summons "hir good awngel" ("her good angel", line 4887) who explains verbally, using a different voice from the others, that her lack of faith will be punished for twelve days by the withdrawal of the Lord's voice, and in fact, her return to grace is marked by His speaking to her once again.

From this particular episode, it is evident that sounds, mainly represented as exterior hallucinations, are a special aspect of God's teaching to her. The experience that converts Margery Kempe to a life of chastity, purgation, and prayer, is auditory too: "a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as she had ben in paradyse" ("a sound of melody so sweet and delectable, she thought, as if she had been in paradise", lines 325–326). Instead, later she hears "so hedows a melodye that sche mygth not ber it" ("so hideous a melody that she could not bear it", line 1242) causing her to faint and hearing "wyth hir bodily erys sweche sowndys and melodiis that sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyd to hir in that tyme, les he spoke the lowder" ("with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she could not well hear what a man said to her at that time, unless he spoke louder", lines 2868–2870), as well as "gret sowndys and gret melodiis wyth hir bodily erys" ("great sounds and great melodies with her bodily ears", lines 6224–6245) that instead signalled heavenly joy. Her revelatory experience is then characterised by a diversity of sounds*:*

> Thys creatur had divers tokenys in hir bodily heryng. On was a maner of sownde, as it had ben a peyr of belwys blowyng in hir ere. Sche, beyng abasshed therof, was warnyd in hir sowle no fer to have, for it was the sownd of the Holy Gost. And than owr Lord turnyd that sownde into the voys of a dowe, and sithyn he turnyd it into the voys of a lityl bryd whech is callyd a reedbrest, that song ful merily oftyntymes in hir ryght ere. And than schuld sche evyrmor han gret grace aftyr that sche herd swech a tokyn. And sche had been used to swech tokenys abowt xxv yer at the writyng of this boke.
>
> ("This creature had various divine signs in her bodily hearing. One was a manner of sound, as if it had been a pair of bellows blowing in her ear. She, being astonished thereby, was warned in her soul not to be afraid, for it was the sound of the Holy Ghost. And then our Lord turned that sound into the voice of a dove, and afterwards he turned it into the voice of a little bird which is called a redbreast, that sang very cheerfully many times in her right ear. And then she should evermore have great grace after she heard such a sign. And she had been accustomed to such signs for about twenty-five years at the writing of this book", lines 2965–2974).

As previously stated, Margery Kempe and her experiences should be analysed through religious lenses within a strict theological context, rather than with the modern perspective of psychology. However, it is crucial to also investigate her mental state

during the episodes she describes, particularly her dialogues with God. Strikingly, as previously stated, the phenomenological richness of Margery Kempe's experiences aligns with what is today known about the experience of hearing voices. Moreover, it is also important to state that it aligns with the experiences of both those meeting the criteria for psychiatric diagnoses and that significant minority of individuals for whom hearing voices is part of everyday experience.[102] Indeed the phenomenological range of Margery Kempe's experiences, from clear external speech to the whispers of the Holy Ghost to the songs of birds, reflects that described by many voice-hearers today, as does the multi-sensory nature of her experiences. Although truly "fused" hallucinations (in which the same entity is, for example, both seen and heard) are rare in contemporary reports[103], many voice-hearers report that sensory and bodily sensations accompany their experiences.[104]

However, Margery Kempe's inner voices can also be considered, as seen in the examples above, an internal conversation. This view resonates with current scientific accounts of inner speech, the conversation with the self that many people report when they reflect on their inner experience. In the "Dialogic Thinking Model", inspired by the writings of the Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, inner speech develops through the gradual internalisation of social exchanges and thus retains its dialogic character. Another important feature of inner dialogue concerns the extent to which it is abbreviated or condensed relative to external speech. The Dialogic Thinking model holds that inner speech can vary between expanded and condensed forms: the former representing cases where inner dialogue takes the form of full sentences retaining the "to-and-fro of conversation", the latter describing exchanges in which the linguistic properties of the utterances are largely stripped away, approaching the state described by Vygotsky as "thinking in pure meanings".[105] Auditory verbal hallucinations, or voice-hearing experiences, are supposed to result when condensed inner speech is temporarily re-expanded into an expanded inner dialogue, causing the sudden emergence of multiple voices into consciousness. Margery Kempe's internal dialogue is a type of inner

[102] Saunders, Corinne, and Charles, Fernyhough, "Reading Margery Kempe's Inner Voices", *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 8, 2017, p. 212.
[103] Waters, Flavie, "Visual Hallucinations in the Psychosis Spectrum and Comparative Information from Neurodegenerative Disorders and Eye Disease", *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 40, 2014, pp. 233–245.
[104] Woods, Angela, Nev Jones, Ben Alderson-Day, Felicity Callard, and Charles Fernyhough, "Experiences of Hearing Voices: Analysis of a Novel Phenomenological Survey", *Lancet Psychiatry* 2, 2015, pp. 323–331.
[105] Vygotsky, Lev S., "Thinking and Speech", *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, Vol. 1, ed. by Robert W. Rieber and Aaron S. Carton, translated by Norris Minick, New York: Plenum, 1987, p. 281.

conversation with minimised linguistic features, where the distinct perspectives in the dialogue are represented simultaneously: a state of "being with" God. In its expanded form, Margery Kempe's inner dialogue becomes an explicit conversation with God, preserving the back-and-forth nature of external conversation. In essence, Margery Kempe believes she hears God (together with other "entities", as previously noted) speaking to her as an interlocutor, and she speaks back as in a conversation with a real person within her mind.[106]

2.4.2 Patriarchy Issues in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Apart from determining a diagnosis for Margery Kempe, another question frequently raised by her critics is the cause of her madness. Reading her chronicle, the onset of madness follows Kempe's attempts to confess a "thing whech sche had so long conselyd" ("thing which she had so long concealed", lines 194-195). Although more details of the "thing" are never given, critics have variously regarded it as connected to either sex or heresy.[107] This unconfessed sin leaves a gap at the heart of Margery Kempe's text. Being a work centred on an absence, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is reminiscent of Hoccleve's *Complaint*, which, as I will analyse subsequently, is also structured around a madness that remains undescribed. Both works imply that there is an aspect of madness that cannot be completely expressed. The undisclosed sin must be significant, as Margery Kempe delays confessing it until she fears for her life. While lying ill after childbirth, she calls for a confessor:

> In ful wyl to be schrevyn of alle hir lyfetym, as ner as sche cowde. And whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing... hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye and gan scharply to undyrnemyn hir, er than sche had fully seyd hir entent, and so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he mygth do.
>
> ("In full willingness to be shriven of all her lifetime, as near as she could. And when she came to the point to say that thing... her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her, before she had fully expressed her intent, and so she would say no more, for nothing he might do", lines 192-197).

Consequently, it can be stated that Margery Kempe's madness occurs when the confessor prevents her from making a full confession, indeed, after her confession is abruptly halted she states:

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[106] Fernyhough, Charles, *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves*, London: Profile Books/Wellcome Collection, 2016, p. 110.
[107] McAvoy, Liz Herbert, "Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe", *Studies in Medieval Mysticism* 5, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 34-35.

Anoon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde, and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer, viii wekys and odde days.

("Immediately, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one side, and his sharp reproving on the other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderfully vexed and troubled by spirits for half a year, eight weeks, and odd days", lines 197-201).

That Margery Kempe's madness arises in response to the intervention of her male confessor also suggests it could be, in part, a reaction to the patriarchal discourse of the Church. It can be argued that the confessor's interruption of her attempts to conform to societal norms prompts her adoption of new norms and a new language through her madness. This new beginning is manifested in Margery Kempe's pious weeping and uncontrollable bodily contortions, representing, at least to her, an expression understood only by the spiritually privileged or genuinely holy. Within *The Book of Margery Kempe*, this entire episode serves as a model where the deficiencies and constraints of religious male-centred rhetoric are thoroughly scrutinised and replaced. This expression of herself, acknowledged and valued by God, is subsequently employed by the author to dismantle established boundaries, advocating for the feminine not just as an alternative, but also as a superior path to achieving spiritual and worldly authority. Indeed, it is crucial to underscore Margery Kempe's perception of herself as a woman, a mother, and consequently a non-virgin—elements profoundly valued within Christian contexts and narratives—that she believed brought her closer to God and holiness,[108] an aspect that will be subject to further analysis in a subsequent section of this thesis. Although interpreting Margery Kempe's madness in the contexts of language and resistance to patriarchy is intriguing, this approach poses challenges. While her madness and subsequent conversion, depicted with feminine imagery, may partly reflect challenges within a patriarchal society and her interactions with the confessor, the connection between her madness and eventual holiness is complex. Although both madness and holiness are deeply tied to her feminine identity, this does not necessarily mean there is a simple cause-and-effect relationship between them. The very existence of *The Book of Margery Kempe* underscores the inadequacy of interpreting her bodily gestures without deeper analysis.[109]

[108] McAvoy, Liz Herbert, "Monstrous Masculinities in Julian of Norwich's A Revelation of Love and The Book of Margery Kempe" in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, pp. 55-60.
[109] McAvoy, *Monstrous Masculinities,* p. 66.

As previously analysed, Margery Kempe's inability to complete her confession serves as a catalyst for her descent into madness. Confession, demanding a comprehensive retelling of one's life, functions as a means of self-mapping through storytelling. Her struggle to articulate a coherent life narrative profoundly influences her self-perception. Her failure to achieve this coherence directly precipitates her madness, manifesting as a visible expression of her narrative fragmentation. Yet, paradoxically, Kempe's creation of her book signifies her reclaiming the authority to narrate her own story. Despite her madness causing a deep alienation from herself, documenting her life allows her to assert agency over her narrative. Rather than isolating her from written expression, her madness prompts a transformative process that enables her to engage with a literary tradition dominated by men since Augustine's *Confessions.* Throughout her literary work, Margery Kempe's experience underscores the complex interplay between narrative construction, madness, and self-reclamation, positioning her within a broader discourse of literary agency and gender-biased narratives.[110]

2.4.3 Motherhood and Food in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Margery Kempe shows a profound awareness of the literary conventions defining her role as a mystic and actively participates in them. Her perceived madness is not solely a reaction to patriarchal pressures within the Church, as embodied by her confessor; it is closely linked with her experience of motherhood, emerging shortly after the birth of her first child and profoundly shaping the course of her narrative. Significantly and as already stated, Margery Kempe's madness lasts "half yer eight wekys and odde days" ("half year, eight weeks and a few more days", lines 149-150), almost the same length of time as a full-term pregnancy, as noted by many scholars.[111] Moreover, other images of pregnancy and childbirth are prominent in her experience of madness. For instance, her description of madness as being "labowryd wyth spyritys" ("struggling with spirits", line 149) is particularly interesting, echoing as it does her description of childbirth: "sche was labowrd wyth grett accessys tyl the chyld was born and than, what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng beforn, sche dyspered of her lyfe" ("she was struggling with great fever until the child was born, and then, because of the pain she had in

[110] Salih, Sarah, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001, pp. 177-180.
[111] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* p. 36.

childbirth and the sickness preceding it, she despaired of her life", lines 177-180). Notably, "labowr" here is not equivalent to the modern English "labour", referring as it does to "pain" or "struggle" in general, rather than the pains of childbirth in particular. Margery Kempe's repeated use of the term on these two different occasions, however, does suggest that she associates it with her experiences of childbirth. Therefore, it is Margery Kempe herself who attributes her madness to her traumatic experiences of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood. As previously noted, it represents a bodily expression of her unconfessed and sinful condition, marking her transition from virginity to wifehood and motherhood. However, while Margery Kempe's madness could be interpreted as an attempt to grapple with the perceived sinfulness of sexuality and her own tainted sense of self, it may also be understood as a response to childbirth rather than sexuality itself. Indeed, upon reading the *Book of Margery Kempe*, it is possible to find a sense of her initial enjoyment of sexuality before the conversion, rather than any overt sense of shame. Post-conversion, Margery Kempe laments that she and her husband had previously "dysplesyd God by her inordynat lofe and the gret delectacyon that thei haddyn eythyr of hem in usyng of other" ("displeased God by her inordinate love and the great delight that they had between them in using each other", lines 357-359).[112]

Another significant aspect of pregnancy, where two beings inhabit the same body, is the disruption of Margery Kempe's natural, unified sense of self, foreshadowing her later experience of madness. Pregnancy is metaphorically likened to demonic possession, where one entity inhabits another's body. While Margery Kempe's experience does not fully align with this pattern, her sense of self is still threatened and nearly overwhelmed by a perceived demonic influence. Furthermore, as with pregnancy, Margery Kempe loses complete control over her body, heightening her sense of vulnerability:

> And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys [flames] of fyr, as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng [pawing] at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng [hauling] hir bothe nygth and day duryng the forseyd tyme.... Sche wold a fordon hirself many a tym at her steryngys and a ben damnyd wyth hem in helle, and into wytnesse therof sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently that it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And also sche roof hir skyn on hir body ayen hir hert wyth hir nayles spetowsly, for sche had noon other instrumentys, and wers sche wold a don, saf sche was bowndyn and kept wyth strength bothe day and nygth that sche mygth not have hir wylle.
>
> ("And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths all inflamed with burning flames of fire, as if they would have swallowed her in, sometimes ramping at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and hauling her both night and day during the aforementioned time.... She would have destroyed herself many times at their urgings and been damned with them in hell, and as evidence thereof, she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life after. And also she tore the skin on her body against her heart with her nails fiercely, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would

[112] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 36-37.

have done, except she was bound and kept with strength both day and night so that she could not have her will", lines 202-221).

Her body becomes a "wytnesse" to a conflict between conflicting identities: the foetus within her, like the demons outside, appears to threaten her stable selfhood. Moreover, both conditions manifest visibly on the body, marked by physical changes and wounds. The demons are like demanding children to Margery Kempe, and her fear of being swallowed relates not only to a symbolic loss of self but also to a more literal consumption. Her body, through pregnancy and lactation, has served as food for her child, and this cycle of consumption continues into her madness. Not only do demons threaten to devour her, but Margery also bites into her own flesh, suggesting a desire for self-consumption. Her self-harming actions associate madness, akin to childbirth, with a violent disruption of bodily integrity, involving the shedding of blood and breaking of skin. Notably, Margery Kempe's return to sanity is also marked by her return to normal eating patterns. It is indeed fitting that her sanity is measured by eating, considering her madness was marked by fears of being consumed. Eating serves to redefine Margery Kempe's bodily boundaries and crucially restores the control over her body lost during her madness. Just as her body is "wytnesse" to her madness, it also seems to bear witness to her return to sanity:

And sche toke hyr mete and drynke as his bodyly strength wold servyn hir, and knew hir frendys and hir meny, and all other that cam to hir to se how owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst had wrowt hys grace in hir...

("And she took her food and drink as her bodily strength would serve her, and knew her friends and her many acquaintances, and all others who came to her to see how our Lord Jesus Christ had wrought His grace in her...", lines 245-248).

While madness drove Margery Kempe towards self-destruction, sanity begins with self-preservation through nourishment. Her approach to food differs from that of many other mystics, as there is no emphasis on miraculous abstinence or sustenance solely through the Eucharist. Nonetheless, food and feeding occupy a central place in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and her conception of madness.[113] In the Middle Ages, feeding was inherently linked to femininity as food shaped women's lives, including their duties and privileges, more profoundly than it did those of men. Margery Kempe's conventional social role as a wife and mother is closely tied to the act of providing food, and the framework of eating and feeding shapes her experience as both a holy and mad woman.

[113] Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 208.

In the Middle Ages, "feeding" held profound religious significance for women, functioning as both a transitive and intransitive verb encapsulated in the Latin term "pascere": they nurtured others while they also fed spiritually on God.[114] To Margery Kempe too, being a woman from the Middle Ages, food practices and images were fundamental. Even on a basic level, her narrative is structured around instances of feeding. Food consumption marks not only the end of her madness but also such crucial moments as her adoption of a vow of chastity, which she and her husband mark by "etyn and dronkyn togedyr in gret gladnes of spyryt" ("eating and drinking together in great gladness of spirit", lines 790-791).[115]

Similarly, many 14th-century mystics, predominantly women, interpreted their experience of God through their bodies and senses, a practice closely tied to the association of femininity with physicality. This connection enabled these women to emphasise their physical expression of "Imitatio Christi". By employing and exploiting their feminine physicality, they sought to transcend it in pursuit of higher spirituality, for instance through restricted eating.[116] Furthermore, the refusal of food could symbolise a rejection of familial bonds, as food represented the most basic provision of a husband or father's resources. Consequently, it can also be seen as a demonstration of agency: in a medieval world dominated by the patriarchal institutions of marriage, the Church, and the Crown, a woman could assert control over the food she consumed.[117] Indeed, by the late 14th century, some religious women began to engage in extreme forms of fasting that mirror the severe eating disorders observed today. Colloquially known as the "holy anorexics", this condition has been retrospectively termed "Anorexia mirabilis", a miraculous absence of appetite.[118] During her early marriage, Margery Kempe undertook her own penance, independent of a confessor, during which she would fast on bread and water only and pray, although she felt this did not relieve her sins. Interestingly, this occurs as marriage and pregnancy hold significant changes for Margery and before she experiences them as a shift in agency and identity.[119]

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[114] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* p. 130.
[115] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 186.
[116] Lochrie, Karma, "The Book of Margery Kempe: The Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16, 1986, pp. 33–55.
[117] Mazzoni, Cristina, "Of Stockfish and Stew: Feasting and Fasting in the Book of Margery Kempe", *Food & Foodways* 10, 2003, pp. 171–182.
[118] Forcen, Fernando E., "Anorexia Mirabilis: The Practice of Fasting by St. Catherine of Siena in the Late Middle Ages", *American Journal of Psychiatry* 170, 2013, pp. 370–371.
[119] Herbert, M. A. L., *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 34-35.

As already stated, after her first pregnancy, Margery Kempe reports being persecuted by demons for nearly eight months. During this period, she engages in several instances of self-harm despite being physically restrained and ate very little. Her torment ended only after a visitation from Christ, who asked, "Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?" ("Daughter, why have you forsaken me, when I have never forsaken you?", line 173). Following this, she reports feeling "Stabelyd in hir wyttys and in hir reson as wel as evyr sche was beforn." ("stabilised in her wits and in her reason as well as she ever was before", line 177). Margery Kempe then returns to normal eating but is later commanded by Christ to refrain from drinking or eating meat on Fridays, a vow she undertakes until she negotiates her chastity with her husband. While her major postpartum fast was never repeated, brief fasting and no meat or wine on many days remained as rules.[120] However, her husband, as well as the society around her, to some extent, sought to protect her from herself. For example, after being released from prison during one of her pilgrimages, the customary laws of Normandy were invoked, requiring that she be chained or constantly guarded to prevent her from harming herself or others[121] since in her madness Margery Kempe displayed the very violent traits discussed above:

Sche wold a fordon hirself many a tym at her steryngys and a ben damnyd wyth hem in helle. And into wytnesse therof sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently that it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And also sche roof hir skyn on hir body agen hir hert wyth hir nayles spetowsly, for sche had noon other instrumentys, and wers sche wold a don saf sche was bowndyn and kept wyth strength bothe day and nygth that sche mygth not have hir wylle.

("She would have destroyed herself many times at their [of the demons] urgings and been damned with them in hell. And as evidence thereof, she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life after. And also she tore her skin on her body against her heart with her nails fiercely, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have done, except she was bound and kept with strength both day and night so that she might not have her will", lines 160-165.)

As stated at the beginning, today many scholars believe that trying to diagnose historical figures retrospectively is fraught with difficulties and modern biases. However, we can examine the sociocultural environment in which these people lived and how they interacted with it. By doing so, for instance, we can understand how women who used food to influence their lives fit within their broader sociocultural context. These scholars also note that what we now see as a disease caused by a complex mix of emotional, social,

[120] Beckwith, Sarah, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe" in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. by David Aers, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986, pp. 34–57.
[121] My translation of Le Cacheux, Paul, ed. *Actes de la Chancellerie d'Henri VI concernant Normandie sous la Domination Anglaise (1422-1435), Tome I*, Paris: A. Picard Fils et Cie, Libraires de la Société de l'École des Chartes, 1907, pp. 181-183.

familial, and existential factors could be viewed in medieval Europe as a miracle.[122] However, it is important to note once again that Margery Kempe would today merit consideration through various psychiatric perspectives for many reasons, such as her intense weeping, severe post-natal fasting and depression, and lifelong religious visions and experiences, which were not universally experienced by others. After the 14th century, the Catholic Church began to discourage extreme fasting acknowledging its risks actively.[123] However, Margery Kempe (along with other figures like Catherine of Siena) found solace and spiritual redemption through their suffering via fasting and *Imitatio Christi*. As previously mentioned, this framework enabled them to navigate and excel within a world dominated by male-centric institutions, and that is why their experiences of suffering may challenge our contemporary understanding of mental disorders. Indeed, we must avoid directly equating their suffering with modern notions of distress, as *Imitatio Christi* is in complete opposition to what the medical community does today, which is to alleviate all kinds of suffering. That is why it can be perplexing when patients derive pleasure from their afflictions as Margery Kempe and Catherine of Siena, who pursued suffering as a means to a higher goal, which is for instance a common sentiment among patients with eating disorders, despite the underlying pathological mechanisms and physical harm associated with their desired affliction.[124]

2.4.4 Sexuality in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

In Margery Kempe's spiritual practice of *Imitatio Christi*, her approach transcends her relationship with food to encompass her entire body. Notably, as a woman who embraces and sees holiness in her body's sexual nature—contrasting with the typically virginal ideal of holy female figures—Kempe argues for the sanctity of her physicality, including its capacity to bear children and lactate. Furthermore, her embrace of maternity emphasises that her sexuality and marital status do not hinder her pursuit of *Imitatio Christi*; instead, they are integral to it and even privileged by it.[125] However, Christ praises her holiness precisely in terms of motherhood and endorses her viewpoint: "thu art to me a very modir

[122] Hubert, L. J., "Anorexia and a Bearded Female Saint", *British Medical Journal* 285, 1982, pp. 1816–1817.
[123] Harris, J., "Anorexia Nervosa and Anorexia Mirabilis, Miss K.R. – and St. Catherine of Siena", *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, 2014, pp. 12–13.
[124] Lieberman, Jeffrey, and Ogas, Ogi, *Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2015, p. 127.
[125] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 49.

and to al the world, for that gret charite that is in the" ("You are to me a true mother, and to all the world, because of the great charity that is in you", lines 2976-2977). Moreover, Christ assures Margery that, although virginity is more highly prized by the Church, He still loved her:

Trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thow dost, for, thow the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state of wedlake, yet, dowtyr, I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world.

("Believe right well that I love married women also, especially those married women who would live chastely, if they could have their will, and do their best to please me as you do. For though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of marriage, yet, daughter, I love you as well as any maiden in the world", lines 1568-1574).

Margery Kempe's experience of motherhood and madness follows a shared paradigm where bodily openness and vulnerability align closely with the potential for holiness. In essence, both her body and mind must be spiritually opened by God through madness to achieve spiritual fruitfulness. However, the dynamic of her relationship with Christ is juxtaposed with her view of a husband. While she describes the exchange of fluids between herself and Christ in a positive light, she perceives her sexual relationship with John Kempe in negative terms. After her conversion, Margery Kempe becomes deeply troubled by sexual intercourse, likening it to the repulsive consumption of filth from a gutter:

Sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose [ooze], the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng, saf only for obedyens.

("She had never desired to have physical relations with her husband, for the duty of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, eat or drink the worst ooze, the muck in the channel, than consent to any physical intimacy, except only out of obedience", lines 346-350).

The image vividly captures Margery Kempe's profound aversion to her husband's sexual desires: it becomes intertwined with the impurities and bodily waste that threaten survival. Like madness, sex is depicted as an act of inappropriate consumption. Whereas madness involves her struggle to consume her own flesh, sex is likened to ingesting waste. Both acts represent futile attempts at nourishment that only harm the body. Margery Kempe appears to equate sex with the loss of self that she endured during pregnancy and

madness, situations where autonomy and bodily integrity were compromised. Indeed, following her conversion, she perceives sexual desire as a form of possession.[126]
However, the most notable example of Margery Kempe's internal struggle with the perception of bodily impurity is when Christ punishes her for her inability to accept the notion of eternal damnation, with visions of naked, demonic priests:

Sche sey, as hir thowt veryly, dyvers men of religyon, preystys, and many other, bothyn hethyn and Cristen, comyn befor hir syght, that sche myth not enchewyn hem ne puttyn hem owt of hir syght, schewyng her bar membrys unto hir. And therwyth the devyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle, and sche must be comown to hem alle.... Hir thowt that he seyd trewth; sche cowde not sey nay; and sche must nedys don hys byddyng, and yet wolde sche not a don it for alle this worlde.... Wher sche went er what so sche dede, thes cursyd mendys abedyn wyth hir.

("She saw, as she thought truly, various men of religion, priests, and many others, both heathen and Christian, coming before her sight that she could not avoid or put out of her sight, showing her bare members to her. And there, the devil urged her in her mind to choose whom she would have first of them all, and she had to be common to them all.... She thought that he spoke the truth; she could not say no; and she had to do his bidding, and yet she would not do it for all this world.... Wherever she went or whatever she did, these cursed men stayed with her", lines 4866-4878).

As appears evident in her writings, this vision strikingly resembles the torments Margery Kempe endured during her period of madness, both involving subordination to demonic instructions against her will. More importantly, her body is central to both episodes; both centring on the transformation of her body into an object to be manipulated by others, and from which Margery Kempe herself is alienated. In her madness, the body is pushed and pulled by surrounding demons; similarly, her transformation into a sexual object suggests a concurrent loss of bodily agency. Even in less dramatic contexts, sexual desire exhibits the same characteristics as possession. As stated in the previous chapters, Margery Kempe is tempted by more prosaic sexual impulses two years after her conversion, when she is overwhelmed by her desire for a man she meets in church, and is tempted into committing adultery. These thoughts of sexual desire seem to originate outside herself; much like in her madness, she is powerless to control her own mind, which is instead governed by demonic persuasion:

The devyl put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not so ben temptyd. She levyd the develys suasyons and gan to consentyn for because sche cowde thynkyn no good thowt. Therfor wend sche that God had forsake hir.

[126] McAvoy, Liz Herbert, "Virgin, Mother, Whore: The Sexual Spirituality of Margery Kempe" in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, ed. by Susannah Mary Chewning, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 121-125.

("The devil put in her mind that God had forsaken her, or else she would not have been so tempted. She believed the Devil's suggestions and began to consent because she could think no good thought. Therefore, she thought that God had forsaken her", lines 446-449).

Indeed, the idea of the devil putting temptation into a person's mind was a doctrinal commonplace in the Middle Ages. For instance, in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" it is written: "atte laste the feend, oure enemy, / Putte in his thought that he sholde poyson beye, / With which he myghte sleen his felawes tweye" ("At last the fiend, our enemy, / Put into his thought that he should poison both, / With which he might slay his two companions").[127] However, this takes on particular significance in the context of Margery Kempe's experiences of madness, as her mental struggles often resemble patterns of demonic possession, mirroring how she experienced them. A clear example is the previously mentioned word "labowr", which as stated previously, is associated in her text with pregnancy and madness, but also linked to adulterous desires:

This creatur was so labowrd and vexyd... that sche wyst nevyr what sche mygth do. Sche lay be hir husbond, and for to comown wyth hym it was so abhomynabyl onto hir that sche mygth not duren it, and yet was it leful onto hir in leful tyme yf sche had wold. But evyr sche was labowrd wyth the other man for to syn wyth hym in-as-mech as he had spoke to hir.

("This creature was so in struggle and vexed... that she knew never what she might do. She lay by her husband, and to have intimacy with him was so abominable to her that she could not endure it, and yet it was lawful for her in lawful time if she had wanted. But she was always troubled by the other man to sin with him as much as he had spoken to her", lines 453-459).

Therefore, the recurrence of the word "labowr" suggests a conceptual link not only between pregnancy and madness but also to sex. All three involve a form of bodily invasion and subsequent alienation from her body, which Margery Kempe then views as the property of another. Additionally, all three are also associated with unproductive feeding. This connection to food resurfaces again after she consents to adultery, only to be decisively rejected by her intended partner, who exclaims that "he had levar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to the pott" ("he would rather have been chopped as small as flesh for the pot", line 463) than sleep with her. In this image, sex is once again depicted as a destructive force, acting on the body and linked to images of feeding and eating. However, it is important to note that this image is presented specifically as an alternative to sexual intercourse in this case. Here, chastity is defined by its ability to feed and nourish others, contrasting with the harmful consumption associated with sex.

[127] Chaucer, Geoffrey, "The Pardoner's Tale" in *The Riverside Chaucer,* Gen. Ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, lines 844-846.

In conclusion, the depiction of mental health issues in *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only tells of intense religious devotion but also explores her author's personal struggles with spirituality and societal expectations in medieval times. Her story weaves together experiences of madness, gender roles, motherhood, food, and sexuality, highlighting the tensions between personal freedom, societal norms, and devotion to God. Margery Kempe challenges traditional views of medieval mysticism by showing herself a woman with her own strength, resilience, and deep desire for spiritual connection, despite her unconventional ways. Her honest portrayal, from hearing divine voices to navigating marital issues, provides a nuanced look at how gender, mental well-being, and faith intersected in late medieval England. Viewing Margery Kempe's story through a theological lens, rather than simplifying it with medical or superficial interpretations, reveals the richness of her perceptions of life and beliefs in a precise context. This invites further scholarly exploration into her work, acknowledging its complexities and the diverse ways her book can be understood today. In the next chapter, I will explore these themes further, particularly in comparison to Julian of Norwich and her work *Revelations of Divine Love*. She and Margery Kempe lived in Norfolk during the same period and shared similar spiritual experiences, offering distinct but complementary perspectives that, in my opinion, are worth studying together as they reveal even more nuances if compared.

3

Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich

The writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich resist simple categorisation as purely theological texts; however, they can be studied as literary works that document the lives of two non-noble women in late medieval England, a rarity for that period. As explained previously, despite living in a deeply patriarchal society, Margery Kempe was a woman who actively defied societal expectations. Not easily silenced or confined to domestic duties, she asserted her autonomy by detailing her spiritual journeys and life despite the constraints imposed on women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Similarly, Julian of Norwich wielded her extensive knowledge and literary ability to transcend the limitations of her historical period. Her *Revelations of Divine Love*, originally a personal account of mystical experiences, later evolved into a profound theological treatise. With her text, as I will analyse in this chapter, Julian of Norwich challenged the prevailing theological doctrines, offering her insights into God's love and humanity's relationship with the divine that rivalled the works of contemporary male theologians, sharing many similarities with *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that the mystical experiences of both Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich were closely linked to episodes of psychological trauma: Kempe's visions and auditory phenomena were prompted by postpartum psychological distress while Julian of Norwich's mystical experiences followed a near-death episode, as I will later analyse in this thesis. These traumatic experiences significantly shaped their spiritual narratives along with their literary and theological expression. By examining these two writings together, within their historical and cultural contexts, it is possible to gain insight into how Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich navigated and reshaped their time's intellectual and spiritual landscapes. Moreover, in exploring the mystical writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, this section will examine their distinct approaches to narrative and theological expression.

As stated previously, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is widely celebrated as the first autobiography in the English language, however, recent scholarship has also reinterpreted it as a sort of "sacred biography". This perspective suggests that the text is a fictive narrative grounded in real events, featuring a character who functions more as a literary persona than a straightforward representation of the historical Margery Kempe.

Accordingly, critics have even started to differentiate between the "Margery", called "creatur" in the text, and the writer herself Margery Kempe who tells the story.[128] However, scholars such as Anthony Goodman argue that, despite its third-person narration, *The Book of Margery Kempe* primarily reflects Kempe's own real story, or at least her perceptions of it, rather than false accounts invented by her or strictly those of her amanuenses. Occasionally, the second amanuensis interjects his voice into the narrative; however, it is only to lend credence to the claims about Margery Kempe's saintly attributes.[129] Indeed, despite the scribe's role in transcribing her oral text into written form, *The Book of Margery Kempe* maintains a literary emphasis on highlighting the voice of a mystic, whose femininity is prominently emphasised in the text. Moreover, it focuses on the spoken word as a primary vehicle for disseminating its mystical themes, thus excluding any scribe's original content.[130]

In contrast, Julian of Norwich approached her revelations with a different intent, even if in the same historical, geographical and social context. According to Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, Julian composed her texts between the mid-1370s and her death, more than forty years later.[131] Watson suggests the Short Text was completed between 1382 and 1388, with the Long Text (which started to be called *Revelations of Divine Love* only in 1670) composed in the early fifteenth century.[132] Instead, Colledge and Walsh argue that Julian wrote the Short Text shortly after her visionary experiences in 1373 and revised it into the Long Text in two stages, the first beginning in 1388 and the second in 1393.[133] However, unlike Margery Kempe's narrative persona and despite all their similarities, Julian's texts evolve into "a speculative vernacular theology" without much emphasis on her protagonist, as noted by Watson and Jenkins.[134] Effectively, in her second and longer text, Julian transitions from participant to only an interpreter, reshaping her initial record of visionary experiences into a real theological work. This transformation underscores Julian's role as a mystic and an interpreter of divine

[128] Staley, Lynn, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 37.
[129] Goodman, Anthony, "The Piety of John of Brunham's Daughter", in *Medieval Women*, ed. by Derek Baker, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, pp. 347-349.
[130] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 178 and p. 200.
[131] Watson, Nicholas, and Jenkins, Jacqueline eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, p. 1.
[132] Watson, Nicholas, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love", *Speculum* 68, 1993, p. 637.
[133] Colledge, Edmund, and Walsh, James eds., *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978, p. 18.
[134] Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings*, p. 3.

revelations, marking a distinctive approach to her spiritual narrative. Indeed, while Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich are comparable figures to some extent, and both contributed significant works to medieval mystical literature, their writings diverged significantly in narrative style and theological interpretation. This divergence might also be attributed to the different nature of the psychological traumas that provoked their mystical experiences and writing intent, as will be discussed further.

Moreover, unlike Margery Kempe, only little is known about the life of Julian of Norwich. There are only scant references and limited personal details available, such as the earliest surviving manuscript of her work, copied by a scribe in the 1470s, which explicitly identifies her as the author. Nonetheless, there are earlier references to Julian of Norwich appearing in four wills, where she is described as an anchoress and given small sums of money by deceased parishioners. Apart from these mentions, Julian's own writings offer minimal autobiographical information. As already stated, this aspect starkly contrasts with Margery Kempe, who vividly positions herself as the central figure in her own narratives.[135] Despite the scarcity of personal information, Julian of Norwich was well known within her community, at least as a spiritual adviser. Margery Kempe seeking her out for spiritual guidance also evidences Julian's respected authority in this context. Nonetheless, historians remain uncertain about some important aspects of Julian of Norwich, such as her actual name. It is commonly believed that her name was derived from the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, to which her cell was attached. Notably, "Julian" was also a common name in the Middle Ages, suggesting it could have been her given Christian name. This ambiguity highlights the broader challenges in piecing together her biography from the limited available sources.[136] However, one aspect about which historians all agree is that Julian of Norwich spent her entire life in the English city of Norwich, which was second only to London in importance during the 13th and 14th centuries and served as the centre of the country's primary region for agriculture and trade.[137] When Julian was six years old, Norwich experienced its first outbreak of the Black Death. Although Julian survived, the epidemic devastated the city, killing three-quarters of the population within a year and persisting for three years. The city came to a standstill; essential tasks like road repairs and shepherding ceased, and the wool trade collapsed. Gradually, life began to return to Norwich but it never fully recovered. At the

[135] Baker, Denise N., "Julian of Norwich and Anchoritic Literature", *Mystics Quarterly* 19, 1993, p. 148.
[136] Windeatt, Barry ed., *Revelations of Divine Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. xiii.
[137] Ramirez, Janina, *Julian of Norwich: A Very Brief History*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2016, p. 17.

age of nineteen, Julian witnessed the collapse of the steeple of Norwich Cathedral during a storm, an event that seemed to many an omen. A few months later, the Black Death returned, this time affecting infants and young children, seemingly confirming the ominous event. During this period, many people believed that the plague was a divine punishment for humanity's sins, sparing no social class. The plague struck again in 1368, accompanied by a cattle disease and a poor harvest the following year.[138] In her work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian recounts becoming seriously ill some years after this last plague, at the age of 30. She may have already been an anchoress at the time, although it is possible she was still a layperson living at home since she was visited by her mother and other individuals, not other religious figures like nuns, and such visits would typically be restricted under the rules of enclosure for an anchoress. On 8 May 1373, a curate administered the last rites to her in anticipation of her death. As he held a crucifix above her bed, she began to lose her sight and feel physically numb. While gazing at the crucifix, she saw the figure of Jesus begin to bleed. Over the next several hours, she experienced a series of 15 visions of Jesus, with a 16th vision occurring the following night.[139] Julian made a complete recovery from her illness on 13 May. It is generally agreed that she wrote about her "Shewings" (as she refers to her visions) shortly after experiencing them.

This profound experience marked the beginning of her religious mystical awakening, similar to that of Margery Kempe.[140] Moreover, some details written in her test remain unclear. For instance, the exact meaning of Julian's self-description as a "simple creature unlettyrde" remains ambiguous, as the last term often referred to knowledge of Latin. Julian may have been illiterate; however, if she had been a nun, she would likely have had the ability to read in English or French and some basic knowledge of Latin. The education of nuns during this period was similar to that of women in general, focusing on learning the alphabet, basic prayers, and the Psalter, but not extending deeply into Latin grammar. Consequently, most nuns could read Latin well enough to recognise and pronounce words, but their comprehension and ability to study the language were limited. Full understanding was typically reserved for texts in French or English. For instance, like most medieval women, Margery Kempe lacked the education necessary to write a theological treatise grounded in reason and scholarly authority. Higher learning

[138] Upjohn, Sheila, and Groves, Nicholas, *St Julian's Church Norwich*, Norwich: The Friends of Julian of Norwich, 2018, p. 13.
[139] Windeatt, *Revelations*, p. ix.
[140] Leyser, Henrietta, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450–1500*, London: Phoenix Press, 2002, p. 219.

institutions were inaccessible to her, and women generally learned only enough Latin to participate in the mass. Even nuns, who usually received more education than the average laywoman, did not attain sufficient Latin literacy for any kind of textual production.[141] However, by Julian's time, women were increasingly interested in personal forms of religious devotion, which encouraged the expression of spirituality through both spoken and written words. Even in lay life, there is a distinct possibility that Julian was literate at least in English. In the fourteenth century, true education was typically associated with the ability to read Latin, and it is perhaps this form of illiteracy to which Julian refers. As a nun, Julian would have had access to education beyond that of most laywomen. However, as a mystic and recipient of divine visions, her writings might have been considered more authoritative than others by literate people. Indeed, as a woman, Julian was not seen as capable of reasoning her way to God through learning, however, as a mystic and anchoress, she was viewed as capable of receiving direct revelation from Him.[142]

3.1 Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich as Mystics and Suffering Feminine Bodies

Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich are significant figures in both literary and theological studies, offering profound insights into the religious and cultural fabric of medieval England. Their writings, rich with spiritual experiences and theological reflections, demand close examination not only for their content but also for the unique perspectives they bring as women of their time. While it is important to avoid an overly modern analysis that might overshadow the broader historical and cultural contexts in which they lived and wrote, it is also essential to acknowledge their gender, which shaped their experiences and writings. Another shared key aspect to consider is that both their mystical experiences, such as visions and auditory phenomena, were induced by episodes of mental afflictions: Margery Kempe's by postpartum psychological trauma and Julian's by a near-death experience psychological trauma similar to Kempe's. This is an important point to highlight since it is their madness experiences that initiated their writing production. Reading their works with this crucial detail in mind adds a new light and

[141] Orme, Nicholas, *Medieval Schools*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 275.
[142] Spearing, Anthony C. ed., "Introduction" in *Revelations of Divine Love*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998, p. ix, quoting Riddy, Felicity, "Women Talking about the Things of God: A Late Medieval Subculture" in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. by Carol M. Meale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

allows us to investigate them beyond literary documents but also as productions of women who suffered from episodes of mental afflictions in medieval England. Through an in-depth analysis of their texts, we can examine the narratives they crafted and the theological discourses they engaged in. By studying their stories and the critiques of their works, we can also understand the multifaceted roles they played as women in late medieval England. Indeed, Margery Kempe's autobiographical account and Julian of Norwich's theological revelations provide us with a unique window into the societal norms of late medieval England, highlighting both their commonalities and differences.

Despite their age difference—Julian being thirty years older—Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich were contemporaries from Norfolk, England, sharing a common socio-religious background. Notably, Margery Kempe recounts spending several days in Julian's company, discussing her own spiritual experiences and receiving Julian's personal endorsement, as I will later detail. Another shared characteristic is that, despite facing criticism for various reasons, both Kempe and Julian have gained, through the centuries, significant acclaim from literary scholars and theologians for their pivotal roles in advancing vernacular religious literature in late medieval England. Julian is notably recognised as the author of the earliest surviving English text authored by a woman, while Kempe is celebrated for the first autobiography in English literature, regardless of its author's gender. Additionally, both Julian and Kempe can be seen as central figures within the english mystical tradition, a movement in the fourteenth century encompassing works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* (author unknown), as well as the writings by Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton.[143] However, doubts have been expressed by scholars like Nicholas Watson regarding this aspect. Watson suggests that if Kempe and Julian had viewed themselves as part of an emerging tradition, whether or not it exists as a cohesive and coherent group of writers, their gender would likely have excluded them from being considered a part of it.[144] Indeed, not all critics have always acclaimed these two women, at least not equally. Consequently, apart from the compelling reasons for studying them together such as their shared historical and psychological background, previous scholarly comparisons of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich often juxtaposed them, portraying Kempe as hysterical or a disruptive figure who seemingly did not meet the standards of Julian's image as a wise and intellectually dignified

[143] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 25.
[144] Watson, Nicholas, "The Middle English Mystics" in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 543-544.

woman.[145] This perception has persisted in some critical interpretations, highlighting a tendency to undervalue Margery Kempe's contributions in favour of the idealisation of Julian's intellectualism. It is often within the context of the literary mystical tradition cited above, that scholars have traditionally interpreted the works of Kempe and Julian, often to the detriment of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. For instance, in his influential study titled *The English Mystical Tradition*, David Knowles suggests that Kempe's work lacks a treatise on contemplation and portrays its author as an intriguing character who, however, does not have the depth of perception or spiritual wisdom found in earlier English mystics and in Julian of Norwich.[146] Wolfgang Riehle also presents a rather critical view of Kempe's book and her mental health, since he believes that the emotional piety displayed also exhibits pathologically neurotic traits. As explored previously in this thesis many critics agree with him, nonetheless, he admits that some of the mystical passages in *The Book of Margery Kempe* hold some literary and religious value. This is also due to Julian of Norwich herself, who conversed with her and acknowledged her experience as genuine, compelling scholars to seriously consider Kempe in their study.[147] However, critics still stigmatised Kempe, despite her distinct aims in writing compared to Julian or the male mystics of medieval England. Indeed, each of these figures and their texts differs significantly from the others, as does Kempe's from Julian's, reflecting the lack of conformity among the works of English mystics, regardless of their gender.[148] Moreover, while some of the stereotyping directed at Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich clearly stems from misogynistic prejudice, it is noteworthy that also female scholars have differentiated between Kempe and Julian in ways that are unfavourable to the former. Indeed, although the writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich have predominantly been examined by male critics and scholars—whose analyses often reflect biased and sexist perspectives—it is crucial to acknowledge the different and significant contributions of female scholars in this field. Female critics have provided critical readings of their works, supposedly free from many gender biases that their male counterparts may hold. Their insights consequently offer a more balanced and nuanced interpretation of Kempe's and Julian's works, thereby enriching our understanding of these important literary and spiritual figures, free from gender-biased readings.

[145] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 25.
[146] Knowles, David, *The English Mystical Tradition*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961, p.139.
[147] Riehle, Wolfgang, *The Middle English Mystics*, London: Routledge, 1981, p. 11.
[148] Watson, "The Middle English Mystics", pp. 547-555.

For instance, Julia Bolton Holloway argued that St. Birgitta of Sweden provided a similar model for the lives of these two very different women, depicting them as the "hysterical Margery of Lynn and quiet Julian of Norwich", and stating that they imitated St. Birgitta, who showed them how women could gain public praise through their visions and writings.[149] Carolyn Dinshaw has also indicated Birgitta of Sweden as a "most explicit saintly model", at least for Kempe.[150] Holloway has taken the matter even further, contending that Kempe intentionally modelled her life, her book, the cessation of her childbirths, her miracles, and her pilgrimages upon St Birgitta's.[151] While there are evident similarities between the lives of Margery Kempe and Birgitta of Sweden, also known in England during the Middle Ages as Bride, several factors must be considered. Both women are credited with performing miracles, yet Kempe's miracles are not similar to Bride's, for instance when she saved herself from the collapsing roof of the church. Additionally, pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela were common during the Middle Ages, as evidenced in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale: "And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem; She hadde passed many a straunge strem; At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne, In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Cologne."("And thrice she had been to Jerusalem; She had crossed many foreign seas; She had been to Rome and Boulogne, To St. James in Galicia, and to Cologne").[152] Kempe and Bride were not unique in visiting these sites, and there is no indication that her pilgrimages were inspired by Bride's earlier journeys anywhere in her text.[153] However, it is noteworthy that Kempe mentions "Bride's book" twice in her text as one of the texts read to her. As Atkinson notes, even if caution must be used in comparing these two figures, both women entered into chaste living arrangements with their husbands, were committed to frequent confession and weekly communion, played roles in saving their wayward sons' souls and were granted visions of the nativity and the crucifixion.[154] Furthermore, Bride figures prominently in Kempe's account of her pilgrimage to Rome: Kempe visits the room where Bride had lived and died, even praying on the stone where the Swedish saint knelt

[149] Saint Bridget of Sweden, *Saint Bride and Her Book: Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations*, transl. Holloway, Bolton Julia, Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000, p. 128.
[150] Dinshaw, Carolyn, "Margery Kempe" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 p. 230
[151] Holloway, Julia Bolton, "Bride, Margery, Julian, and Alice: Bridget of Sweden's Textual Community in Medieval England" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Sandra McEntire, New York: Garland Publishing, 1992, p. 215.
[152] Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in *The Riverside Chaucer*, lines 463-466.
[153] Atkinson, Clarissa, W., *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983, pp. 175-176.
[154] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, pp. 177-178.

when God revealed the date of her death. Kempe also meets Bride's maid and her maid's landlord, who share personal anecdotes about the saint's goodness and cheerfulness with her.[155] However, none of the similarities noted by Atkinson provides solid evidence that Kempe intentionally imitated Birgitta's life or her revelations. For instance, Bride's account of the nativity is markedly different from Kempe's: in her text, a composed Mary journeys to Bethlehem with expensive linen and silk swaddling clothes,[156] whereas Kempe's Mary must use bits of white cloth procured by the author herself through begging. Furthermore, Birgitta's vision of the crucifixion is empathetic and grim, contributing to the contemporary style of graphic, tortured crucifixes.[157] In contrast, Kempe's Passion meditations are more evocative and impactful, as I will detail in further sections of this thesis while comparing them to Julian's. Birgitta's vision, though descriptive, lacks the emotional engagement found in Kempe's narrative, which aligns more with the tradition of Affective Piety. For instance, Birgitta mentions weeping sorrowfully at Mount Calvary and feeling filled with sorrow, but she does not articulate the depth of compassion for Christ's suffering or attempt to evoke such feelings in her readers.[158] Despite this, it is crucial not to dismiss Birgitta's influence on Kempe entirely, as Gibson even suggests that Kempe may instead have viewed Bride as a rival.[159]

Margery Kempe, during a mass, witnesses the fluttering of the host and chalice and hears Jesus telling her:

"Thow schalt no mor sen it in this maner, therfor thank God that thow hast seyn. My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse." Than seyd this creatur in hir thowt, "Lord, what betokenyth this?" "It betokenyth venjawnce." "A, good Lord, what venjawnce?" Than seyd owyr Lord agen to hir, "Ther schal be an erdene, tel it whom thow wylt in the name of Jhesu. For I telle the forsothe rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to the, dowtyr, and I telle the trewly it is trewe every word that is wretyn in Brides boke, and be the it schal be knowyn for very trewth. And thow schalt faryn wel, dowtyr, in spyte of alle thyn enmys; the mor envye thei han to the for my grace, the bettyr schal I lofe the."

("You shall see it no more in this manner, therefore thank God that you have seen it. My daughter, Bride, never saw me in this way." Then the creature thought to herself, "Lord, what does this mean?" "It signifies vengeance." "Oh, good Lord, what vengeance?" Then our Lord said again to her, "There shall be an earthquake; tell it to whom you will in the name of Jesus. For I tell you for certain, just as I spoke to Saint Bride, I speak to you, daughter, and I tell you truly every word that is written in Bride's book is true, and through you, it shall be known as the absolute truth. And you shall fare well, daughter, in spite of all your enemies; the more envy they have towards you because of my grace, the more I shall love you.", lines 1084-1092).

[155] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 179.
[156] Harris, Tjader, Marguerite ed., *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, translated by Albert Ryle Kezel, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990, pp. 203 and 205.
[157] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 172.
[158] Harris, *Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 188-190.
[159] Gibson, Gail McMurray, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 47.

This claim not only affirms the authenticity and significance of both women's mystical experiences, but also elevates Kempe over Bride. In the end, despite similarities in their devotion and mystical experiences, the key difference lies in the origins of their spiritual awakenings. St. Birgitta's path to holiness was a gradual and steady progression grounded in her devout life. In contrast, Margery Kempe's conversion, along with Julian of Norwich's—an aspect I will explore in the next section—was dramatically triggered by an episode of madness, specifically following childbirth. This distinction not only sets Margery Kempe apart but also aligns her more closely with Julian of Norwich, whose revelations also emerged after a serious illness.

Indeed, it is Margery Kempe's madness, as analysed in previous chapters, which triggers her vision of Christ and subsequent conversion. Another key aspect is that this conversion is marked by bodily openness, serving as a model for all her body's subsequent appearances in the text. Kempe thus joins the tradition of mystical writing that views illness and bodily weakness as pathways to access God. This weakness, implying self-negation, becomes an accepted means to a new identity, separating the self from society and allowing for self-transformation. Julian of Norwich's *Showings* is particularly relevant for comparison, as her spirituality also arises from illness and mental health issues. Julian, as I will further detail, prays for illness as a means to draw closer to God. In both texts, illness is portrayed as a self-initiated and transformative experience, setting in motion the process that leads to writing. This experience transforms these women's intention to express their inner selves (or at least how they perceived it) into agency, first enacted through the text of their suffering bodies and later translated into the written word. Consequently, Margery uses her madness to articulate her new, holy identity, while Julian uses it as the foundation for her theology.[160] Undergoing suffering allowed people to replicate Christ's experience, as seen in the *Imitatio Christi* case for Margery Kempe's fasting, particularly his suffering and death on the cross. Moreover, as detailed above, it is this suffering that prompted Kempe's spiritual awakening. Similarly, Julian's conversion in the Short Text is marked by a period of intense suffering, described as having "raued":

Thann comm a religiouse personn to me and asked me howe I farde, and I sayde that I hadde raued þat daye. And he lugh lowde and enterlye. And I sayde: The crosse that stode atte my bedde feete, it bled faste; and with this worde the personn that I spake to wex alle sadde and meruelande.

[160] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 10.

("Then a religious person came to me and asked me how I was doing, and I said that I had raved that day. And he laughed loudly and heartily. And I said: The cross that stood at the foot of my bed bled profusely; and with these words, the person I spoke to grew very sad and amazed.").[161]

Reading this passage, it is evident that although the suffering brought on by madness is not inherently positive, it is crucial for facilitating positive self-transformation. This is true for both Julian and Kempe: madness opens the self to inspiration and, by distancing the self from mundane reality, shares similarities with traditional conversion. This conversion then, prompted by madness, notably transforms the meaning of their bodies' representation: the open, bleeding, wounded body is valorised in both texts for its resemblance to Christ's crucified body. Indeed, the wounded body of Christ is central to both Julian's and Margery Kempe's texts, serving as a focal point for their sense of self. McAvoy and others note that maybe as a result of this, both Julian and Margery perceive Christ within a feminine context, as I will analyse later in this thesis when confronting their theologies.[162] As Bynum notes, this perception of Christ is not unique to these two texts but was a common view in the Middle Ages. Both men and women sometimes described Christ's body in its suffering and generativity as that of a birthing and lactating mother. This suggests that, on some level, they may have felt that a woman's suffering was her way of fusing with Christ, as Christ's suffering flesh was seen as feminine.[163]

Margery particularly emphasises a womanly characteristic where Christ's body mirrors the female body in its tendency to bleed and give birth. Christ's wounded body aligns him with both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, resonating with what Laurie Finke characterises as the "grotesque bodies of mystical discourse". These are bodies that, metaphorically, opened up and released their contents such as blood and milk, enduring wounds and mutilations.[164] Margery portrays Christ's crucifixion, in particular, in a manner akin to childbirth:

And than owr Lordys body shakyd and schoderyd, and alle the joyntys of that blisful body brostyn and wentyn asundyr, and hys precyows wowndys ronnyn down wyth reverys of blood on every syde.

("And then our Lord's body shook and trembled, and all the joints of that blessed body burst and opened, and His precious wounds streamed down with rivulets of blood on every side.", lines 4572-4575).

[161] Colledge, Edmund and Walsh, James eds., "The Short Text" in *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich,* Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978, p. 266.
[162] McAvoy, *Monstrous Masculinities*, p. 58.
[163] Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 260-261.
[164] Finke, Laurie A., "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision" in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. by Ulrike Wiethaus, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993, p. 38.

Once more, it is the body's capacity to endure suffering and openness that enables it to nourish life. Similarly, Kempe's own body undergoes suffering, both through pregnancy and subsequent madness, to provide nourishment.

Julian of Norwich also depicts a feminine, vulnerable Christ. Indeed, she takes it even further, portraying divinity with a female body that groans and moans under torture. By projecting her own suffering body onto the divine, she envisions Christ assuming a form that mirrors her female body.[165] In the Short Text, Julian's vision of the crucified Christ is more evidently dominated by His shedding of blood, but it is important to note that this is not a detail she chose to change when she wrote the Long Text[166]:

I saw, beholding the body plentiously bleding in seming of the scorgyng, as thus: The faire skynne was brokyn ful depe into the tender flesh with sharpe smyting al about the sweete body. So plenteously the hote blode ran oute that there was neither sene skynne ne wound, but as it were al blode.

("I saw, beholding the body plentifully bleeding in what seemed like the scourging, as follows: The fair skin was broken very deeply into the tender flesh with sharp blows all over the sweet body. The hot blood ran out so plentifully that neither skin nor wound could be seen, but it was all as if it were all blood.", lines 473-476.)

The emphasis on blood, which Julian of Norwich shares with Margery Kempe, is central to both their texts. I have already discussed Kempe's use of madness as a catalyst for self-transformation and her use of fluids, including blood, as a positive means of identifying with Christ. Similarly, in Julian's conversion, Jesus' blood serves as a validation of her speech, countering her self-accusations of madness. Not only are bleeding and madness beneficial, but they also make the female body more like Christ's, as Jesus' body is portrayed as "all blode." While analysing this aspect, McAvoy also argues that Jesus' bleeding can be interpreted as characteristically feminine, suggesting that the *Showings* contain a subtext equating Christ's precious blood with specifically female blood loss, different from the males', such as that from a ruptured hymen, menstrual flow, or childbirth.[167] Indeed Julian's description of the blood itself is also interesting in itself, revealing the significance of Christ's blood in Julian's theology, emphasising its power to redeem and save souls from hell, its continual intercessory role in heaven, and its rejoicing in the salvation of humanity:

[165] McEntire, Sandra J., "The Likeness of God and the Restoration of Humanity in Julian of Norwich's Showings" in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Sandra J. McEntire, Garland Medieval Casebooks 21, New York: Garland, 1998, p. 18.
[166] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 80.
[167] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 80-81.

Beholde and se: The pretious plenty of His dereworthy blode desendith downe into Helle and braste her bands and deliveryd al that were there which longyd to the curte of Hevyn. The pretious plenty of His dereworthy blode overflowith al erth and is redye to wash al creaturs of synne which be of gode will, have ben, and shal ben. The pretious plenty of His dereworthy blode ascendid up into Hevyn to the blissid body of our Lord Jesus Christe, and there is in Him, bleding and praying for us to the Father, and is and shall be as long as it nedith. And evermore it flowith in all Hevyns enjoying the salvation of al mankynde that arn there and shal ben, fulfilling the noumber that failith.

("Behold and see the power of this precious abundance of His dear worthy blood. It descended down into hell and broke its bonds, and delivered all who were there and who belong to the court of heaven…. The precious abundance of His dear worthy blood ascended up into heaven in the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and there it is in Him, bleeding, praying for us to the Father, and is and shall be as long as we need it. Moreover, it flows in all heaven, rejoicing in the salvation of all humankind who are there and who shall be, fulfilling the number that is lacking.", lines 488-497).

Although Julian of Norwich's depiction of Christ's suffering body is more explicit, Rosemary Voaden and others argue that Kempe's physicality should be interpreted as more imitative, reflecting her drive to align her body with Christ's, which appears repeatedly throughout *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Notably, both Christ and Kempe have suffering bodies that cannot contain what is inside them; Jesus' holy bleeding and the author's responsive cries and roars are both unrestrainable. Ultimately, Christ's and Kempe's bodies become indistinguishable.[168] For instance, in passages such as the one describing her contemplation of the Passion, Kempe's emotional identification with Christ becomes a bodily identification:

Sche had so very contemplacyon in the sygth of hir sowle as yf Crist had hangyn befor hir bodily eye in hys manhode... hys precyows tendyr body – alto-rent and toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wowndys than evyr was duffehows of holys, hangyng upon the cros wyth the corown of thorn upon hys hevyd, hys blysful handys, hys tendyr fete nayled to the hard tre, the reverys of blood flowyng owt plentevowsly of every membre, the gresly and grevows wownde in hys precyows syde schedyng owt blood and watyr for hir lofe and hir salvacyon – than sche fel down and cryed wyth lowde voys, wondyrfully turnyng and wrestyng hir body on every syde, spredyng hir armys abrode as yyf sche schulde a deyd, and not cowde kepyn hir fro crying and these bodily mevyngys, for the fyer of lofe that brent so fervently in hir sowle wyth pur pyte and compassion.

("She had such a true contemplation in the sight of her soul as if Christ had hung before her bodily eye in his humanity... his precious tender body – all torn and ripped with scourges, more full of wounds than a dove-cote is full of holes, hanging upon the cross with the crown of thorns upon his head, his blessed hands, his tender feet nailed to the hard tree, the rivers of blood flowing out plentifully from every member, the grisly and grievous wound in his precious side shedding out blood and water for her love and her salvation – then she fell down and cried with a loud voice, wonderfully turning and writhing her body on every side, spreading her arms abroad as if she should have died, and could not keep herself from crying and these bodily movements, for the fire of love that burned so fervently in her soul with pure pity and compassion.", lines 1613-1625).

[168] Voadenn, Rosalynn, *Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late Medieval Women Visionaries*, York: York Medieval Press, 1999, p. 118.

Karma Lochrie specifically connects Margery Kempe's suffering to her imaginative interaction with His holy body. Her contemplation of Christ's wounded body results in a physical wounding of her own. Lochrie also proposes an imaginative link between Kempe and Christ, suggesting that her body adopts aspects of the crucified Christ.[169] In writing this, Kempe's potentially transgressive body is legitimised by its similarity to Christ's, however, this radical interpretation of her body was strongly contested by those around her. As John Arnold argues, Kempe's trouble stemmed from the difficulties people had in the context of religious fears in deciding how to "read" the interior person from the exterior. While Margery Kempe asserted that her body was holy, observers perceived it as an out-of-place secular body. Many accusations of madness directed at her arose exactly from this conflict over how her body had to be interpreted. As stated in the previous chapter, this difference in perception between Kempe and those around her, led to the belief that she must have been either insane or demonically possessed.[170]

Despite these controversies, Kempe never stopped seeking both approval and understanding from other Christians—whether clergy or laypeople—for her crying and roaring. Throughout her book, she insists on recounting numerous instances where various members of the clergy expressed approval of her spiritual weeping, including an archbishop (chapter 16), a White Friar (chapter 61), a parson (chapter 67), and a Dominican doctor (chapter 68), among others. In a significant episode in chapter 18, Margery Kempe, following a command from Jesus, visited Julian, already an anchoress in Norwich, referring to her as "Dame Jelyan" (line 955). Julian considered the description of Margery Kempe's experiences and responded with mostly approbation, offering only a few mild cautions. Kempe records Julian of Norwich as saying:

What creatur that hath thes tokenys he muste stedfastlych belevyn that the Holy Gost dwellyth in hys sowle. And mech mor, whan God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, devosyon, er compassyon, he may and owyth to levyn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle. Seynt Powyl seyth that the Holy Gost askyth for us wyth mornynggys and wepyngys unspekable, that is to seyn, he makyth us to askyn and preyn wyth mornynggys and wepyngys so plentyuowsly that the terys may not be nowmeryd. Ther may non evyl spyrit gevyn thes tokenys, for Jerom seyth that terys turmentyn mor the devylle than don the peynes of helle… Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world.

("Whoever has these signs must steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost dwells in their soul. And much more, when God visits a person with tears of contrition, devotion, or compassion, they may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in their soul. Saint Paul says that the Holy Ghost asks for us with groanings

[169] Lochrie, Karma, "Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*", New Cultural Studies Series,* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 174.
[170] Arnold, John H., "Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy and Dissent" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 90-93.

and weepings unspeakable, that is to say, He makes us ask and pray with groanings and weepings so plentifully that the tears cannot be numbered. No evil spirit can give these signs, for Jerome says that tears torment the Devil more than the pains of hell do…Place all your trust in God and do not fear the language of the world.", Lines 972-984).

Kempe does not give many details about what happened between herself and Julian in the "many days" (line 987) they spent together, saying only, "Mych was the holy dalyawns that the ankres and this creatur haddyn be comownyng in the lofe of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist." ("Much was the holy conversation that the anchoress and this creature had communing in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ." Lines 986-987). Nonetheless, the outcome of these conversations is clear: Margery Kempe feels affirmed in the legitimacy of her spiritual gifts, especially her tears, similar to how Christ's words, as already detailed in the previous chapter, reassured her in her visions. Also by having secured the approval of sympathetic clergy and Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe was absolved of the charge of Lollardy, a process detailed in chapters 13 and 54 of her book. This validation not only cleared her name but also allowed her to solidify her identity within the mystic movement. Like her more serene counterpart, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe became a significant figure in the theological heritage of Christianity. In the following section, I will compare Margery Kempe's contributions with those of Julian of Norwich, highlighting the unique aspects of her spirituality in relation to Julian's. Additionally, I will assess their combined impact on the development of Christian mysticism and the literary tradition of Affective Piety.

3.2 Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich in the Tradition of Affective Piety

Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, as previously outlined, are acknowledged as prominent figures in medieval English spirituality and among the early English mystic writers. Furthermore, they also hold pivotal positions in the literary tradition of Affective Piety. Their writings, rooted in personal encounters with divine visions and profound spiritual insights prompted by different episodes of psychological afflictions, intricately engage with the emotional and contemplative dimensions of religious devotion. Affective Piety, characterised by its deeply emotional devotion to the humanity of Jesus, particularly in his infancy and Passion, and to the experiences of the Virgin Mary, emerged as a pervasive influence on late-medieval devotional literature across Europe, both in Latin and vernacular languages. This practice of prayer, reading, writing and meditation often involved the vivid visualisation and contemplation of scenes from the

Bible, the lives of saints, and religious symbols. Practitioners engaged with these scenes either through mental imagery evoked by literature or by the contemplation of manuscript illuminations and artworks, aiming to elicit profound emotional responses. This style of affective meditation encouraged the participants to immerse themselves mentally and emotionally in the depicted scenes, fostering sentiments of love, fear, grief, and repentance.[171] Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich contributed to and shaped the Affective Piety tradition through their distinct literary styles and theological perspectives, highlighting their enduring influence on medieval religious literature. They both had access to Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum*, available in Latin and a Middle English translation from the fourteenth century. This work, written around 1160, encouraged meditation on Christ's life, especially his passion, by imagining oneself as a participant in these events.[172] Previously, around 1120, Bernard of Clairvaux had already advocated meditating on Christ's suffering, believing it would inspire contrition, recognition of God's love, and a longing for union with Him.[173] The practice of engaging emotionally with Christ and His mother's suffering, known as "sucking honey from the rock", was also promoted by influential Franciscan works from the thirteenth century. These include Bonaventure's *De Perfectione Vitae* and *Lignum Vitae*, James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris* (with which Kempe was familiar)[174], and the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, often attributed to Bonaventure.[175] All these texts invited readers to focus their devotions on Christ's humanity and His suffering during the passion.

As previously detailed in this thesis, Margery Kempe experienced significant mental health issues following postpartum psychological trauma. Unlike Julian of Norwich, whose psychological difficulties and visions were more private and discrete, Kempe frequently exhibited her distress through public displays of weeping and loud crying, particularly during church services when she contemplated the events of Christ's life. Despite the disapproval of the presiding clergy and her fellow worshippers, one such instance occurred during a Good Friday service, where Kempe was deeply moved by feeling the events of the Passion:

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[171] Bartlett, Anne Clark, and Bestul, Thomas H., "Introduction" in *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 2-3.
[172] Ayto, John, and Barratt, Alexandra eds., *Aelred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 39-51.
[173] Baker, Nowakowski, Denise, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 25-27.
[174] Windeatt, *The Book,* Chapter 58, p. 182.
[175] Ragusa, Isa, and Green, Rosalie B. trans., *Mediations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 333

Drawyng hir mende al holy into the Passyon of owr Lord Crist Jhesu, whom sche behelde wyth hir gostly eye in the syght of hir sowle as verily as thei sche had seyn hys precyows body betyn, scorgyd, and crucifyed wyth hir bodily eye, whech syght and gostly beheldyng wrowt be grace so fervently in hir mende, wowndyng hir wyth pité and compassyon, that sche sobbyd, roryd, and cryed, and, spredyng hir armys abrood, seyd wyth lowed voys, "I dey, I dey," that many man on hir wonderyd and merveyled what hir eyled.

("Drawing her mind entirely into the Passion of our Lord Christ Jesus, whom she beheld with her spiritual eye in the sight of her soul as truly as if she had seen His precious body beaten, scourged, and crucified with her physical eye. This sight and spiritual contemplation worked by grace so fervently in her mind, piercing her with pity and compassion, that she sobbed, roared, and cried out, spreading her arms wide and saying with a loud voice, 'I die, I die,' causing many people to wonder and marvel at what troubled her.", lines 3307-3313).

Furthermore, a similar episode had already occurred during the Corpus Christi procession, where many people were astonished by Margery Kempe's behaviour:

On Corpus Cristi Day aftyr, as the prestys born the Sacrament abowte the town wyth solempne processyon, wyth meche lyth and gret solempnyté, as was worthy to be do, the forseyd creatur folwyd ful of terys and devocyon, wyth holy thowtys and meditacyon, sor wepyng and boystows sobbyng. And than ther cam a good woman be this creatur and seyd, "Damsel, God gef us grace to folwyn the steppys of owr Lord Jhesu Crist."Than that worde wrowt so sor in hir herte and in hir mende that sche myth not beryn it that sche was fawyn to takyn an hows. And ther sche cryed, "I dey, I dey," and roryd also wondirfully that the pepil wonderyd upon hir, havyng gret merveyl what hir eyled."

("After, On Corpus Christi Day, as the priests carried the Sacrament around the town with a solemn procession, with much light and great solemnity, as was fitting to be done, the aforementioned creature [Margery Kempe] followed, full of tears and devotion, with holy thoughts and meditation, sorrowfully weeping and loudly sobbing. Then a good woman came to this creature and said, 'Damsel, may God give us grace to follow in the steps of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Then that word wrought so sore in her heart and her mind that she could not bear it, and she was compelled to take a sit. And there she cried, 'I die, I die,' and roared also wonderfully that the people wondered at her, having great marvel at what ailed her.", lines 2524 – 2531).

These intense emotional responses of Margery Kempe to the Passion invite comparison with Julian of Norwich's expressed desire for a similar profound religious experience, which she also had after a psychological trauma. Despite occasional "feelings" about the Passion events, Julian indicates in the opening of her text that before her visionary experiences in May 1373, she had fervently prayed for an active and deeply affecting encounter with Christ's suffering akin to that vividly described by Margery:

I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of the compassion our Lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time His peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him.

("I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily pains of our Saviour and of the compassion of our Lady and of all His true lovers that saw, that time, His pains. For I would be one of them and suffer with Him.", lines 48-50).

Julian of Norwich's longing to partake in Christ's suffering recurs later in her text, as noted by Karma Lochrie. Her observation underscores Julian's persistent quest for a participatory engagement with the suffering of Christ, a theme that resonates throughout her *Revelations*.[176] As for *The Book of Margery Kempe*, this desire reflects perfectly the broader medieval tradition of Affective Piety, wherein individuals sought not only to contemplate but also to empathise intensely with the suffering of Christ as a means of deepening their spiritual connection and understanding. Julian clearly articulates this aspiration when she reflects on her desire for deeper communion with the Passion of Christ, and writes:

> Than came suddenly to my minde that I should desire the second wounde of our Lords gracious gift, that my body might be fulfilled with minde and felyng of His blissid passion, for I would that His peynes were my peynes, with compassion, and, afterward, longeing to God. But in this I desired never bodily sight nor sheweing of God, but compassion as a kinde soule might have with our Lord Jesus that for love would beene a dedely man, and therefore I desired to suffer with Him.
>
> ("Then came suddenly to my mind that I should desire the second wound of our Lord's gracious gift: that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of His blessed Passion. For I would that His pains were my pains, with compassion and afterward longing to God. But in this I desired never bodily sight nor shewing of God, but compassion such as a kind soul might have with our Lord Jesus, that for love would be a mortal man: and therefore I desired to suffer with Him.", lines 107-113).

Julian of Norwich hopes that experiencing "bodily sight" of the Passion will grant her a similar depth of compassion for Christ's suffering as Margery Kempe achieves through meditation. Julian further expresses her wish that this compassion will foster contrition for her sins and intensify her longing for God. In doing so, she aligns herself with the principles of Affective Piety, aiming not at doctrinal instruction or formal worship, but at stirring deep emotional responses in the believers' hearts,[177] engaging them and making them feel what they already believed in,[178] such as the theory of salvation, advanced by Anselm of Canterbury in the late eleventh century, which emphasises the centrality of Christ's humanity in the drama of the Passion.[179]

Participation is a key aspect of Affective Piety: for instance, in one of her visions recounted in *The Book of Margery Kempe* she visualises herself present at the births of Jesus and his mother. In this vision, Kempe assumes the roles of maid and servant to St. Anne and the Virgin Mary, respectively, accompanying them through their motherhood:

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[176] Lochrie, Karma, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 34.
[177] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 129.
[178] Woolf, Rosemary, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 14.
[179] Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, p. 17.

And than went the creatur forth wyth owyr Lady to Bedlem and purchasyd hir herborwe every nyght wyth gret reverens, and owyr Lady was receyved wyth glad cher. Also sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swathyn in hir sone whan he wer born, and, whan Jhesu was born sche ordeyned beddyng for owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssed sone.

("And then the creature went on with our Lady to Bethlehem and procured lodgings for her every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received with glad cheer. She also begged of our Lady fair white clothes and veils to swaddle her son in when He was born, and when Jesus was born she arranged bedding for our Lady to lie on with her blessed son. And later she begged food for our Lady and her blessed child.", lines 427-431).

It is clear that Kempe is following the guidance of manuals like the *Meditationes Vitae Christi,* one of the most prominent books concerning Affective Piety, vividly placing herself in these scenes and actively participating in the unfolding events as those manuals instructed her to do, as this passage shows:

Kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus who lies in the manger and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him a while. Pick Him up and hold Him in your arms. Gaze on His face with devotion and reverently kiss Him and delight in Him . . . Then return him to his mother and watch her attentively as she cares for Him assiduously and wisely, nursing Him…and remain to help her if you can.[180]

As Gail McMurray Gibson has argued, Margery Kempe's worthiness as a servant appears to stem from her intent to highlight her own sanctity and singularity, a concept that will be later analysed in this thesis. Moreover, Kempe is depicted as a worthy handmaiden chosen by St. Anne herself: she fulfils Mary's desire to serve as the handmaiden of God's chosen handmaiden. This portrayal underscores Kempe's own elevated spiritual status and her unique role in the divine narrative to her readers.[181]

Strikingly, comparing Margery Kempe's infancy meditations with Julian of Norwich's spiritual vision of Mary at the Annunciation reveals two very distinct approaches and purposes. Unlike Kempe, who actively participates in her meditations, Julian adopts the role of an observer, documenting only what she "sees" in a spiritual rather than a bodily vision. Julian's vision emphasises Mary's humility and awe at being chosen to bear the Messiah, rather than highlighting Julian's own holiness in serving her. Unlike Margery Kempe, Julian does not use the moment to underscore a personal relationship with Jesus or Mary, such as by taking on the role of the Archangel Gabriel. Instead, Julian conveys what her experience taught her about Mary's simplicity, humility, willingness to be God's handmaiden, and her esteemed position in creation. In short,

[180] Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, lines 38-39.
[181] Gibson, Gail McMurray, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 50.

Kempe's infancy meditations reveal aspects of Mary but emphasise even more details about Margery Kempe herself, whereas Julian of Norwich's vision focuses entirely on Mary and how she perceived her:

Also God shewid in party the wisedam and the trueth of hir soule, wherein I understood the reverend beholding she beheld hir God and maker mervelyng with greate reverence that He would be borne of hir that was a simple creature of His makeyng. And this wisdam and trueth, knowyng the greteness of hir maker and the littlehede of hirselfe, that is made, caused hir sey full mekely to Gabriel, "Lo, me, Gods handmayd." In this sight I understoode sothly that she is mare than all that God made beneath hir in worthyness and grace. For aboven hir is nothing that is made but the blissid manhood of Criste, as to my sight.

("Also, God showed in part the wisdom and the truth of her soul, in which I understood the reverent gaze with which she beheld her God and Creator, marvelling with great reverence that He would be born of her, who was a simple creature of His making. And this wisdom and truth, knowing the greatness of her Creator and her own littleness, being a created being, caused her to say very humbly to Gabriel, "Behold, I am God's handmaid." In this vision, I truly understood that she is more worthy and graced than all that God made beneath her. For above her, there is nothing made except the blessed humanity of Christ, as I saw.", lines 135-143).

Julian has two additional visions of Mary, one as she stands sorrowing at the foot of the cross[182] and the other as she shares in the glory of her son's resurrection; in both instances, her involvement in the revelation is again restricted to that of an observer.[183] Christopher Cannon has explored the "startling independence of Julian's thought", as he defines it, and noted that most details in her revelations come directly from the conventional traditions of Affective Piety. Cannon asserts that not only Kempe's, but also Julian of Norwich's visions can be seen as coordinated and consistent responses to contemplative practices recommended by earlier monastic treatises for enclosed women.[184] Notably, as for the example of Margery Kempe following the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Baker agrees that Julian was deeply engaged in affective meditation and further suggests that Julian's language reflects this tradition. By providing concrete details of Christ's physical suffering, Julian aims to evoke compassion in her audience, much like the writers of meditative treatises on the Passion. This tradition influences both what Julian sees and how she reports it,[185] for instance, when in the Tenth Revelation Jesus reveals to Julian details of the Passion that were common in medieval art and sculpture, specifically the wound on Christ's side from which blood and water flowed, and a heart split in two by a spear:

[182] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, The Eighteenth Chapter, p. 210.
[183] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, The Twenty-Fifth Chapter, p. 221.
[184] Cannon, Christopher, "Monastic Productions" in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 339.
[185] Baker, *Julian of Norwich*, p. 55.

Than with a glad chere our Lord loked into His syde and beheld, enjoyand; and with His swete lokyng He led forth the understondyng of His creture be the same wound into Hys syde withinne. And than He shewid a faire, delectabil place and large enow for al mankynd that shal be save to resten in pece and in love. And therwith He browte to mende His dereworthy blode and pretious water which He lete poure al oute for love.

("Then, with a glad expression, our Lord looked into His side and beheld it, rejoicing; and with His sweet gaze, He led the understanding of His creature through the same wound into His side within. And then He showed a fair, delightful place, large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love. And with that, He brought to mind His precious blood and precious water which He let pour out completely for love.", lines 863-868).

Unlike Julian of Norwich's visions of disparate moments that occurred during the Passion, in Chapters 79 and 81 of her text Kempe affords us a series of "spiritual sights" which originated as individual mediations but which Kempe has combined to constitute a sequential narrative of the events leading up to and including the crucifixion, which ties them all together:

Swech gostly syghtys had sche every Palme Sonday and every Good Fryday, and in many other wise bothe many yerys togedyr. And therfor cryid sche and wept ful sor and suffyrd ful myche despite and repref in many a cuntré. And than owr Lord seyd to hir sowle, "Dowtyr, thes sorwys and many mo suffyrd I for thi lofe, and divers peynys, mo than any man can tellyn in erth. Therfor, dowtyr, thu hast gret cawse to lovyn me ryght wel, for I have bowt thi lofe ful der."

("Such spiritual visions she had every Palm Sunday and every Good Friday, and in many other ways for many years together. And therefore she cried and wept very sorrowfully and suffered much contempt and reproach in many a country. And then our Lord said to her soul, 'Daughter, these sorrows and many more I suffered for your love, and various pains, more than any man can tell on earth. Therefore, daughter, you have great cause to love me very much, for I have bought your love very dearly'.", lines 4520-4525).

Notable among these meditations is a very graphic account of the crucifixion itself, which attests not only to Kempe's skill as a writer but also to the fact that she was as determined as Julian was to awaken in her readers feelings of compassion for Christ's suffering:

Than sey sche wyth hyr gostly eye how the Jewys festenyd ropis on the other hand, for the senwys and veynys wer so schrynkyn wyth peyne that it myth not come to the hole that thei had morkyn therfor, and drowyn theron to makyn it mete wyth the hole […] And anon sche sey hem takyn up the crosse wyth owr Lordys body hangyng theron and madyn gret noyse and gret crye and lyftyd it up fro the erthe a certeyn distawnce and sithyn letyn the crosse fallyn down into the morteys. And than owr Lordys body schakyd and schoderyd, and alle the joyntys of that blisful body brostyn and wentyn asundyr, and hys precyows wowndys ronnyn down wyth reverys of blood on every syde. And so sche had evyr mor cawse of mor wepyng and sorwyng.

("Then she saw, with her spiritual eye, how the Jews fastened ropes on to the other hand—for the sinews and veins were so shrunken with pain that it would not reach to the hole that they had drilled for it—and they pulled on it to make it reach the hole [...] She straightaway saw them take up the cross with our Lord's body hanging on it, and make a great noise and cry; and they lifted it up from the earth a certain distance, and then let the cross fall down into a prepared mortise. And then our Lord's body shook and shuddered, and all the joints of that blissful body burst and broke apart, and his precious wounds ran down with rivers of blood on every side, and so she had ever more reason for weeping and sorrowing.", lines 4559-4575).

Kempe is inviting her readers to compare her actions to Mary's, and is also deliberately reinforcing the relationship between them when Jesus subsequently tells her to stay in the company of His mother until he comes again to comfort both of them as if they were equal:

Be stille, dowtyr, and rest wyth my modyr her and com fort the in hir, for sche that is myn owyn modyr must suffyr this sorwe. But I schal come ageyn, dowtyr, to my modyr and comfortyn hir and the bothyn and turnyn al yowr sorwe into joye.

("Be still, daughter, and rest with my mother here and find comfort in her, for she who is my own mother must endure this sorrow. But I shall come again, daughter, to my mother and comfort her and both of you, and turn all your sorrow into joy", Lines 4481-4484).

The effort to establish and maintain strong connections between herself and Mary throughout these passion meditations is striking because it aims to elevate Margery Kempe's status in the eyes of the readers, a move not mirrored by Julian of Norwich anywhere in her text. Furthermore, Mary's dual role in the spirituality of the Passion can be seen as a model of compassion for her dying son, and secondly, as someone deserving compassion herself due to her identification with his suffering. Margery Kempe is depicted in both roles through her deep compassion for Christ's suffering and as a figure who elicits compassion for her own personal struggles. In contrast to Julian of Norwich, who emphasises Mary's role without drawing direct parallels to herself, Kempe actively aligns herself with Mary's experiences, portraying herself as both a compassionate observer and a participant in the Passion narrative. This dual portrayal enhances Kempe's spiritual authority and crucially underscores her intimate connection to the sacred events she describes.[186]

As Margery Kempe does in her writings, it appears clear that Julian of Norwich frequently draws upon the imagery and rhetoric of the Affective Piety tradition in her *Showings*, shaping her responses to the experiences she encounters in her meditations. However, a crucial distinction emerges between the two figures regarding the use of these spiritual encounters to elevate their status in the eyes of their readers. Julian of Norwich, known for her contemplative and introspective approach, does not utilise her visions to enhance her own standing or assert her uniqueness. Instead, she focuses on conveying profound spiritual truths and insights, emphasising the divine revelations she receives rather than her role within them. In contrast, Margery Kempe actively employs her

[186] Kieckhefer, Richard, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 93 and p. 106.

writings and meditations to bolster her spiritual authority and emphasise her distinctiveness as a visionary and mystic. She portrays herself not only as a devout witness to sacred events but also as an active participant whose experiences with Mary, Jesus, and the divine realm affirm her chosen role and unique relationship with God. In the upcoming section, this contrast will be examined further, exploring how Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich diverge in their approaches to asserting their singularity within their respective texts shaping their spiritual narratives and establishing their place in medieval religious discourse.

3.3 Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich as Protagonists

As detailed in the previous section, the writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, though distinct in content and purpose, both emerge from the medieval devotional tradition known as Affective Piety. This tradition profoundly influenced the emotional responses of both writers to the passion of Christ and the intimate love of God they witnessed. In this section instead, the focus will be on how Margery Kempe's work centres on God's love for her protagonist, Kempe herself, portraying an intimate relationship with Jesus as her lover. In contrast, I will also analyse Julian of Norwich's emphasis on how God's love extends equally to all people, even expressing doubts on whether salvation would not be for all at the end of times. This difference in perspective shapes their respective writings, highlighting the contrasting ways in which Kempe and Julian perceive themselves and their singularity with God, with their divergent approaches to expressing divine love and experiences.

Kempe's Nativity meditations cited in the previous section are not particularly sophisticated if compared to the ones concerning the Passion. However, they provide valuable insight into what Kempe wanted her readers to understand about her unique relationship with Jesus and Mary at an early stage of her life. Indeed, throughout Chapters 6 and 7 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she emphasises her own presence at the Nativity and her intimate involvement in these pivotal moments, illustrating the distinctiveness of her spiritual experiences and her closeness to the holy family. Notably, in chapter 6, it is Kempe rather than the Angel Gabriel, who informs Mary of her role as the mother of Jesus. In response, Mary expresses a wish to be worthy of serving Kempe, who would conceive the Son of God. When Mary conceives, reaffirming Margery Kempe's prophecy, she humbly declares herself unworthy of serving Mary. However, Mary

reassures her, expressing satisfaction with her service, a sentiment echoed by Mary's cousin Elizabeth, who commends Kempe for fulfilling her duties well. Throughout Chapter 7, Kempe's unique role is also highlighted during the arrival of the Magi, particularly through her profound emotional response. She weeps intensely upon their arrival and cries grievously upon their departure, displaying a depth of feeling that underscores her singular connection to the events, once again, perfectly in line with the tradition of Affective Piety. This emotional display recurs when Kempe contemplates the future suffering of Jesus and compassionately swaddles the infant with her tears, giving Him another gift along with the Magi's presents: her tears.[187] Margery Kempe's narrative emphasises this distinctiveness, or "singularity", of her protagonist's spiritual experiences and personal relationship with the divine. However, Watson and Jenkins note that this singularity carries negative connotations, suggesting an inappropriate and prideful self-separation from others, a vice that any visionary would be cautioned against. They argue that this concept starkly contrasts with the "onehede of cherite" (the "unity of charity") that Julian of Norwich advocates, highlighting a fundamental difference in their spiritual philosophies. Doing so, Watson and Jenkins reinforce the distinction between Kempe's representation of herself as a unique being, and Julian's efforts to suggest that she is not in any way unique but like every other good Christian.[188]

Indeed, Julian of Norwich appears to have taken great care to assure her readers that her revelatory experiences did not set her apart as unique or make her relationship with God any different from that of her "evencristen", a Middle English term typically translated as "fellow Christians" but more literally meaning "equal Christians." This emphasis on equality (and her subjugation to the Church) is underscored many times in her writings, for instance, early in the Long Text when Julian declares that:

> For sothly it was not shewid me that God lovid me better than the lest soule that is in grace, for I am sekir that there be many that never had shewing ner sight but of the comon techyng of Holy Church that loven God better than I.
>
> ("For truly it was not revealed to me that God loves me more than the least soul who is in a state of grace, for I am certain that there are many who have never had revelations or visions, but only the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I.", lines 322-325).

At this point is also crucial to highlight that, while composing the Long Text, Julian even modified the pronouns in her original account of her visions. This adjustment was made

[187] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* chapters 6 and 7, lines 402-457.
[188] Watson, Nicholas, and Jenkins, Jacqueline eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, pp. 9-14.

to narrow the distance between herself and her intended readers.[189] In the Short Text, for instance, Julian writes that those who deliberately occupy themselves with earthly business, constantly seeking worldly well-being, do not have God's rest in their hearts and souls. Instead, in the more inclusive sentence in the subsequent Long Text version, the pronouns have been changed from third-person plural to first-person plural:

For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of herete and soule, for we sekyn here rest in those things that is so littil, wherin is no rest, and know not our God that is al mighty, al wise, all gode; for He is the very rest.

("For this is the reason why our hearts and souls are not in perfect ease, because here we seek rest in this thing which is so little, in which there is no rest, and we do not know our God who is almighty, all wise and all good, for he is true rest.", lines 161-164).

Julian of Norwich's deliberate adjustment of pronouns in the Long Text serves to cultivate a more intimate and engaging exchange with her readers, fostering mutual reflection and spiritual growth. Her choice to use first-person plural pronouns not only personalises her message but also affirms her role as a spiritual mentor who empathises deeply with the challenges and aspirations of her audience, positioning herself as a fellow Christian journeying alongside them. In contrast, as discussed previously, Margery Kempe adopts a different approach in her writings. Rather than minimising the distance between herself and her readers, she emphasises her personal involvement and unique experiences within the scenes depicted in her meditations. This distinction underscores Kempe's portrayal of herself as an active participant in sacred events, distinct from Julian's more inclusive and reflective narrative style. Indeed, Julian even informs her readers that these visions were intended for their salvation as well as for her own:

In al this I was mekil sterid in charite to mine even Cristen, that thei might seen and knowyn the same that I saw, for I would it were comfort to they. For al this sight was shewid general.

("In all this, I was greatly moved in charity towards my fellow Christians, that they might see and know the same things that I saw, for I wished it to be a comfort to them. For all this vision was shown universally.", lines 303-305).

It is important to note that some scholars, such as Colledge and Walsh, in their translation use the term "for all men", which may be perceived as sexist today, at a point where Julian is making a conscious effort to keep her language universally inclusive with a gender-neutral approach:

[189] Windeatt, B.A., "Julian of Norwich and her Audience", *Review of English Studies* 28, 1977, pp. 5-6.

I was greatly moved in love towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same as I saw, for I wished to be a comfort to them, for all this vision was shown for all men.[190]

The modern editors' choice reflects the conventions of the 1970s, when the term "men" was more universally used to denote all people as there was not the modern emphasis on gender-specific language. The Middle English phrase "For al this sight was shewid general" was in my opinion more accurately interpreted by scholars like Watson and Jenkins as "a message for everyone"[191]. This is a translation choice I also adopted in my thesis to faithfully convey Julian of Norwich's original intent, which is placing herself among all other believers as her equals, regardless of their gender.

In addition to using gender-neutral language, Julian of Norwich incorporates self-deprecating terms such as calling herself a "wretch", a term also appearing in the seventeenth chapter in lines 657 and 712 of her writings. Notably, the self-effacing language found in Chapter VI of her earlier Short Text is absent from the final version of her writings, suggesting a growing self-confidence as she developed the Long Text. This change highlights Julian's increasing assertiveness and refinement in presenting her spiritual insights. Furthermore, scholars like Sandra McEntire argue that Julian's enhanced confidence is evident in her deliberate reworking of patriarchal discourse in the Christian context. This reinterpretation not only reflects Julian's maturation as a writer but also demonstrates her active engagement with the theological and societal norms of her time. The evolving approach in the Long Text, marked by direct address and a nuanced exploration of spiritual themes, signifies a shift towards a more authoritative and introspective narrative style.[192] This aspect is exemplified in passages like the following:

And that I say of me, I sey in the person of al myn even Cristen, for I am lernyd in the gostly shewing of our Lord God that He menyth so; and therefore I pray you al for Gods sake, and counsel you for your owne profitt, that ye levyn the beholding of a wretch that it was shewid to, and mightily, wisely, and mekely behold God that of His curtes love and endles godenes wolde shewyn it generally in comfort of us al. For it is God's will that ye take it with gret joy and likyng as Jesus had shewid it on to you all.

("Everything that I say about me I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation. And therefore I pray you all for God's sake, and I counsel you for your own profit, that you disregard the wretch to whom it was shown, and that mightily, wisely and meekly you contemplate upon God, who out of his courteous love and his endless goodness was willing to

[190] Colledge, Edmund, and Walsh, James trans., *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978, The Eighth Chapter, p.190.
[191] Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings*, p. 150.
[192] McEntyre, Sandra, "The Likeness of God and the Restoration of Humanity in Julian of Norwich's Showings" in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Sandra McEntyre, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998, p. 10-12.

show it generally, to the comfort of us all. For it is God's will that you accept it with great joy and delight, as Jesus has shown it to you.", lines 311-318).

Notably, Margery Kempe also used the deprecating term "wretch" right from the proem, where she states: "Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and unspecabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu" ("Here begins a short treatise and a comfort for sinful wretches, wherein they may have great solace and comfort, and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Savior, Christ Jesus." lines 1-3). It may initially appear unclear whether she includes herself in the group of "sinful wretches", but shortly after she writes in the first person plural: "Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth yf lak of charyté be not ower hynderawnce" ("All the works of our Savior are for our example and instruction, and any grace that He works in any creature benefits us if a lack of charity does not hinder us." lines 5-7). This suggests that Margery Kempe included herself among the sinful wretches, acknowledging her own sins and need for divine grace, at least before her conversion. Indeed, particularly after Kempe's spiritual awakening, the distinction in how Julian and Kempe present themselves is evident. Julian of Norwich aimed to establish a more direct and engaging rapport with her readers. She does not use the term "wretch" to degrade herself placing herself among the other readers. Instead, she often addresses her readers directly, enhancing their involvement in her spiritual reflections. As Turner writes, to emphasise that the target of the showings is not herself but her readers, Julian always addresses them using the direct second-person plural.[193]

The most distinct example of the difference in how Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe present themselves to their readers, as well as their respective relationships with the divine, is found in the depiction of Kempe's relationship with Jesus Christ. Their rapport is depicted as deeply personal and revelatory, involving regular, private encounters with an emphasis on "meditation" and "high contemplation":

For evyr the mor slawnder and repref that sche sufferyd, the mor sche incresyd in grace and in devocyon of holy medytacyon of hy contemplacyon and of wonderful spechys and dalyawns whech owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle, techyng hyr how sche schuld be despysed for hys lofe, how sche schuld han pacyens, settyng all hyr trost, alle hyr lofe, and alle hyr affeccyon in hym only.

[193] Turner, Denys, *Julian of Norwich Theologian*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 74.

("For the more slander and reproach she suffered, the more she increased in grace and in devotion to holy meditation of high contemplation and of wonderful speeches and conversations which our Lord spoke and conversed with her soul, teaching her how she should be despised for his love, how she should have patience, placing all her trust, all her love, and all her affection in Him alone.", lines 37-41).

The term Margery Kempe uses to describe her conversations with Jesus is particularly significant. While "dalyawns" can simply mean casual social conversation in Middle English, it often appears in medieval romance literature to denote flirtatious dialogue or even serve as a euphemism for sexual relations. Given the deeply intimate nature of the relationship Kempe constructs between herself and Jesus, some scholars speculate that the inherent ambiguity of "dalyawns" may have been intentional. Moreover, in the concluding remarks of this chapter, Kempe's confessor underscores the importance of this term when he tells Kempe: "Daughter, you are sucking gently at Christ's breast" ("Dowtyr, ye sowkyn evyn on Crysts brest", lines 397-398). This statement encapsulates the profound and intimate nature of Kempe's spiritual experiences, highlighting the close and personal connection she describes with Jesus. The use of such language suggests a deliberate blurring of spiritual and sensual boundaries, reflecting the complex interplay of intimacy and reverence in Kempe's mystical encounters.[194] Indeed, it can be argued that, after Kempe's conversion and first exhibited episodes of mental afflictions, the focus shifts to proving that she deserves the deep confidence and love Jesus shows her. This is because Kempe portrays herself as an exceptional woman whose unique qualities are emphasised in several ways to her readers. These qualities highlight the holiness of her life and hint at her potential for future sanctification. Central to this uniqueness is her "homely" relationship with Jesus, who defines their bond as follows:

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

("When you strive to please me, then you are a true daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and my Passion, then you are a true mother having compassion on her child; when you weep for other people's sins and adversities, then you are a true sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a true spouse and wife, for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company.", lines 715-721).

Kempe frequently uses a nuptial metaphor to describe her relationship with the divine. For instance, Jesus calls Kempe "myn owyn blyssed spowse" ("my own blessed spouse",

[194] McAvoy, *Authority*, pp. 129-130.

line 1201) and expresses His appreciation for her careful preparation to receive the sacrament each Sunday. He compares her devotion to that of a wife eagerly awaiting her husband's return after a long absence, saying she prepares "wyth al maner of mekenes, lownes, and charité, as any lady in this werld is besy to receyve hir husbond whan he comyth hom and hath be long fro hir" ("with all manner of meekness, humility, and charity, as any lady in this world is busy to receive her husband when he comes home and has been long away from her," lines 5081-5082). Another example can be found previously, in chapter 36, in which Christ seems to be depicting a very human relationship with her:

For it is convenient the wyf to be homly wyth hir husbond. Be he nevyr so gret a lorde and sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth hir, yet thei must ly togedir and rest togedir in joy and pes. Ryght so mot it be twyx the and me, for I take non hed what thu hast be but what thu woldist be. And oftyntymes have I telde the that I have clene forgove the alle thy synnes. Therfore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt.

("For it is appropriate for the wife to be on homely terms with her husband. Even if he is a great lord and she a poor woman when he marries her, they must live together and rest together in joy and peace. In the same way, it must be between you and me, for I do not consider what you have been but what you would like to be. I have often told you that I have completely forgiven all your sins. Therefore I must be homely with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.", lines 2097-2108).

Kempe seeks to describe her relationship with Jesus as a form of "homely" love, a term also used by Julian of Norwich. While the adjective is now rare, in Kempe's time "hamly" or "homly" denoted "intimate" or "familiar," but could also mean "simple", "direct," or even "equal," as Julian explores in Chapter 7 of her *Revelations*. Julian suggests that this "homely relationship" is possible between Jesus Christ and every other Christian like her. In contrast, when Jesus says to Kempe, "But hyly I thanke the, dowtyr, that thu hast suffyrd me to werkyn my wil in the and that thu woldist latyn me be so homly wyth the." ("But truly, I thank you, daughter, that you have allowed me to work my will in you and that you wished to let me be so homely with you.", lines 4986-4987), He is highlighting that their relationship is both intimate and "exclusive," and this may even suggest they relate as equals. While Julian of Norwich argues that God wants to share a "homely" love with all of humanity, Kempe emphasises that her intimate relationship with Jesus is unique because she is a "singular" individual. This uniqueness is also highlighted early

in Kempe's narrative, where she laments her lost virginity. She wishes she had died right after her baptism to avoid displeasing God through that sin. To comfort her, Jesus reassures her that her sins are forgiven and that they will be "united" in love forever. The Middle English text at lines 1156-1158 reads: "A, dowtyr, how oftyntymes have I teld the that thy synnes arn forgove the and that we ben onyd togedyr wythowtyn ended?" which means, "Oh, daughter, how often have I told you that your sins are forgiven and that we are united together without end?" Here, "we ben onyd togedyr" suggests that they are "made one" together. Together with these words, further underscoring Margery's potential for sainthood is Jesus's promise to bestow upon her, at her death, the same grace given to St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Barbara, and St. Paul:

Thu art to me a synguler lofe, dowtyr, and therfor I behote the thu schalt have a synguler grace in hevyn, dowtyr, and I behest the I schal come to thin ende at thi deyng wyth my blyssed modyr and myn holy awngelys and twelve apostelys, Seynt Kateryne, Seynt Margarete, Seynt Mary Mawdelyn, and many other seyntys that ben in hevyn, whech gevyn gret worshep to me for the grace that I geve to the, God, thi Lord Jhesu. Thow thart drede no grevows peynes in thi deyng, for thu schalt have thy desyre, that is to have mor mynde of my Passyon than on thin owyn peyne. Thu schalt not dredyn the devyl of helle for he hath no powyr in the. He dredyth the mor than thow dost hym.

("You are to me a special love, daughter, and therefore I promise you that you will receive a special grace in heaven, daughter. I promise that I will come to you at your death with my blessed mother, my holy angels, and the twelve apostles, as well as Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Mary Magdalene, and many other saints in heaven, who give great honour to me for the grace I have given you, God, your Lord Jesus. Do not fear any grievous pains in your dying, for you will have your desire, which is to remember my Passion more than your own suffering. You need not fear the Devil of hell, for he has no power over you. He fears you more than you fear him.", lines 1158- 1166).

As Katherine J. Lewis points out, Kempe is being assigned the same intercessory powers that were traditionally attributed to four of the "universal saints" venerated across medieval Europe. These saints, drawn from the Bible or early Christian history, were universally seen as highly influential figures. Clearly, *The Book of Margery Kempe* aims to place its author among them, highlighting her close relationship with Christ and her extraordinary abilities.[195] Additionally, in three separate chapters —29, 56, and 84— Kempe and her readers are assured that the grace bestowed upon her will eventually make her renowned worldwide.

As discussed in this section, while the medieval tradition of Affective Piety influenced both authors, their works diverge significantly in content and purpose, presumably partly due also to the different nature of the psychological traumas that

[195] Lewis, Katherine J., "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Arnold John H. and Lewis Katherine J., Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 202.

prompted their respective spiritual awakenings. *The Book of Margery Kempe* serves as a form of auto-hagiography, designed to elevate Kempe's status as a holy figure, potentially even a saint. This text vividly depicts her intimate divine encounters and spiritual gifts, particularly her gift of tears, emphasising her deeply personal communion with Jesus Christ. In contrast, Julian of Norwich's *Showings* transcends personal narrative, evolving into a sophisticated theological treatise. Julian challenges the retributive theodicies of Augustine and his medieval successors, offering comfort and reassurance through her affirmation of God's boundless love for humanity. Her work provides a universal theological perspective, offering profound insights into the nature of God's love and the relationship between God and humankind. In the next section, I will delve deeper into Julian of Norwich's theology, particularly in relation to her fellow and equal Christians, as well as to the theological concepts proposed by Margery Kempe.

3.4 Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe's Theologies and Controversies

As previously discussed, the writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich provide distinct yet influential perspectives on medieval spirituality and their personal connections with the divine. Both women experienced profound mystical visions and revelations in the wake of significant personal crises, which catalysed their spiritual journeys. Kempe's experiences followed what is believed to be a postpartum crisis, while Julian of Norwich's visionary experiences emerged from a near-death illness, during which she witnessed a vision of the bleeding cross. These profound experiences of suffering and subsequent divine encounters form a common thread in their narratives, illustrating how mental affliction can pave the way for profound spiritual insights and revelations, or at least what they perceived and described as such. *The Book of Margery Kempe* acts as an auto-hagiography, aiming to present her as a holy figure, potentially even a saint, by emphasising her intense and personal communion with Jesus Christ. In contrast, Julian of Norwich's *Showings* evolves from a personal narrative into a sophisticated theological work, offering comfort and reassurance through her focus on God's boundless love for all humanity. These facts alone illustrate the distinct differences between their theologies and their perceptions of religious themes and concepts within their respective contexts and narratives; however, a thorough comparison must be made to better understand the conceptual differences in their works.

One of these key concepts is that, unlike Kempe, Julian often references all three persons of the Trinity, using parallelism to emphasise their unity, whereas Kempe concentrates solely on Jesus Christ. Conversely, Julian rarely mentions one person of the Trinity without referencing the other two, frequently employing parallelism to honour the Trinity. Moreover, as a rhetorical device, she often uses a triadic structure even when not strictly necessary, for instance using this structure in listing adjectives in parallel series: "For thy love I made her so hey, so noble, and so worthy" ("It is for love of you that I have made her so exalted, so noble, so honourable.", lines 896-89). Occasionally, the parallelism is more syntactically complex, as in the following sequence of sentences:

I se three things, game, scorne, and arneste; I se game that the fend is overcome. I se scorne that God scornith him and he shal be scornyd. And I se arneste that he is overcome be the blissfull passion and deth of our Lord Jesus Criste; that was done in ful arnest and with sad travelle.

("I see three things: sport and scorn and seriousness. I see sport, that the devil is overcome; and I see scorn, that God scorns him and he will be scorned; and I see seriousness, that he is overcome by the blessed Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was accomplished in great earnest and with heavy labour.", lines 524-528).

Furthermore, receiving another vision of the Trinity, Julian insists on the use of parallelism in her writings, as evident in the following passage in which she remarks:

For the joy I understode the plesance of the Fader, and for the blis, the worshippe of the Son, and for the endles lykyng the Holy Gost. The Fader is plesid, the Son is worshippid, the Holy Gost lykith.

("For the joy I understood the pleasure of the Father, and for the bliss, the worship of the Son, and for the endless delight, the Holy Ghost. The Father is pleased, the Son is honoured, the Holy Spirit takes delight.", lines 823-825).

Another comparable example of the use of parallelism to explain the workings of the Trinity can also be found in the most famous passage of the *Showings*, in which God makes Julian a promise in response to all her doubts. Although it may initially seem like a fourfold promise, Julian later clarifies that it is a statement reflective of the Trinity in both form and content:

I may makyn al thing wele, I can make al thing wele, and I wil make al thyng wele, and I shall make al thyng wele, and thou shal se thiself that al manner of thyng shal be wele. That He seyth, I may, I understond for the Fader, and He seith, I can, I understond for the Son, and where He seith, I will, I understond for the Holy Gost, and wher He seith, I shall, I understond for the unite of the blissid Trinite, three persons and one trouthe.

("I may make all things well, I can make all things well, and I will make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and you shall see yourself that all manner of thing shall be well. That He says 'I may,' I understand for the Father, and He says 'I can,' I understand for the Son, and where He says 'I will,' I understand for the Holy Ghost, and where He says 'I shall,' I understand for the unity of the blessed Trinity, three persons and one truth.", lines 1026-1031).

Although Margery Kempe tells her audience that she too has direct experience of the workings of the Trinity, her understanding of this theological construct seems less rooted in deep reflection, possibly also due to the more invasive and stronger nature of her mental affliction compared to Julian's. Unlike her, Kempe apparently has not contemplated the matter extensively, nor does she reference the mystery of the Trinity with the intellectual and syntactical sophistication that Julian demonstrates. Instead, Kempe's syntax often becomes confused as she attempts to articulate complex concepts lacking further intellectual or spiritual reflection, for instance: "Sumtyme the Secunde Persone in Trinyté; sumtyme alle thre Personys in Trinyté and o substawns in Godhede dalyid to hir sowle and informyd hir in hir feyth and in hys lofe." ("Sometimes the Second Person in Trinity, sometimes all three Persons in Trinity and one substance in Godhead, spoke to her soul, and informed her in her faith and in His love.", lines 895-897). Jesus' assurance to Kempe regarding her understanding of the workings of the Trinity seems to be equally lacking in theological depth, or at least imprecise in its language:

Also thu thynkyst that eche of the three personys in Trinité hath that other hath in her Godhed, and so thu belevyst verily, dowtyr, in thy sowle that ther be three dyvers personys and oo God in substawnce, and that eche knowyth that other knowyth, and ech may that other may, and eche wil that other wil. And, dowtyr, this a very feith and a ryght feyth, and this feith hast thu only of my gyfte.

("You also think that each of the three Persons in the Trinity has what the other has in their Godhead, and so you truly believe, daughter, in your soul, that there are three divers Persons and one God in substance, and that each knows what the others know, and each may do what the others may, and each wills what the others will. And daughter, this is a true faith and a right faith, and this faith you have only of my gift.", lines 5023-5028).

However, *The Book of Margery Kempe* also contains original and complex insights into the nature of God and Christ through her visions. One notable example is Kempe's unique portrayal of the Holy Spirit, whose traditional biblical imagery found in both the Old and New Testaments, often depicts it as a dove, breath, wind, or tongues of fire. In contrast, Margery Kempe's vision introduces a new image:

Thys creatur had divers tokenys in hir bodily heryng. On was a maner of sownde as it had ben a peyr of belwys blowyng in hir ere. Sche, beyng abasshed therof, was warnyd in hir sowle no fer to have for it was the sownd of the Holy Gost. And than owr Lord turnyd that sownde into the voys of a dowe, and sithyn he turnyd it into the voys of a lityl bryd whech is callyd a reedbrest that song ful merily oftyntymes in hir ryght ere. And than schuld sche evyrmor han gret grace aftyr that sche herd swech a tokyn.

("This creature had various signs in her bodily hearing. One was a kind of sound like it had been a pair of bellows blowing in her ear. Being astonished by this, she was warned in her soul not to be afraid, for it was the sound of the Holy Ghost. And then our Lord transformed that sound into the voice of a dove, and afterward he transformed it into the voice of a little bird called a redbreast, which sang very cheerfully many times in her right ear. After she heard such a sign, she should always have great grace thereafter.", Lines 2113-2118.)

The rushing wind in Margery Kempe's ear assures her that it is the Holy Ghost, a symbol of God's spirit as ancient in theology, as it is familiar to her. Interestingly, the cheerful song of a redbreast is a new image and an auditory experience, not a vision as other phenomena Kempe describes to have experienced. This symbol represents a friendly, almost cheerful aspect of God, which seems to complicate other images she previously used, including the calm of the dove. It is in all probability not by chance that, in the same chapter as this unique contribution to theology along with the serene dove, Christ also reminds her of maintaining a balanced spirituality: "And I have oftyntymes, dowtyr, teld the that thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe." ("And I have often told you, daughter, that thinking, weeping, and deep contemplation is the best life on earth.", lines 2089-2091).

In these passages, where Kempe delves into the theological meanings behind her visions and meditations, she portrays herself as especially close and dear to God, as in other parts of her book. In contrast, even while expressing her theological ideas, Julian of Norwich emphasises her equality with other Christians, even challenging some Church teachings. Julian was committed to making her manuscript widely available, driven by her desire to encourage fellow Christians, however, many ideas in her work could be seen as subversive challenges to the Church's teachings and authority. One potentially controversial theme in her work is her subtle support for Universalism, the belief that all will be saved and go to heaven. The orthodox and official position of the Church, endorsed by figures like Dante and Thomas Aquinas, was that unbelievers and unrepentant sinners are damned to Hell.[196] Julian of Norwich often notes that she never saw anyone who was not saved or God blaming humanity for sinning in her visions. She, however, does mention seeing "the feende" and refers to souls in Heaven as "all that schalbe savyd":

For in this God shewid that the fend is dampnid. And this ment I when I seid he shall be scornyd at domys day generally of all that shal be savyd to hose consolation he hath gret invye.

("For in this, God showed that the fiend is damned. And this is what I meant when I said he shall be scorned at Judgment Day by all who shall be saved, for whose consolation he has great envy.", Lines 529-532).

In this passage, Julian mentions the Devil, a part of humanity (and only a part) that shall be saved, and later refers to Hell again in line 534. However, when she discusses those who shall be saved, her language is often broad. Indeed, she also states "I speake of hem

[196] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, NewAdvent.org, 2008, Question 97.

that shal be saved, for in this time God shewid me none other" ("I speak of those who shall be saved, for in that time, God showed me none other.", line 334). While Julian is not the first to suggest the possibility that everyone would be saved, as a woman, and so like Kempe, she faced greater scrutiny and had to be particularly careful to reassure her readers and potential Church censors that she was not challenging the official teachings of the clergy. This explains why, even if hinting at Universalism, she reassures her audience by stating that she just did not see any of the damned in her vision, not precisely stating whether they exist or not.

As already discussed, Julian of Norwich's descriptions of her visions are both narrative and reflective: she not only recounts the events of her visions and her conversations with God, but also explores their deeper meanings. In The Long Text, her reflections reveal a theological purpose behind her writings. According to Spearing, even though women were not officially recognised as theologians, Julian practised theology in her own way. She engaged with the ideas of male theologians and developed a distinctively female perspective. Despite not writing in Latin or using the logical and analytical methods of scholasticism, Julian's work demonstrates her theological engagement. This might also be attributed to the fact that Julian's mental affliction was and was perceived, as less severe and more "manageable" than Kempe's, which helped her to be taken more seriously by her contemporaries and later critics.[197] Several themes are prominent in Julian's theology, for which she is well known in her literary tradition. One significant theme is her exploration of the nature of evil, or, as she typically refers to it, "synne":

In this nakid word synne, our Lord browte to my mynd generally al that is not good, and the shamfull dispite and the utter nowtyng that He bare for us in this life, and His dyeng, and al the peynys and passions of al His creatures, gostly and bodily.

("In this simple word 'sin,' our Lord brought to my mind generally all that is not good, and the shameful disdain and the utter nothingness that He bore for us in this life, and His dying, and all the pains and passions of all His creatures, spiritually and physically.", Lines 938-941).

It seems to perplex Julian that sin and evil do not seem to appear or take any form in her visions, making her think that God guides all humans and that is the reason why sins do not appear. She notes in the third revelation:

Wherefore me behovith nedes to grant that al thing that is done, it is wel done, for our Lord God doth alle. For in this time the werkyng of cretures was not shewid, but of our Lord God in the creature. For He is in the mydde point of all thyng, and all He doith; and I was sekir He doith no synne. And here I saw sothly that synne is no dede, for in al this was not synne shewid. And I wold no lenger mervel in this, but beheld

[197] Spearing, Elizabeth and Spearing, A. C. eds, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text and Long Text,* London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. XXIII-XXIV.

our Lord, what He wold shewen. And thus as it might be for the time, the rightfulhede of Gods werkyng was shewid to the soule.

("Therefore, I must necessarily admit that all things that are done are done well, for our Lord God does all. For at this time, the actions of creatures were not shown, but those of our Lord God within the creature. For He is in the center of all things, and He does everything; and I was certain that He does no sin. And here I saw truly that sin is not a deed, for in all this, no sin was shown. And I did not want to marvel at this any longer, but looked to our Lord to see what He would show. And thus, as it could be for the time, the righteousness of God's workings was shown to the soul.", lines 438-445).

Julian of Norwich acknowledges that everything that happens is ultimately done well because it is God's work, indicating a profound trust in the divine plan and the inherent goodness of God's actions. In this particular spiritual vision, God is described as the central force in all things, the one who is actively doing everything, and Julian is certain that God does not commit sin. Moreover, through this vision, she understands that sin is not an actual deed or action: no sin is visible in the vision, suggesting that sin is an absence or distortion rather than a positive action. This understanding aligns with Julian's broader reflection that the word "sin" indicates generally all that is not good. Moreover, still explaining her visions and her explanations on the nature of sin theologically, she writes:

But I saw not synne, for I beleve it hath no manner of substance ne no party of being, ne it myght not be knowin, but by the peyne that it is cause of; and thus peyne - it is somethyng, as to my syte, for a tyme, for it purgith and makyth us to knowen our selfe and askyn mercy.

("But I did not see sin, for I believe it has no kind of substance nor any part of being, nor could it be known except by the pain it causes; and thus pain—it is something, as it seems to me, for a time, for it purges and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy.", Lines 949-952).

Julian of Norwich again conveys the idea that sin itself is not a tangible entity or an essential part of existence but is recognised through the pain it causes. However, the effects of sin—pain and suffering—are real and tangible. Pain is described as having a temporary existence and serving an important purpose: it helps individuals become aware of their faults and encourages them to seek mercy and forgiveness. Therefore, sin is not presented as a substantial entity but plays a significant role in spiritual development by fostering self-awareness and the search for mercy. This concept, that evil or sin has no real existence but is a lack of being, is rooted in Christian tradition and has been investigated also by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*[198] and St. Augustine in the *Enchiridion*, in which he writes: "Whenever a thing is consumed by corruption, not even the corruption remains, for it is nothing in itself, having no subsistent being in which

[198] Thomas Aquinas, "The Effects of Sin, and, First, of the Corruption of the Good of Nature" in *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2008, Accessed July 12, 2024: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2085.htm.

to exist."[199] It is unclear how familiar Julian of Norwich was with these writings, but it is evident that their ideas reached her time and education, as there are clear similarities. However, she does not merely repeat the ideas of other theologians about evil, but she actively participates in theological discussion by expanding and developing her own explanations. Indeed, Julian goes even further in her theological analysis by identifying wrath and anger as failings of what is good. Since there can be no failing or lack in God, she implies that these traits cannot be attributed to the divine:

For I sow no wrath but in mannys partie, and that forgevyth He in us. For wreth is not ell but a frowardness and a contrarioste to peace and to love. And eyther it commyth of faylyng of myte, or of faylyng of wisdam, or of faylyng of goodnes, which faylyng is not in God, but it is on our partie, for we be synne and wretchidnes have in us a wretchid and continuant contrariuste to peace and to love, and that shewid He full often in His lovely chere of ruth and pety.

("For I saw no wrath except in the part of man, and that He forgives us. Wrath is nothing but a stubbornness and a contradiction to peace and love. And it either comes from a failure of power, or a failure of wisdom, or a failure of goodness, which failures are not in God, but are on our part. For we, in our sin and wretchedness, have a wretched and persistent opposition to peace and love, and this He showed often in His loving countenance of compassion and pity.", Lines 1681-1686).

Julian of Norwich introduces a new and original dimension to the theological discussion on sin and punishment. Saint Paul in Romans 5:8-9 states that God's wrath has been satisfied through Christ's death saying "But God commendeth his charity towards us; because when as yet we were sinners, according to the time, Christ died for us; much more therefore, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from wrath through him."[200], however, Julian expands this discussion by presenting a different perspective. She identifies wrath and anger as failings of what is good and argues that such traits cannot be ascribed to God. Since there can be no failing or lack in the divine, Julian of Norwich implies that these attributes are incompatible with God's nature, thereby offering an original contribution to the theological discourse.

In addition to her views on sin as a non-tangible entity and wrath and anger as failings that cannot be attributed to the divine, Julian of Norwich introduces another significant theological dimension through her use of feminised imagery for God and Jesus. As stated previously in this thesis discussing Christ's scenes during the Passion, with a body which involves feminine features, this approach adds depth to her theological discourse. Julian's vivid and feminised images challenge and broaden the conventional

[199] Saint Augustine, *Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope and Love*, ed. and transl. by Albert C. Outler, 1955, Accessed July 12, 2024: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm.
[200] Saint Paul. Romans 5:8-9, In *The Holy Bible, Douay-Rheims Version*, Accessed July 12, 2024, https://drbo.org/chapter/52005.htm.

understanding of the divine. By presenting God and Jesus with nurturing and maternal qualities, she highlights a more intimate and compassionate relationship between the divine and humanity. For instance, concerning Jesus, she writes:

And ferthermore I saw that the Second Person, which is our Moder substantial, that same derworthy person is become our Moder sensual. For we arn duble of Gods makyng, that is to say, substantiall and sensual. Our substance is the heyer parte, which we have in our fader God Almyty. And the Second Person of the Trinite is our Moder in kynde in our substantiall makeyng, in whome we arn groundid and rotid, and He is our Moder in mercy in our sensualite, taking flesh. And thus our Moder is to us dyvers manner werkyng, in whom our parties are kepid ondepartid. For in our Moder Criste we profitten and encresin, and in mercy He reformith us and restorith; and, be the vertue of His passion and His deth and uprisyng, onyth us to our substance. Thus werkith our Moder in mercy to all His children which arn to Him buxum and obedient.

("Furthermore, I saw that the Second Person, who is our substantial Mother, has become our sensual Mother as well. For we are double in God's creation, that is to say, substantial and sensual. Our substance is the higher part, which we have in our Father God Almighty. And the Second Person of the Trinity is our Mother in kind in our substantial creation, in whom we are grounded and rooted, and He is our Mother in mercy in our sensuality, having taken flesh. Thus, our Mother works with us in different ways, in whom our parts are kept undivided. For in our Mother Christ we profit and grow, and in mercy He reforms and restores us; and, by the virtue of His passion, death, and resurrection, He raises us to our substance. Thus, our Mother in mercy works for all His children who are submissive and obedient to Him.", lines 2412-2422).

In these theological concepts of Christ as both a nurturing and merciful figure, emphasising His role in both substantial creation and sensual mercy, the term "sensual" refers to the aspect of human nature connected to physical and emotional experiences. This is in contrast to the "substantial" aspect, which is purely spiritual. The key point is that Julian of Norwich even goes so far as to define the Second Person of the Trinity as "our Mother Christ." Furthermore, concerning God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity, Julian of Norwich writes:

As veryly as God is our fader, as verily God is our Moder; and that shewid He in all, and namely in these swete words where He seith, I it am. That is to seyen, I it am, the myte and the goodnes of the faderhed. I it am, the wisdam of the Moderhede. I it am, the lyte and the grace that is al blissid love.

("As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother; and He showed this in all things, and especially in these sweet words where He says, 'I am it.' That is to say, 'I am it,' the might and goodness of Fatherhood. 'I am it,' the wisdom of Motherhood. 'I am it,' the light and grace that is all-blessed love.", lines 2448-2451).

This original theological concept, which suggests that God embodies both paternal and maternal aspects and expresses divine qualities through these roles, is framed in a way that, as Spearing notes, could probably not be entirely new to Julian of Norwich.[201] The Bible contains numerous feminine and motherly images of God, and other medieval commentators, like Richard Rolle, also developed portrayals of Jesus Christ as a

[201] Spearing, p. XXIII.

mother.[202] However, as Spearing observes, what is remarkable about Julian's depiction of God as a mother is the depth of her treatment and the theological implications that arise from it[203]: she clearly and repeatedly states that God is both a mother and a father. Indeed, in the theological concepts she outlines, each member of the Trinity embodies both genders, allowing God to relate to us as a father, mother, sibling, or spouse:

> And thus I saw that God enjoyeth that He is our fader, God enjoyeth that He is our moder, and God enjoyeth that He is our very spouse, and our soule is His lovid wife.
>
> ("And thus I saw that God delights in being our Father, God delights in being our Mother, and God delights in being our true Spouse, and our soul is His beloved wife.", Lines 2074-2076).

This vision reflects the idea that God finds joy in different relational roles with humanity, highlighting the divine pleasure in being both nurturing parent figures, as mother and father.

Moreover, another aspect to highlight is that when Julian of Norwich introduces divine knowledge in her visions, she often does so with phrases such as "I saw that…". This approach serves to reassure the Church and her readers that she is not challenging orthodoxy, as she consistently affirms her adherence to and belief in the Holy Church. This is particularly interesting when considering Julian from a modern perspective, where her experiences might be understood as manifestations of mental afflictions. By presenting her mystical visions and theological insights as something she physically saw rather than personally elaborated, Julian underscores her role as a genuine and passive recipient of divine revelation. This framing helps to validate her experiences within the context of her mental state, making her claims more palatable to her contemporaries and aligning them with the accepted religious orthodoxy of her time. Indeed, this reassurance is also particularly important because some of her insights do not fully align with traditional Church teachings or depictions of the Trinity. For instance, she often offers reassurances in the text, as in the case in which Christ declares His identity as both the object of the Church's teachings and to have revealed Himself personally: "Our Lord Jesus oftentymes seyd, […] I it am that Holy Church prechyth and teachyth the, I am that shewed me here to thee."("Our Lord Jesus often said, [...] I am the one whom Holy Church preaches and teaches to you; I am the one who has shown Himself to you here.", lines 919-923). In other instances, she declared that the Holy Church serves as a vital

[202] Boenig, Robert, "The God-as-Mother Theme in Richard Rolle's Biblical Commentaries", *Mystics Quarterly* 10.4, 1984, pp. 171-174.
[203] Spearing, p. XXIII.

means through which divine grace and understanding are imparted to believers. It offers both spiritual guidance and practical teaching, working in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to nurture and support the faithful in their spiritual journey:

He gave me understondyng of two parties. That one party is our Savior and our salvation. This blissid parte is hopyn and clere and faire and lite and plentiuous, for al mankynde that is of good wille, and shal be, is comprehendid in this parte. Herto arn we bounden of God and drawen and councellid and lerid inwardly be the Holy Gost and outwardly be Holy Church in the same grace.

("He gave me understanding of two aspects. The first aspect is our Savior and our salvation. This blessed aspect is hopeful, clear, beautiful, light, and abundant, for all of humankind that is of goodwill, and shall be, is encompassed in this aspect. We are bound by God to this, drawn and guided inwardly by the Holy Ghost and outwardly by Holy Church in the same grace.", Lines 1006-1009).

Moreover, since Julian supports the idea of universal salvation on Judgment Day, as explored previously, her views contrast with the official and orthodox teachings of the Church. Consequently, when discussing heaven, hell, and the Devil, she frequently repeats her reassurances, such as "For I levyd sothfastly that Hel and Purgatory is for the same end that Holy Church techith."("I firmly believed that hell and purgatory are for the same purpose that Holy Church teaches", lines 1118-1119), and:

I speake of hem that shal be save, for in this time God shewid me none other. But in al thing I leve as Holy Church levith, preachith, and teachith. For the feith of Holy Church, the which I had afornhand understonden and, as I hope, by the grace of God wilfully kept in use and custome, stode continualy in my sight, willing and meneing never to receive onything that might be contrary thereunto.

("I speak of those who shall be saved, for at this time God showed me nothing else. But in all things, I believe as Holy Church believes, preaches, and teaches. For the faith of Holy Church, which I had previously understood and, as I hope, by the grace of God willfully kept in practice and custom, remained continually in my view, willing and meaning never to accept anything that might be contrary to it.", lines 334-338).

Julian, although she claims in the Short Text that nothing she saw conflicted with the Church's teachings, elaborates on her struggles and concerns about reconciling her visions with Church doctrine, especially in the Long Text. Despite experiencing profound spiritual sweetness and delight, Julian felt unsettled due to the Church's different teachings on sin and judgment. The Church's views made her conscious of her own sinfulness and the concept of divine wrath and blame, which were not evident in her perception of God:

And thow this was swete and delectabil, yet only in the beholdyng of this, I cowd nowte be full esyd. And that was for the dome of Holy Church, which I had aforn understond and was continuly in my syte. And therfore be this dome methowte me behovyd neds to know me a synner, and be the same dome I understode that synners arn worthy sumtime blame and wreth. And these two cowth I not se in God.

("And though this vision was sweet and delightful, yet even in contemplating this, I could not be fully satisfied. This was because of the judgment of Holy Church, which I had previously understood and which was continually before my eyes. Therefore, because of this judgment, it seemed to me that I needed to

recognise myself as a sinner, and by the same judgment, I understood that sinners are sometimes deserving of blame and wrath. And I did not see these two things in God.", lines 1577-1582).

It seems evident that there were points of apparent conflict between what the vision revealed and what she had learned from the Church's teachings. Indeed, a little further along in the Long Text, Julian recounts a similar struggle:

For I knew be the comyn techyng of holy church and by my owne felyng tha the blame of oure synnes continually hangyth uppon us, fro the furst man in to the tyme that we come uppe in to hevyn. Then was this my merveyle, that I saw oure Lorde God shewyng to us no more blame then if we were as clene and as holy as angelis be in hevyn. And between theyse two contraryes my reson was grettly traveyled.

("But yet here I wondered and marvelled with all the diligence of my soul, thinking thus: Good Lord, I see You who are very truth, and I know truly that we sin grievously all day and are greatly blameworthy, and I can neither deny the knowledge of this truth, nor do I see You showing us any manner of blame. How can this be? For I knew by the common teaching of the Holy Church, and by my own feeling, that the blame for our sin continually hangs upon us from the first man until the time that we come up into Heaven. Then this was my marvel, that I saw our Lord God showing us no more blame than if we were as clean and as holy as angels are in Heaven.", lines 1764-1772).

This passage reflects a profound spiritual struggle: on one side is the traditional doctrine of the Holy Church, emphasising human sinfulness and the need for ongoing repentance due to continual blame. On the other side is her personal, mystical experience of God, who appears not to focus on blame but instead sees humanity in a state of purity and holiness, as He is within every person. This contrast prompts Julian of Norwich to deeply question how these two understandings can coexist, illustrating the complexity of navigating personal spiritual revelations within the framework of established religious teachings. However, she does not feel obliged to explain and reason her way through the apparent conflicts as a theologian like Thomas Aquinas might have done. Instead, her solution is to trust, accept the paradox, and resign herself to one truth on earth and another in heaven:

For the heyer dome God shewid Hymselfe in the same tyme, and therfore me behovyd neds to taken it, and the lower dome was lern me aforn in Holy Church, and therfore I myte in no way levyn the lower dome. Than was this my desire - that I myte sen in God in what manner that the dome of Holy Church herin techyth is trew in His syte, and how it longyth to me sothly to knoyn it, wherby thei myte both be savid so as it wer worshipfull to God and ryte way to me.

("For the higher judgment, God showed Himself at the same time, and therefore I had to accept it. The lower judgment was taught to me beforehand in Holy Church, and therefore I could not leave the lower judgment. Then this was my desire: that I might see in God in what manner the judgment of Holy Church is true in His sight, and how it pertains to me truly to know it, so that they might both be reconciled in a way that is honorable to God and the right way for me.", Lines 1582-1588).

In this passage, the emphasis is on Julian's internal conflict between the "higher judgment" she perceives directly from God and the "lower judgment" she has learned from the Holy Church. She desires to understand how these two judgments can be

reconciled, ensuring that the teachings of the Church are true in God's eyes and finding a way to harmonise them in a manner that honours God and is spiritually appropriate for her and her visions.[204] Similarly, Julian acknowledges the mystery of the paradox between the Church's teachings and what was shown in her vision by explaining:

For althyng that the simple soule understode, God will that it be shewid and knowen. For the thyngs that He will have privy, mytyly and wisely Hymselfe He hydeth hem for love. For I saw in the same shewing that mech privity is hid, which may never be knowen into the tyme that God of His goodnes hath made us worthy to sen it. And therwith I am wele paid, abyding our Lords will in this hey mervel. And now I yeele me to my moder Holy Church as a simple child owyth.

("For everything that the simple soul understood, God wills that it be revealed and known. For the things that He wills to keep secret, He hides them mightily and wisely for love. For I saw in the same vision that much secrecy is hidden, which may never be known until the time that God, in His goodness, has made us worthy to see it. And with that, I am well satisfied, awaiting our Lord's will in this great marvel. And now I yield myself to my mother, Holy Church, as a simple child ought to.", lines 1632-1638).

This passage conveys Julian of Norwich's acceptance of both the revelations God wishes to make known and the mysteries He chooses to keep hidden. She trusts in God's timing and goodness; however, she explicitly and humbly submits to the authority of the Holy Church, likening herself to a simple child in its care.

Although it is impossible to fully ascertain the sincerity of her insistent assurances about her dedication to the teachings of the Holy Church, it is evident that Julian was not interested in having her orthodoxy questioned or challenged. Rather than using her visions to confront the Church, Julian's foremost desire was for her book to be written and read as a source of encouragement for the reader, reaffirming her profound respect for and alignment with the Church's teachings. Julian felt the need to be exceedingly careful in reassuring Church authorities. She understood that the most effective way to publish and preserve her visions for posterity was to firmly maintain her position within Catholic orthodoxy.[205] Indeed, as she concluded the book, she recalled asking God for an explanation of the meaning of her revelation, and God seems to have answered simply enough as "love":

And fro that time that it was shewid I desired oftentimes to witten what was our Lords mening. And fifteen yer after and more I was answerid in gostly understonding, seyand thus: Woldst thou wetten thi Lords mening in this thing? Wete it wele, love was His mening. Who shewid it the? Love. What shewid He the? Love. Wherfore shewid it He? For love.

("And from the time it was revealed, I often desired to know what our Lord's meaning was. And fifteen years later and more, I was answered in a spiritual understanding, saying thus: Would you know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was His meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did He show you? Love. Why did He show it? For love.", lines 3401-3405).

[204] Pelphrey, Brant, *Love Was His Meaning: The Theology and Mysticism of Julian of Norwich*, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik: Universität Salzburg, 1982, pp. 295-297.
[205] Pelphrey, pp. 297-299.

At the very end of the book, in a concluding passage that functions almost as a postscript, she underscores once again her continued and strong faith in the Church. Simultaneously, she offers a prayer, seeking divine blessing for her work:

I pray Almyty God that this booke com not but to the hands of them that will be His faithfull lovers, and to those that will submitt them to the feith of Holy Church, and obey the holesom understondying and teching of the men that be of vertuous life, sadde age, and profound lerning.

("I pray Almighty God that this book comes only into the hands of those who will be His faithful lovers, and to those who will submit themselves to the faith of Holy Church, and obey the wholesome understanding and teaching of men who are of virtuous life, mature age, and profound learning", lines 3418-3421)

Building on the earlier sections of this thesis and the analysis of these passages from Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, it is clear that both she and Margery Kempe introduced a subversive quality in their messages when contrasted with the teachings of the Holy Church. As McAvoy points out, each of these women challenged the traditional boundaries assigned to her, using her body and voice to push beyond the constraints established by ecclesiastical authority.[206] As stated in this section, Julian of Norwich subverted traditional Catholic orthodoxy through her ideas of universal salvation, a nurturing, motherly God, and a deity defined entirely by love rather than wrath. Although her views were provocative, she was never formally accused of heresy. In contrast, Margery Kempe encountered significant opposition for her unconventional behaviour, facing persecution, efforts to curtail her influence and even opposition from scribes to write her revelations and story. From line 62 to line 72 of her book, Kempe recounts that over twenty years after her initial revelations, she was divinely instructed to document her experiences to show God's goodness to the world. Initially, she struggled to find a scribe to write, support and validate her account. Eventually, a man from Germany, who had English origins and was already familiar with her story, travelled to her and began recording her account as she desired. However, after his death, the book was still not finished and Kempe's controversial reputation made it exceedingly difficult for her to find another writer to complete the manuscript. Kempe had a priest who could help her, however, he said the book was so poorly written that he could barely understand it, as it was neither proper English nor German, and the letters were too irregular. Despite this, he promised that if he could decipher it, he would copy and improve it willingly. Eventually he kept his promise, however, prior to this Kempe writes:

[206] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 2.

Than was ther so evel spekyng of this creatur and of hir wepyng that the prest durst not for cowardyse speke wyth her but seldom, ne not wold wryten as he had behestyd unto the forseyd creatur. And so he voyded and deferryd the wrytyng of this boke wel onto a fourth yer or ellys mor, notwythstandyng the creatur cryed often on hym therfor. At the last he seyd onto hir that he cowd not redyn it, wherfor he wold not do it. He wold not, he seyd, put hym in perel therof.

("There was so much negative talk about this woman and her weeping that the priest, out of fear, dared not speak with her often, nor would he write as he had promised her. Thus, he avoided and postponed writing the book for nearly four years or even longer, despite the woman frequently calling on him. Eventually, he told her that he could not read it and therefore would not do it, saying he did not want to put himself in danger over it.", lines 78-84).

Despite facing significant resistance throughout her life, Margery Kempe's opposition could not prevent her ministry and message from being heard. This resistance may indicate that she posed a challenge to a deeply misogynistic Church, however, her success also demonstrates that the Church was capable of recognising and supporting female preachers, teachers, and theologians. Interestingly, Kempe was often persecuted more by her fellow pilgrims or townspeople than by members of the clergy. However, Kempe's frequent mental afflictions and outbursts, which led many contemporaries to perceive her as hysterical, added significant difficulties to her experience as a writer of theological insights and preacher. Indeed, in addition to conveying God's revelations to individuals, Kempe was known to preach to large groups of laypeople willing to listen, despite frequent opposition and attempts to silence her. In one notable instance, Kempe was imprisoned in a private home awaiting trial for the heresy of Lollardy. Rather than remaining passive, she opened a window and continued her ministry, much as she did in churches or during her pilgrimages:

Than stode sche lokyng owt at a wyndown, tellyng many good talys to hem that wolde heryn hir, in so meche that women wept sor and seyde wyth gret hevynes of her hertys, 'Alas, woman, why schalt thu be brent?'

("Then she stood looking out of a window, telling many good stories to those who would listen to her, so much so that women wept bitterly and said with great heaviness of their hearts, 'Alas, woman, why must you be burned?'", Lines 3082-3084).

Margery Kempe did not have access to a lector's pulpit in a church, however, McAvoy describes her window as a "makeshift pulpit" and identifies it as one of the most explicit instances of a woman taking on the role of the preacher in medieval literature outside traditional hagiography. Moreover, McAvoy also writes that despite significant opposition, Church culture did provide a space for mystics who spoke with the authority of divine revelation, enabling even a woman like Kempe to assume the role of preacher.[207]

[207] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 28.

Nonetheless, references to Kempe's own dramatic outbursts in her book are almost as frequent as the mentions of her profound moments of religious expression to other people. These outbursts are met with a range of reactions, from astonishment to annoyance. The expressions of astonishment and wonder highlight the uniqueness of Kempe's spiritual gift, as seen in chapters 26, 27, and 33, where a German priest in Rome tests her tears of contrition and concludes that they are inspired by the Holy Ghost. Conversely, the annoyance expressed by others serves a different function, underscoring the ongoing challenges Margery faced, for instance in Canterbury (Chapter 13), in Jerusalem (Chapter 28), in Beverley (Chapter 54), in Aachen (Book II, Chapter 6), and London (Book II, Chapter 9). Early in the text, her tears of contrition provoke a public response that would contribute to her enduring pain and suffering in the years to come:

Hir wepyng was so plentyuows and so contwnyng that mech pepul wend that sche mygth wepyn and levyn whan sche wold, and therfor many men seyd sche was a fals ypocryte and wept for the world for socowr and for wordly good.

("Her weeping was so plentiful and so continual that many people thought that she could weep and leave off when she wanted, and therefore many people said she was a false hypocrite and wept when in company for advantage and profit.", lines 295-298).

Despite this, Christ appreciates Kempe's suffering, saying at one point:

"Dowtyr, it is mor plesyng unto me that thu suffyr despitys and scornys, schamys and reprevys, wrongys and disesys than yif thin hed wer smet of thre tymes on the day every day in sevyn yer. And therfor, dowtyr, fere the nowt what any man can seyn onto the, but in myn goodnes and in thy sorwys that thu hast suffryd therin hast thu gret cawse to joyn, for, whan thu comyst hom into hevyn, than schal every sorwe turnyn the to joye."

("Daughter, it is more pleasing to me that you endure despises and scorns, shame and reproaches, wrongs and injuries than if your head were struck three times a day every day for seven years. Therefore, daughter, do not fear what anyone may say to you, but take joy in my goodness and in the sorrows you have endured. For when you come home to heaven, every sorrow will turn to joy.", lines 3094-3099.)

However, He also offers to lift the burden of suffering from Margery if she finds it more than she can endure. Margery responds to this offer by saying:

"Nay, good Lord, late me be at thi wille and make me mythy and strong for to suffyr al that evyr thu wilt that I suffyr, and grawnt me mekenes and pacyens therwyth."

("No, good Lord, let me be at your will, and make me mighty and strong to suffer all that you ever wish me to suffer, and grant me meekness and patience as well.", lines 2817-2819).

As John H. Arnold observes regarding this section of Kempe's text, it is evident that Kempe views the calumnies against her faith as a form of Christ-like suffering or "quasi-martyrdom". She perceived the opposition from others as essential to demonstrating that

her way of life involved struggle and sacrifice.[208] Samuel Fanous agrees, suggesting that these encounters collectively represent one of the most meticulously crafted sections of *The Book*. While the explicit theme is Margery's trials, the subtext can be seen as nothing less than "The Passion of Margery Kempe"[209]. Gibson makes a similar observation, arguing that if martyrdom by the sword was unavailable to qualify Margery for sainthood, then martyrdom by slander was a viable alternative. *The Book of Margery Kempe* appears to be quite aware of the validating implications of such suffering.[210] Indeed, examining the extent of suffering described in her text, it becomes clear why Christ might tell Kempe that the only purgatory she will ever be required to endure will be the "slawndyr speche of the world" ("the slanderous talk of this world.", lines 1168-1169). These details about her "martyrdom" also explain why, as noted at the beginning of this section, Gibson has recently described Kempe's book as "a calculated hagiographical text." He cautions that while its rambling and conversational style may seem distracting, its true literary and spiritual influences were the "legenda", the lives of late medieval saints as St. Birgitta of Sweden.[211]

In this section, I have examined the distinctive contributions of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich within the realm of medieval religious literature, particularly in the context of Affective Piety. Both women embarked on their mystical journeys—and their subsequent revelations—following significant mental health challenges. Margery Kempe likely experienced a postpartum crisis, whereas Julian of Norwich faced a near-death illness that triggered her vision of the bleeding cross, as discussed earlier in this thesis. Despite emerging from a shared devotional tradition, their writings reflect substantial differences in content and purpose. *The Book of Margery Kempe* functions as a compelling auto-hagiographical work, carefully crafted to enhance her status as a holy figure and assert her unique spiritual authority. Her vivid accounts of personal communion with Jesus Christ, often marked by intense emotional expression, highlight her role as a mystic. However, Kempe's mental afflictions—more severe and disruptive compared to Julian's—frequently led to outbursts that marginalised her, complicating her reception among contemporaries and critics. In contrast, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*

[208] Arnold, John H., "Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy and Dissent" in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis , Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 81.
[209] Fanous, Samuel, "Measuring the Pilgrim's Progress: Internal Emphases in The Book of Margery Kempe" in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, p. 160.
[210] Gibson, Gail McMurray, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 47.
[211] Gibson, p. 47.

of Divine Love transcends personal narrative to become a sophisticated theological treatise. Her work engages critically with existing religious doctrines and emphasises God's boundless love for humanity, offering a universal and comforting perspective. Unlike Kempe, Julian's mental health challenges did not provoke the same level of scepticism, which likely contributed to her more favourable reception among her contemporaries and later critics. Julian's theological insights advocate a more inclusive vision of salvation and divine love, distinguishing her from Kempe's more individualised approach and the prevailing doctrines of the Church. By comparing Kempe's portrayal of her unique divine encounters with Julian's broader theological reflections, this analysis reveals how each woman navigated and articulated her spirituality. Kempe's narrative underscores her personal elevation within the mystic tradition, while Julian's work provides profound theological insights that broaden the understanding of divine love. Additionally, their presentations of mystical experiences as tangible visions rather than personal interpretations offer a valuable perspective on how mental health and religious expression intersected in their writings.

While I hope this study revealed the rich diversity of medieval mysticism and the significant influence both women had on its development, shaping the literary and theological traditions of their time, in the last section of this thesis I will compare Margery Kempe to another writer, Thomas Hoccleve. Having explored Kempe within the shared context of another religious figure, Julian of Norwich, I find it now pertinent to broaden the scope by comparing her to a non-religious counterpart who also suffered from mental afflictions. Indeed, Thomas Hoccleve, a prominent poet of the 15th century, presents an intriguing comparison due to his own documented struggles with mental health, which he poignantly depicted in his works. This comparative analysis will explore several dimensions. It will delve into how also Hoccleve articulated his experiences of mental health challenges within the constraints and conventions of his literary genre. Indeed, Hoccleve's *Series*, particularly *The Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*, provides a vivid narrative, reflecting the societal and personal implications of mental illness. Furthermore, this section will analyse the reception of his works by his contemporaries and later readers, considering how mental health struggles influenced the perception of his writings too. The comparison will underscore the ways in which personal suffering was intertwined with literary creativity, providing insights into the human condition that transcends the boundaries of religious and secular spheres. This type of analysis, in my opinion, not only enriches our understanding of medieval literature but also contributes

to the ongoing discussion of the intersection between mental health and narrative expression.

4

Margery Kempe and Thomas Hoccleve

In this final section, it might be interesting to turn to a comparative analysis that broadens the scope of Margery Kempe's experiences by juxtaposing her with a non-religious contemporary, Thomas Hoccleve. While earlier sections have situated Kempe alongside Julian of Norwich, a contemporary mystic deeply rooted in medieval religious tradition, I now find it pertinent to explore how mental health challenges were articulated by a writer from a different social and professional context. Thomas Hoccleve, a prominent 15th-century poet and clerk, provides a compelling counterpart to Kempe, as his works vividly document his own struggles with mental illness. This comparison will examine how both writers navigated their mental health experiences within the constraints and conventions of their respective genres—Kempe's auto-hagiographical religious narrative and Hoccleve's more secular, urban literary tradition. Specifically, I will analyse Hoccleve's *Series*, with particular attention to his *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*, where he poignantly portrays the societal and personal implications of mental illness. By contrasting these two figures, this section aims to shed light on the different ways mental health was expressed and perceived in the literary and cultural contexts of medieval England, offering a nuanced understanding of the intersection between mental affliction and literary expression.

4.1 Thomas Hoccleve's Biography

Thomas Hoccleve was born in 1368, as he notes in 1421 when he mentions having lived "fifty wyntir and three" ("fifty-three winters", *Dialogue*, line 246) [212]. While little is known about his family, it is likely that they originated from the village of Hockliffe in Bedfordshire. This is suggested by an event in November 1420, when Hoccleve's colleague at the Privy Seal, John Bailey, returned land and tenements in Hockliffe to him. Instead, the last recorded payment to Hoccleve, for red wax and ink for office use, appears in the Exchequer rolls on 4 March 1426. He likely died shortly thereafter, as on 8 May

[212] Hoccleve, Thomas, *Complaint and Dialogue*, ed. by J. A. Burrow, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society (Original Series, 313), 1999; line numbers and my modern translation will be inserted in the text for each passage.

1426, his corrody (an allowance for food and clothing) at Southwick Priory in Hampshire was transferred to Alice Penfold, indicating that Hoccleve had passed away.[213]

What is known about Thomas Hoccleve's life primarily derives from his works and administrative records. Details about his early personal life remain scarce, but his clerkship, which demanded proficiency in both French and Latin, suggests he received a solid education. Hoccleve secured a clerkship in the Office of the Privy Seal around the age of eighteen or nineteen. Despite his frequent complaints and aspirations for a church benefice that never materialised, he held this position for approximately thirty-five years, until 1411. This information is detailed in passages from *The Regement of Princes*, where Hoccleve provides valuable and specific insights into his own life:

In the office of the Privee Seel I wone
And wryte - there is my custume and wone
Unto the Seel, and have twenti yeer
And foure come Estren, and that is neer.

("I live in the office of the Privy Seal
And write there - that is my habit and usual place
To work for the Seal, and I have done so for 20 years
And four more come Easter, and that is near.", *Regement of Princes*, lines 804–805.)[214]

On 12 November 1399, he was granted an annuity by the new king, Henry IV. It was not always paid as regularly as he would have wished, or in full; he is known for complaining about his lack of funds.[215] The works in which Hoccleve describes his work environment provide the reader with a way to construct an image of what his regular life was like. For example, the financial struggles he describes in *La Male Regle* to Fourneval, at that time the King's Treasurer, were likely not simply a result of what Burrow describes as "the poet's excesses in his riotous youth"[216]. These struggles may have been a result of events such as Hoccleve reports in his *Regement of Princes*, where he describes "one of the tricks by which they were deprived of the legitimate rewards of their labours"[217]. In this context, Hoccleve's works reveal his skill in using language to craft vivid depictions of his surroundings. For instance, in *The Regement of Princes*, he contrasts the lively

[213] Sobecki, Sebastian, *Last Words: The Public Self and the Social Author in Late Medieval England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 65–73.
[214] Hoccleve, Thomas, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. by Charles R. Blyth, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999, line numbers and my modern translation will be inserted in the text for each passage.
[215] McCormick, William Symington, Chisholm, Hugh eds., "Occleve, Thomas" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. 19 (11th ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911, pp. 966.
[216] Burrow, John Anthony, "Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68, 1982, p. 409.
[217] Burrow, p. 406.

atmosphere of a craftsman's shop—filled with talk, song, and laughter—with the "trauaillous stillnesse" of the Privy Seal office, employing a precise use of language. Indeed, Hoccleve not only lived within a closed community of colleagues but also endured the constraints of working in silence and often without adequate compensation. Despite holding a position at court, Hoccleve's working conditions were far from ideal, and he frequently expressed his grievances through his petitionary poems. All these instances, in which he expressed his malcontent, probably marginalised him in his working context even before his madness.[218] Moreover, some of his works are translations, such as his first known datable poem, *The Letter to Cupid*, which was a 1402 translation of Christine de Pizan's *L'Epistre au Dieu d'Amours.* This may have been seen as inappropriately francophile in the context of the rising English nationalism of the early 15th century, which would soon result in the resumption of hostilities in the Hundred Years War, marginalising him even more at the court.[219] Nonetheless, Hoccleve relied on noble patrons such as Duke Humphrey of Gloucester and Lady Hereford for work and composed many of his translations and original pieces at the request of these patrons.

However, having failed to secure a church benefice, by 1410 he had married "only for love" (*Regiment of Princes*, line 1561) and settled down to writing moral and religious poems, including his most widely circulated poem, the *Regiment of Princes*, which he wrote around 1411 and dedicated to the future Henry V.[220] Hoccleve was still married in November 1420, since he and his wife received bequests in a will. However, as I will analyse later, according to some of his writings, it was not a happy marriage and he did not see women in a positive light.[221] The marriage was costly for his career, moreover, married clerks were traditionally unable to hold government office, and in the political instability of the early 15th century, Henry V leaned on the legitimising power of tradition. According to the information available, Hoccleve appears to have been something of a loner, poor at leveraging social connections in the service of his career or personal wealth even before his episodes of mental affliction.[222]

Hoccleve's unsuccessful marriage, along with the work environment he criticises in his petitionary poems, may have contributed to his mental illness, reportedly occurring around 1414. This period of mental distress led to the creation of the *Series* and his

[218] Burrow, p. 406.
[219] Bowers, John M. "Thomas Hoccleve and the Politics of Tradition", *The Chaucer Review* 36, 2002, 352–359.
[220] McCormick, Chisholm, eds., p. 967.
[221] Sobecki, pp. 70–71.
[222] Bowers, pp. 365–369.

subsequent marginalisation. Although he recovered by 1415, his *Complaint*— as stated, written approximately in 1420—indicates that he continued to suffer from social alienation five years after his recovery.[223] Mental illness led to Hoccleve's voice being "publicly regarded as being unstable", a significant disadvantage for an author whose most successful work up to that point was a didactic text. In *Dialogue with a Friend*, the poem that follows the *Complaint* in his *Series*, Hoccleve also details his deteriorating eyesight, which compounded his difficulties as a scribe. Most importantly, this poem includes a thorough examination of his mental state and its perception by both himself and others, which will be explored in the subsequent sections.[224]

4.2 Hoccleve's Two Complaints and Kempe's "Auto-hagiography"

The complaint is a multifaceted literary genre that gained considerable popularity in the late medieval period. It can encompass various themes—political, protest, satirical, and religious—and be expressed through different forms, including narrative, lyric, ballad, drama, treatise, and letter. This genre likely evolved from a blend of troubadour traditions such as lament*, chansons de geste*, *salut*, and *planctus*. The term "complaint" instead, may have been employed interchangeably with both "planctus" and "lament", reflecting its nature but also the overlap and fluidity in their definitions.[225] Authors may have utilised complaint poetry to address political or social issues in a relatively non-confrontational manner. Additionally, the act of composing a complaint serves a cathartic function, allowing authors to process and reconcile difficult personal circumstances. This aspect is evident in Hoccleve's autobiographical *My Compleinte*, in which the speaker employs the genre to convey the profound sense of desperation experienced by someone who has been socially marginalised and is seeking acceptance. However, the choice of this genre is not unique in Hoccleve's literary production, indeed in the *Conpleynte Paramont*, he explores the Virgin Mary's effort to carve out a space for her private emotions within the public realm. Despite the significant differences between the two complaints, Hoccleve employs similar vocabulary, imagery, and themes to illuminate the

[223] Sobecki, pp. 74–87.
[224] Simpson, James, "Madness and Texts: Hoccleve's Series" in *Chaucer and Fifteenth Century Poetry*, Cowen, Janet and Boffey, Julia eds., King's College London Medieval Studies 5, London: King's College, London, 1991, pp. 15-29.
[225] Zeeman, Nicolette, "The Theory of Passionate Song" in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature*, ed. by Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011, pp. 248-251.

complexities of navigating both an internal and external existence.[226] Indeed, also in his *Complaint*, Hoccleve places substantial pressure on himself to meet the expectations of the townspeople, both in his actions and appearance, while simultaneously grappling with his own self-perceptions. As Malo suggests, Hoccleve employs penitential discourse as a way to structure his "impulse to communicate his inner self to a broad audience."[227] This characteristic, typical of the complaint genre and others of Hoccleve's works, recurs in many texts of his literary production. However, it is most evident in Hoccleve's other piece within the complaint genre, the aforementioned *Conpleynte Paramont*.

In this text, the Virgin Mary laments at the foot of the cross, and consumed by grief, comes to understand that her role as the mother of Christ is divinely ordained. She gradually, and it seems reluctantly, accepts that Christ did not leave her by choice, but was compelled to die to redeem humanity from sin. This realisation enables her to publicly share in the collective sorrow, as she speaks from the foot of the cross, looking up at her crucified son. In an article on the poem, through critical reading, Bryan observes that the Virgin here represents the private relationships that must be sacrificed for the sake of public duty, the personal history that must be written over by a collective and masculine narrative or destiny.[228] Discussing the transformation in the final three stanzas of the poem, Bryan also notes that Mary's "voice becomes exhortative and exemplary in the service of the public spectacle of the Passion". Much like a lamenting heroine in secular poetry, who recognises that her personal experience is being subsumed by public memory and moralisation, the Virgin ultimately accepts her place within the prevailing narrative of futurity in the eyes of other people.[229] With this final submission to her fate and the public eye, the reader is drawn so deeply and empathetically into Mary's present anguish through her complaint, that the poem itself becomes "a refuge against that inevitable futurity", according to Bryan. Moreover, this space serves as a subtle resistance to the power structures that seek to suppress individual, particularly female, identities.[230]

These themes clearly emerge again in *My Complaint*, Hoccleve's opening work of the *Series*. After reading this other work within the complaint genre, *The Conpleynte Paramont* might appear to align Hoccleve with the figure of the Virgin Mary, similar to

[226] Dean, Nancy, "Chaucer's Complaint, a Genre Descended from the *Heroides*", *Comparative Literature* 19, 1967, pp. 1-27.
[227] Malo, Robyn, "Penitential Discourse in Hoccleve's *Series*", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34, 2012, p. 280.
[228] Bryan, Jennifer E., "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint", *PMLA* 117, 2002, p. 1175.
[229] Bryan, p. 1178.
[230] Bryan, pp. 1178-1182.

how Margery Kempe positioned herself within nativity scenes as intimately connected or even equal to the mother of Christ. However, I believe this parallel with *The Book of Margery Kempe* does not fully hold. The comparison between Kempe and Hoccleve is limited to thematic similarities, as they both express similar struggles, but Hoccleve never makes a direct identification or explicit comparison between himself and Mary in either text. Instead, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the author vividly portrays herself as a saintly figure closely aligned with the Virgin Mary, in order to distinguish herself from other contemporary spiritual figures. As previously analysed, throughout Chapters 6 and 7, Kempe emphasises her direct and intimate involvement in key events of the Nativity. She not only witnesses but also actively participates in these sacred moments, even assuming the role traditionally held by the Angel Gabriel. Indeed, in Chapter 6, Kempe, rather than Gabriel, informs Mary of her divine role as the mother of Jesus. This bold reimagining places Kempe in a uniquely elevated position, and when Mary conceives, in affirmation of Kempe's prophecy, she humbly declares herself unworthy to serve Mary—a declaration met with reassurance by both her and Elizabeth, further solidifying Kempe's distinct spiritual status. After this episode, Chapter 7 continues to underscore Kempe's unique role during the arrival of the Magi, marked by her profound emotional response, aligning her experiences closely with the tradition of Affective Piety, yet distinctly centred on her own holiness and divine connection. Furthermore, in Chapters 79 and 81, Mary's dual role also in the spirituality of the Passion—as a model of compassion for her dying son and as someone deserving compassion herself due to her identification with his suffering—serves as a critical model for Kempe. Margery Kempe is depicted in both roles through her deep compassion for Christ's suffering and as a figure who elicits compassion for her own personal struggles, something that Hoccleve never hints at in his writings when depicting the same scene. Kempe, instead, actively aligns herself with Mary's experiences, portraying herself as both a compassionate observer and a participant in the Passion narrative. This dual portrayal I previously analysed, as noted by scholars like Kieckhefer, enhances Kempe's spiritual authority and underscores her intimate connection to the sacred events she describes. Moreover, it also deliberately reinforces the relationship between them when Jesus Himself tells her to stay in the company of His mother until he comes again to comfort both of them as if they were equal:

> Be stille, dowtyr, and rest wyth my modyr her and com fort the in hir, for sche that is myn owyn modyr must suffyr this sorwe. But I schal come ageyn, dowtyr, to my modyr and comfortyn hir and the bothyn and turnyn al yowr sorwe into joye.

("Be still, daughter, and rest with my mother here and find comfort in her, for she who is my own mother must endure this sorrow. But I shall come again, daughter, to my mother and comfort her and both of you, and turn all your sorrow into joy", Lines 4481-4484).

As already detailed, instead, Julian of Norwich does not utilise her visions to enhance her own standing or assert her uniqueness. Instead, she focuses on conveying profound spiritual truths and insights, emphasising the divine revelations she receives rather than her role within them. Julian's two distinct visions of Mary which I already discussed, one as she stands sorrowing at the foot of the cross ("The Eighteenth Chapter", p. 210) and the other as she shares in the glory of her son's resurrection ("The Twenty-Fifth Chapter", p. 221), are very different from Kempe's. In both instances, Julian's role is again restricted to that of an observer, a stark contrast to Kempe's active and personal involvement in similar spiritual moments.

This self-stylisation of Kempe as a figure parallel to Mary then, not only contrasts with Julian of Norwich but also with Thomas Hoccleve's treatment of the Virgin Mary's complaint at the foot of the cross in *The Conpleynte Paramont*. Unlike Kempe, Hoccleve does not draw a direct parallel between himself and Mary. Instead, he maintains a clear distinction, recounting and revering Mary's suffering and aligning with her only thematically and in a later work, the *Complaint* in the *Series*, without integrating her experiences with his own life or struggles. Indeed, the resemblance between Hoccleve's two complaints lies primarily in their shared genre and themes rather than in any deeper spiritual alignment with a holy figure as for Kempe. Moreover, *The Conpleynte Paramont* is not an original work by Hoccleve but a translation, with significant alterations, of *Pèlerinage de l'âme* by Guillaume de Deguileville. In the two pieces, Hoccleve does not draw any comparison between his and the Virgin Mary's similar struggles to express their inner selves within a public sphere that expects them to conform to different roles and behaviours. However, a study of Hoccleve's conscious decision to title his interpretation of Mary's experience at the crucifixion as a "complaint" rather than a "lament" is crucial to understanding this piece and investigating its connection with the author. Traditionally, descriptions of Mary's personal crisis at the crucifixion have been framed as "laments." However, as Zeeman argues, though "complaint" and "lament" are nearly interchangeable translations of the Latin genre *planctus*, Hoccleve's choice of the term "complaint" might signal a specific intention. Indeed, to prove this point, Ellis even suggests that the final words of the *Conpleynte Paramont*, "que Dieu pardoynt", may indicate that Lady Hereford, Hoccleve's patron at the time, passed away before he completed the translation, in 1419. This could imply that Hoccleve was working on *The*

Conpleynte Paramont around the same time he was writing the *Series*. Thus, despite the sometimes-inconsistent definitions of the genres "complaint", "lament", or "planctus", it is plausible that Hoccleve deliberately chose the title of "complaint", avoiding the traditional "lament". This choice clearly connects this to the autobiographical *Complaint* he was already writing. However, in my opinion, this choice seems to be not a way to present himself as suffering a martyrdom similar to the Virgin Mary's, but a way to examine the complexities of reconciling the internal, private world of an individual with the external, public sphere they both encountered. Consequently, through a careful examination of two of Hoccleve's complaints, one autobiographical and the other a translation of a conventional Marian lament, it is possible to investigate how Hoccleve conceptualised the relationship between internal and external expression. Nonetheless, this study of Hoccleve's two complaints does not suggest an intentional and straight comparison between the author and a holy figure, or at least of their struggles, as Kempe openly does in *The Book of Margery Kempe.*[231]

Moreover, the themes analysed in the two complaints, apart from the connections between the public and inner spheres of the author, differ significantly. Indeed, another concept is evidently central to Hoccleve's narrative in the *Complaint*: madness. However, Hoccleve's account does not delve deeply into his personal experience of mental struggles; rather, it begins with his recovery and frames madness as a condition of the past. Unlike Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, Hoccleve's work does not focus on the experience of madness itself but rather on its aftermath and how it influences identity. As explored previously in this thesis, Margery Kempe's narrative precisely starts from her episode of mental affliction and presents madness from an internal perspective, incorporating both her personal feelings and perceptions alongside external judgments and its consequences: "Ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Jhesu havyng pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur turnyd helth into sekenesse, prosperyté into adversyté, worshep into repref, and love into hatered." ("Our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, having pity and compassion for His creation, turned health into sickness, prosperity into adversity, honour into reproach, and love into hatred", *The Book*, Lines 15-17). In contrast, as I will further detail, Hoccleve's madness is portrayed as something past, and as a public affliction lacking any

[231] Ellis, Roger, "Introduction" in *'My Compleinte' and Other Poems,* ed. by Roger Ellis, Exeter: University of Exeter, 2001, pp. 58-63.

association with divine or mystical visions. For Hoccleve, madness is perceived purely as a sickness which does not grant him any mystical power and is well-known as such among his friends and colleagues. Notably, Hoccleve does not explore the internal experience of madness beyond its social and personal repercussions. His portrayal of madness largely exists through the eyes of others and reflects his primary concern with its impact on those around him. In comparison, Kempe's *The Book* is a deeply personal account that intertwines her experiences of madness with her spiritual journey. Although she was illiterate, Kempe was determined to document all her visions, travels, and spiritual experiences, creating a form of auto-hagiography. The text serves as both a defence of her sanctity and a portrayal of her transformation from a wife and mother to a, sometimes misunderstood, holy figure. Indeed, the initial portion of her text, detailing her madness, is crucial to her personal transformation and the reconfiguration of her identity into a saint. As discussed previously, Kempe's madness provides a space for her to reinvent herself, shaping her identity as a mystic and allowing her to reposition herself within society. In contrast, Hoccleve's *Complaint,* as I will investigate in the subsequent sections, depicts madness as a disruptive force that creates a gap in his identity, leading him from sanity to frenzy and melancholia over time. As I will detail, the fundamental difference between these works lies in their authors' intentions: Margery Kempe's text is a spiritual autobiography that uses madness to redefine her identity as a holy woman and align herself with other saintly figures, while Hoccleve's *Complaint* is a literary effort to present himself as restored to sanity and ready to re-engage with society.

4.3 Hoccleve's Mental Health: the Diagnosis

Records suggest that in his 40s and 50s, Hoccleve experienced periods of madness that modern psychologists, analysing his symptoms retrospectively, have often described as a form of bipolar or manic-depressive disorder.[232] However, without concrete medical evidence, such retrospective diagnoses lack the validity needed for an accurate understanding of Hoccleve's condition. Nonetheless, in my opinion, as for the case of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, the precise label for Hoccleve's illness is less significant than the impact it had on his writing. Moreover, it is crucial to approach their

[232] Harrington, A., G. Oepen, and M. Spitzer, "Disordered Recognition and Perception of Human Faces in Acute Schizophrenia and Experimental Psychosis", *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 30, 1989, 376–384.

literary works, lives and experiences with the respect and empathy they all deserve and that was not granted in some past critiques.

Regardless of its origin, Hoccleve's mental instability resulted in a body of work marked by a pronounced tendency toward introspection. He addresses mental illness in several of his writings, however, the most prominent references are found in the *Series*, written between 1419 and 1421, although the exact date remains uncertain. The *Complaint*, the opening work of the *Series*, offers readers an exceptionally personal account of depression, as Hoccleve himself serves as the narrator and vividly details his personal experiences. This makes it the earliest autobiographical depiction of mental illness in English literature, excluding cases such as Margery Kempe's, where the illness is portrayed as stemming from mystical or divine influences. For Hoccleve, the type of depression he likely endured aligns most closely with what we now refer to as clinical depression. According to psychiatrist Daniel K. Hall-Flavin, clinical depression, as it is understood today, is "the more severe form of depression, also known as major depression or major depressive disorder". He sums up some of the most significant symptoms, which can be found particularly in Hoccleve's work, as I will detail through the analysis of some passages from his writings, such as "feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness or hopelessness", "sleep disturbances", "anxiety, agitation or restlessness", "slowed thinking, speaking or body movements", "feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or self-blame", "trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things" and "frequent or recurrent thoughts of death"[233].

There is an ongoing debate about whether Hoccleve's portrayal of madness is autobiographical or simply a literary convention. As John Burrow has noted, these two possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive.[234] Furthermore, Hoccleve frequently discusses himself in his works, often in a self-critical manner, which suggests symptoms of depression. This kind of candid self-reflection, such as when he admits to being "dull" and learning "little or nothing" from his master Chaucer, is something he would likely have avoided if his illness were merely feigned.[235] Despite this doubt about its nature, there have been varying diagnoses of Hoccleve's mental illnesses. Most critics agree that he exhibits two distinct sets of symptoms. The first set consists of symptoms that are

[233] Hall-Flavin, Daniel K. "Clinical Depression: What Does That Mean?", Mayo Clinic, 13 May 2017. www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/expert-answers/clinicaldepression/faq-20057770. Accessed 17 August 2024.
[234] Burrow, John, *Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve*, Sir Isaac Gollancz Memorial Lectures, London: British Academy, 1983, p. 394.
[235] Burrow, p. 389.

either observed in him or, as Hoccleve suggests, projected onto him by others, typically associated with frenzy. The second set of symptoms can be discerned through Hoccleve's own writings, particularly in *The Complaint* and *Dialogue*, where he displays characteristics often linked to melancholy. His friends were worried about a possible recurrence of madness in summer—a season considered most perilous for all forms of madness, particularly frenzy rather than melancholy, which, as a cold and wet condition, is more prevalent in autumn—this suggests that, at least from their perspective, his condition was more likely to be frenzy than melancholy. Nonetheless, there is more evidence of the melancholic symptoms, which include the fact that his illness coincided with the season when melancholic humour was believed to be at its peak, his reflections on death and mutability, and his insomnia and despair in his writings. Furthermore, Hoccleve's advancing age made him more prone to melancholy, and thus, to depression rather than frenzy.[236]

However, Hoccleve probably suffered from both as his melancholy, described as a "thoghtful disese" ("melancholic disease", *Complaint*, line 388), seems to stem from the social isolation he endured after his previous episode of frenzy. Nonetheless, these two afflictions are not simply a matter of cause and effect, but they should be understood as distinct yet parallel illnesses, each with its own medical and literary roots and characteristics. Knapp, for instance, categorises Hoccleve's frenzy merely as a literary device and within the "ecclesiastical traditions of penitence and consolation", identifying it as a form of misfortune that aligns with the Boethian tradition. In contrast, he suggests that Hoccleve's melancholy is more grounded in reality.[237] Although scholars like Knapp may view Hoccleve's frenzy as more of a literary construct than his melancholy, both conditions are equally plausible from a medical standpoint. Additionally, while Knapp points out that Hoccleve's frenzy is never attributed to a specific cause, this is actually typical for the period. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the Middle Ages offered a wide range of explanations for madness, and medical writers often struggled to pinpoint the exact origins of any mental illness.

Hoccleve's texts, nonetheless, provide numerous details and perspectives on his illnesses. His friends, for example, seem to interpret his condition strictly through a medical lens. They rely solely on their textual knowledge to understand his madness,

[236] Doob, Penelope B. R., *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974, pp. 220-221.
[237] Knapp, Ethan, "Bureaucratic Identity and the Construction of the Self in Hoccleve's Formulary and La Male Regle", *Speculum* 74, 1999, pp. 358–359.

often dismissing Hoccleve's own descriptions of his mental state. Their scepticism is evident in their doubts about Hoccleve's claims to have overcome his madness, which he expresses at various points in the text. For instance, when they say: "Althogh from him his seeknesse sauage withdrawe and past as for a tyme be, restore it wole namly in swich age as he is of." ("Although his savage illness may withdraw from him and pass for a time, it will return, especially at his age." *Complaint*, lines 86-89) or "Whan passynge hete is, quod they trustith this, assaile him wole ageyn þat maladie" ("When the intense heat has passed, they said, believe this: that illness will attack him again." *Complaint*, lines 92- 93). These friends are interpreting his condition according to medical texts, in which age and climate are widely accepted as triggers for insanity. However, Hoccleve makes a counter-accusation, that his friends themselves cannot be trusted as interpreters, as I will also analyse in the subsequent sections. Furthermore, Harper states that by reading Hoccleve's body for signs of madness, his friends are "reading in the wrong genre". They are operating in a medical genre while Hoccleve is prompting them to read theologically, or at least to believe that he is sane again.[238] Mills also suggests that the narrator's friends engage with him using a diagnostic language borrowed from medical treatises, thereby confining both him and themselves within the boundaries of medical discourse. Ultimately, the narrator lacks any other language to replace this discourse. Instead, he can only present a narrative that frames him not as an example of madness, but as a model of patience as I will analyse later, similar to the martyrdom Margery Kempe wrote to be suffering. However, Hoccleve must also defend himself against his friend's preference for abandoning this discourse altogether and label him as mentally ill without much questioning.[239] However, Hoccleve's friends and colleagues read his madness in acceptable medical terms with some contradictions. Heat could indeed bring on an attack of frenzy but Hoccleve's advanced age, bringing a cooling and drying according to medieval medical textbooks, might make him more inclined to melancholy, not to a choler-induced frenzy. Even by their own standards and those available at the time, the judgements of Hoccleve's friends lack medical authority.[240]

Indeed, while his friends focus on a medical reading, one of the most characteristic features of Hoccleve's treatment of his madness is instead a mixture of religious and

[238] Harper, Stephen, *Insanity, Individuals, and Society in Late-Medieval English Literature: The Subject of Madness*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003, p. 196.
[239] Mills, David, "The Voices of Thomas Hoccleve" in *Essays on Thomas Hoccleve*, ed. by Catherine Batt, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, pp. 94–96.
[240] Mills, pp.105-107.

medical imagery. As briefly stated above, he invites them to read his condition theologically, and this approach revolves around God as the "curteys leche souerain" ("courteus physician sovereign", *Complaint*, lines 236), a concept I will later analyse when comparing him to Margery Kempe. An instance of this theme can be found in passages such as this: "Right so thogh þat my wit were a pilgrym and wente fer from hoom he cam agayn. God me voided of the greuous venym Þat had infectid and wyldid my brayn" ("Thus, although my mind was like a pilgrim travelling far from home, it returned again. May God free me from the grievous poison that had infected and wilded my brain" *Complaint*, lines 232-235). Madness as poisoning was a common image, used often in medical texts, and so something evil, unseen and unexpected. Indeed, as stated above, while it is nearly impossible to diagnose Thomas Hoccleve's condition with certainty today, we can glean insights from passages like this and consider what he and his contemporaries may have observed and believed.

The subsequent sections will explore his mental health and the details discussed in this introductory passage through various interpretations and perspectives. However, given these foundations for understanding his mental condition, it is in my opinion productive to compare Thomas Hoccleve's mental state with that of Margery Kempe. Indeed, as for the comparison with Julian of Norwich, by examining the similarities and differences in their conditions and the communities they interacted with, we can gain an even more nuanced perspective for both writers.

4.3.1 Hoccleve's Mental Health: a Comparison with Kempe

As Isabel Davis notes, Hoccleve "comes from a similar cultural milieu to Kempe: part of the nascent bourgeoisie in the urban centres of late medieval England"[241]. However, neither Hoccleve nor Kempe fit well into their culturally prescribed roles. Kempe, as detailed in the previous chapter, is caught between her duty as a wife and her desire to be a holy woman. Hoccleve has similar problems: as a secular clerk, he does not fit into the traditional three-estate model, he is neither cleric, soldier, nor peasant.[242] Indeed, like Kempe, Hoccleve does not easily fit into society. Their writings and approaches to madness diverge significantly, largely due to the gendered nature of madness. In the

[241] Davis, Isabel, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 35-36.
[242] Knapp, Ethan, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p. 71.

Middle Ages, madness had different implications for men and women. In the following sections, I will explore how Hoccleve's masculinity allows him to address his madness differently from Kempe, often demonstrating rationality in ways she cannot. Yet, as a man, Hoccleve was also vulnerable to madness in ways that women were not, and he viewed it primarily as a handicap. In contrast, as discussed earlier, Kempe harnessed her madness as a positive force in shaping her identity.

It is impossible to study these figures without investigating their mental afflictions. Indeed, as discussed in the section "2.4 Mental Health and Gender Issues in *The Book of Margery Kempe*", despite modern efforts to diagnose her using contemporary psychiatric terms, Margery Kempe's psychological difficulties resist a straightforward interpretation. Over time, she has been variously diagnosed as epileptic or hysterical, however, Lawes has more recently suggested that Margery may have suffered from a depressive psychosis related to the puerperium, coupled with temporal lobe epilepsy. As detailed in the previous section instead, Hoccleve was affected by a form of bipolar or manic-depressive disorder for a long time and then also suffered its consequences. While the treatment approach can be similar, as appears evident through their writings, Hoccleve and Kempe were affected by very different sets of psychological difficulties. Understanding the nature of their maladies is crucial to studying their works, as they recount many instances in which mental illnesses affected their lives and how they and the people around them perceived these episodes or reacted to them. Kempe's condition, depressive psychosis related to the puerperium, is a condition specifically triggered by childbirth. It occurs during the postpartum period and is characterised by severe depression and psychotic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations. When this condition is coupled with temporal lobe epilepsy as in her case, the condition becomes more complex, as the individual may also experience neurological symptoms, including seizures and altered consciousness. These neurological disturbances add another layer of complexity to the depressive and psychotic symptoms typical of postpartum psychosis.[243] In contrast, Hoccleve's psychological affliction, bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive disorder, is a chronic and often lifelong condition. Bipolar disorder is marked by distinct episodes of mania and depression, with psychosis sometimes occurring during these mood episodes. However, the psychosis in bipolar disorder is generally tied to the mood state—grandiose delusions during mania, for instance, or guilt-ridden delusions

[243] Pearlstein, Teri, Howard, Margaret, Salisbury, Anne, Zlotnick, Caron, "Postpartum Depression", *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 200, 2009, pp. 357–364.

during depression—rather than being a reaction to a specific life event like Kempe's childbirth.[244]

The comprehension of what they suffered and described is crucial to understanding these authors and their writings; however, despite these differences in their mental afflictions, there are also notable similarities in their accounts of madness that I will examine further. Notably, even if suffering from different psychological difficulties, in their text the similarities are evident in their descriptions of madness as a movement away from their true selves or an invasion of it, and their portrayal of madness as a form of martyrdom. Instead, the main differences are that while Kempe publicly used her episodes of madness to build a new identity and authority, Hoccleve tried to conceal his afflictions and fractured identity from the public sphere and actively tried to defend his sense of masculinity.

4.3.2 Hoccleve's Mental Health: a Fragmented Identity

As stated in the previous section, even if with very different traits, Hoccleve presents madness in a notably depersonalised manner, similar to Kempe's depiction. It seems that to better investigate and describe his complicated inner self, Hoccleve personifies his illness and gives it intent in passages like this one: "Witnesse vppon the wilde infirmite wiche Þat I hadde, as many a man wel knewe, and wiche me oute of my silfe cast and threwe." ("Witness the wild infirmity which I had, as many people knew well, and which threw and hurled me out of myself", *Complaint*, lines 40-42). This "wilde infirmite" echoes the animalistic and brutal view of madness he previously attributed to himself in the poem, evoking the image of a sudden and ferocious attacker targeting an unsuspecting victim. Moreover, the involuntary expulsion of "me oute of my silfe" not only portrays the speaker as a victim but also prompts an examination of the concepts of "me" and "my silfe." Typically, these elements are generally perceived as inseparable; however, within the broader context of the poem, "me" and "my silfe" appear as fragments within the larger, complex inner world of the individual. Hoccleve uses the personification of his illness to expel it from his being symbolically and personifies different aspects of his identity to achieve a sense of internal unity. Only when the illness has been expelled and

[244] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013, pp. 150-154.

the faculties of his identity have been integrated Hoccleve can truly claim a return to sanity in the text.[245]

This portrayal also emphasises spatial and dynamic aspects, even using the term "retur" ("return") to describe his recovery, similar to Kempe's usage in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In her text, madness is characterised by movement and instability, while sanity is associated with stability and a fixed point. Hoccleve's view aligns with hers, suggesting that madness represents an absence, whereas sanity signifies a "retur" of his mind within himself. Indeed, in Hoccleve's writings, madness is defined by a total absence of the self, rather than being actively experienced: "the substance of my memorie wente to pleye as for a certein space" ("the main part of my memory took a break away for a period of time" (*Complaint*, lines 50-51) until God "Made it for to retourne into the place whens it cam" ("Made it return to the place from where it came", *Complaint*, line 54). This portrayal is evidently similar to how Margery Kempe describes her experience with mental struggles and how God healed her, as she explains that "towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly sekenesse, wher thorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace restoryd her ageyn." ("touched by the hand of our Lord with great bodily sickness, lost her reason and senses for a long time until our Lord, by grace, restored them.", *The Book*, lines 22-23). This depiction of mental illness contrasts sharply with the previous violent imagery of illness that Hoccleve proposed. However, despite this contrast, both portrayals convey the idea that the speaker has lost control over the elements of a consistent identity. Moreover, the interplay between violence and movement outside oneself offers a nuanced view of medieval concepts of madness. Hoccleve distances himself from his memory, effectively expelling it from his self. This act seems to serve as a means to explore the intricate relationship between internal and external experiences, even within a single individual.

Indeed, as Hoccleve himself writes, there seems to be a "disseuerance" ("disagreement", *Complaint*, line 248) between the author and himself: madness creates a division in Hoccleve's identity; it does not build a new one as it did for Kempe through a mystical experience. The first reference Hoccleve makes to a separate entity within himself occurs during his period of recovery, as he expresses gratitude to God for the restoration of his mental health. He notes, "My wit and I haue bene of suche acord as we

[245] Silverio, Lauren M., *So Vexed Me the Þouȝtful Maladie: Public Presentation of the Private Self in Hoccleve's My Compleinte and the Conpleynte Paramont*, Honors Scholar Theses, University of Connecticut, 2015, p.16, Consulted at https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/413/

were or the alteracioun of it was" ("My mind and I have been in such agreement as we were before it underwent any change.", *Complaint,* lines 58-62). Hoccleve further develops the idea of his reason as a distinct entity by likening it to a drunkard "buried in the cuppe" ("buried in the cup", *Complaint*, line 231) and, as already stated previously, to a pilgrim "wente fer from home" ("went far from home", *Complaint,* line 233). While the pilgrimage of his reason leads Hoccleve into madness, his friends undertake a real pilgrimage, concerned for his mental health and seeking a remedy, an event described in lines 47-48. This journey represents their attempt to address and cure his madness, an illness that Hoccleve himself struggled to comprehend, as exemplified in other lines such as: "Debaat is nowe noon bitwixe me and my wit" ("There is now no argument between me and my mind." *Complaint,* line 247), suggesting that Hoccleve and his personified reason, previously in conflict, eventually reached an agreement. Moreover, the term "debaat" implies not only separation, but also active opposition between the speaker and his reason. Reason consequently, is not only an allegorical figure—a common convention in medieval literature—but it also clearly represents a separate entity from the speaker's own self.

Nonetheless, both the depictions given by Kempe and Hoccleve of their madness, also indicate God as inflicting and healing them. As explored in previous sections, one of the most vivid examples of Margery Kempe's internal conflict over her body and the invasion of self occurs in the form of a divine punishment. In one instance, Christ inflicts upon her visions of naked, demonic priests as a consequence of her struggle to accept the notion of eternal damnation. These visions, which she finds herself unable to resist or coherently respond to according to her own will and feelings, underscore the tension between her spiritual aspirations and bodily subjugation in her psychological condition:

> Hir thowt that he seyd trewth; sche cowde not sey nay; and sche must nedys don hys byddyng, and yet wolde sche not a don it for alle this worlde.... Wher sche went er what so sche dede, thes cursyd mendys abedyn wyth hir.
>
> ("She thought that he spoke the truth; she could not say no; and she had to do his bidding, and yet she would not do it for all this world.... Wherever she went or whatever she did, these cursed men stayed with her", *The Book*, lines 3432-3436).

This vision, as recorded in her writings, mirrors other torments she endured during her period of madness, where she repeatedly describes her body as being manipulated by external demonic entities. In both cases, her loss of agency over her body parallels her alienation from the self, as if she was no longer in control of her own actions or thoughts. Moreover, the sexual objectification she experiences in these visions heightens the sense

of bodily submission, as her body becomes a site of external control rather than personal autonomy. Indeed, even outside these episodes, Margery Kempe equates sexual desire with supernatural possession over her body, where the loss of control is similarly depicted. Indeed, this sense of powerlessness is also evident when two years after her conversion, she is overwhelmed by sexual desire for a man she encounters in church, tempting her toward adultery. Much as in her earlier experiences of madness, these sexual impulses seem to stem from an external source, governed by demonic persuasion rather than her own will:

The devyl put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not so ben temptyd. She levyd the develys suasyons and gan to consentyn for because sche cowde thynkyn no good thowt. Therfor wend sche that God had forsake hir.

("The devil put in her mind that God had forsaken her, or else she would not have been so tempted. She believed the Devil's suggestions and began to consent because she could think no good thought. Therefore, she thought that God had forsaken her", lines 446-449).

In both instances, her inner turmoil is marked by an inability to distinguish her own desires from external influences, blurring the boundaries between the self and demonic influences, similar to how Hoccleve perceives his true self as separate from another part of him within himself. However, what makes Margery Kempe's experience particularly interesting in this context is the way her struggles with madness resemble patterns of demonic possession, a perspective she vividly conveys in her writings. This is in stark contrast to Hoccleve's perception, who also characterises his own madness as a divine affliction, yet frames it as a bodily sickness rather than a spiritual or demonic invasion. Indeed, unlike Kempe Hoccleve does not speak of external entities directly controlling his body, however, he also focuses on his affliction as a physical ailment imposed by God to punish his sins rupturing his inner self.

Moreover, he never mentions inner voices when he describes madness as a bodily invasion, as Margery Kempe does throughout her text. As already analysed, her internal dialogue aligns with contemporary scientific understandings of inner speech, a form of internal conversation that lacks fully developed linguistic structures, where multiple perspectives coexist simultaneously. However, in its expanded form, Kempe's internal dialogue takes the shape of an explicit conversation, closely resembling a normal discourse. According to her text, she genuinely believes that she hears God—along with other entities, as previously noted, speaking to her as an interlocutor, to which she responds in a manner akin to conversing with a physical presence. This element of her experience starkly contrasts with Thomas Hoccleve's, who never depicts such direct

internal conversations in his accounts. However, what further distinguishes Kempe is that the voices she hears are not confined to her inner mind. In fact, her writings suggest that these auditory experiences might signal a form of affliction more invasive than Hoccleve's episodes. She acknowledges distinct kinds of auditory perception, claiming to hear God "wyth hir bodily erys a lowde voys clepyng: 'Margery'" ("with her bodily ears a loud voice calling: 'Margery'", line 4381) as well as the demonic voices presented above. Furthermore, on one occasion her prayers summon "hir good awngel" ("her good angel", line 4887), who speaks to her using a voice distinct from the others, and tells her she will be punished for twelve days by the withdrawal of God's voice. Her eventual return to grace is signified by hearing His voice once again, highlighting how these phenomena are central to her experience with madness and with the integrity of herself.

Moreover, this interplay of divine and demonic voices also highlights how Kempe's experience of losing her reason is entirely situated within a religious framework. Indeed, her madness, characterised by temptations from demonic forces and a temporary rejection of her Christian identity, might invite readers to view her condition as entirely different from that of Hoccleve. Nonetheless, as already detailed in previous chapters, while demonic temptation plays a significant role in Kempe's struggles, modern interpretations resist labelling her condition as outright possession. Although demons tempt and command her, Kempe's writings suggest she retains autonomy; her selfhood remains intact even if battling with other entities. Possession, by contrast, involves the complete takeover of the body by a demon, who then speaks in place of the afflicted person. In Kempe's case, despite the similarities to demonic possession, her affliction appears to be more of a mental struggle, even if perceived as divinely inflicted as for the case of Thomas Hoccleve, as I will analyse. Therefore, it remains valid to compare her condition with his, as both can be viewed as psychological rather than purely supernatural phenomena, for both writers their illnesses are situated in a religious framework.

Furthermore, concerning the matter of mental health and its exhibition, just as Hoccleve must persuade the townspeople of his regained sanity, he also needs to convince the reader of his reliability as a narrator of his experiences. This task becomes particularly difficult when the speaker himself asserts he is feigning his own appearance in public "My spirites labouriden euer ful bisily to peinte countenaunce, chere and look" ("My spirits laboured ever very diligently to paint my expression, demeanour, and look." *Complaint,* lines 148-149). In passages like this, the speaker distinguishes his spirits and countenance from his broader identity as he did for his reason, creating a dynamic where

the spirits act as painters, constructing an outward appearance of health and sanity. Given that *The Series* aims to illustrate the process of using writing to demonstrate a return to sanity, the reliability of the narrator is crucial. Hoccleve thus explores how one's internal state can be accurately reflected in one's outward appearance and reception by society, with the sole purpose of trying to convince the readers of his return to sanity. Instead, through its analysis, *The Book of Margery Kempe* results as a form of compelling auto-hagiographical work, meticulously designed to establish Kempe as a holy figure and assert her unique spiritual authority. Her vivid depictions of personal communion with Jesus Christ, often accompanied by intense emotional displays, solidify her role as a mystic to the readers. However, her mental afflictions—far more severe and disruptive than those of contemporaries from the same milieu like Julian of Norwich—frequently led to public outbursts, alienating her from a part of both her contemporaries and critics. Despite these challenges, Kempe cultivates her spiritual authority by carefully navigating these experiences within her narrative and portraying herself as an exceptional woman. *The Book of Margery Kempe* continuously highlights the holiness of her life and hints at her potential for future sanctification. As already analysed, central to this uniqueness is her "homely" relationship with Jesus, who in her text is reported to tell her:

> Whan thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytés, than art thow a very syster; and, whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens.
>
> ("When you strive to please me, then you are a true daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and my Passion, then you are a true mother having compassion on her child; when you weep for other people's sins and adversities, then you are a true sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a true spouse and wife, for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company.", lines 715-721).

Kempe's approach to the teachings of the Church is often individualised, reflecting her struggle to reconcile personal experiences with doctrinal expectations. As previously examined, her inability to complete a confession catalysed her descent into madness. Indeed, it is a failed confession, a practice requiring one to recount their life that becomes for Kempe a critical aspect of her narrative construction. Her madness, lasting "half yer eight wekys and odde days" ("half year, eight weeks and a few more days", lines 149-150), begins when she fails to confess her sins. This can be seen as echoing Thomas Hoccleve's account of his madness as a consequence of sin, which could only be healed by God through confession, as I will analyse in the next section. However, unlike

Hoccleve, Kempe's text emphasises her authority as a mystic and a holy figure, not only as a sane person. Yet, paradoxically, *The Book of Margery Kempe* also represents her reclamation of that same narrative authority: despite her madness initially alienating her from her own sense of self, the act of documenting her life enables her to reassert control over her story, granting her a form of literary authority. As already detailed, this process of reclaiming agency is also particularly significant given the male-dominated literary tradition of her time, exemplified for instance, by works like Augustine's *Confessions*. Kempe's madness does not isolate her from written expression; rather, it propels her into a transformative space where she engages with—and challenges—the literary conventions of her time. In documenting her madness, Margery Kempe not only reclaims her identity but also reshapes it, positioning herself as a mystic in defiance of societal constraints. Moreover, by engaging with the complexities of her mental experiences, Kempe carves out a unique position for herself, grounding her spiritual authority upon her intimate connection with the divine. For instance, in this context, as already analysed, Kempe frequently uses nuptial metaphors: Jesus calls Kempe "myn owyn blyssed spowse" ("my own blessed spouse", line 1201) and compares her devotion to that of a wife awaiting her husband's return after a long absence, saying she prepares "wyth al maner of mekenes, lownes, and charité, as any lady in this werld is besy to receyve hir husbond whan he comyth hom and hath be long fro hir" ("with all manner of meekness, humility, and charity, as any lady in this world is busy to receive her husband when he comes home and has been long away from her," lines 5081-5082). Unlike Hoccleve, but also unlike more similar figures like Julian of Norwich, Kempe builds her authority and part of her identity by depicting a very human relationship with Jesus, who tells her:

> And oftyntymes have I telde the that I have clene forgove the alle thy synnes. Therfore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt.
>
> ("I have often told you that I have completely forgiven all your sins. Therefore I must be homely with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.", lines 2101-2108).

It is through this special relationship and her mental and spiritual struggles that Kempe establishes herself as a mystic, crafting a narrative that is both personal and authoritative, consciously reshaping her identity as a woman and mother into a holy spiritual guide.

Furthermore, Hoccleve's experience of madness undermines his authority as a writer, a challenge that does not apply to Kempe. Unlike Hoccleve, Kempe had no prior literary authority before her experience with mental illness and seemingly no intention to write before it. Hoccleve's primary struggle as an author lies in the public perception of his voice as unstable following his madness, especially since he wrote didactic texts.[246] Perhaps this is another reason for which his frenzy is described also as something alien, something else that takes over the self, similar to the bodily invasion described by Kempe during her periods of strong mental illness. There is a real sense of Hoccleve's madness as an invasion, as he describes it as a "Wylde infirmitee" ("Wild infirmity", *Complaint*, line 40), and a "Seeknesse sauage" ("Savage sickness", *Complaint*, line 86), defending his "normal" self. In a previous section of this thesis, I already analysed the correlation between madness and wilderness, highlighting how it alienated mentally ill people from their communities. However, while Hoccleve's madness is aggressive, even if less violent and invasive than Kempe's, he seems entirely passive in response to this invasion of his self, exactly like her. He characterises himself as a victim of madness as he takes a "Falle into wyldenesse" ("fall into wilderness" *Complaint*, line 107) and, as investigated in this section, he seems particularly concerned about presenting madness as an episode entirely separate from his normal self, something alien invading his body and life. While the possible causes and aftermath of madness are clearly articulated, the period of madness itself remains obscure in his narrative. It is a blank space, revealed only through its consequences and the insights we gather from Hoccleve's perceptions or the words of others he reports, something that as I will now detail, is described by him as similar to a public martyrdom.

4.3.3 Hoccleve's Mental Health: Confession and Martyrdom

Through the personal insights Hoccleve provides, it becomes evident that to some extent, he employs a strategy similar to Margery Kempe's in attributing his madness to divine intervention. As mentioned earlier, he likens God to a divine physician and states in line 23 that he is "scourged" by his sickness, punished for his sins in this life rather than the next, presenting himself as a martyr to his readers. Moreover, like Kempe, Hoccleve portrays himself as persecuted by those who fail to understand God's plan. His solitary existence is thus justified by invoking the powerful trope of a persecuted holy man.

[246] Simpson, pp. 20-21.

Excluded from society, Hoccleve lives in "Greet torment and martire" ("Great torment and martyrdom" *Complaint*, line 63). Moreover, later in his text he also states:

Syn I recouered was haue I ful ofte
Cause had of anger and inpacience,
Where I born haue it esily and softe,
Suffryng wrong be doon to me and offense
And nat answerd ageyn But kept silence.

("Since I recovered, I have often had
Cause for anger and impatience,
Although I have born it easily and softly,
Enduring wrongs and offences done to me
Without responding in return, but keeping silent", *Complaint*, lines 176-180)

Hoccleve, in turning the other cheek to his enemies, is here fulfilling the Christian conception of suffering patiently through adversity. However, the fact that Hoccleve is prompted in his tolerance by fear of being judged as mad again actually complicates the idea of him as a martyr. Unlike Kempe, who wants to be perceived as a saintly figure, he cannot fully embrace the potential for holiness implicit in madness. Indeed, Kempe to enhance her mystical authority highlights in her writings how she endured all her life persecutions, marginalisation and even imprisonment along with public accusations of heresy, as she describes in passages like this one:

"Sche was so usyd to be slawndred and repreved, to be cheden and rebuked of the world for grace and vertu wyth whech sche was indued thorw the strength of the Holy Gost that it was to her in a maner of solas and comfort whan sche sufferyd any dysese for the lofe of God and for the grace that God wrowht in hyr."

("She became so accustomed to being slandered and reproached, to being chided and rebuked by the world for the grace and virtue with which she was endowed through the strength of the Holy Ghost, that it became to her a kind of solace and comfort when she suffered any discomfort for the love of God and for the grace that God worked in her.", *The Book*, lines 33-37).

Instead, it seems that Hoccleve most wishes simply to return to an uncomplicated, masculine identity after the scorn he suffered publicly. To do this, since God seems to be both who inflicts him with this sickness to punish him and who can heal him, he must confess his sins. Moreover, also Hoccleve's portrayal of God as "scourging" him with madness, followed by the "curteys leche souerain" ("courteus physician sovereign", *Complaint*, lines 236) who provides healing, is paralleled in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Indeed, this concept is introduced at the very beginning, as Kempe describes how God afflicted her with "grett bodyly sekenesse" ("great bodily sickness," line 22) and then healed her:

Than this creatur, of whom thys tretys thorw the mercy of Jhesu schal schewen in party the levyng, towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly sekenesse, wher thorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace restoryd her ageyn, as it schal mor openly be schewed aftyrward.

("Then this creature, of whom this treatise, through the mercy of Jesus, will partly show the life, was touched by the hand of our Lord with great bodily sickness, through which she lost her reason and her senses for a long time, until our Lord, by His grace, restored them to her again, as will be more openly shown later.", *The Book*, lines 20-24)

Nonetheless, this is not a new concept in Hoccleve's writings and it intertwines with his view of disease as a consequence of sin. Moreover, it is coupled with the belief that true healing requires a complete confession, whose failure started Kempe's mental struggles, and is a recurring theme in his works, including *The Regement of Princes*. In this work, this perspective is particularly evident in his choice of texts for translation, such as the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum*, a widely popular medieval compendium that intertwines medical, moral, and physiognomic knowledge. The *Secreta Secretorum* highlights the intricate connection between the soul and body, advocating for health through moderation and the practice of balance in all things. Additionally, certain versions of the text specifically advise embodying the seven cardinal virtues, emphasising the link between moral integrity, good health, and effective leadership.[247] This emphasis on the interconnection between physical health, salvation, and virtue is evident not only in *The Regement of Princes* but also throughout Hoccleve's broader work *The Series*. Indeed, his translation choices for this work, particularly the incorporation of tales from the *Gesta Romanorum*, further underscore this theme. As I will explore in the next sections with the example of "The Jereslaus's Wife Tale", Hoccleve's translations reveal a consistent preoccupation with the moral and spiritual dimensions of health. Through these tales, he reinforces the idea that moral conduct and spiritual well-being are essential not only for personal salvation but also for maintaining physical health, thereby reflecting a holistic medieval understanding of human well-being.[248] Indeed, as previously mentioned, Hoccleve intertwines substantial scientific and medical understanding with conventional moral and religious views that regard madness, melancholy, and disease as punishments for sin and as a form of earthly purgatory, far preferable to the torments of hell. This approach results in highly detailed portrayals of madmen, melancholics and diseased sinners in the narrative sections of the *Series*. Moreover, as Harper notes, this

[247] Mitchell, Jerome, *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968, pp. 24-25.
[248] Mitchell, pp. 25-31.

shift allows Hoccleve to distance himself from his own experience of insanity, making him a moralistic observer of madness rather than its pitiable victim.[249]

As stated, before the *Series*, these themes already appeared in *The Regement of Princes*, which is the first of Hoccleve's poems to address melancholy explicitly. In this work, Hoccleve's purse and body are still unwell, and the poem's more serious tone, starkly contrasting with the wit and levity of *The Male Regle*, suggests that Hoccleve may have genuinely experienced financial hardship and severe bouts of depression. The prologue opens with Hoccleve describing his oppressive sleeplessness of "thoght" ("thought", line 7, *The Regement*) by which he means something like morbid anxiety or melancholia. Trapped in this state of mind, Hoccleve engages in a Boethian reflection on the fleeting and deceptive nature of worldly happiness. The following morning, Hoccleve wanders into the fields, his mind teetering on the edge of madness, embodying the already detailed classic symptoms of a textbook melancholic:

What wight that inly pensyf is, I trowe,
His moost desir is to be solitarie.
[…]
For the nature of hevynesse is this:
If it habownde greetly in a wight,
The place eschueth he whereas joie is,
For joie and he nat mowe accorde aright.

("Whoever is deeply pensive, I believe,
Desires most of all to be alone.
[…]
For the nature of heaviness (sorrow) is this:
If it abounds greatly in a person,
He avoids the place where joy is found,
For joy and sorrow cannot coexist harmoniously." *The Regement*, Lines 85-86 and 92-95)

A few lines later, he even portrays in detail the plight of the contemplative and melancholic individual, also using again the image of reason physically leaving him and going to another place, as explored in the previous section:

Whan to the thoghtful wight is told a tale,
He heerith it as thogh he thennes were;
His hevy thoghtes him so plukke and hale
Hidir and thidir, and him greeve and dere,
That his eres availle him nat a pere;
He undirstandith nothyng what men seye,
So been his wittes fer goon hem to pleye.
The smert of thoght I by experience
Knowe as wel as any man dooth lyvynge.

[249] Harper, Stephen, *Insanity, Individuals, and Society in Late-Medieval English Literature: The Subject of Madness*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003, p. 215

His frosty swoot and fyry hoot fervence,
And troubly dremes drempt al in wakynge,
My mazid heed sleeplees han of konnynge
And wit despoillid, and so me bejapid
That aftir deeth ful often have I gapid.

("When a tale is told to a thoughtful person,
He hears it as though he were not there;
His heavy thoughts pull and drag him
Here and there, causing him grief and pain,
So much that his ears are of no use at all;
He understands nothing of what is said,
For his wits have wandered far away.
The pain of thought, I know by experience,
As well as any man alive.
Its frosty sweat and fiery hot fever,
And troubled dreams dreamt while awake,
Have robbed my sleepless, confused head
Of knowledge and wit, and so deceived me
That I have often longed for death.", *The Regement*, lines 99-112)

Experiencing the classical symptoms of melancholy, unawareness of his surroundings, intense anxiety, chills and fever, delusions upon waking, and a desire for death, Hoccleve encounters "the Beggar". This figure, recognising Hoccleve's apparent madness and aiming to cure him, employs various therapeutic strategies from medieval medicine, presenting an early fictional depiction of psychiatry. In line with Church teachings, he combines both mental and spiritual remedies, which will recur in Hoccleve's future works. Identifying Hoccleve as a melancholic, the Beggar advises him against wandering alone, insists on engaging in conversation, and urges him to reveal the true source of his distress, whether it be fear of losing wealth, poverty, or love. As already explored in this thesis, this approach was a typical treatment for melancholic madness in the Middle Ages. Hoccleve ultimately admits that his grief stems from his poverty and his fear of losing what little he has, to the point where he would prefer death. The Beggar then reassures him that he will not lose his money and even if he did, poverty would not be as dire as he fears. He emphasises that the rich risk their souls and cites the scripture, "Whom so I loue, hym wole I chastise" ("Whoever I love, I will chastise", *The Regement*, line 1260). Despite this, the remedy does not alleviate Hoccleve's melancholy. Consequently, the Beggar suggests a practical solution: if Hoccleve engages in translating a noble work for Prince Henry, it might alleviate both his melancholy and fear of poverty. Following this advice, Hoccleve resolves to avoid idleness by writing, resulting in the creation of *The Regement of Princes*. Hoccleve's persistent focus on sin and disease remains a significant theme in *The Regement of Princes*, though, after this prologue, it is less pronounced and explicit compared to *The Male Regle* or the *Series*. This subtlety may be attributed to the

dialogue format that he will also use with the Friend in his *Dialogue*. This format presents two distinct perspectives both voiced by the author: that of the Beggar (or the Friend) and Hoccleve himself. For instance, in this case, Hoccleve's actions and statements reveal the deep-seated affliction of melancholy but also hint at its cause: an excessive yearning for material wealth. In contrast, the Beggar, content with his poverty, views it as a fitting consequence of his past sins and a means of divine refinement through suffering. In this prologue, it is Hoccleve's misguided fear of poverty, which drives him into melancholy and not fully embrace the Beggar's advice about caring less for wealth. Instead, the Beggar settles for alleviating Hoccleve's despair by suggesting that he write *The Regement of Princes*. Hoccleve thus avoids the simplistic resolution of valuing less material wealth, as he did humorously in *The Male Regle*, but also refrains from the tentative submission to the divine will as he does in the *Series*.

Indeed, this theme, Hoccleve's preoccupation with the connection between physical and mental illness and moral failure, reaches its most complete expression in the *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*, which serve as openings to *The Series*. These poems, and *The Series* as a whole, emphasise the necessity of maintaining a balance between recognising sin as a disease that can be cured through repentance and confession, and avoiding the despair that excessive awareness of sin can cause. The poems advocate for patience and humility in a world characterised by Boethian mutability, where true reliance should be placed on virtue and God rather than on material wealth or the mundane company of friends. Within this work, Hoccleve discusses the remedy for his melancholic despair by reading a "trostbuch" (a book of consolation, identified by Rigg as Isidore of Seville's *Synonyma*), which was lent to him by a friend, in lines 309-315.[250] In this text, Reason consoles the sorrowful man by highlighting, as the Beggar does in the *Regement*, the value of suffering:

It [tribulation] sleythe man not to them that ben sufferable;
and to whom goddes stroke is acceptable,
purveyed Ioye is: for god woundythe tho
that he ordeyned hathe to blysse to goo.
Gold purgyd is, thou seyst, in the furneis,
for the fyner and clenner it shall be;
of thy disease the weyght and the peis
bere lyghtly, for god, to prove the,
scorgyd the hathe with sharpe adversitie.

("It [tribulation] does not harm those who are patient;
and to those to whom God's afflictions are acceptable,

[250] Rigg, Arthur G., "Hoccleve's Complaint and Isidore of Seville", *Speculum* 45, 1970, pp. 564-574.

joy is prepared: for God wounds those
whom He has destined for bliss.
Gold, as you say, is purified in the furnace,
to become finer and cleaner;
so too does your burden and weight
seem lighter to God, who tests you,
for He has scourged you with sharp adversity.", *Complaint*, lines 354-362)

Just as God healed Hoccleve of his frenzy-madness five years previously, Reason appropriately cures the melancholic madness that afflicts him in the *Complaint* by advising him to have faith in God. Hoccleve is now fully sane, and readily embraces the same advice from Reason that he had previously dismissed when offered by the Beggar:

Thrwghe gods iust dome and his iudgement -
and for my best, now I take and deme -
gave that good lorde me my punishement:
in welthe I toke of hym none hede or yeme
hym for to plese, and hym honoure and queme;
and he gave me a bone on for to knaw,
me to correcte, and of hym to have awe.
he gave me wit, and he toke it away
when that he se that I it mys dyspent,
and gave agayne when it was to his pay.

("Through God's just judgment and His decision—
and for my own good, as I now consider—
the good Lord gave me my punishment:
In times of prosperity, I paid Him no attention or care,
I did not seek to please, honour, or delight Him;
and He gave me a trial to endure,
to correct me and instil fear of Him in me.
He granted me reason, and took it away
when He saw that I was misusing it,
and gave it back when it was pleasing to Him., *Complaint*, lines 393-402)

Hoccleve indeed, views his madness and the subsequent trials as a form of loving punishment from God, and he resolves to accept everything as being for the best. Ultimately, Hoccleve believes that his illness stems from God's will, but it is his perception of society's negative judgment that perpetuates his disorder. As described at the beginning of this section, he even describes the extent of God's influence by stating, "[God] ȝaf me wit and he tooke it away" ("[God] gave me reason, and He took it away," *Complaint*, line 400). The notion that God both bestowed reason upon him and then sent it away on a pilgrimage, leaving Hoccleve in the grip of insanity, adds a further layer of fatalism to his situation: his mental state was, and remains, beyond his control. This lack of control is highlighted when his reason returns, even if other people remain sceptical of his recovery: "For thouȝ that my wit were hoom come aȝein, men wolde it not so vndirstonde or take" ("For though my reason has returned home again, people would not

understand or accept it as such," *Complaint*, lines 64-65). While Hoccleve may be relieved that God has restored his reason, he is still unsettled by the fear that others may not recognise or believe in his recovery. Consequently, some scholars such as Malo interpret the *Complaint* as a form of penitential discourse, emphasising the speaker's apparent need to amend his "sinful gouernaunce" ("sinful behavior", *Complaint*, line 406) to achieve harmony between himself, his reason, and God.[251] The realisation that his mental health ultimately rests in God's hands seems to bring a sense of relief to the troubled speaker. Anyway, it must be stated that by placing his trust in God's will, he also further externalises his illness, absolving himself of responsibility and allowing him to concentrate on rationally re-establishing his connections with the community.

Moreover, this is clearly another analogy with *The Book of Margery Kempe.* She even uses almost the same imagery to describe a God that gave her sickness and then healed her, as already analysed at the beginning of this section. Furthermore, she also indicates her madness as inflicted because of her sins, as Hoccleve does in his writings:

Whech synful caytyf many yerys was in wyl and in purpose thorw steryng of the Holy Gost to folwyn oure Savyour, makyng gret behestys of fastyngys wyth many other dedys of penawns. And evyr sche was turned agen abak in tym of temptacyon, lech unto the reedspyr which boweth wyth every wynd and nevyr is stable les than no wynd bloweth, unto the tyme that ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Jhesu havyng pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur turnyd helth into sekenesse, prosperyté into adversyté, worshep into repref, and love into hatered.

("This sinful wretch, for many years, was willing and intended—through the stirring of the Holy Ghost—to follow our Savior, making great promises of fasting along with many other deeds of penance. Yet, she always turned back in times of temptation, like a reed that bends with every wind and is never stable unless no wind blows, until our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, having pity and compassion for His creation, turned health into sickness, prosperity into adversity, honour into reproach, and love into hatred.", *The Book*, lines 10-17).

These themes are all central also to Hoccleve's depiction of his experience with madness, including its origins and consequences, as explored in works such as *The Series* and *The Regement of Princes*. Across these different texts, Hoccleve portrays God as both the enforcer of punishment through mental affliction and the divine physician who heals him after he confesses his sins, which are depicted as the true cause of his suffering. This narrative clearly parallels Margery Kempe's account of her mental health experiences in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, encompassing the causes, effects, and her own understanding of divine intervention in relation to her psychological affliction. Moreover, these themes will lead to another key aspect of Hoccleve's madness and one of the analogies with Kempe's case, and that I will subsequently analyse: the violent rupture of

[251] Malo, Robyn, "Penitential Discourse in Hoccleve's *Series*", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34, 2012, p. 286.

the public and private selves, triggered by their episodes of madness. Given that this destruction of their inner and social selves is expressed through different episodes and in distinct ways, I will explore it in the following section by analysing Hoccleve's public and private spheres. This will include a closer examination of how his friends perceive him, as well as the mirror episode, where Hoccleve himself attempts to read and understand his own identity.

4.3.4 Hoccleve's Mental Health: Disrupting Public and Private Spheres

Since Hoccleve's body is consistently misread by his friends, he creates a text, the *Complaint*, that in his intentions cannot be misunderstood. Both Hoccleve and Kempe are notably concerned with using writing as a form of defence: Hoccleve to affirm his return to sanity, and Kempe to support her claim to potential sainthood. Madness, obviously, complicates the act of "reading someone", not only for those experiencing it but also for those observing from the outside. The surface no longer reliably reflects what lies beneath. Margery Kempe's selfhood in her text is closely tied to her body, especially as the feminine body of a mother and a non-virgin, which remains central to her identity in spite of her madness. Hoccleve, instead, lacks this stability in his body when trying to defend his sanity. His text reveals a profound distrust of the body and a fear that it might betray him. The famous mirror scene, which I will analyse later, illustrates his alienation from his body, a characteristic of bipolar disorder: a dual fear that the mirror either fails to reflect his true self or, paradoxically, reflects it too well. Unlike Kempe, who uses her feminine body to define herself in her text, Hoccleve seems compelled to distance himself from his body, seeking identity instead only through textual authority.[252] Yet, this approach presents its own challenges. As a member of an emerging class of secular clerks, Hoccleve has no straightforward way to align himself with any established source of textual authority.[253]

Madness, though central to Hoccleve's narrative, is also absent: he never fully addresses his experience of madness; instead, his narrative begins with his recovery. In the *Complaint*, madness is always positioned in the past. Unlike the writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, Hoccleve's work is not an account of madness itself, but

[252] Hickey, Helen, "Doubting Thomas: Hoccleve's Wilde Infirmite and the Social Construction of Identity", *Deviance and Textual Control: New Perspectives in Medieval Studies* 2, ed. by Megan Cassidy, Helen Hickey, and Meagan Street, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1997, pp. 56–59.
[253] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, p. 71.

rather an account of its aftermath and an exploration of how the experience of insanity influences identity. In Kempe's case, madness is presented from an internal perspective, as she recounts her own feelings and perceptions alongside what others say about her. In contrast, Hoccleve's experience is a distinctly public madness, devoid of any association with divine or mystical visions. It does not help him in building an identity and is perceived only as sickness, and it is very well known as such, since he declares that "it was so knowen to the peple and kowth Þat conseil was it noon ne nat be mighte" ("it was so well known to the people and widely understood that it was no secret, nor could it be", *Complaint*, lines 43-44). Indeed Hoccleve, in different instances, writes about how his sickness reached the public domain: "how it with me stood was in euery mowth" ("how things stood with me was on everyone's lips", *Complaint*, line 45). However, as already stated, our knowledge of Hoccleve's madness comes solely from his own words, or others' perceptions introduced by him in terms of what "men seide…" ("men said…" *Complaint*, line 120), similar to how Kempe reports the townspeople or clergy members' words marginalising her because of her outbursts. However, in his case the public-private dynamic is reversed: for Hoccleve, as a man and a court official, his illness becomes a public matter, despite his desire to keep it private and silence the gossip surrounding him and his condition. In contrast, Margery Kempe, whose identity as a woman and mother naturally situates her within the private sphere, attempts to make her condition public. By doing so, she seeks to portray herself publicly as a martyr, thereby enhancing her perceived sainthood among fellow Christians.

It is also important to stress again that Hoccleve rarely discusses the interior experience of madness other than through its social and personal consequences.[254] Indeed, his madness seemingly only exists in terms of the perceptions of others. Moreover, Hoccleve seems primarily concerned about the effect that his madness has on others rather than on himself.[255] As a consequence, the *Complaint* is overwhelmingly concerned with its author's need to fit into the crowd. Hoccleve finds himself continually the subject of others' gaze. The city in which he lives and works exercises a constant pressure: "if I in this prees amis me gye to harm wole it me torne and to folie" ("if I in this crowd misguide myself it will turn to harm and folly for me", *Complaint*, lines 139-140). Hoccleve is particularly concerned with repressing any trace of an aberrant individuality as he aims to be unnoticed, unable even to speak, "lest þat men of me deeme wolde and seyn 'See

[254] Hickey, pp. 62-64.
[255] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, p. 165.

how this man is fallen in ageyn'" ("lest people would judge me and say 'See how this man has fallen back into it again'", *Complaint*, lines 181-82). His madness, phrased as it is in terms of an absence of the self, has created a gap between Hoccleve's past and current social identities. Hoccleve is no longer able to act naturally: he is ever conscious that he is being watched for signs of a return to madness. His post-madness existence too is a life lived through the reactions of others. In his opinion, even his absence from the crowd's gaze will cause him to be judged: "if þat I nat be seen among the prees men deeme wole þat I myn heed hyde and am wers than I am it is no lees" ("if I am not seen among the crowd people will think that I am hiding my head and that I am worse than I actually am, this is no lie", *Complaint*, lines 191-193). Even Hoccleve's descriptions of his own madness focus on those aspects that can be observed by others:

Men seide I lookid as a wylde steer
And so my look aboute I gan to throwe.
Myn heed to hye anothir seide I beer.
'Ful bukkissh is his brayn wel may I trowe',
Seide the thridde 'and apt is in the rowe
To sitte of hem þat a resounlees reed
Can yeue no sadnesse is in his heed'.
Changed had I my paas some seide eek,
For heere and ther forth stirte I as a ro,
Noon abood noon areest but al braynseek.
Anothir spak and of me seide also
My feet were ay wauynge to and fro
Whan þat I stonde sholde and with men talke,
And þat myn yen soghten euery halke.

("People said I had a wild gaze,
And so I began to throw my gaze around.
Another said I held my head too high.
'His mind is very stubborn, I can surely believe',
Said a third, 'and he's likely among those
Who give irrational advice; there's no steadiness in his head.'
Some also said I had changed my pace,
For here and there I would leap forward like a deer,
Never staying still, never at rest, but entirely mind-sick.
Another spoke and also said about me
That my feet were always wavering to and fro
When I should stand still and talk with people,
And that my eyes were constantly searching every corner." *Complaint*, lines 120-133)

It is important to clarify that this description does not depict Hoccleve's madness directly, as he is sane again in these stanzas. According to him, the only madness present here is that which others project onto him. Nonetheless, although Hoccleve is presumed to have relapsed into a previous state of madness, we can reasonably think that the symptoms of madness observed in the sane Hoccleve closely mirror those he displayed during his actual period of madness. This is the real and central conflict in the *Series*: the speaker's

past experience with madness and the subsequent recovery he tries to prove. As he states, the recovery had already happened years prior to Hoccleve's writings, "a Alle Halwemesse was fiue ȝeere" ("at all Saint's Day, it was five years ago", *Complaint*, lines 55-56). However, he still remained on the periphery of society as a result of his inability to appear convincingly well again. By his friends, Hoccleve's madness is primarily interpreted through his movements, gestures, and actions. He is judged for his inability to conform and for moving out of sync with those around him. Furthermore, his symptoms—such as rolling eyes, restlessness, loss of control over bodily movements, and a complete lack of reason—are reminiscent of descriptions found in medieval medical texts, discussed earlier in this thesis. Indeed, as Doob notes, these frenzied movements and eye-rolling were typical symptoms of madness and particularly associated with frenzy, which isolate him from society even after his recovery.[256]

Likewise, Margery Kempe's experiences with madness demonstrate how deeply this condition isolates and reshapes an individual's identity, both bodily and socially. Indeed, she often describes how it led her to make slanderous accusations against her family, abandon her faith, physically harm herself, and even contemplate suicide, actions that effectively isolate her from her family, friends, and almost all of society, as it does for Hoccleve. Kempe, in her religious context, does not portray her madness as a path toward spiritual enlightenment, but rather as a brutal demonic assault. Moreover, the toll that this demonic attack takes on her bodily identity, as analysed in the previous chapter and observed by scholars such as Bale, also reflects a broader disruption of her social identity, leading her to sever ties with those closest to her, her faith, and her very place within her community:

> And also the develys cryed upon hir wyth greet thretyngys, and bodyn hir sche schuld forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth, and denyin hir God, hys modyr, and alle the seyntys in hevyn, hyr goode werkys and alle good vertues, hir fadyr, hyr modyr, and alle hire frendys. And so sche dede. Sche slawndred hir husbond, hir frendys, and her owyn self; sche spak many a reprevows worde and many a schrewyd worde.
>
> ("And also the devils cried upon her with great threats, commanding her that she should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, His mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, and herself; she spoke many a reproachful word and many a wicked word.", *The Book,* lines 206-211).

Since the very beginning of *The Book* indeed, Kempe describes how madness thrust her into a state of semi-martyrdom, where she finds herself abandoned by friends and family.

[256] Doob, p. 221.

In the wake of this isolation, her only solace is in her renewed Christian identity and the teachings of the Church. However, many of her contemporaries—pilgrims, clergy members, and townspeople alike—view this form of self-imposed mortification with suspicion, marginalising her even more and often accusing her of being motivated by vanity rather than genuine devotion, reflecting what many scholars later thought about the nature of her writings. About the isolation she experienced, not different from Hoccleve's or the destiny of many contemporary "lunatics", Kempe writes:

Than was pompe and pryde cast down and leyd on syde. Thei that beforn had worshepd her sythen ful scharply reprevyd her; her kynred and thei that had ben frendys wer now hyr most enmys. Than sche, consyderyng this wondyrful chawngyng, sekyng socowr undyr the wengys of hyr gostly modyr, Holy Cherch.

("Then, pride and pomp were cast down and set aside. Those who had previously honoured her now sharply reproached her; her family and those who had been friends were now her greatest enemies. Then she, considering this wonderful change, sought refuge under the wings of her spiritual mother, Holy Church.", *The Book*, lines 25-29).

As previously discussed, Margery Kempe's dramatic outbursts provoke a broad range of reactions, from astonishment to frustration. Some of these reactions emphasise the distinctiveness of her spiritual experiences, as in chapters 26, 27, and 33, where a German priest in Rome tests her tears of contrition and concludes they are inspired by the Holy Ghost. On the other hand, the annoyance she elicits from others reveals the persistent challenges she faced throughout her life as a person suffering from mental illness. This is evident in various occasions and locations, such as Canterbury (Chapter 13), Jerusalem (Chapter 28), Beverley (Chapter 54), Aachen (Book II, Chapter 6), and London (Book II, Chapter 9). Indeed, in her text, she often describes how her tears of contrition triggered doubts and accusations in different contexts and stages of her life:

Hir wepyng was so plentyuows and so contwnyng that mech pepul wend that sche mygth wepyn and levyn whan sche wold, and therfor many men seyd sche was a fals ypocryte and wept for the world for socowr and for wordly good.

("Her weeping was so plentiful and so continual that many people thought that she could weep and leave off when she wanted, and therefore many people said she was a false hypocrite and wept when in company for advantage and profit.", *The Book*, lines 295-298).

As Margery Kempe's writings reveal, her social and religious identities are closely intertwined, with her religious identity often defined in opposition to the societal norms imposed by her role and gender. Indeed, before her madness, her sense of self largely conformed to societal expectations, but afterwards, she breaks free from all conventions. During her episode of madness, her social and religious identities become inseparable

making her a holy woman within the mystic movement. Indeed, her position within society and her gender play a significant role in shaping her experience of madness, as it does for Hoccleve. By its nature, this mental state is deeply isolating, separating the afflicted from their community. However, with this condition, Kempe not only experiences isolation but also a broader disruption of social hierarchies, as explored in previous sections by following Lawes' analysis. Indeed, for Kempe madness is marked by her exclusion from society, but unlike Hoccleve, she is able to use her becoming an outcast to her advantage. This radical loss of identity allows her, upon recovery, to redefine her place in the social hierarchy and create a new identity for herself: a mystic and a holy woman. As Kempe herself reflects, after she "comen ageyn to hir mende, sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt" ("came again to her mind, she understood she was bound to God and that she would be His servant", *The Book*, lines 253–255).

Instead, in Hoccleve's writings, the description of his condition and the intersection between the inner and outer worlds is not expressed solely through the social sphere. Madness appears to act as a catalyst for Hoccleve, and even if it does not build a new identity for him, it prompts him to explore how external factors can penetrate and shape his internal experience. Indeed, on a broader scale, Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker is also influenced by environmental factors in the text, with the weather serving as a reflection of his internal emotional state, while at the same time influencing it. The clearest example is how the *Complaint* opens, grimly and with a vivid description of a dull season:

Aftir Þat heruest inned had hise sheues,
And that the broun sesoun of Mihelmesse
Was come, and gan the trees robbe of her leues,
That grene had ben and in lusty freisshenesse,
And hem into colour of ȝelownesse
Had died and doun throwen vndirfoote,
That change sanke into myn herte roote.

("After harvest had gathered in its sheaves,
And the brown season of Michaelmas
Had come, and began to strip the trees of their leaves,
Which had been green and full of vibrant freshness,
And dyed them into a colour of yellowness
And cast them down underfoot,
That change sank deep into my heart's root", *Complaint*, lines 1-7).

In these opening lines of the *Complaint*, Hoccleve introduces the natural world as a metaphor for his inner emotional turmoil. The seasonal shift—marked by the harvest's

end, the falling of leaves, and the transition from vibrant greenery to a "colour of yellowness"—mirrors the speaker's decline into melancholia. It is the end of November, and the leaves have fallen and withered, suggesting that just as the trees are stripped bare, so too is his spirit left exposed and vulnerable. The trees brace for a long and cold winter, just as the speaker's "heart root" did after his period of mental illness. Particularly, the use of the word "root" evokes a sense of depth and permanence, indicating that this emotional state has penetrated the core of his being. Indeed, the "root" of the heart suggests that his melancholia is not superficial or fleeting but something that has taken hold in a foundational way, entwined with his very identity. This notion aligns with medieval understandings of mental illness, particularly melancholia, which was often seen as stemming from an imbalance of humours and deeply affecting both body and soul. In addition, the imagery of leaves being "cast down underfoot" emphasises a sense of defeat and helplessness. Just as the leaves fall helplessly to the ground, so too does the speaker feel overcome by his emotions, unable to resist the onset of despair in the following lines. The external world becomes a reflection of his inner self, reinforcing the notion that the speaker's mental illness has not only drained him emotionally but has also transformed his perception of the environment around him. Moreover, the cyclical nature of the seasons, moving inevitably from the decay of autumn to the renewal of spring in an endless cycle, unfolds in the following lines, reflecting the Boethian concept of mutability that Hoccleve had previously explored. In these subsequent lines, he writes about how:

That stablenes in this worlde is there none
there is no thinge but channge and variaunce
how welthye a man be or well be-gone,
endure it shall not he shall it for-gon.
deathe vnder fote shall hym thrist adowne:
that is every wites conclusyon.
whiche for to weyue is in no mannes niyght,
how riche he be stronge, lusty, freshe, and gay.

("There is no permanence in this world:
here is nothing but mutability and changeableness.
However wealthy or lucky in life someone is,
it will not last — they will lose it.
Death will trample them down underfoot:
that will be everyone's ending,
which it is in no one's power to avoid,
however rich they are now, strong, vibrant, fresh or lively", *Complaint*, lines 9-16).

This introduction sets the tone for the poem by mirroring Hoccleve's melancholic emotional landscape with the surrounding environment, creating a reciprocal relationship

between the very intimate image of his heart and the broader external world. It is not by chance that the author uses the same image of being trampled underfoot for both people and the leaves. The speaker further explores this connection through naturalistic imagery that reflects his mental state and the Boethian concept of mutability in human life:

I sy wel, sithin I with siknesse last
Was scourgid, cloudy hath bene Þe fauour
That shoon on me ful briȝt in times past.
The sunne abated and Þe dirke shour
Hilded doun riȝt on me and in langour
Me made swymme….

("I see well, since I was struck by illness,
The favour that once shone brightly on me
Has become clouded.
The sun has dimmed, and the dark shower
Poured directly down on me, making me
Swim in sorrow…" *Complaint*, lines 22-27).

In just five lines, the imagery intensifies dramatically: the weather—and by extension, the speaker's mental state—escalates from cloudy to hail, then to rain and despair so profound that the speaker feels compelled to swim. The implied threat of drowning in a flood evokes the reader's sympathy, conveying the speaker's very real fear and loss of control as his mental state deteriorates. This use of nature to reflect human emotions is known as a "pathetic fallacy", where human feelings and behaviours are attributed to elements of nature, such as weather or landscapes, or where emotions are expressed through them. By portraying nature in this way, writers create a powerful emotional connection between the external environment and the characters' inner experiences, enhancing the overall impact of the narrative.[257] This concept was deeply rooted in the cultural and literary traditions of the Middle Ages, where nature and human experience were more strictly interconnected, as exemplified for instance by Chaucer in the General Prologue of his *Canterbury Tales* where the rebirth of nature corresponds with the rebirth of human spirits.[258] Medieval writers frequently used natural elements as an extension of a character's emotional and psychological journey, or to better explain their feelings. An instance of this use can be found also in Dante's poem "Io son venuto al punto de la rota", in which each of the five stanzas begins describing a winter scene, followed by four lines

[257] Mautner, Thomas ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy,* 2nd ed., London: Penguin Books, 2005, p. 455.
[258] Chaucer, Geoffrey, "General Prologue" in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, specifically The Canterbury Tales, lines 1-18.

about the poet's despair, hopelessly in love with a woman "harder than stone".[259] This Italian poem, written a century before Hoccleve, employs the same literary device, signalling how it was already a consistent feature across medieval poetry and prose. Moreover, this technique remained prevalent also after Hoccleve's time: its use is evident in the opening of *The Testament of Cresseid* by Robert Henryson (c. 1460–1500), a Scottish poet who lived shortly after Hoccleve. Indeed, reading the passage from the *Complaint* particularly evoked for me its lines:

Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte
Suld correspond and be equivalent
Richt sa it wes quhen I began to wryte
This tragedie, the wedder richt fervent
Quhen Aries in middis of the Lent
Schouris of haill gart fra the north discend
That scantlie fra the cauld I micht defend.[260]

("A sorrowful season should correspond to a mournful tale,
And so it was when I began to write this tragedy, the weather was truly harsh.
When Aries was in the middle of Lent,
Hail showers came down from the north,
So that I could barely protect myself from the cold.")[261]

In Henryson's work, the sorrowful weather mirrors the dread that permeates the story he begins to write. Likewise, in Hoccleve's poem, the natural imagery he uses transforms his abstract feelings of sorrow and despair into vivid, tangible experiences. At the same time, the imagery raises again the question of the relationship between the speaker's private and public spheres. Indeed, Hoccleve describes his shame and fear in public situations by saying that it felt as though his: "Herte hadde be dippid in Þe brook, it weet and moist was ynow of my swoot, wiche nowe was frosty colde, nowe firy hoot" ("My heart had been dipped in the brook; it was wet and soaked with my sweat, which was now icy cold, now fiery hot", *Complaint*, lines 152-154). This image is particularly interesting because it describes again the external world and a natural image – the brook – directly affecting the most internal component of a being – the heart. Moreover, also in this passage, the speaker seems to be tormented by his body and how it is perceived by other people.[262]

[259] Alighieri, Dante, *Rime* in "Le Opere di Dante", ed. by Michele Barbi, Firenze: Società Dantesca Italiana, 1960, "Rima C".
[260] Henryson, Robert, "The Testament of Cressid" in *The Complete Works*, ed. by David J. Parkinson, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010, lines 1-4.
[261] My translation.
[262] Harper, Stephen, "'By Cowntyaunce It Is Not Wist': Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint and the Spectacularity of Madness in the Middle Ages", *History of Psychiatry* 8, 1997, p. 390.

Consequently, Hoccleve fears that others may see the loss of control that comes with having the qualities and judgments of the wild, untamed external world infiltrate the internal. This connection between wilderness and mental health, which I already analysed in this thesis when detailing the figure of the "wild men" in section 1.3, depicts someone mad as inherently wilder than other humans are. Hoccleve's view of the relationship between the wild and the tame is one of constant interaction. In literature, the term "wilderness" often represents a pure, unaltered, and natural state that can sometimes be interpreted as positive. The wilderness as a natural environment instead is closely linked to the always negative social concept of "Wildenesse" ("Wilderness", *Complaint*, line 107). Notably, the label of "wildness" is not attributed to Hoccleve due to any inherent natural and positive behaviour, but is instead imposed upon him by townspeople who consider his social actions wholly unnatural and less civilised. The townspeople are alarmed by the speaker's seemingly wild and uncontrollable movements, perceiving him not as a creature of nature but as an untamed beast. This interaction between the natural and sociocultural factors shapes the speaker's understanding of how others view him, as discussed in relation to lines 120-133 of the *Complaint*. His friends compare him to something wild, causing him to become increasingly self-conscious and agitated, perceiving him as something untamed, dangerous, alien, and "sauage" ("savage", *Complaint*, line 86). Having deviated from societal norms, Hoccleve is thus considered a creature that cannot be trusted, leading him to doubt his own perceptions, a theme that I will explore further in the next sections.

4.3.5 Hoccleve's Mental Health: Prejudice and Solitude

Another notable difference in how mental afflictions affect Margery Kempe and Thomas Hoccleve lies in their experiences within the social sphere after their illnesses and how they react. Kempe publicly embraces her mental struggles, using them as a means to construct a new identity, similar to how Julian of Norwich does through her revelations. Hoccleve's experience, however, is markedly different. While Kempe faces scorn and even imprisonment for her behaviour, she shows little inclination to conceal it. For instance, she rewrites the madness of which she is accused as the only appropriate response to a true vision of the crucifixion, even if very extreme and in public "than the creatur thowt that sche ran al abowte the place as it had ben a mad woman, crying and roryng" ("then the creature thought that she ran all about the place as if she had been a

mad woman, crying and roaring", lines 6500-6501). In contrast, Hoccleve's external sociocultural environment influences his internal sense of identity in a very different way, so that he cannot re-contextualise madness as Kempe does. For instance, I have already discussed how Hoccleve's colleagues treat him, but his writings also emphasise that when he began to suffer from mental afflictions, most of his friends abandoned him:

A rietous persone I was and forsake.
Min oolde frendshipe was al ouershake.
As seide is in þe sauter miȝt I sey,
'They þat me sy fledden awey fro me.'
Forȝeten I was, al oute of mynde awey,
As he þat deed was from hertis cherte.

("I was a rebellious person and forsaken.
All my old friendships were shattered.
As it is said in the Psalms, I could say,
'Those who saw me fled away from me.'
I was forgotten, entirely out of mind,
As if I were dead to the hearts of men", *Complaint*, lines 68-81).

This passage is very similar to Kempe saying in line 27 of *The Book* "her family and those who had been friends were now her greatest enemies"; however, living among his fellow Londoners, Hoccleve must take a different approach toward his public appearances. Unlike Kempe, who uses her outbursts to highlight her proximity to Jesus Christ, Hoccleve finds himself asking himself whether it is better to go out in public and risk confirming peoples' suspicions about the return of his mental affliction or to stay at home and allow unfounded rumours to spread in his absence. The speaker's extreme self-consciousness in social situations is evident, for instance, in the following passage:

Thus thouȝte I: 'A greet fool I am,
This pauyment adaies thus to bete,
And in and oute laboure faste and swete,
Wonderinge and heuinesse to purchace,
Sithen I stonde out of al fauour and grace.'

("Thus I thought: I am a great fool,
To pound this pavement day after day,
And to labour hard, sweating as I go in and out,
Only to gain worry and sorrow,
Since I am out of all favour and grace", *Complaint*, lines 185-189).

In these two stanzas, Hoccleve desires to be seen as sane by his fellow Londoners but he is also deeply unable to communicate effectively with them. Once again, the intense self-consciousness that Hoccleve feels with regard to others' opinions of him seems to actually perpetuate his mental anguish.

Contrastingly, despite receiving support from a small part of the clergy, Margery Kempe frequently and actively defends herself against malicious rumours and accusations of heresy in public. Indeed, Kempe persistently searches for approval and understanding from other Christians, both clergy and laypeople, for her acts of spiritual weeping. Throughout her book, she recounts numerous instances where she succeeded and various clergy members expressed approval of her spiritual experiences, including an archbishop (chapter 16), a White Friar (chapter 61), a parson (chapter 67), and a Dominican doctor (chapter 68). However, despite these instances, she actively continues to seek validation from all the others who criticise her without concealing her mental afflictions. As previously discussed, a significant episode in chapter 18 recounts how Margery Kempe, following a command from Jesus, visited Julian of Norwich, who was already an anchoress. Kempe records Julian as saying:

What creatur that hath thes tokenys he muste stedfastlych belevyn that the Holy Gost dwellyth in hys sowle. And mech mor, whan God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, devosyon, er compassyon, he may and owyth to levyn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle. Seynt Powyl seyth that the Holy Gost askyth for us wyth mornynggys and wepyngys unspekable, that is to seyn, he makyth us to askyn and preyn wyth mornynggys and wepyngys so plentyuowsly that the terys may not be nowmeryd. Ther may non evyl spyrit gevyn thes tokenys, for Jerom seyth that terys turmentyn mor the devylle than don the peynes of helle… Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world.

("Whoever has these signs must steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost dwells in their soul. And much more, when God visits a person with tears of contrition, devotion, or compassion, they may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in their soul. Saint Paul says that the Holy Ghost asks for us with groanings and weepings unspeakable, that is to say, He makes us ask and pray with groanings and weepings so plentifully that the tears cannot be numbered. No evil spirit can give these signs, for Jerome says that tears torment the Devil more than the pains of hell do…Place all your trust in God and do not fear the language of the world.", *The Book*, lines 972-984).

Kempe does not provide many details about her time spent with Julian of Norwich, but the outcome of their discussions is clear: Margery Kempe affirmed the validity of her spiritual gifts, particularly her tears, similar to the reassurance she received from Christ's words about her visions. Moreover, by securing the approval of the sympathetic clergy and of Julian of Norwich, Kempe was able to dispel the accusations of Lollardy against her, a process detailed in chapters 13 and 54 of her book. This success in defending herself contrasts sharply with Hoccleve's struggles with public gossip about his behaviour and psychological condition. Furthermore, Kempe also uses her madness and the subsequent slander from fellow pilgrims and townspeople in another way: to present herself as a lone martyr. While her frequent mental afflictions and outbursts lead many of her contemporaries to view her as hysterical, complicating her role as a writer and preacher, she leverages these challenges to portray herself as a persecuted figure. To underscore

this, as previously mentioned, she even recounts that Christ acknowledged and valued her suffering, stating to her:

Dowtyr, it is mor plesyng unto me that thu suffyr despitys and scornys, schamys and reprevys, wrongys and disesys than yif thin hed wer smet of thre tymes on the day every day in sevyn yer. And therfor, dowtyr, fere the nowt what any man can seyn onto the, but in myn goodnes and in thy sorwys that thu hast suffryd therin hast thu gret cawse to joyn, for, whan thu comyst hom into hevyn, than schal every sorwe turnyn the to joye.

("Daughter, it is more pleasing to me that you endure despises and scorns, shame and reproaches, wrongs and injuries than if your head were struck three times a day every day for seven years. Therefore, daughter, do not fear what anyone may say to you, but take joy in my goodness and in the sorrows you have endured. For when you come home to heaven, every sorrow will turn to joy.", *The Book*, lines 3094-3099.)

Furthermore, He also offers to lift the burden of suffering from Kempe if she finds it more than she can endure. However, probably to enhance her martyrdom and sense of abandonment in the eyes of readers, and to justify her mental afflictions in public, she responds to this offer by saying:

Nay, good Lord, late me be at thi wille and make me mythy and strong for to suffyr al that evyr thu wilt that I suffyr, and grawnt me mekenes and pacyens therwyth.

("No, good Lord, let me be at your will, and make me mighty and strong to suffer all that you ever wish me to suffer, and grant me meekness and patience as well", *The Book*, lines 2817-2819).

Arnold notes that Margery Kempe in her solitude perceives and presents the slanders against her faith as a form of Christ-like suffering, or "quasi-martyrdom". Gibson offers a similar perspective, suggesting that while martyrdom by the sword was not an option for Margery to achieve sainthood, martyrdom through slander provided a viable alternative. These insights into what Fanous describes as her "Passion" also clarify why Gibson has characterised Kempe's book as "a calculated hagiographical text," as noted at the beginning of this thesis.

Hoccleve instead is strongly affected by the gossiping townspeople and it seems that he cannot escape or use at his advantage what he knows they are saying about him: "I leide an eere ay to as I by wente and herde al" ("I listened closely as I walked by and heard everything", *Complaint*, lines 134-135). The speaker's intense focus on the townspeople's opinions shapes his internal world, as he interprets their expectations and reactions. As long as he bases his self-worth and mental stability on how others perceive his condition, he will continue to view himself as they do. His belief in his own well-being has little impact on how others respond to him. The townspeople's reliance on visible "symptoms" to diagnose Hoccleve's madness, not only fuels their distrust of his claims and actions but also undermines Hoccleve's ability to recognise and trust his own

bodily signals. This emphasis on observable signs is not merely a local phenomenon but reflects a broader societal understanding of madness. As scholars like Harper have observed, madness during this period was predominantly understood as a physical condition, with its symptoms clearly identifiable according to contemporary medical texts. A maniac, for instance, would exhibit wild behaviour, similar to those described by Hoccleve's friends. In contrast, the melancholic, possibly another diagnosis for Hoccleve, was believed to be characterised by an excess of black bile and recognised by profound sadness and a darkened complexion. In essence, "insanity was visible".[263]

4.3.6 Hoccleve's Mental Health: the Issue of Interpretation

As previously discussed, in a society where madness and mental illness were believed to manifest through physical traits, the meticulous observation of somatic irregularities was commonplace. However, even when Hoccleve feels certain that his illness has passed, the townspeople remain distrustful, continuing to interpret his actions through the lens of their preconceived notions of his insanity. This persistent doubt from his peers leads the speaker to question his own sanity. Hoccleve becomes so worried by their perceptions that he imagines their judgments even in the privacy of his own home. As James Simpson observed, paradoxically, the place of maximum privacy, his home, becomes inoffensive against public scrutiny in protecting Hoccleve.[264] Consequently, instead of defining himself by his own terms or the quality of his mind, bases his identity on the acceptance of his fellow Londoners. In his heightened state of self-consciousness, he describes how he rushes to the mirror, desperate to see what the townspeople are judging him by and to gain the objectivity needed to view himself clearly:

And in my chaumbre at home whanne Þat I was
Mysilfe alone I in Þis wise wrouȝt.
I streite vnto my mirrour and my glas,
To loke howe Þat me of my chere Þouȝt,
If any othir were it than it ouȝt,
Amendid it to my kunnynge and myȝt.
Many a saute made I to this mirrour,
Thinking, "If Þat I looke in Þis manere
Amonge folke as I nowe do, noon errour
Of suspect look may in my face appeere.
This contenance I am seur and this cheere
If I foorth vse is no thyng repreeuable
To hem þat han conceites reasonable".

[263] Harper, p. 388.
[264] Simpson, p. 24.

And therwithal I thoghte thus anoon:
"Men in hire owne cas been blynde alday,
As I haue herd seyn many a day agoon,
And in þat same plyt I stonde may.
How shal I do which is the beste way
My troublid spirit for to brynge in reste?
If I wiste how fayn wolde I do the beste".

("And in my chamber at home when I was
Alone by myself, I worked in this way.
I went straight to my mirror and my glass,
To see how my appearance seemed to me,
If it was any different than it ought to be,
I adjusted it to my knowledge and my might.
I made many gestures before this mirror,
Thinking, 'If I look this way among people
As I do now, no error or suspicious look
Should appear on my face.
This demeanour and this appearance,
If I continue to use them, are not at all
Blameworthy to those who have reasonable judgments.'
And with that thought, I immediately reflected:
'People are blind to their own situation every day,
As I have heard said many days ago,
And I may be in the same plight.
How should I act to best bring my troubled spirit to rest?
If I knew how, I would gladly do what is best.'", *Complaint*, lines 155-175).

Hoccleve's attempt to "see" and "read" his own insanity through the mirror has garnered significant critical attention. This moment is widely recognised as revealing the depth of Hoccleve's fractured identity. By looking in his mirror, he is treating himself purely as other: he tries to see himself only as others see him, and as a result, he ceases to follow any sense of personal coherence.[265] Hoccleve presents himself as both the observer looking into the mirror and the self being observed, a duality that intentionally evokes the uncanny, often associated with the mirror in literature. This results in a fragmentation of self, where Hoccleve becomes both the subject and object of his own perception.[266] In his attempt to reclaim his former identity, Hoccleve experiences what Knapp describes as "internal fragmentation", a continuation of the "mutual surveillance" imposed by the crowd.[267] Furthermore, for Hoccleve, the use of mirrors seems to be particularly problematic. As Harper notes, madness in literature is often depicted as spectacular and immediately identifiable by appearance. However, in his *Complaint*, the identification of madness is more complex, as Hoccleve consistently highlights the discrepancy between inner, subjective experiences and outer appearances.[268] Hoccleve observes that the

[265] Simpson, p. 24.
[266] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse,* p. 170.
[267] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, p. 169.
[268] Harper, pp. 202-203.

strangers, acquaintances, and former colleagues he encounters on the streets are so eager for a label that they interpret any deviation from expected behaviour as confirmation of madness. The mirror scene allows readers to experience the speaker's internal turmoil as he scrutinises his own reflection, revealing the complex relationship between external perceptions and internal reality. As Hoccleve internalises the judgments he believes others are making about him, he perpetuates his own suffering. Through this scene, the speaker reflects on the reliability of physical appearance as an indicator of mental health and ultimately realises the "impossibility of gaining any objective knowledge"[269] about both his appearance and his mental state.

This realisation prompts the speaker to question how one can truly understand the inner workings of another person. In this pivotal moment of the *Complaint* as a narrative and in Hoccleve's personal journey, the speaker makes the assertion that "Many a doom is wrappid in the myste. Man by hise dedes and not by hise lookes shal knowen be. As it is writen in bookes" ("Many a judgment is wrapped in the mist. A man shall be known by his deeds and not by his looks, as it is written in books" *Complaint*, lines 201-203). This statement urges the audience to question the reliability of these people's senses and thoughts, as after some time Hoccleve is still considered mad or prone to be mad again when he states he is sane: "As ȝit this day ther deemen many oon I am not wel, may, as I by hem goo, taaste and assay if it be so or noo" ("Even today, many judge me. I am not well, perhaps. As I pass by them, I am tested and examined to see if it is so or not", *Complaint*, lines 208-210). Nonetheless, in the mirror scene, Hoccleve consciously attempts to "perform" his pre-madness self, and these desperate efforts only result in falsity. His awareness of this performance challenges the body as an unquestioned source of identity. Consequently, following the mirror scene, issues of interpretation become paramount in the text. Indeed, both the *Complaint* and later the *Dialogue* engage in a continuous contest of interpretation. All along these texts, Hoccleve's challenge lies in his inability to control how his body or speech is perceived and interpreted by others: "Whatso þat euere I sholde answere or seye they wolden nat han holde it worth a leek" ("Whatever I might answer or say, they would not have valued it as worth a leek", *Complaint*, lines 142-143). He turns to writing as a means of communicating over which he has more control than over his body and as something that a "madman" could not do as he does. However, also this is misinterpreted and even seen as the cause of his illness. Indeed, in another of his works, the *Dialogue*, Hoccleve is misread by his Friend and his

[269] Harper, p. 391.

initial madness is attributed to his "bisy studie" ("intense study", *Dialogue*, line 302), as he even tells Hoccleve: "thy werk hard is to parfourme, I dreede. Thy brayn parcas therto nat wole assente" ("your work is hard to perform, I fear. Perhaps your brain will not agree to it", *Dialogue*, lines 296-297) and "of studie was engendred thy seeknesse, and þat was hard" ("your illness was caused by study, and that was harsh", *Dialogue*, line 379).

As Harper notes, Hoccleve frames the interpretation of his madness as the central issue in his struggle for identity and the main theme of the *Complaint*. Specifically, the crucial question Hoccleve raises in his writings is who holds the authority to diagnose madness. Ironically, the behaviour of those who continue to see Hoccleve as mad after his recovery—an inability to distinguish reality from imagination, truth from fiction—mirrors the very madness they attribute to him. Hoccleve, in effect, projects his madness onto his accusers. As Harper points out, Hoccleve creates a scenario where those who consider him mad are themselves associated with delusion and the perilous power of the imagination[270], for instance in passages like these: "I may nat lette a man to ymagyne ferre aboue the moone if þat him list" ("I cannot prevent a man from imagining far above the moon if he wishes" *Complaint*, lines 197-198). Hoccleve, in contrast, presents himself as the figure of reason: "of swich ymagynynge I nat ne recche; let hem dreeme as hem list and speke and drecche" ("I do not care about such fantasies; let them dream and speak and be troubled in their sleep as they please", *Complaint*, lines 307-308). In the debate over his sanity, Hoccleve's repeated use of the word "ymagination" serves both as a defensive and an aggressive tactic. By doing so, Hoccleve not only seeks to shed the stigma of insanity but also turns the accusation back on "the gossipers", suggesting that those who still believe him mad are the truly deluded ones.[271] Furthermore, those who accuse Hoccleve of madness exhibit behaviours typically associated with madmen themselves. Their false predictions about his condition and their insistence on possessing knowledge that Hoccleve asserts belongs only to God are characteristics of the melancholic. Hoccleve's insistence that "it is a lewdenesse men wyser hem pretende than they be" ("it is foolishness for people to pretend to be wiser than they are", *Complaint*, lines 101-102), brings those who accuse him down to the level of "fools". His friends, Hoccleve suggests, are themselves guilty of mental lapses. Similarly, in a passage I already discussed, in response to criticisms that her crying is excessive and hypocritical, Kempe contends that her tears are, in fact, the only rational response to Christ's Passion.

[270] Harper, p. 195.
[271] Harper, p. 209.

She believes that weeping and roaring for the sins of the world is a sign of true sanity, whereas grieving over material losses as many of her critics did constitutes genuine insanity. This inversion of societal norms and expectations allows Margery Kempe to redefine the parameters of sanity, as also Hoccleve does, reinforcing her position as the true sane and legitimising her spiritual experiences. Similar to how for Hoccleve the true deluded ones are the gossipers, for Kempe the real madmen are those who "wyl cryen and roryn and wryngyn her handys as yyf thei had no wytte ne non mende, and yet wetyn thei wel inow that thei displesyn God" ("will cry and roar and wring their hands as if they had no wit nor any mind, and yet they know well enough that they displease God", *The Book*, lines 2286-2288). However, the Friend in the *Dialogue*, as part of his effort to dissuade Hoccleve from publishing the *Complaint*, assures him that: "how it stood with thee leid is al asleepe, men han foryete it it is out of mynde" ("how things stood with you is all forgotten; people have forgotten it, it is out of their minds", *Dialogue*, lines 29-30). In doing so, he instils doubts about Hoccleve's reliability in describing his critics and also seems to highlight another symptom of his madness: paranoia. This behaviour seems to drive Hoccleve to isolate himself from others even more. Indeed, Hoccleve's primary lament in his *Complaint* is his exclusion from the company of his friends and his estrangement from a homosocial society.[272]

This issue goes beyond concerns about his work or social standing; as I will explore in the next section, it also involves a profound loss of masculinity. Indeed, unlike Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, Hoccleve faced the additional challenge of confronting his sense of masculinity, which was significantly undermined by his experience with madness. This aspect is crucial in understanding his relationship with madness and how it reshaped his identity—both in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, including friends, colleagues clerks, and strangers. The fragmentation and transformation of his masculine identity are central to his experience, and I will now further examine how he attempted to navigate and respond to this crisis.

4.4 Hoccleve's Mental Health: Gender Issues in his Writings

In writing this chapter on Thomas Hoccleve, I explored the many differences and connections between his work and that of Margery Kempe. A key distinction is that Hoccleve is not only writing in a different context, a city, but he is also a man. This is

[272] Simpson, p. 24.

significant, as his writings reveal that he perceives insanity as a threat to his masculinity. As discussed earlier in this thesis, men and women were treated very differently regarding mental health and its treatment. Consequently, it is essential to recognise that in medieval England, discourses of madness imply different difficulties for men and women. I already analysed the struggles it brought for women describing Kempe's life; for men, instead, it often carried an underlying theme of threatened masculinity, which is clearly reflected in Hoccleve's *Series.* This rejection by other men, combined with the loss of his clerkly status, strips Hoccleve of much of what constitutes his identity as a man. As Mills observes, Hoccleve's suffering stems from his isolation from the social network that sustains him and from his inability to regain access to it, whether through money or the ability to write.[273] Hoccleve's sense of self is deeply tied to his gender and role within the Privy Seal, which is integral to his identity. His masculinity is defined by his connections with other men and his professional work. Indeed, Davis asserts that in the fifteenth century "work increasingly defines the masculine self"[274]. However, Hoccleve resists any notion of lost masculinity. As he does when reversing his psychological condition onto the gossipers, he suggests that those who accuse him of madness are, in fact, the ones whose masculinity is in question. He is aided in this by the fact that, while others denigrate his masculinity, they do so in what he considers the feminine medium of gossip:

Axid han they ful ofte sythe and freyned
Of my felawes of the priuee seel
And preide hem to telle hem with herte vnfeyned
How it stood with me whethir euele or weel.

("They have asked many times and inquired
Of my companions of the Privy Seal
And begged them to tell them sincerely
How things stood with me, whether for better or worse", *Complaint*, lines 295-298).

Indeed, Hoccleve's writings, a textual effort to reassert his sanity, can also be interpreted as a defence against accusations of diminished masculinity. As discussed, one of his strategies is to complicate the concept of madness, effectively blurring the lines between the sane and the mad, and also asking who has the authority to identify madness. However, this is just one of several tactics employed throughout the *Series*. Significantly, concerning his gender, Hoccleve also seeks to normalise his experience of madness by drawing parallels to other male experiences, such as comparing madness to drunkenness.

[273] Mills, p. 91.
[274] Davis, p. 142.

This comparison transforms his seemingly terrifying condition into something more familiar, temporary and comprehensible. Moreover, by likening madness to drinking, Hoccleve aligns it with an activity traditionally perceived as masculine:

Nay thogh a man do in drynkynge excesse
So ferfoorth þat nat speke he can ne go,
And his wittes wel ny been reft him fro
And biried in the cuppe he aftirward
Comth to himself ageyn elles were hard.

("No, even if a man indulges in drinking to such excess
That he cannot speak or walk,
And his wits are almost completely taken from him
And buried in the cup, he later returns to himself;
Otherwise, it would be difficult", *Complaint*, lines 227-231).

With this passage, Hoccleve also presents madness as something from which one can recover forever, defending himself once again from the malicious gossip of the community surrounding him. Moreover, in another passage, Hoccleve makes a deliberate effort to assert his masculinity and position himself within a masculine community, the religious one. Through a dual approach, Hoccleve in the *Dialogue* integrates his struggle with masculinity and sanity into a religious framework, underscoring his effort to maintain his identity and stability:

The benefice of God nat hid be sholde...
It to confesse and thanke him am I holde,
For he in me hath shewid his miracle.
His visitacioun is a spectacle
In which þat I beholde may and see
Bet than I dide how greet a lord is he.

("The blessing of God should not remain hidden...
I am obliged to confess it and thank Him,
For He has shown His miracle in me.
His visitation is like a spectacle
Through which I may look and see
Better than I did before, how great a Lord He is", *Dialogue*, lines 92-98).

This stands in contrast to the mirror scene in the *Complaint*, as the nature of this spectacle has shifted dramatically: instead of him embodying madness, the spectacle is now the testament of God's benevolence. This transformation enhances Hoccleve's self-identification as a servant of Christ: His visitation made him a living symbol of His power and again a part of the male-dominated religious community.[275]

[275] Davis, p. 87.

When comparing Hoccleve's case to Margery Kempe's experience with madness excluding her from a community, and its connection to her gender, it becomes evident that the themes of masculinity and femininity are central in both cases. Indeed, it shapes not only their relationships with others of the same and opposite gender but also influences their interactions within their religious and social contexts. At the beginning of this thesis, I tried to demonstrate through their own writings, how scholars such as Chambers, Coleman, Inge, and Lawes have consistently positioned Margery Kempe's gender as central—whether in positive or negative analyses—to their interpretations of her life, psychological condition, and literary work. Both Kempe's experience of madness and her gender play a key role in her self-redefinition, allowing her to transition from a bourgeois homemaker to a devout religious figure. However, before this transformation, her madness posed a threat to her identity, similarly to Hoccleve, as her writings show. The challenges to Kempe's bodily identity during this time mirrored the disruptions to her social identity, as her psychological condition led her to reject her friends, family, and even her faith. However, while Kempe portrays madness as a state of social isolation, she also manages to use it to her advantage. This profound loss of identity ultimately enables her, upon recovery, to reposition herself within the social hierarchy and to construct a new identity as both a holy prophet and a woman in medieval England.

Moreover, serving as a focal point for their sense of feminine self, the wounded body of Christ plays a central role in both Julian of Norwich's and Margery Kempe's texts. Indeed, both Julian and Kempe perceive Christ within a feminine context and use it to shape their feminine identities within a religious male-dominated context. However, as Bynum noted, their portrayal of Christ as akin to that of a birthing and lactating mother, was not unique to their writings but was a common view during the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, Margery Kempe particularly emphasises this connection of Christ's body to the female body, highlighting its tendency to bleed and give birth in portraying Christ's crucifixion in a manner akin to childbirth:

> And than owr Lordys body shakyd and schoderyd, and alle the joyntys of that blisful body brostyn and wentyn asundyr, and hys precyows wowndys ronnyn down wyth reverys of blood on every syde.
>
> ("And then our Lord's body shook and trembled, and all the joints of that blessed body burst and opened, and His precious wounds streamed down with rivulets of blood on every side", *The Book*, lines 4572-4575).

It is the body's ability to endure suffering and remain open that enables it to nourish life. Consequently, in Kempe's spiritual practice of *Imitatio Christi* her practices extend

beyond her connection with food to encompass her entire feminine body. Indeed, unlike the typical virginal ideal of holy female figures, Kempe embraces the sanctity of the totality of her physicality, including its sexual nature and its ability to bear children and lactate. According to her, neither her gender nor maternity impedes her pursuit of *Imitatio Christi*; rather, it is central to it and even enhances her holiness. Affirming her viewpoint through His words, in her text Christ Himself is reported to praise her sanctity specifically in relation to motherhood, saying: "thu art to me a very modir and to al the world, for that gret charite that is in the" ("you are to me a true mother, and to all the world, because of the great charity that is in you", *The Book*, lines 2976-2977). Likewise, in another instance Christ assures Kempe that, although she was not a virgin or a widow He still loved her:

Trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thow dost, for, thow the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state of wedlake, yet, dowtyr, I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world.

("Believe right well that I love married women also, especially those married women who would live chastely, if they could have their will, and do their best to please me as you do. For though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of marriage, yet, daughter, I love you as well as any maiden in the world", *The Book*, lines 1568-1574).

Kempe's experience of motherhood and madness follows a common paradigm in which the bodily openness and vulnerability given by her gender are closely tied to the potential for holiness. Both her body and mind, in this sense, must be spiritually opened by God through madness to achieve spiritual fruitfulness, making her gender not an obstacle but a tool to assert her holy identity and reshape her place within her context dominated by the opposite sex, also seemingly trying to minimise any contrast with it.

Contrastingly, Hoccleve in his *Dialogue with a Friend* seems to try to enhance his masculinity by excluding women and at the same time re-entering the male community of husbands. For instance, while in this text pleasing women is presented as admirable, the Friend also warns against losing masculine authority in doing so and against women's influence over him:

But thogh to wommen thow thyn herte bowe
Axynge hir graces with greet repentance
For thy giltes, thee wole I nat allowe
To take on thee swich rule and gouernance
As they thee rede wolde for greuance
So greet ther folwe mighte of it parcas
That thow repente it sholdest ay, Thomas.

("But though you bend your heart to women,

Seeking their grace with deep repentance,
For your sins, I shall not permit,
That you take on such rule and guidance,
As they would counsel, for such distress,
Might follow, by chance,
That you would always regret it, Thomas", *Dialogue*, lines 715-721).

Moreover, the Friend illustrates this warning with the biblical example of Eve crushing the head of the serpent in *Genesis*:

Now syn womman had of the feend swich might,
To breke a mannes heed it seemeth light.
Forwhy, let noon housbonde thynke it shame
Ne repreef vnto him ne vilenye,
Thogh his wyf do to him þat selue same.
Hir reson axith haue of men maistrie
Thogh holy writ witnesse and testifie
Men sholde of hem han dominacioun,
It is the reuers in probacioun.

("Now since women had such power over the devil
It seems easy for them to break a man's head.
Therefore, let no husband think it shameful
Nor a reproach to him, nor villainy,
If his wife does the same to him.
Her reason demands mastery over men,
Though Holy Scripture bears witness and testifies
That men should have dominion over them,
The reality proves the opposite", *Dialogue*, lines 727-735).

This assertion of women as superior, even if in a seemingly humoristic context, actually suggests and fosters a sense of male camaraderie built on the exclusion of women as something different from men. Indeed, the relationship between Hoccleve and the Friend, previously characterised by their extended argument about Hoccleve's mental state, seems strengthened through their shared concern about women as readers. Likewise, at the end of *The Tale of Jereslaus's Wife*, Hoccleve tries to re-enter the homosocial community of sane men fostering this same camaraderie described above, enhancing his masculinity to readers as he presents himself as a married man like all the others:

In the world so louynge tendrenesse
Is noon as is the loue of a womman
To hir chyld namely & as I gesse,
To hire housbonde also where-of witnesse
We weddid men may bere if pat vs lyke.

("In the world, there is no tenderness
As great as the love of a woman,
Especially toward her child, and I believe,
Also toward her husband, as witnesses
We married men can bear, if we want", *Jereslaus's Wife*, lines 393-398).

However, Hoccleve's view and relationship with the opposite and his own gender can be further analysed through a study of his other works, especially concerning his experience with mental health and its social consequences. Consequently, through a comparison of his other writings with *The Series,* in the next section I will try to investigate how he navigated gender issues also in his other texts, even if sometimes they can be seen as contradicting one another.

4.4.1 Hoccleve's Relationship with Women in *The Letter of Cupid*

To analyse effectively and correctly the gender dynamics in Hoccleve's writings, particularly in comparison to his *Series*, it is essential, in my opinion, to begin with a text he wrote as a translator: *The Letter of Cupid*. This work not only sparked the debate over whether Hoccleve's writings exhibit antifeminism, but is also discussed in his *Dialogue with a Friend*, where Hoccleve examines his female readers. As previously noted, Hoccleve's *Series* consists of interlinked texts within a frame narrative. The sequence begins with the *Complaint*, where Hoccleve laments his circumstances and plans to re-enter the social world through his authority as a writer. This is followed by the *Dialogue with a Friend*, in which Hoccleve and a visiting friend discuss his madness and debate whether returning to writing might trigger a relapse, while also discussing how women readers perceived Hoccleve's works. The narrative continues with three texts that Hoccleve decides to write during the *Dialogue*: two exempla, *Jereslaus's Wife Tale* and *The Tale of Jonathas*, along with a moralistic treatise on the proper preparation for death, *Lerne to Die*. An obvious unifying theme throughout the *Series* is the presence of mental instability, indeed episodes of madness or at least feigned madness appear in each text, highlighting its centrality to the work. However, both in the *Dialogue* and the subsequent moralised tales, significant attention is also given to women readers and women in general. Indeed, many critics have explored Hoccleve's writings in relation to women and his perceived loss of masculinity, seeking to understand his perspectives on gender issues, with varying results and interpretations.[276]

As I stated, I believe it is impossible to truly study and analyse the gender issues in Hoccleve's *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend,* and how they were developed and

[276] Patterson, Lee, "'What is Me?': Self and Society in the Poetry of Thomas Hoccleve", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23, 2001, pp. 449-450.

discussed, without also studying his *Letter of Cupid* and all the disputes it involved over the centuries. In 1399, Christine de Pisan launched a critique of the misogynistic literature prevalent in late medieval Europe with her *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*. In this poem, Cupid defends women against what Christine de Pisan perceived as the defamation of their gender by Jean de Meun and other male authors.[277] Three years later, Hoccleve produced an adaptation of Christine de Pisan's work, titled the *Letter of Cupid*. While Pisan's poem is widely regarded by scholars as a straightforward defence of women, Hoccleve's adaptation has been the subject of considerable debate. Most critics agree that the English version parodies Christine's original, though opinions vary on the extent and intent of this parody. For example, Mitchell argues that, despite the "humorous passages" in Hoccleve's work, the *Letter of Cupid* can be considered as feminist as its French counterpart.[278] With a similar opinion, Pearsall observes that Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid* demonstrates that Hoccleve "could laugh at women as well as himself", suggesting that it should not be considered anti-feminist.[279] Following this thread, Fleming finds "no evidence of antifeminism" in Hoccleve's work and argues that Hoccleve was not mocking women at all. Instead, he contends that Hoccleve was satirising Christine de Pisan's interpretation of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* as an antifeminist diatribe.[280] Likewise, Diane Bornstein characterises Hoccleve's Cupid as merely a "jester", whose inept defence of women is intended to be satirical, a view echoed by Quinn, who also describes Hoccleve's Cupid as a "buffoon" rather than an antifeminist character.[281] Nonetheless, according to Bornstein, the exaggerated defence offered by Cupid, the proverbial language used to critique women's behaviour, and the omission of actual examples of women's good deeds all contribute to undermining Christine de Pisan's argument, making Hoccleve's work, if not antifeminist, at least a parody of feminism rather than a genuine and courtly defence of women.[282]

Although modern critics still debate whether to classify Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid* as satirical or antifeminist, Hoccleve himself in his *Dialogue with a Friend*

[277] Christine de Pisan, *Oeuvres poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. by Maurice Roy, Paris: Didot, 1891, pp. 1-27.
[278] Mitchell, Jerome, *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968, p. 53.
[279] Pearsall, Derek, "The English Chaucerians" in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966, p. 225.
[280] Fleming, John Vincent, "Hoccleve's 'Letter of Cupid' and the 'Quarrel' over the *Roman de la Rose*", *Medium Aevum* 40, 1971, pp. 23.
[281] Quinn, William, "Hoccleve's Epistle of Cupid", *Explicator* 45, 1986, p. 9.
[282] Bornstein, Diane, "Anti-feminism in Thomas Hoccleve's Translation of Christine de Pizan's Epistre au dieu d'amours", *English Language Notes* 19, 1981, pp. 7-14.

acknowledges that some women might not have appreciated his humour. However, this variability in the interpretation of gender issues in the whole *Series* probably reflects its complex nature without giving precise answers. Indeed, over the years, the *Dialogue* too has been subjected to a range of critical readings, illustrating its multifaceted nature. For instance, in his analysis of Hoccleve's *Dialogue with a Friend*, Mitchell accepts the sincerity of Hoccleve's apology to female readers about his Cupid, recognising the nuanced and complex position of Hoccleve's commentary.[283] Likewise, Burrow claims that, despite the obvious debt to Chaucer's prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Hoccleve's defence leaves "an impression of real anxiety" in the author concerning women's influence as readers.[284]

However, before dismissing some of Hoccleve's remarks as antifeminist in his *Letter to Cupid* or the tales Hoccleve translates in the *Series*, it is important to state that they were not his first attempts at writing a parody. A clear example I think can be found in one of his previous works, where Hoccleve encompasses different "Hocclevian themes", such as madness as a disease that God can cure as a divine physician through confession, in a text that is a parody of other literary conventions. Indeed, his first attempt at writing a parody can be seen as already occurring approximately in the year 1406 in Hoccleve's best-known poem, *The Male Regle*. This poem was written circa 15 years before the *Series* and 5 years before *The Regiment of Princes*. Thornley states that the character of this work as a begging poem leans more towards parody than a straightforward expression of the themes already discussed in Hoccleve's writings. Moreover, she connects Hoccleve's use of the imagery of sin and disease to the conventions of the penitential lyric, viewing the poem as more conventional than autobiographical. Consequently, she interprets it as a parody of religious and courtly love complaints, relating it to the confessional form.[285] In *The Male Regle*, Hoccleve states "my body and purs been at ones seeke" ("my body and purse have been sick both together", *Male Regle,* line 408), and undertakes a full confession of his excesses to the god of Health in order to cure them. The invocation to Health carries clear religious implications, drawing on the double meaning of "salus" as both physical and spiritual health (and perhaps "financial" for Hoccleve). However, the double-edged humour of the

[283] Mitchell, p. 53.
[284] Burrow, John, "Hoccleve's Series: Experience and Books" in *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. by Robert F. Yeager, Hamden: Archon Books, 1984, pp. 269-270.
[285] Thornley, Eva M., "The Middle English Penitential Lyric and Hoccleve's Autobiographical Poetry", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 68, 1967, pp. 295–321.

poem arises from Hoccleve's persistence in seeking the former kind of health rather than the latter. In his confession, he laments his rebellious youth and his willful disregard for Reason's counsel of moderation, confesses his submission to the seven deadly sins and admits that his excesses in the tavern and the "lures of Bacchus" have led him to physical illness and to poverty: "the penylees maladie" ("the pennyless sickness" *Male Regle*, line 130) he laments. Hoccleve, exploring again one of his recurring themes and trying to regain the lost health of his body and purse, makes a complete confession of his sins and offences against "God, his freend, & eek him self" ("God, his friend and also himself", *Male Regle*, line 168). He does so with significant detail and fulfilling the requirements of explaining in a proper religious confession "why & where, how & whenne, and how ofte" ("why and where, how and when, and how often") and differentiating between sins of word, thought, and deed.[286] Thus, Hoccleve formally completes the three components of the Christian confession: he openly recounts his sins in detail and he claims to be driven by such extreme contrition that he even says "I trowe þat I raue" ("I think I'm raving mad", *Male Regle*, line 403) which is strikingly also the same expression used by Julian of Norwich to describe her episode of madness. Then, he expresses a desire to make different amends in a conspicuous number of lines, circa from line 369 to 408. However, even if it apparently fulfils these three points, Hoccleve's confession remains flawed in each aspect, aligning it to a parody: first, in narrating the circumstances of his sins he indulges in blaming others, even naming them in line 321, when he stops speaking about his misbehaviour and starts accusing Prentys and Arondel to the God of Health, a practice explicitly prohibited in confessional manuals such as *Jacob's Well*.[287] Secondly, his contrition appears misplaced; rather than genuinely regretting his offence against God, he seems motivated by a desire for health and financial recovery, using confession as a means to that end. This other fallacy is also clearly addressed in *Jacob's Well* as Hoccleve most probably knew: "thou schalt nozt haue sorwefull mynde in pin herte for pi good & for pi gold, but for pi synne, and nogt for pi bely"[288] ("you should not have a sorrowful mind in your heart for your wealth and gold, but for your sins, and not for your belly"). In conclusion, the poem's conscious irony which is already evident in these parts of the confession, becomes especially clear in Hoccleve's proposal for reform: he pledges to abandon the sins of the flesh and pride (his wish to be called "maister" and not "Sir" as

[286] Brandeis, Arthur ed., *Jacob's Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, London: Kegan Paul, 1900, pp. 293-295.
[287] Brandeis, pp. 180-182.
[288] Brandeis, p. 170.

he explains in lines 201-205), yet his plea for wealth reveals his persistent lust. Indeed, all along the text, it seems that what Hoccleve truly seeks is not spiritual salvation but an earthly remedy for his financial woes. This makes Hoccleve's poem a parody of genuine confession according to many scholars, as it also appears clear from the last five stanzas in which he exaggerates both his misfortune and the formality of his plea to Lord Furnivall and the God of Health.[289]

This previous attempt at writing a parody of a literary genre in the *Male Regle*, would attest to Hoccleve's humoristic intent, rather than antifeminist, also in the *Letter of Cupid*. Indeed, as I shall analyse, Hoccleve himself will subsequently defend his work and intentions in the *Dialogue with a Friend*. Here, as already stated, women are indeed presented as clearly problematic readers: "wommen been felle and wyse; hem for to plese lyth greet craft & art" ("women are fierce and wise. To please them requires great craft and skill", *Dialogue*, lines 681-682). However, Hoccleve claims that he has been misinterpreted in the past, as he and his *Letter to Cupid* are not misogynists at all: "whoso lookith aright there in may see Þat they me oghten haue in greet cheertee" ("whoever looks rightly there may see that they [women] ought to hold me in great affection", *Dialogue*, lines 776-777). While he is defending himself from accusations of antifeminism, at the same time it seems that according to Hoccleve most women readers cannot be trusted to interpret a text correctly. Indeed, as I will analyse, in many lines the problem of female readers replaces the Friend's original concern about the reactions of Hoccleve's male readers about his mental state. Moreover, as already stated when discussing Hoccleve's perceived loss of masculinity, it could be argued that Hoccleve's supposed disregard for the female opinion of which he is accused, in his intentions actually enhances his masculinity and proximity to male readers.[290]

4.4.2 Hoccleve's Relationship with Women in *The Dialogue with a Friend*

Despite these various critical readings on gender issues in the *Letter of Cupid*, understanding this theme in Hoccleve's writings demands the analysis of the *Series* and especially his words to the Friend in the *Dialogue* and the two embedded tales, *Jereslaus's Wife* and *Jonathas and Fellicula*. Though these stories are intended to illustrate the virtue

[289] Mitchell, Jerome, *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968, pp. 3-4.
[290] Mills, David, "The Voices of Thomas Hoccleve" in *Essays on Thomas Hoccleve*, ed. by Catherine Batt, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, pp. 95.

or villainy of women, they have been somewhat peripheral in discussions of Hoccleve's other works, particularly regarding his relationship with women and his own gender. Exceptions to this are Mann, who briefly discussed *Jereslaus's Wife* but did not consider *Jonathas and Fellicula*[291] and Mitchell, who provided two extended discussions of both Hoccleve's inscribed tales.[292] In these, Mitchell has even described *Jereslaus's Wife* as Hoccleve's "supreme contribution to medieval feminist literature"[293], thus not identifying him as an antifeminist writer. However, as for the *Letter of Cupid,* on these tales too the scholarly debate is fractured. Indeed, Winstead has contrastingly argued that these tales represent an antifeminist continuation of *The Letter*. According to her, here Hoccleve targets "feminist" readers again, such as Christine de Pisan, who are seen as blindly objecting to any criticism of their sex. Winstead also states that Hoccleve resumes his critique of contentious women by promising an apology for his literary misdeeds but ultimately reproducing the primary themes and strategies of his Cupid. Moreover, her critical reading suggests that Hoccleve's admiration for women is dubious like Cupid's, and that his tales offer a platform for the misogynistic rhetoric he claims to reject, similar to Cupid's epistle.[294]

As is evident, also on the gender dynamics within *The Dialogue with a Friend*, the scholarly debate is divided. Nonetheless, all critics agree that, as in Kempe, a crucial element of Hoccleve's identity is his problematic relationship with the opposite gender, marking one of their several analogies in their experience with their writings and mental health. Indeed, as I analysed through a close reading of her writings, when it comes to her relationship with men Kempe juxtaposes her positive spiritual connection with Christ against her negative view of her husband and sexual relations with men in general. For instance, while she describes her "homely relationship" with Christ in a positive light, she perceives her sexual relationship with John Kempe negatively. Moreover, as already detailed after her conversion, she becomes deeply disturbed by sexual intercourse in general and writes different passages like this one:

Sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose [ooze], the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng, saf only for obedyens.

[291] Mann, Jill, *Apologies to Women*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 21-22.
[292] Mitchell, pp. 43-47 and pp. 86-96.
[293] Mitchell, p. 55.
[294] Winstead, Karen A., "'I am al othir to yow than yee weene': Hoccleve, Women, and the Series", *Philological Quarterly* 72, 1993, pp. 143-145.

("She had never desired to have physical relations with her husband, for the duty of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, eat or drink the worst ooze, the muck in the channel, than consent to any physical intimacy, except only out of obedience", *The Book*, lines 346-350).

This imagery vividly conveys Margery Kempe's deep aversion, without any supposed humoristic intent as in Hoccleve, to her husband's sexual desires that she associates with impurity. Moreover, Kempe also seems to associate sex with the loss of self she experienced during pregnancy and madness, both of which compromised her autonomy and bodily integrity. Her narrative intricately weaves together themes of madness, gender roles, motherhood and sexuality, highlighting the tensions between personal freedom, societal norms, and devotion to God. Indeed Kempe challenges conventional perceptions of medieval mysticism by presenting herself as a woman of resilience and profound spiritual yearning, despite her unconventional methods. Furthermore, in doing so, her portrayal ranging from divine voices to marital struggles, offers a nuanced perspective on the intersections of mental health and faith in late medieval England, without excluding her gender.

The intertwining and exploration of these themes have concerned Hoccleve's writings too, with many analogies and differences. As in Kempe, this aspect in his works has prompted various scholars to offer conflicting interpretations that have enriched, and sometimes challenged, the study of Hoccleve's writings over the years. For instance, Davis identifies an insecure sexual identity as a core characteristic of Hoccleve's clerkly class, attributing this to the disparity between occupational and sexual identities within medieval social structures. According to Davis, these literate professions were often associated with chaste religious orders, even though secular clergy existed. Married or, more ambiguously, never-married bureaucrats seemed to occupy a space between the first estate, due to their occupation, and the second or third estates, due to their sexual or marital status.[295] Hoccleve himself, as noted earlier in this section, has a wife, but their relationship does not seem particularly close. We first learn of her through Hoccleve's Friend in the *Dialogue*, who inquires:

"Thomas how is it twixt thee & thy feere?" "Wel, wel", quod I "What list yow thereof heere? My wyf mighte haue hokir & greet desdeyn if I sholde in swich cas pleye a soleyn."

("'Thomas, how is it between you and your friend?' 'Well, well,' I said, 'What do you want to hear about it here? My wife might have great scorn and disdain if I were to play the fool in such a situation'", *Dialogue*, lines 739-742).

[295] Davis, p. 94.

Building on this passage, Davis argues that Hoccleve's wife initially appears in the text as a distinctly negative figure. According to her, in a work focused on representation, Hoccleve's choice to present his wife without substantial presence and after speaking of Eve deceiving Adam is highly significant. She is introduced only to be dismissed, characterised solely by her tendency for "hokir and greet desdeyn". This portrayal of marriage, depicted in Hoccleve's narrative, is strikingly negative. Indeed, according to Davis, "Hoccleve regards women only as distractions, impediments, and embarrassments".[296] Furthermore, Davis notes that Hoccleve actively distances both his narrator and himself from his marriage and women in general, never discussing it when defending his sanity or his wife as someone who could help him. Instead, Hoccleve constructs his personality and presents himself as inherently clerical, naturally celibate, and regards his marriage as "an aberration", as appropriate for his profession. Still according to Davis, in Hoccleve's verses, the body is often depicted as a source of pollution with words that reflect a "pervasive clerical hostility" toward sexuality.[297] However, these perspectives are widely debated within the scholarly discourse surrounding Hoccleve and the gender dynamics in his writings. For instance, opposing this view, some scholars such as Batt contend that instead Hoccleve's discourse is intrinsically linked to themes of femininity. In his works, particularly in *The Regiment of Princes*, Hoccleve employs binary oppositions—such as intellect versus body, power versus disenfranchisement, and centrality versus marginality—traditionally associated with sexual differences. These oppositions form part of the discourse Hoccleve navigates and ultimately transcends in describing his own situation. Batt further argues that as Hoccleve articulates his position, he places himself within spaces conventionally viewed as "feminine". Indeed, in defending his masculinity, Hoccleve's persona often adopts traits traditionally considered feminine. Batt also notes that, despite assuming the role of an advisor, Hoccleve exhibits behaviours that antifeminist literature typically condemns in women: he wanders aimlessly, succumbs to excess, and is excessively talkative.[298] Bryan, in his examination of the gendered dynamics in Hoccleve's *Complaint*, also supports the view of Hoccleve aligning with a feminine position, in contrast to Davis' views. According to Bryan, Hoccleve highlights traits such as "the complainer's enforced marginality, private suffering, and adept commodification of his inner experiences for the

[296] Davis, pp. 156-157.
[297] Davis, p. 143.
[298] Batt, Catherine, "Hoccleve and... Feminism? Negotiating Meaning in The Regiment of Princes" in *Essays on Thomas Hoccleve*, ed. by Catherine Batt, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, pp. 61–62.

scrutiny of more powerful eyes", all of which were traditionally associated with femininity in the Middle Ages.[299] Moreover, Batt and Bryan's arguments apply also to Hoccleve's position in the *Complaint* in presenting writing as arguably analogous to that of giving birth:

The greef aboute myn herte so swal
And bolned euere to and to so sore
Þat needes oute I muste therwithal.
I thoghte I nolde keepe it clos no more
Ne lette it in me for to eelde and hore;
And for to preeue I cam of a woman
I brast out on the morwe and thus began.

("The grief around my heart swelled so
And burned continually, so intensely,
That I had to release it.
I thought I would no longer keep it hidden
Or let it continue to age and fester within me;
And to prove this, that I came from a woman,
I burst out the next morning, and thus it began", *Complaint*, lines 29-35).

Nonetheless, while the above passage positions Hoccleve in a feminine role, it should not necessarily be interpreted as literal and without further analysis. This depiction of birth might be intended to symbolise Hoccleve's appropriation of the act of creation. By reconfiguring creation as a masculine act, Hoccleve then would displace the feminine as the source of birth. This would also align with his treatment of women in the *Complaint* and *Dialogue*, where he effectively excludes them from the text. However, in these same works the attributes Hoccleve associates with his madness closely mirror those he attributes to women. For instance, the "chaunge and variaunce" ("change and variance", *Complaint*, line 10) linked to Hoccleve's descent into madness parallels the inconstancy of women, a characteristic he frequently criticises.[300] As for Kempe, also Hoccleve's body, a fundamental aspect of his gender and its perception, is impacted by his madness. His insanity disrupts the straightforward reflection of his identity in his body, which becomes evidence of his ongoing madness despite his belief in his own sanity. As analysed when discussing the "mirror scene", Hoccleve is compelled to modify his demeanour and behaviour to continually perform sanity. Yet, he remains haunted by the fear that his body will betray him, that the madness others perceive in him may indeed

[299] Bryan, Jennifer E., "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint", *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 117, 2002, pp. 1172–1173.
[300] Bryan, 1173-1175.

reflect his true self. This leaves his body unstable, prone to change, and liable to disclose hidden truths, embodying characteristics he perceives as feminine.

Moreover, throughout the interconnected tales translated from *The Gesta Romanorum* in his *Series*, *Jereslaus' Wife*, *Lerne to Die*, *Jonathas and Fellicula*, Hoccleve consistently associates madness with women and their influence. By condemning irrational women and the mad men around them, he positions himself as a rational authority, capable of advising others on avoiding the pitfalls of feminine irrationality. These tales begin with a critique of the unreliability of female readers. By the end of the text, Hoccleve has distanced himself from his madness to establish himself as a sane figure, guiding others away from women he describes as "sources of madness" in line 10 of *Jonathas and Fellicula*. Through all these instances, by projecting his madness onto the feminine, Hoccleve tries to reintegrate into a homosocial environment sustained by the rejection of the feminine. The authoritative Hoccleve at the end of the *Series* stands in stark contrast to the victim of feminised madness depicted at the beginning of the *Complaint*.[301] It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that before this transformation Hoccleve transcribes an advice of the Friend on this very matter. Indeed, in the *Dialogue*, the latter accuses Hoccleve of perpetuating claims that women did wrong, and offers him the following counsel:

Sumwhat now wryte in honour & preysynge
Of hem so maist thow do correccioun
Sumdel of thyn offense and mis-berynge.
Thow art cleene out of hir affeccioun;
Now syn it is in thyn elecciouN
Whethir thee list hir loue ageyn purchace,
Or stonde as thow doost out of loue & grace
[…]
Truste wel this wommen been fell and wyse;
Hem for to plese lyth greet craft & art.
[…]
By buxum herte & by submission
To hir graces yildinge thee coupable
Thow pardon maist haue, & remission
And do vn-to hem plesance greable.
To make partie art thow nothyng able.

("Write something now in honour and praise
of women, so you might make amends
in some part for your offense and misbehaviour.
You are fully out of their affection.
It is now in your choice
whether you desire to again purchase their love
or stand as you do out of love and grace.
[…]

[301] Bryan, 1175-1178.

Trust well this: women are fierce and wise.
To please them requires great craft and skill.
[…]
By obedient heart and by submission
to their graces, offering yourself as culpable,
you may have their pardon and forgiveness.
And do unto them proper effort to please.
You are in no way able to make a fight with them", *Dialogue*, lines 673-692).

With his friend's help, Hoccleve seemed to understand what he needed to do, though he laments that he still cannot fathom why women are upset with him and that he is right in his claims:

My ladyes all as wisly god me blesse,
Why þat yee meeued been can I nat knowe;
[…]
to me, wrecche, it may wel sitte
To axe pardoun thogh I nat trespace;
Leuer is me with pitous cheere & face,
And meek spirit, do so than open werre
yee make me & me putte atte werre.

A tale eek which I in the Romayn deedis
Now late sy in honur & plesance
Of yow, my ladyes — as I moot needis.
Or take my way for fere in-to ffrance, —
Thogh I nat shapen be to prike or prance, —
Wole I translate and þat shal pourge, I hope.
My gilt as cleene as keuerchiefs dooth sope.

("All my ladies, as wisely god blessed me,
why can I not know why you've been peeved at me?
[…]
For me, a wretch, it may well be appropriate
to ask pardon, though I have not trespassed.
Better it is for me, with piteous demeanour and face
and meek spirit, to do so, than unimpeded war
you wage on me, and put me at war.

Also, a tale which in the Roman deeds I
now recently saw, in honour and pleasing
of you, my ladies — as I much need,
or I'll go my way for fear into France,
though I'm not fit to ride or prance —
that I will translate and that shall purge, I hope,
my guilt as clean as soap does with handkerchiefs", *Dialogue*, lines 806-826).

Despite these reassurances, as already stated, many scholars argue that Hoccleve's *Series* is too rich in references to the trials of marriage and the iniquities of wives to be considered free of any antifeminist trait. Moreover, this passage has been critically examined in different manners and in great detail over the years. For instance, this very suggestion that women's approval has a slightly mercenary quality, that it can be

"purchased", has been seen as only the first of many criticisms woven into the Friend's concern for female approval. Furthermore, according to some critics, Hoccleve's use of an image of washing "keuerchiefs" as a metaphor for purging the conscience assists in trivialising the matter of women. Washing laundry was seen as a typically female occupation and the "keuerchief" a particularly negligible item of clothing. The opinions of women then, according to some scholars, to Hoccleve seem to hold the same importance: they are not to be taken seriously. Moreover, Hoccleve's disavowal of any intention of "priking and prauncing" in this futile and unjust battle of women readers against him, can be read as a continuation of his disregard for female opinion rather than an admission of his faults. Indeed, in the end, he claims that he will confine himself to "translating"—an act both rational and befitting of a learned clerk—in honour of women. However, as some scholars have noted, this act appears to serve his own dignity more than it honours women, particularly when considering how their figures are portrayed in the following tales.[302]

4.4.3 Hoccleve's Relationship with Women in *The Tale of Jereslaus's Wife*

As already analysed, Winstead is not the only scholar to note discrepancies in Hoccleve's apologies to women in the *Series*. Although the first tale about Jereslaus's Wife may initially appear as "an unexceptionable example of wifely virtue quite untinged by irony" according to some scholars such as Cowen, Hoccleve also repeatedly "interrupts the story with clumsy tributes to women that vitiate its effectiveness as a pro-woman exemplum". Moreover, Hoccleve concludes the *Series* with *Jonathas and Fellicula*, a tale of feminine perfidy that seems likely to offend "overly sensitive" women. Taken together, according to Cowen, the two tales can be interpreted as an artfully constructed antifeminist joke, mocking disorderly women in general and "feminist readers" in particular, similar to some readings of the *Letter of Cupid*.[303]

In addition to his *Dialogue with a Friend*, Hoccleve's tales merit deeper examination for their further exploration of themes first introduced in the *Complaint*. Notably, his translation of *Jereslaus's Wife*, the opening tale in the collection, provides a

[302] Jose, Laura, *Madness and Gender in Late-Medieval English Literature*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/217, accessed June 4, 2024, p. 287

[303] Cowen, Janet "Women as Exempla in Fifteenth-Century Verse of the Chaucerian Tradition" in *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen, London: King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991, p. 62.

key text for analysing recurring motifs throughout the *Series*, particularly Hoccleve's views on women and the metaphor of madness as a disease. *The Tale of Jereslaus's Wife*, adapted from the widely circulated *Gesta Romanorum*, belongs to a genre of romances featuring long-suffering wives whose virtues are presented in quasi-hagiographic terms. Although Hoccleve may undertake his penance of winning back women readers with some reluctance, and the tales having very different interpretations, to many scholars he appears to actually deliver exactly what the Friend insists his critics demand: a tribute to feminine virtue.[304]

In the tale of Jereslaus's Wife, the Emperor leaves his wife to look after his lands while he goes on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The Wife is presented as a paragon of women, both in beauty and virtue:

And for þat beautee in womman, alone
Withouten bontee, is nat commendable
Shee was ther-to a vertuous persone,
And specially pitous & merciable
In all hir wirkes which ful couenable
And pertinent is vn-to wommanhede.

("And because beauty in a woman, by itself,
Without goodness, is not praiseworthy,
She was therefore a virtuous person,
And especially compassionate and merciful
In all her deeds, which is very fitting
And appropriate for womanhood", *Jereslaus's Wife*, lines 8-13).

However, the very traits of pity and mercy that define the Wife are also the ones that lead to her downfall. Emperor Jereslaus, unfortunately, appoints his corrupt brother as a steward during his absence. In a typical narrative link between land and the female body, the brother also develops a desire for her. It is this desire, rather than his mistreatment of the poor people, that prompts the Wife to imprison him. Yet, demonstrating her characteristic mercy, she succumbs to her brother-in-law's pleas for release before the Emperor returns. Here, Hoccleve interjects with one of the remarks that Cowen critiques as undermining the tale's function as a moral example for women: "often happith wommannes tendrenesse torneth hir vn-to harm and to duress" ("often, a woman's tenderness, leads her to harm and distress.", *Jereslaus' Wife*, lines 172-173), and so the narrative proceeds according to this statement. Indeed, the brother wastes no time in blackmailing the Wife again, and when she refuses his advances, he leaves her hanging

[304] Mehl, Dieter, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 120-123.

by her hair from a tree in the forest. An earl from a distant land eventually discovers her, but the Wife, refusing to disclose her true identity or the abuse she suffered, allows others to misinterpret her situation, a theme that reflects Hoccleve's personal experiences with misjudgement. Still concealing her identity, she takes a position as governess to the earl's daughter. However, the household steward becomes infatuated with her, and when rejected, he frames her for the murder of the earl's daughter. Misunderstood and unable to defend herself, the Wife remains silent, knowing that any protest would be in vain. Banished from the court, she later encounters a thief on his way to execution. Compelled by compassion, she pleads for his life and bribes the guards to spare him. The thief becomes her servant, and they travel together. Her reputation for goodness grows, attracting the attention of a shipman who conspires with the thief and kidnap her. Then, the Wife cleverly agrees to the Shipman's advances—who later suffers from frenzied outbursts similar to those Hoccleve experienced—but she secretly prays for deliverance. Her prayers are answered when a storm wrecks the ship. She survives miraculously and joins a nunnery, where she leads a holy life and gains the ability to heal the sick. This transformation parallels the "divine physician" concept, a role in which Hoccleve sees God and marks another one of the typical Hocclevian themes that can be found in this tale. Moreover, those who wronged the Wife—the steward, thief, and Shipman—face divine punishment in the form of various ailments. When Emperor Jereslaus returns from the Holy Land, he is told that his wife has been abducted and killed. Meanwhile, his brother has been afflicted with leprosy. Hearing of a mysterious nun with miraculous healing powers, Jereslaus, along with others who wronged the Wife and survived, seek her help, unaware of her true identity. Disguised under a veil, the Wife demands that they confess their sins and admit their wrongdoings against the Empress before she heals them of their leprosy, blindness, palsy, gout, and frenzy. After their confessions, she reveals her identity, cures them, and is reunited with her husband, thus delivering a resolution that gives her a happy conclusion.

In the narrative, the Empress is portrayed as a virtuous and saintly woman, admired by men and loving them in return. However, towards the end of the story, Hoccleve makes a striking statement: just as not all men behave like the wicked individuals who wrong the Empress, not all women exhibit the same love and mercy toward men that she does. This remark can be interpreted as another sharp critique of women, and it comes at a pivotal moment—right after the Empress's joyful reunion with

her husband. Hoccleve then adds another observation, suggesting that many men might actually prefer that a long-lost wife remain lost:

O many a wrecche is in this lond, y weene
þat thogh his wyf lengere had been him fro,
No kus but if it had been of the spleene,
Shee sholde han had & forthermore also,
ffyndynge of hire had been to him but wo,
ffor him wolde han thoght þat swich a fyndynge,
To los sholde han him torned, and harmynge.

("O, in this land is many a wretch, I think,
that though his wife had longer been away from him
with no reason other than spitefulness,
he would have wanted her to be away even longer.
Finding of her would be to him only woe,
for he would think that such a finding
would turn him to loss and harming", *Jereslaus's Wife*, Lines 939-945).

Furthermore, the poor judgment Jereslaus's wife demonstrates in her misplaced trust in a series of untrustworthy men during her exile reflects poorly on what Hoccleve initially described as women's ability for "rule and gouernance" ("rule and conduct", *Dialogue,* line 718). While the tale begins by emphasising her authority, much of it focuses on her victimisation at the hands of men. Moreover, throughout the story, Jereslaus's wife remains passive in the face of her misfortunes, never attempting to actively remedy her circumstances or reclaim her lost status.

However, Hoccleve also seems to undercut the narrative's power as a testament to feminine virtue by appending a prose "moralizacio", informing readers that *Jereslaus's Wife's Tale* is not about a virtuous woman at all but is, instead, an allegory of the relationship between Christ, the soul, and the body. As if anticipating objections that he failed to fulfil his promise to write about feminine virtue, Hoccleve insists that this moralisation was the Friend's suggestion, not his own. In fact, the Friend not only provides Hoccleve with the *Gesta Romanorum,* but also demands the addition of extra material. First, he asks to include the moralisation of *Jereslaus's Wife's Tale*, which Hoccleve had intended to omit, and later, *The Tale of Jonathas and Fellicula*, which the Friend insists on including with *Lerne to Dye*. Hoccleve explains that, upon reading *Jereslaus's Wife Tale*, the Friend complained that Hoccleve had omitted the moral. When Hoccleve responded that his source lacked such a moral, the Friend provided one, which Hoccleve then dutifully translated. According to him then, these tales reflect the Friend's tastes rather than his own. This religious allegorisation of this tale clearly undermines Hoccleve's commitment to his task of praising women, leaving the tale as a religious

allegory at best, or just another critique of troublesome women. Supporting this latter interpretation, the second tale, *Jonathas and Fellicula*, mirrors many of the events from *Jereslaus's Wife's Tale* but casts a woman in the role of the antagonist. In this story, Jonathas is betrayed and robbed by the courtesan Fellicula. His indulgence in sins of the flesh leads to his suffering, as he becomes leprous after consuming a strange fruit, and his feet begin to decay in a hot stream. However, he finds healing through a second, restorative fruit and a purifying stream, after which he seeks revenge on Fellicula. Assuming the guise of a physician, Jonathas cures many people before Fellicula herself falls ill and calls for him. He insists that she make a full confession, but Fellicula does so to secure her cure, not out of true contrition. In a twist of cruel irony, Jonathas gives her the same fruit that caused his leprosy and the water that brought him decay, leading to Fellicula's miserable death.

In composing these tales, Hoccleve appears less concerned with defending his works against women who, in his view, misinterpreted them, and more focused on instructing women on proper conduct. He suggests that women need not be contentious, deceitful, or self-centred; instead, they can reject the "sickness" of anti-menism and, like the Empress in the tales, show mercy and love even toward wrongdoers. For men, Hoccleve implies that true moral health comes not from worshipping women but from worshipping God, as underscored by the moralisation of the tales. According to Isabel Davis, women are often depicted negatively in these stories, especially in the conclusion. Davis notes that Hoccleve's other writings, such as his letter to Sir John Oldcastle, make this association explicit, where elite masculinity is defined by religious submission and obedience. This is framed as "an active, martial activity, an assertive and heroic kind of virility", while rebellion against societal norms is depicted as a typical feminine flaw. An example of this can be found within the *Series* itself, where the term recurs in the *Tale of Jonathas*. In this tale, Jonathas's mother warns him to avoid "the conpaignie of wommen riotous" ("the company of riotous women", *Jonathas and Fellicula*, line 354), reinforcing the negative view of women presented throughout. Moreover, according to her though Hoccleve presents *Jereslaus's Wife Tale* as an apology for the *Letter of Cupid*, the tale echoes many of the earlier work's themes. In her reading, *Jereslaus's Wife's Tale* essentially retells Cupid's complaint in narrative form about how easily a "sely symple and innocent woman" can be deceived by the "sleyght and sotilte" of men ("blessed, simple, and innocent woman", "deceitful and cunning", *Letter of Cupid*, lines 78-80). Apparently, Hoccleve even mirrors Cupid's language, lamenting, "O noble lady symple

and Innocent, trustynge vp-on [man's] ooth and his promesse" ("O noble lady, simple and innocent, trusting in a man's oath and his promise", *Jerusleus's Wife*, lines 169-170), just as Cupid had declared, "O feythful woman ful of Innocence, thou arte deceyved be fals apparence!" ("O faithful woman full of innocence, you are deceived by false appearance!", *Letter of Cupid*, lines 41-42).[305]

In conclusion, as I have sought to demonstrate, Hoccleve's text invited a multitude of different critical interpretations, making it difficult to definitively determine whether he was seeking to re-enter the homosocial male community at the expense of women—who are indisputably portrayed as fundamentally different from himself and his peers—or whether he was simply defending himself against feminist critics he deemed too extreme. These diverse viewpoints, however, underscore the complexity and layered nature of his work. Ultimately, the challenge for readers is to form their own opinions on a writer who lived in a context vastly different from our own. We must also remember that Hoccleve, abandoned by his community and lacking the medical support he likely needed for his mental health struggles, leaves us with texts that reflect both personal and societal tensions.

[305] Davis, Isabel, "Men and Margery: Negotiating Medieval Patriarchy" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 35-40.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have focused on autobiographical accounts of individuals experiencing mental illness in medieval England, specifically Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Hoccleve. Their narratives, as found in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *Revelations of Divine Love*, and *The Series*, which includes *Complaint* and *Dialogue*, offer invaluable insights into the intersection of mental health with both religious and secular life. These works, in my view, are indispensable for a comprehensive exploration of mental health, of medieval literature, and of how these two intertwined. Often overlooked within academic discourse, the cohesive integration of first-hand accounts reveals many hidden nuances if they are not merely treated as subjects for retrospective diagnosis. My approach, instead, has deliberately avoided applying retrospective medical labels, as these often fail to provide an accurate understanding of the individuals' conditions within their historical context. Nevertheless, I have provided some medical background to offer context for their psychological states, without the intention of validating or discrediting their narratives. I believe that the specific medical terminology used to describe their conditions is less significant than the profound impact these conditions had on their writings. My goal has been to let these authors' own words speak for them, only accompanied, and not re-interpreted, by critical analyses from scholars who have previously engaged with their work and my personal reading.

However, despite the difficulties inherent in researching mental illness in the medieval period, I find that contemporary literary, social and medical sources shed light on aspects of these narratives that might otherwise remain overlooked. Indeed, in medieval society, their three different conditions and their consequences carried many aspects that must be studied in great detail in order to truly understand them as writers and as people. Margery Kempe's, Julian of Norwich's, and Thomas Hoccleve's mental condition not only affected them individually but also reshaped their broader community's perceptions, often leading others to believe in divine punishments when confronting themselves with these mysterious and poorly understood struggles. Indeed, these autobiographies offer invaluable insights into the nature of different illnesses, and more importantly, into the everyday lives of these writers and the ways those around them perceived them. Through their narratives, we gain a unique viewpoint on social dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and community reactions to their psychological conditions,

offering glimpses into their personal struggles, coping mechanisms, and the societal responses they recounted through their own words. This is what I have aimed to achieve and analyse in this research: to look through the windows that these writers opened into their daily lives and inner worlds, as they perceived and reflected them in their writing. In doing so, I have remained focused on what scholars have observed and studied over the centuries, carefully avoiding biases, labels, or misconceptions that could distort their experiences. Where my views diverged from previous scholarship, I have sought to highlight these contrasts with evidence and nuance. This process was not always straightforward, as I have attempted to demonstrate that it is possible to study these writers and their work with respect, without reducing them to mere representations of their illnesses, as some critics have done over the centuries. From referring to Margery Kempe by her full name, rather than the infantilising "Margery", to examining Hoccleve's words and contradictions without reducing his writings to a simple reflection of his mental state, I have endeavoured to maintain objectivity while navigating the complexities of a distant historical and cultural context.

To provide a thorough analysis of the society they lived in, the first four chapters of this thesis have delved into the medieval context of insanity. These chapters have traced the historical origins of medieval beliefs about mental illness, examined medical perspectives, and explored societal views, including how the legal system treated the mentally ill, their families, and their communities. After this analysis, it has become clear that medieval society grappled with the relationship between insanity and the unknown, relying on the limited cultural and medical understanding available at the time. Yet, it would be incorrect to claim that no progress was made toward a more modern understanding of mental illness. Medical records from the period show efforts, however imperfect, to treat mental conditions. Nonetheless, misconceptions, and at times harsh or even cruel social responses, persisted, as reflected in the literature of the era. For instance, the artistic and literary depictions of madness during this time, as discussed in the thesis, not only reflected but also shaped societal attitudes toward mental illness. This is evident in the archetypes of mad characters prevalent in medieval literature, including those I explored in the romance *Ywain and Gawain*. These texts highlight common themes associated with mentally ill characters, particularly knights, and reveal how these representations helped solidify the medieval concept of madness as something wild, unholy, and that excluded the afflicted from the community of the sane, moral and human. By laying this contextual basis, before analysing the three writers central to the thesis, I

have aimed to demonstrate how deeply intertwined the medieval understanding of mental illness was with societal norms, legal practices, and artistic expression.

After establishing this foundational context, I have turned my focus to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, exploring the biography of its author, while also examining how gender, religion, and mental health intersect in the Middle Ages. To do this effectively, I have delved into the complexities of mental health and gender as depicted in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This approach was essential to understanding the multifaceted nature of her experiences and perspectives: *The Book of Margery Kempe* does more than recount intense religious devotion. Indeed, it also serves as a window into the personal struggles of its author as she contended with spirituality and societal expectations in medieval times. Kempe's narrative weaves together experiences of madness, gender roles, motherhood, food and sexuality, underscoring the tensions between personal autonomy, societal norms, and her deep devotion to God. Throughout her text, she challenges conventional views of medieval mysticism by presenting herself as a woman with inner strength, resilience, and a profound yearning for spiritual connection, despite her unconventional and often controversial methods. Even when contradicting her own words or the Church teachings, her personal portrayal, from hearing divine voices to navigating the complexities of marriage, offers a nuanced exploration of how gender, mental health, and faith intersected in late medieval England. Approaching *The Book of Margery Kempe* from both a literary and theological perspective, with all its contradictions and sometimes harsh images, rather than reducing it to medical or superficial sexist readings, uncovers the richness of Kempe's perceptions of life and her beliefs within their historical context. This approach not only highlights the depth of her experience but also encourages further scholarly exploration of her work, recognising its complexities and the diverse interpretations it continues to inspire today.

After completing this in-depth analysis, I have turned to a comparison between Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich through her words in *Revelations of Divine Love*. In this section, also drawing parallels with St. Brigitta of Sweden, I have examined both women as mystics and as "suffering feminine bodies", how they position their narratives within the tradition of Affective Piety, and how they depict Christ in feminine terms. Furthermore, I have looked at the differences in how each author presents herself as the protagonist of her narrative, as well as their respective theologies and the controversies they faced within their communities. Compared to Kempe, this has been the greatest difference I encountered in her writings: Julian of Norwich appears particularly mindful

of the need to reassure Church authorities of her orthodoxy, to the point where a sceptical reader might even question if her protests are excessive. Unlike Kempe, Julian understood that the best way to ensure her visionary writings were published and preserved for posterity was by remaining within the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. While she was never canonised as a saint, Julian was neither excommunicated nor accused of heresy, unlike Margery Kempe, and is indeed honoured today with the title of "Blessed". Sustaining this viewpoint, also McAvoy observes "paradoxically, the apparent privation of the enclosed cell was to offer its occupant much more freedom for the development of her writing than was for a long time available to the more worldly Margery Kempe." [306] Indeed, in my view, this is the most significant difference between the two authors as writers and people: while the enclosed cell is typically viewed as a place of confinement, for Julian of Norwich it became a space of intellectual and spiritual freedom—an area within the Church where she could transcend the very limitations the Church imposed on women. On the other hand, Kempe confronted the broader outside world and society with no fear of judgment or authority, engaging directly with both her faith and the secular world around her as a mystic and, above all, a woman.

In the final chapter, I have shifted my focus to Thomas Hoccleve and his *Series*, with particular attention to *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a Friend*. I have compared Hoccleve's experiences and writings to those of Margery Kempe, examining how each author confronts their respective challenges. Unlike the case of Julian of Norwich, this section has explored how a writer from a distinct social and professional background articulates mental health struggles, and of the opposite sex, which turned out not to be a minor detail. Hoccleve's journey shows a progression: from rejecting the adversities caused by his mental state in *The Male Regle*, to the internal conflict between following God's path and facing divine punishment versus living a mundane life in the *Regement of Princes*, and finally, to the full acceptance of God's will and punishment through mental illness in *My Complaint*. Hoccleve admits that he lost his reason due to his sins but was eventually healed of both madness and the lingering melancholy that almost led him back into insanity. *My Complaint* recounts the cure of his initial affliction and details the remedy for the second phase of his suffering. In contrast, the *Dialogue* illustrates Hoccleve's recovery from melancholy. When a friend visits him to inquire about his health, Hoccleve shares *My Complaint*, which he plans to distribute. The friend advises

[306] McAvoy, Liz Herbert, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Studies in Medieval Mysticism, vol. 5, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, p. 6.

against it—questioning why Hoccleve would remind people of his madness—but Hoccleve remains resolute. Aware that people still doubt his sanity, he wishes to tell his story to demonstrate his recovery and honour God. Moreover, he also plans to translate *Lerne for to Dye* to help others avoid similar misfortunes. As modern readers, we should consider ourselves fortunate that he did not follow the Friend's advice, as Hoccleve's writings provide us with a perspective on medieval mental illness that can only be described as unique. His works trace his recovery while also exploring the social and personal consequences of his mental struggles. While modern psychologists might describe his illness as bipolar or manic-depressive disorder, the specific diagnosis is less significant than how it influenced his writing, much like Kempe's experience. A key difference between the two, however, is how they navigated their post-illness social experiences. Kempe embraced her mental struggles publicly, using them to forge a new identity, whereas Hoccleve faced a profound struggle with societal perceptions. While Kempe displayed little concern for concealing her behaviour, even in the face of scorn and imprisonment, Hoccleve grappled with the dilemma of whether to risk public suspicion or withdraw in response to unfounded rumours. Furthermore, Hoccleve placed the interpretation of his madness at the heart of his struggle for identity, making it a central theme in his *Complaint*, without needing to present himself as a saint or spiritual figure to his fellow Christians. This difference, along with his professional background as a bureaucrat and poet, allowed Hoccleve greater freedom to explore his inner world and personal perceptions in a more poetic and introspective vein, something Kempe was less able to embrace given her focus on religious devotion and outward expressions of piety. Moreover, Hoccleve also posed the critical question of who holds the authority to diagnose madness, emphasising the fact that the issue extended beyond concerns about his work or social standing—it involved a deep loss of personal identity. Indeed, unlike Kempe, Hoccleve also had to reconcile his experience with madness in relation to his sense of masculinity, a crucial aspect for understanding his relationship with madness and its effect on his identity, both personally and socially. Moreover, throughout the *Series*, Hoccleve associates madness with women and their influence. By condemning irrational women and the mad men who surround them, he positions himself as a rational authority, attempting to distance himself from his own madness. This contrast further underscores the complex interplay between mental health, gender, and identity in medieval English literary and cultural contexts.

By organising the chapters in this way and presenting information through the words of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Hoccleve, this thesis has sought to contextualise their autobiographical accounts within the broader medieval worldview. Such contextualisation is crucial to understand the unique perspectives these individuals offer and to recognise the significance of their contributions to our understanding of mental illness, both in the Middle Ages and in contemporary discussions. Their mental illnesses compelled them to write and express their experiences, and their writings now provide us with a rare and valuable perspective, relevant both to psychology and to literature. These individuals suffered from conditions that neither they nor their communities fully understood, and without clear explanations, they could not be helped clinically or socially. Yet they made the deliberate and active choice to write about their experiences, giving us invaluable insight into what it was like to live with mental health challenges in medieval England. Their perspectives are rich with detail, offering glimpses into their inner worlds and daily lives that defy singular interpretation. Instead, what we can study, analyse, and understand from comparing these three writers are the nuances they reveal when their works are approached with respect and careful attention. After all the critical readings over the centuries, the only certainty after having looked through the windows in their lives they themselves opened, is that fully understanding them remains an elusive yet profoundly compelling task.

ITALIAN SUMMARY

Dall'inizio del Novecento, nella ricerca storica e letteraria si è rivolto un sempre maggiore interesse alla storia e lo studio delle malattie mentali nel Medioevo. L'impegno in questo campo ha raggiunto diversi successi, ma comprendere pienamente le esperienze vissute da chi soffrì di questo genere di patologie in quel contesto rimane tutt'oggi una sfida. Questo è anche dovuto al fatto che le fonti che documentano le loro lotte diventano sempre più scarse man mano che si risale nel tempo, e inoltre, le loro prospettive personali sono spesso assenti dai registri storici. La mia tesi, tuttavia, si concentra sulle testimonianze di alcune personalità del tardo medioevo inglese che hanno sofferto di afflizioni mentali e ne hanno scritto in prima persona. Esaminando le loro opere, intendo analizzare come questi autori abbiano articolato le loro esperienze e in che modo queste afflizioni abbiano influenzato la loro produzione letteraria. Con questo studio, spero di contribuire non solo a una maggiore comprensione della malattia mentale nel Medioevo, ma anche sottolineare alcuni aspetti spesso trascurati o emarginati nei discorsi storici e letterari.

La tesi si concentra sui resoconti autobiografici di Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich e Thomas Hoccleve. Le loro opere, rispettivamente *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *Revelations of Divine Love* e *The Series* (che include *Complaint* e *Dialogue*), offrono profonde riflessioni sulle esperienze di chi ha sofferto di malattie mentali, sia da una prospettiva religiosa che secolare. A mio parere, queste opere sono fondamentali per un esame approfondito della salute mentale nella letteratura medievale, poiché offrono una prospettiva unica su esperienze personali spesso trascurate dalla storiografia. Infatti, le voci di coloro che soffrivano di malattie mentali sono state spesso ignorate o considerate solo oggetti di diagnosi nelle analisi di diversi studiosi e critici. Questo è anche dovuto al fatto che, come succede purtroppo ancora oggi, soffrire di malattie mentali nella società medievale aveva implicazioni pratiche, morali e legali, infliggendo uno stigma sociale a chi ne soffriva. Questa etichetta non influenzava solo l'individuo, ma anche la loro comunità, alterando le percezioni di chi veniva considerato affetto da qualcosa di non totalmente comprensibile e il loro studio nei secoli successivi. Adottando un approccio differente, in questa tesi analizzo queste figure storiche senza fare affidamento a diagnosi retrospettive, che spesso mancano di validità per comprendere appieno le loro condizioni. Nei casi di Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich e Thomas

Hoccleve, infatti, i dettagli medici delle loro malattie sono meno rilevanti rispetto all'impatto che queste condizioni hanno avuto sui loro scritti e alle conclusioni che è possibile trarne. Ciononostante, fornisco nella tesi anche alcuni riferimenti medici per contestualizzare le loro condizioni mediche, rilevanti per le loro esperienze psicologiche, prima di discutere i passaggi delle loro opere che fanno riferimento, esplicitamente o implicitamente, al disagio mentale. Il mio obiettivo è lasciare che siano le loro parole a raccontare le loro storie, con traduzioni in inglese moderno e il supporto di letture critiche basate su analisi di studiosi che mi hanno preceduto.

Per fornire un'analisi completa di questo tema, i primi quattro capitoli di questa tesi sono dedicati all'esplorazione del contesto medievale della salute mentale. Il primo capitolo inizia con una sezione che esamina le origini storiche delle credenze medievali su questo tema, tracciando come le teorie antiche e altomedievali abbiano influenzato le successive comprensioni, contemporanee agli scrittori analizzati. Segue una sezione che si concentra sulla prospettiva medica, dettagliando le teorie prevalenti e i trattamenti della malattia mentale così come compresi dai medici e dagli studiosi medievali, con particolare attenzione alla teoria degli umori e al caso specifico della malinconia. La sezione successiva approfondisce gli aspetti sociali, discutendo come la malattia mentale fosse percepita dalla comunità in generale, incluso il trattamento legale riservato a chi era affetto da disordini mentali, delle loro famiglie e delle comunità. Infine, il quarto capitolo esplora la rappresentazione della malattia mentale nella letteratura medievale, rivelando come le rappresentazioni artistiche riflettessero e plasmassero le attitudini sociali verso chi soffriva di problemi legati alla salute mentale. Per offrire una prospettiva completa, ho concluso questa parte con una sottosezione che si concentra sugli archetipi medievali dei personaggi ritenuti "folli" e un approfondimento su *Ywain and Gawain* e i suoi temi principali. Solo dopo aver posto queste basi, ho ritenuto opportuno concentrarmi su *The Book of Margery Kempe*, percorrendo la biografia della sua autrice, del suo contesto sociale, ed esaminando le intersezioni di genere e religione con la salute mentale nel Medioevo. Nelle sezioni successive, approfondisco le questioni di salute mentale e di genere così come presentate in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, insieme ad aspetti chiave come l'udire voci nella sua condizione psicologica, il patriarcato, la maternità, la sessualità e il cibo all'interno del testo. Queste informazioni sono essenziali, a mio avviso, per comprendere il capitolo successivo, in cui confronto Margery Kempe e Julian of Norwich. In questo confronto, le analizzo entrambe come mistiche e come donne nel loro contesto storico e sociale, tracciando parallelismi con Santa Brigida di Svezia ed

esplorando come abbiano inserito le loro narrazioni all'interno della tradizione letteraria della Pietà Affettiva. Inoltre, esamino come abbiano presentato se stesse come protagoniste delle loro opere, inclusi gli aspetti teologici e le controversie che ciascuna ha affrontato all'interno delle rispettive comunità. Nell'ultimo capitolo, mi concentro su Thomas Hoccleve e la sua opera *The Series*, con particolare attenzione a *Complaint* e *Dialogue with a Friend*. Confronto poi, come fatto per Julian of Norwich, le esperienze e gli scritti di Hoccleve con quelli di Margery Kempe, esplorando come ciascun autore abbia affrontato le proprie sfide con la malattia mentale e le sue conseguenze. Anche per il caso di Hoccleve, per stabilire una base, inizio con sezioni che dettagliano la sua biografia e la sua probabile diagnosi. Esamino poi le somiglianze e le differenze tra Hoccleve e Kempe, in particolare su come loro e le loro comunità percepissero la loro condizione. Per entrambi, era vista come un allontanarsi o un'invasione del sé, una forma di martirio e qualcosa che sconvolgeva sia le loro vite pubbliche che private, portando a pregiudizi e isolamento. Il capitolo si conclude affrontando i problemi di interpretazione delle loro condizioni mentali e le distinte questioni di genere presenti nelle loro opere.

Organizzando i capitoli in quest'ordine e presentando le informazioni attraverso le stesse parole di Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich e Thomas Hoccleve, questa tesi mira a contestualizzare i loro resoconti autobiografici all'interno della più ampia visione del mondo medievale. Tale contestualizzazione è cruciale per comprendere le prospettive uniche che questi individui offrono e per riconoscere il significato dei loro contributi alla nostra conoscenza della malattia mentale, sia nel Medioevo che nelle discussioni contemporanee. Per aiutare ulteriormente i lettori, tutti i passaggi citati dalle loro opere sono accompagnati da traduzioni in inglese moderno. Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich e Thomas Hoccleve soffrirono di afflizioni che né loro né le loro comunità capirono appieno, e senza spiegazioni chiare o oggettive, non poterono essere aiutati né clinicamente né socialmente. Eppure fecero la scelta, che potrebbe anche essere definita coraggiosa, di scrivere delle loro esperienze, fornendoci prospettive inestimabili e storicamente uniche sulla vita quotidiana di chi soffriva di problemi di salute mentale nell'Inghilterra medievale.

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