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Establishing Spiritual Authority in Female Visionary Writing: *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Mengge Wang

School of International Studies, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710062, China; wangmg@snnu.edu.cn

Abstract

The Book of Margery Kempe is an extraordinary work of female visionary writing, in which Margery Kempe narrates her intimate and direct communications with Jesus Christ. The aim of this paper is to investigate how Kempe fashions herself into an authoritative religious figure and the impact of her self-fashioning. The study reveals that Kempe builds up her image as a chosen woman through a designed narrative discourse, which features disorder, imbalance, and homogeneity. To be specific, Kempe intentionally foregrounds her spiritual life endorsed by Christ and downplays her secular life in order to establish her authority. Moreover, Kempe's work replicates the essential ingredients of hagiography, namely trials, divine intervention, and redemption, which naturally elevates Kempe to sainthood and therefore justifies her position of spiritual authority. Following on from this, Kempe, like other holy women, is well-qualified to instruct her fellow Christians to emulate her form of life, that is, to live a devout life. The establishment of Kempe's spiritual authority is the epitome of women's pursuit of spiritual leadership in the later Middle Ages, when they struggled with social conventions and ecclesiastical regulations.

Keywords: female visionary writing; spiritual authority; Margery Kempe; self-fashioning; sainthood; narrative discourse

1. Introduction

Visions are the main emphasis of mysticism. Milem (2016) points out that "some mystical writers in the Middle Ages explored or emphasized the possibility that union with God is available in this life rather than exclusively in heaven" (p. 107). In this regard, visionary writing, as Watson (2011) argues, aims to verify visionary experience (p. 23). *The Book of Margery Kempe*[1] (abbreviated to *BMK*) is an account of the visionary experience of Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1438). Kempe's visions, as major manifestations of spirituality, represent the higher realities, which transcend and overcome worldly realities by virtue of the spiritual union with God. Accordingly, these visions "are her inward archive, her sources, and become key to the text, and to reading and understanding it" (Windeatt 2019a, p. xxxiii).

The current *BMK* has been revised from an unsatisfactory initial version written by the first amanuensis (possibly Kempe's son, who was living in Germany at the time). Its nature is illegible and unreadable, owing to the idiosyncratic handwriting and the language that is neither English nor German. In spite of its indecipherability, it "is acknowledged to have recorded accurately the substance of Kempe's meaning" (Windeatt 2019a, p. xviii). Thereafter, Kempe entreats Richard Salthouse (fl. 1443, d. before 1487), "a monk at Norwich's Benedictine cathedral priory" (Bale 2017, p. 177), to transcribe her visions from the earlier version. The production of *BMK* is a collaborative process, in which the monk

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reads every word of the work to Kempe, who "sometimes helping where there was any difficulty" (Kempe 2019, p. 6)[2], and "told him her feelings as to what would happen in such matters as he asked her about, if her feelings were true" (Kempe 2019, p. 58).[3] Simply put, the monk writes down Kempe's memory of her visions when she cannot write because of illiteracy. Ong (1984) points out that "One hires a scribe to write a document as one hires a shipwright to build a ship" (p. 5). In light of this, Kempe authors and owns the work. She seeks to create a text that is about her spiritual experience with the assistance of a scribe (Staley 1994, p. 22). It is therefore reasonable to claim that *BMK*, as an oral text, is "written" by Margery Kempe herself.

Spiritual authority, as Rapp (2005) defines, "is the authority that comes from the possession of the Holy Spirit" (p. 56). Given this, spiritual authority is based on charisma, "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1978, p. 241). As a laywoman who can never hold an official position in the Church, Kempe intends to establish her authority through narrating her spiritual communications with Jesus Christ. Her use of visions as proof of her charisma is against the background that "visionary writings . . . reference a tradition whose roots are in Old Testament prophecy and the apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period" (Watson 2011, p. 23). In this context, writing a book about her visionary experience could ensure her success in fashioning herself into a spiritual authority who is socially recognized without raising suspicions.

In addition to her visions, Kempe also recounts her devotional practices, such as attending Mass, receiving Communion, and making pilgrimages. These devotions enable Kempe to reproduce the fundamental components of a sacred narrative in *BMK*, thereby modeling herself on saints. The humiliations and ostracism that she suffers in the course of Mass or pilgrimages would automatically remind readers of the trials that saints typically endure. As a result, Kempe portrays herself as a Christian martyr. In response to her piety, God alleviates her sufferings via miracles and allows redemption for all. In short, Kempe employs the convention of hagiography as a means to sanction her sainthood.

Regarding in what way Kempe connects herself with the traditions of mystics and saints, few studies have noticed the role of narrative in forging such connections. Mcavoy (2016) contends that "Kempe's decision upon her return to England to get her book written once and for all was almost certainly a result of her exposure to the cults of a whole variety of women writers during her travels, Mechtild included" (p. 72). Mcavoy simply demonstrates the influence of Mechtild of Hackeborn's visionary writings on Kempe, not delving further into how Kempe narrates her visionary experience in her own way. Lucas (2019) investigates the sartorial commonality between Kempe and female saints, arguing that "Margery remakes herself in the image of these female saints, a process of refashioning that culminates, finally, in Margery's receipt of communion while wearing white" (p. 54). It is evident that Lucas likewise neglects the importance of narrative and therefore fails to uncover the underlying channel for Kempe's sanctity. Azime Pekşen Yakar is the only one who studies the strategies Kempe adopts in her narration. Yakar (2021) notes that "Rather than recounting rituals, she narrates her own spiritual experiences in detail, thereby putting her own experiences in a more central and essential place" (p. 313). Through revealing that Kempe deliberately emphasizes her spiritual experiences, Yakar links Kempe to the tradition of mystics. However, the absence of narrative theory renders Yakar's study relatively superficial and unsystematic.

Given the significance of narrative to Kempe's promotion to spiritual authority, this paper proposes to analyze how Kempe narrates her visions and devotional practices so as to detect the positive role of narrative discourse in fashioning her into a soul chosen by

Christ. Furthermore, by comparing Kempe's narrative with hagiography, this paper aims to demonstrate that Kempe models and even remodels sainthood. Viewed in the context of the later Middle Ages, her struggle for spiritual authority both reflects the rise in popular spirituality and epitomizes the trend of female sanctity.

Four sections constitute the main body of this paper. The first section analyzes how Kempe achieves her self-fashioning into a chosen woman through narrative discourse. The second section examines the similarities between *BMK* and hagiography, revealing the way in which Kempe elevates herself to a special sainthood. The third section investigates the impact of Kempe's spiritual authority on her fellow Christians; the fourth discusses its wider implications, especially the pursuit of spiritual leadership by medieval women.

2. Kempe's Self-Fashioning into a Chosen Woman

Kempe recounts her mystical visions and devotional practices with a narrative discourse characterized by disorder, imbalance, and homogeneity. Kempe advances the narration of her visions and relevant events whilst delaying the account of those unrelated; she narrates her religious devotions far more slowly than her secular life; she repeats her visions and pilgrimages within the same narrative structure. That narrative discourse suggests that Kempe intends to impress readers as a chosen woman who has built a remarkably intimate relationship with Christ.

Disorder is the most noticeable peculiarity of this visionary writing. The scribe claims in the proem that "This book is not written in order, every thing after another as it was done" (Kempe 2019, pp. 6–7).[4] That is to say, Kempe does not write her visions and devotional practices in chronological order, "the order of events referred to by the narrative", but arranges them in explanatory order, "the order of events presented in the narrative discourse" (Brooks 1984, p. 12). The gap between the natural order and the narrative order is therefore a clear indication of Kempe's deliberate organization of her writing. It would be significant to ponder the difference between the time of the events and the time at which Kempe narrates them.

The beginning of *BMK* typifies the disagreement between the two orders. The work begins with Kempe's marriage and her first pregnancy: "When this creature was twenty years of age, or somewhat more" and "was with child within a short time" (Kempe 2019, p. 11).[5] Her origin, however, is revealed in a later quarrel with her husband, to whom she says "she was come of worthy kindred—he should never have married her—for her father was sometime mayor of the town of N., and afterwards he was alderman of the High Guild of the Trinity in N." (Kempe 2019, p. 13).[6] The reversal of the sequence suggests that for Kempe, her identity as a wife and mother is more crucial than her identity as a daughter. It is being a mother that provides her with an opportunity to see Christ. When she has long been troubled by "the labour-pains she had in childbirth and the sickness that had gone before" (Kempe 2019, p. 11)[7], Christ appears to her "in the likeness of a man. . .sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits" (Kempe 2019, p. 12).[8] This scene of pain relief is based on the premise of secular motherhood but eventually generates sacred daughterhood, seeing that it presents Kempe as the beloved daughter of Christ, rather than that of a powerful and influential worldling.

Kempe's visionary experience is narrated in order of importance in terms of her self-fashioning. As far as the content is concerned, *BMK* is divided into two books. The first details Kempe's mystical visions and remarkable pilgrimages; the second outlines her pious prayers and extraordinary travels after the deaths of her son and husband. By reviewing these chapters, Kempe's visionary experience can be seen as an integrated story developing in stages. The first stage consists of penance, conversion, divine promises and commands. Most of them happened before 1413 and are narrated in the first fifteen chapters, except her

temperance, which is recounted in Chapter 26 of Book I. Kempe delays telling the audience that she "had eaten no meat and drunk no wine for four years before she left England" (Kempe 2019, p. 64)[9], and inserts this information into her account of the journey to the Holy Land, which is assumed to have happened in 1413. In doing so, Kempe not only avoids repetition in the narration of her wholehearted obedience to Christian discipline, an essential manifestation of her conversion, but also artfully utilizes this flashback to introduce the troubles with her travelling companions, who complain to her confessor about her refusal to eat meat. These complaints instead help build up her image as a devout Christian, because fasting is a way of moderating lust, cleansing the brain and the body, and preparing the soul for God's inspiration (Bynum 1987, p. 36). Her ascetic practices authenticate the presence of spiritual authority, as "ascetic accomplishments are the outward face of spiritual authority" (Rapp 2005, p. 18).

Along the same lines, Kempe postpones revealing the arrival of a priest who "had read to her for about seven years" (Kempe 2019, p. 150)[10], until he fell very ill. For him she prays to God and then he "recovered and went about where he liked" (Kempe 2019, p. 150).[11] The priest has read books to her since 1413, but is only mentioned in 1420 when the third stage, the establishment of a good reputation, is underway. This suspension can be attributed to Kempe's intention to quote the priest's miraculous recovery as evidence of the effectiveness of her visions, which would largely approve her fame. It can be observed that Kempe's arrangement of the narrative order centers around her self-fashioning into a devout mystic.

Imbalance is another feature of this visionary writing, manifesting itself in the pace or duration of the narrative. Genette (1980) notes that the duration of a narrative may be defined by comparing its duration to that of the story it tells (p. 87). That is to say, the narrative duration can be detected through the narrative speed, which refers to "the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years) and a length (that of the text, measured in lines and in pages" (Genette 1980, pp. 87–88). On the whole, Kempe narrates her religious devotions slower than her secular life, and she narrates her private devotions slower than the public worship she attends.

There are eighty-nine chapters in Book I and ten chapters in Book II. The majority of the chapters are descriptions of Kempe's devotional practices; those associated with her secular life comprise less than one-fourteenth of the writing. Obviously, the narrative speed of her secular life is much faster than that of her devotions. In Book I, there are only five chapters concerning Kempe's secular life. These chapters recount her business ventures, the lure of adultery, the harassment from the Steward of Leicester, her illness in Lynn and her husband's disability caused by an accident. Likewise, there are just two chapters about the deaths of her son and husband in Book II. It is noted that the depictions of Kempe's secularity focus on her sins and family. By her account, her sins constitute an essential prerequisite for her conversion from a depraved soul to a devout Christian, and her family attests to her identity as wife and mother "at both a literal and a spiritual level" (Ross 1991, p. 532).

Kempe plays the role of wife and mother in her earthly and spiritual family at the same time. After her husband breaks his legs and hurts his head because of a fall from the stairs, "she took her husband home with her and looked after him for years afterwards, as long as he lived. She had very much trouble with him" (Kempe 2019, p. 182).[12] Her continuous and thoughtful care for her severely disabled husband is approved by our Lord who instructs that "you shall have as much reward for looking after him and helping him in his need at home, as if you were in church to say your prayers" (Kempe 2019, p. 182).[13] From this point of view, Kempe practices devotions in the form of family duties, and, as a result, "fulfils her special calling better when subject to the influence of devotion"

(St. Francis de Sales 2009, p. 11). In short, her secular life, a seeming digression, is actually in the service of her self-fashioning.

Kempe's religious devotions can be classified into two categories: private devotions and public worship. It is worth mentioning that her private devotions, which could display her extraordinary favor with Christ, take priority over the public worship regulated by the Church in her writing. The disparity in the narrative speed between the two types of devotions clearly demonstrate such in-text hierarchy.

Take Communion as an example. In Chapter 5 of Book I, Kempe reports that a vision of Christ comes to her when she asks for forgiveness for her sins. Christ assures her of posthumous bliss, and commands that "you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar" (Kempe 2019, p. 21).[14] In this case, it is her vision that motivates her to participate in the Communion. As for Holy Communion, Christ stresses that "you receive my body every Sunday" (Kempe 2019, p. 21).[15] Obeying this divine command, Kempe receives communion every Sunday when she is in Norwich, the Holy Land, Venice, Rome, York, Lynn, and Norway. In this episode, the narrative speed of Kempe's vision is far slower than that of her practice, since the duration of her vision is "a Friday before Christmas Day" (Kempe 2019, p. 20)[16], and it reaches a length of seven lines in total, while the duration of her practice is approximately nineteen years, from 1414 to 1433, and the narration of the practice is about thirteen lines in length. The wide disparity between the two narrative speeds suggests that Kempe treats her private devotion as the first priority that needs elaboration, whereas she regards the public worship as being of secondary importance. That is to say, her service to God as an outstanding Christian receiving divine guidance, instead of her role as a laywoman following priests' instructions, is greatly stressed by means of the imbalance in her narration.

Homogeneity is likewise a feature of the writing. This feature is constructed out of narrative frequency, defined by Genette (1980) as "the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis" (p. 113). According to the definition, the repetitions of the event narrated and the statement used for narration can be considered as clear signals of latent emphasis, for a point of emphasis is likely to be mentioned frequently in a writing. Therefore, despite the fact that Kempe has recounted a large quantity of devotional practices in her writing, we can still find those that are highly emphasized by keeping an eye on the recurrence of the same devotion or the repetition of identical narrative statements. Kempe's visions and pilgrimages are rightly the main focuses of *BMK*, inasmuch as the narrative statements about them are repeated most often.

Kempe's visions show a recurrence of holy speeches and intimate conversations with Christ. In her writing, nearly half of the chapters devote themselves to displaying and explaining spiritual exchanges. Although her visions vary considerably in content, they resemble each other in abstract form, which means that they are not similar with respect to "material (phonetically or graphically) or even idea (linguistically)", but are identical in terms of "their co-presence and their succession" (Genette 1980, p. 114). Overall, Christ's consolation and endorsement are indispensable to her visions, thus recurring throughout the writing.

In Kempe visions, Christ is a tolerant and protective parent. He consoles her with the assurance that "no man shall slay you, nor fire burn you, nor water drown you, nor winds harm you" (Kempe 2019, p. 34)[17], and the promise that "shall I wash you in my precious blood from all your sin" (Kempe 2019, p. 34).[18] These words of consolation are repeated at the time of her being denigrated and ostracized, strengthening her faith in the idea that "devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us" (St. Francis de Sales 2009, p. 9). Meanwhile, the realization of Christ's promises endorses her identity as a chosen soul. When Kempe prays for a chaste life, Christ

responds to her plea with a pledge that "you shall have your wish before Whit Sunday, for I shall suddenly slay [all sexual desire in] your husband" (Kempe 2019, p. 25).[19] With divine assistance, her husband "was made so afraid when he would have touched her, that he dared do no more" (Kempe 2019, p. 27).[20] Henceforth Kempe is permitted to end sexual relations with her husband. This instance expressly reflects Christ's preference for Kempe.

Kempe's narration of her pilgrimages follows a set pattern: divine commands given through the medium of visions, popular objections to her devotions, and final acceptance. Her writing of the dispute over her white clothes is emblematic of such a pattern. White clothes appear as a demand of Christ in *BMK*. After being assured that her sins would be forgiven, Kempe is required to make a pilgrimage and "wear white clothes and no other colour" (Kempe 2019, p. 36).[21] At first Kempe is afraid of the upcoming slander on her name, since white clothes symbolize virginity that contradicts her marriage. Despite that, she "dared not do otherwise than as she was commanded in her soul" (Kempe 2019, p. 36).[22] Her unconditional obedience to Christ presents herself as a submissive disciple. As expected, Kempe is criticized and excluded by both the laity and the clergy. When she, dressing all in white, receives communion at the hospital of St Thomas of Canterbury in Rome, there comes a priest who "spoke so badly of this creature and slandered her name so much in the Hospital that, through his evil tongue" (Kempe 2019, p. 82).[23] The priest's slanderous remarks cause her to be ejected from the hospital and forbidden to receive communion there. Lay people defame her in a similar vein, so "she has suffered much contempt and much shame in many different countries, cities and towns" (Kempe 2019, p. 106).[24] Their objections to her wearing white clothes are, in essence, the denials of her chastity. However, the divine command certifies Kempe spiritually pure already.

Kempe endures the opprobrium and ostracism willingly and patiently for the purpose of "fulfilling His Divine Counsels and inspirations" (St. Francis de Sales 2009, p. 9). At her insistence, the Church approves of her dressing in white, which is delineated in Chapter 48 of Book I. She confides to the Abbot of Leicester, a Preaching Friar, and a worthy cleric that Christ bids her wear white clothes during her pilgrimages. Kempe's disclosure of the divine command persuades the clerics to defend her against the Mayor of Leicester. They tell the mayor a partial truth that "her confessors had charged her to wear white clothes, and she had bound herself in obedience to them" (Kempe 2019, p. 118).[25] The support from the clergy may not only enable her to gain the recognition of her fellow Christians, but also help confirm her identity as the one answering a special calling.

In short, disorder, imbalance, and homogeneity are the main characteristics of the elaborately designed narrative discourse; they constitute a narrative structure in relation to the construction of Kempe's identity as a chosen woman, who grows into an exemplary Christian under the instruction and the protection of Christ. Following the shaping of this positive self-image, Kempe promotes herself to sainthood in an endeavor to obtain official recognition of her spiritual authority. The next section is about to explore how and why Kempe models her writing on hagiography.

3. Kempe's Elevation to Sainthood

Margery Kempe consciously foregrounds the resemblance between saints' devotional experiences and hers by imitating hagiography. Hagiography is "inspired by religious devotion to the saints and intended to increase that devotion" (Delehaye 1962, p. 3). From the aim of hagiography, it can be observed that this genre is inclined to recount the life and spiritual development of a saint so as to set a transcendent example for Christians to follow. On that account, the indispensable components of a sacred narrative, namely trials, divine intervention, and redemption, constitute a handy tool for Kempe to establish her spiritual authority.

Trials, in general, are represented as the conflicts between "the typical figure of a martyr and the typical persecutor" (Delehaye 1962, p. 19). In the context of *BMK*, the martyr, who suffers a lot owing to her faith in Christ, is unquestionably the heroine Margery Kempe, and the persecutors are the people who humiliate her and stigmatize her devotions. Among tribulations Kempe endures, assaults on her loud weeping and white clothes occur most frequently in the course of her recorded life. The controversy over her unusual devotions causes her to be described as a weird "self-styled holy woman" (Windeatt 2019a, pp. xxix–xxx), who is an exemplar of lay piety in her own view and a hysterical woman in the eyes of her enemies.

Kempe begins her habit of clamorous weeping on Mount Calvary where she sees the Passion of Christ through a vision. She "cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified." (Kempe 2019, p. 71).[26] Thereafter, she weeps bitterly over the memory of the Passion when provoked by preaching and sermons. Her astonishingly loud cries elicit a strong aversion from a friar, who comes to Lynn for preachment. In the midst of his sermon, Kempe bursts out weeping violently at her contemplation of the grace of God. The friar rebukes Kempe for her annoying crying, ordering "I wish this woman were out of the church" (Kempe 2019, p. 151).[27] Incited by the friar, people are resentful about her crying and condemn her as being possessed by the devil. Lochrie (1991) argues that what offends the friar is the publicity of her weeping and its capacity for silencing him (pp. 196–97). Taken further, her tears, the physical sign of her mystical experience, challenge his authority to peach. Facing the exclusion and reproaches, Kempe insists on worshiping with uncontrollable and disputable crying in the belief that the more slanders and rebukes she suffers, the more she increases in grace and in devotion. In this regard, Kempe has been following in the footsteps of saints to suffer martyrdom meekly and willingly for the sake of higher devotion.

Not only does the friar disapprove of Kempe's anomalous behavior, other clergymen also strongly object to her eccentric clothes. In Chapter 34 of Book I, her German confessor orders her to take off her white clothes and put on black clothes. As noted earlier, wearing white clothes is a divine command and an acknowledgement of Kempe's purity. Thus, what the confessor orders her to leave off is not simply the white clothes but her vocation and the display of her chastity. The confessor's distrust of Kempe's purity is actually stirred up by an English priest who is her enemy and always opposes her chosen costume. It is intriguing that Kempe shows how Christ speaks to her in her soul just after recounting the priest's opprobrious remarks that "Now I well know that you have a devil inside you, for I hear him speak in you to me" (Kempe 2019, p. 87).[28] Obviously, she intends to explain that she comes under attack for having a holy conversation. From this perspective, the condemnation from the priest serves as a testament to her identity as a singularly blessed figure who could converse with Christ. At the end of this chapter, Christ's words that "I should be crucified anew in you by sharp words" (Kempe 2019, p. 87)[29] elevate Kempe's sufferings to the crucifixion and therefore promote her to a position of spiritual authority.

Divine intervention, simply stated, refers to help from God to change a situation or state of affairs, usually via miracles, divine revelation or divine providence. Among the foregoing divine actions, Miracles are divine gifts given to saints in particular, operating as rewards for their reenactment of Christ's torment and death (Coon 1997, p. 4). It is believed that through miracles "all abuses could be discounted as ultimately unimportant: they were simply tests of holiness or sacrifices for a greater good" (Kuefler 2020, p. 248). In this sense, the opprobrium and ostracism Kempe suffers are very likely to be converted into the occasion to be empowered to perform miracles. The slanders on her reputation, for

instance, are tests of her sanctity, which, as a matter of course, would give rise to miracles that work through the agency of her prayers.

That Kempe passes the examination by Henry Bowet, the Archbishop of York, is a typical example of divine miracle. When Kempe is brought into his chapel, the archbishop asks, "Why do you go about in white clothes? Are you a virgin?" (Kempe 2019, p. 126).[30] Kempe gives an honest account of her marital status, and then the archbishop "ordered his household to fetch a pair of fetters and said she should be fettered, for she was a false heretic" (Kempe 2019, p. 126).[31] On that occasion, Kempe prays to God for assistance in justifying herself. Her prayers are answered and she is able to answer the archbishop's questions about the Articles of the Faith truly and easily. That being the case, the archbishop reluctantly grants her recognition as an orthodox Christian. It is clear that her triumph over the archbishop is credited to the grace of God who bestows wisdom upon her, an uneducated woman, so as to enable her to respond to the learned man well. In view of this, the miracle indicates that God endorse her clothing and acknowledge her as a faithful believer whose spiritual growth is fostered by God himself.

A sudden and incredible snowstorm that extinguishes a great fire at Lynn is another miracle. At the beginning of Chapter 67 of Book I, there is a presumption that this serious fire "was very likely to have burned down the parish church—dedicated in honour of St Margaret, a stately place and richly honoured—and also the whole town as well, had there been no grace or miracle" (Kempe 2019, p. 164).[32] The miracle mentioned herein is a snowstorm, which is exactly the result of Kempe's devout prayers. On that day, she cries over the predicament of the whole town many times and prays for mercy on all the people. Under the circumstances, people who cannot bear her crying before "begged her to continue, fully trusting and believing that through her crying and weeping our Lord would take them to mercy" (Kempe 2019, p. 165).[33] That is to say, Kempe's unwelcome crying is miraculously transformed into access to salvation in times of danger. Such dramatic reversal of popular opinion about her unusual devotion perfectly embodies divine intervention, which not only proves her gift for tears orthodox, but also reveals "the fundamental correlation between female piety and redemption" (Coon 1997, p. xxiii). As a parish priest of St. Margaret's Church says, "because of her prayers God granted them to be delivered out of their great danger" (Kempe 2019, pp. 165–66).[34] It is therefore reasonable to conclude that it is by way of Kempe's loud crying and abundant weeping that the townsfolk are saved and the parish church survives the terrible fire. Hagiographies, as Coon (1997) claims, aim at affirming the possibility of universal salvation (p. xvii). Kempe's account of this miraculous snowstorm rightly confirms ecumenical redemption. Just like holy women, Kempe extends her special favor with God to all the people, vividly showing the redemption of universal humanity can be realized.

Given that Kempe reproduces the three key elements of hagiography in her book, it is tempting to consider that she means to prepare herself for sainthood, since "every saint was defined by the story that revealed his or her sanctity" (Herrick 2020, p.1). In this regard, her *BMK* is a self-styled hagiography, which replicates the model of sainthood and redefine it at the same time.

Firstly, the production of *BMK* does not follow the tradition of hagiographical writing. Despite the fact that "the saints assumed roles that ran the gamut of religious experience" (Stouck 1999, p. xviii), their memoirs are conventionally written after their death by hagiographers making cases for their sainthood (Windeatt 2019a, p. xxxii), and their lives and spirits must be officially recognized by the Church. On the contrary, Kempe herself initiates the making of *BMK* by imploring the scribes to transcribe her visions and pilgrimages from her dictation into a written text. In doing so, her book might circulate in her lifetime and could assist in the establishment of her reputation as a holy woman in the

later Middle Ages when "the capacity to proclaim the divine will to men soon became the chief criterion of perfection" (Vauchez 1997, p. 412).

Secondly, any sense of the Church's recognition of Kempe's sainthood is absent from *BMK*. In general, the lives of the saints would be recited by priests during mass, read by literate audience, and depicted in art for illiterate Christians (Coon 1997, p. 1). However, there are no lines to suggest that Kempe has been acknowledged as a saint by the Church, and her life is described only in *BMK*, which survives in a sole manuscript and thus might not circulate in a wide range. Therefore, *BMK* is simply able to sanctify Kempe herself, but cannot "provide testimony of the continuing life of Christ in the Church" (Jones 2000, p. 383), something that hagiography is obliged to do.

Although *BMK* deviates from traditional hagiography, it indeed elevates Kempe to a special sainthood, which is authorized by Christ and empowers her to preach the gospel to humans.

4. The Impact of Kempe's Spiritual Authority

Margery Kempe, as a self-appointed saint, functions as an intermediary between God and humanity. She not merely embodies the lofty ideals of Christianity in her devotions, but also makes a significant impact on her fellow Christians by virtue of holy thoughts and revelations received from Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various other saints. As the scribe claims, her *BMK* is for "sinful wretches, in which they may have great solace and comfort for themselves, and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Saviour Jesus Christ" (Kempe 2019, p. 3).[35] That is to say, Kempe's calling is to preach the word of God to all blameworthy Christians, including both the clergy and the laity.

The swearing clerks in the offices of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the arrogant men from the household of the Archbishop of York are representative of sinful wretches. When hearing the clerks' great oaths and thoughtless words, Kempe "boldly rebuked them, and said they would be damned unless they left off their swearing and the other sins they practised" (Kempe 2019, p. 40).[36] Furthermore, she requires the archbishop to explain why his clerks betray God and advises him to put these clerks out of his service; the archbishop "allowed her to say what was on her mind and gave her a handsome answer" (Kempe 2019, p. 41).[37] The support from the archbishop is a clear indication that Kempe has been recognized as an arbitrator for Christian communities. Her condemnation of the swearing clerks would greatly help maintain the integrity of the clergy, since the sinful clerks are far more likely to correct their behaviors or be evicted as a punishment. Along the same lines, Kempe rectifies the misconduct of the household of the Archbishop of York through harsh criticism. Before meeting the archbishop, Kempe is despised by his household. They call her heretic and curse her to be burned, to which she replies, "Sirs, I fear you will be burned in hell without end, unless you correct yourselves of your swearing of oaths, for you do not keep the commandments of God" (Kempe 2019, p. 126).[38] Her criticism of their arrogance shames them and prompts them to repent of their malevolence. In view of this, it might be safe to assume that Kempe does accomplish her mission, which is to influence all Christians to live according to the law of God.

Lost laypeople could benefit from Kempe's revelations as well. In Chapter 19 of Book I, Kempe reveals the plight of their deceased husbands to two laywomen. One is an estimable lady who has a deep distrust of Kempe from the beginning, the other is a widow who has faith in Kempe's prayers. In spite of their contrasting attitudes to her, Kempe makes full disclosure of holy speeches without discrimination. She tells the lady, "Madam, our Lord Jesus Christ bade me tell you that your husband is in purgatory, and that you shall be saved, but that it will be a long time before you get to heaven" (Kempe 2019, p. 49).[39] It is quite obvious that she proposes to save the souls of the lady and her husband from purgatory

(an intermediate state after death for the purification of the elect) by telling her Christ's instruction, warning her against committing more sins, and reminding her to show charity towards the disadvantaged in her later life. Nevertheless, the lady insists that her husband has been spared from purgatory due to his good deeds. Confronted with the serious doubt, Kempe still performs her duty of "unleashing souls from purgatory and releasing them into God's care" (Coon 1997, p. 13). She informs the widow that her husband's soul "would be thirty years in purgatory, unless he had better friends on earth" (Kempe 2019, p. 50)[40]; she then counsels her to "give three or four pounds for him in masses and in alms-giving to poor folk" (Kempe 2019, p. 50)[41], for only in this way can his soul be greatly eased in the cleansing fire. It is important to note that Kempe's revelations and advice are backed by her confessor, a respectable anchorite. This indicates that Kempe is qualified and competent to guide people towards salvation.

In sum, Kempe actively and faithfully passes messages from God on to the believers regardless of class and gender. In this respect, her *BMK*, which recounts her meditations and holy conversations she experiences inwardly, is undoubtedly a spiritual guidebook instructing people to live a devout life and intending to strengthen their faith in God. Meanwhile, her capacity to transmit the word of God validates her authority, since a female mystic can only claim authority if she presents herself as the empty vessel of God's word (Beckwith 1992, pp. 181–82).

5. Medieval Women's Pursuit of Spiritual Leadership

Women's pursuit of leadership commences in the nascent stage of Christianity. As Muir (2019) outlines, "over the centuries, women have been apostles and deacons, priests and presbyters, preachers and prophets, bishops and archbishops, abbesses and canonesses, missionaries and itinerants, ministers and evangelists, and maybe even a pope" (p. 363). They exercise authority in their diverse capacities. Junia has been an apostle before Paul converts to Christianity (Romans 16:7). It is evident that Junia is a leader in the early Church. The four unmarried daughters of Philip the evangelist, as prophets (Acts 21:8-9), play a vital role in the development of the early Christian Church. The Martyr Perpetua (c.182–203) exhibits an exemplary bravery, thus being revered by the Church. Melania the Elder (c.341–c.410) is a prominent ascetic who sells her vast holdings and abandons her infant son for leading the ascetic life. Egeria (fl. c.381) makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and contributes to the diffusion of knowledge about the rituals in the Holy Land. Brigid of Kildare (c.453–523) exercises episcopal jurisdiction, being "the Mother Abbess of all of Ireland's convents and the schools attached to the monasteries" (Muir 2019, p. 22). These examples explicitly illustrate that women took a leading role in late antique and early medieval Christian Church.

However, numerous women leaders were put down and persecuted for their assumption of authority in the Church in the High and Late Middle Ages. Under the circumstances, women manage to base their leadership on spiritual authority, which is derived from the belief that the Holy Spirit acts through them and manifests itself in visions. Hildegarde of Bingen (1098–1179) is one of the first female visionaries; she is renowned for her prophecy that advances the reform of the Church. The thirteenth century witnessed the proliferation of female visionaries, among whom Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) stands out for her enormous influence on Franciscan monks. In the later Middle Ages, female saints appeared in substantial numbers, such as Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373), Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), and Dorothea of Montau (1347–1394). These women free themselves from the constraints of marriage and family through a devout and solitary life. They receive divine revelations, have special visions, and make pilgrimages to holy places. In doing so, they subvert the conventional role of women, who are ordered to be submissive and

invisible in church, and win the right to voice their own insights into Christian doctrine. The accounts of their devotional experiences have a profound impact on Kempe's vocation and her *BMK*.

Julian of Norwich is the only female mystic that Kempe visits in person. She is a knowledgeable theologian, "often mentioned today in the same breath with such other female medieval thinkers as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen" (Duran 2009, p. 552). Her *Book of Showings* describes sixteen revelations she receives after a recovery from a serious illness. These "showings" graphically show her encounters with Christ who is perceived as the mother of humans and therefore becomes feminine. Owing to Julian's expertise in interpreting mystical visions, Kempe visits Julian in an attempt to search reassurance about her visionary experience. She tells Julian "the grace, that God had put into her soul, of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion, compassion with holy meditation and high contemplation, and very many holy speeches and converse that our Lord spoke to her soul, and also many wonderful revelations" (Kempe 2019, p. 45).[42] Hearing her devotions and meditations, Julian suggests that she ought to obey the will of God and fulfil the mission he assigns to her. In addition, Julian quotes St. Paul and St. Jerome as demonstrating that Kempe's gift of weeping is a token of the Holy Ghost dwelling in her soul. It is clear that Julian assists Kempe in strengthening her faith in God by offering theological explanation for her unusual experiences. In this regard, Julian is Kempe's spiritual mentor who imparts the knowledge of mystical experience to her successor.

Blessed Angela of Foligno is a role model for Kempe. She had lived in a worldly life as a wealthy wife and mother until the age of thirty-seven, when she had a vision of St. Francis who urged her to reflect on her life. In 1288, she underwent a conversion and then devoted herself to a life of visions and ecstasies. She does extreme penances and cuts her ties to the world. It can be observed that her devotional experiences bear a striking resemblance to those Kempe recounts in *BMK*. Her most famous vision occurs in the basilica of Assisi where she "had screamed and shrieked at the door of San Francesco in Assisi and had received a revelation in the Portiuncula Chapel on Lammas Day" (Windeatt 2019b, p. 300). As it happens, Kempe goes to the same basilica at Assisi, in which "She wept, she sobbed, she cried, with great abundance of tears and many holy thoughts" (Kempe 2019, p. 81).[43] She is also there on Lammas Day "in order to obtain grace, mercy and forgiveness for herself, for all her friends, for all her enemies, and for all the souls in purgatory" (Kempe 2019, p. 81).[44] These coincidences suggest Kempe's imitation of Angela's devotions, and more importantly, reproduce a female visionary who is distinguished for her visions which reveal "the path toward an experience of ecstatic union with God" (Milem 2016, p. 112). This union with the divine, as McCabe (2023) notes, "ultimately enables Kempe to overcome the restrictions of her own gendered existence" (p. 1578). In a manner of speaking, divine visions authorize both Angela and Kempe to tell and teach their inner transformations.

Despite the fact that her visions indicate divine approval of her devotions, Kempe is not accepted as an eligible preacher. The controversy about female preaching is often related to the judgement on female religious authority, as preaching is a work of authority. St. Paul, who offers instructions on worship in his Epistles[45], requests women to remain silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34) and forbids them to teach or have authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12). Pauline texts generate suspicions of women's voices in the public sphere and relegate women to the role of submissive listeners in churches. The prohibition against female preaching within the Christian tradition, as Minnis and Voaden (2010) argues, obliges women to profess their inferiority as channels for divine grace (p. 1). Other than that, church councils draw a rigid distinction between the laity and the clergy, seeking to promote the clergy to "the only mediators of the divine" (Macy 2003, p. 117).

Ecclesiastical restrictions placed on female and lay preaching exclude laywomen from scriptural exegesis and thus hinder them from pursuing spiritual leadership. Against this background, more and more women join non-orthodox religious organizations for the sake of preaching rights. Catharism appreciates women's abilities, so Cathar women are permitted to administer the *consolamentum*, the Cathar rite of initiation (Hamilton 2016, p. 139). They are called Good Women or *perfecti* (perfect ones) who have duties of preaching, visiting, and baptizing. Waldensian women, followers of Peter Waldo/Valdès (c.1140–c.1218), were free to preach and teach before the 1240s, when the persecution of Waldensians became intense. Lollardy consents to female preaching. Walter Brut, one of early Lollard preachers, contends that women could preach because Mary Magdalen has preached (Muir 2019, p. 176). There exist many Lollard women who study the Bible and teach the believers publicly. Unfortunately, these female lay preachers are banished, tried, and even burned because they are labelled as heretics who "are obstinate outsiders, a self-conscious threat to the social order" (Arnold 2025, p. 20). Persecution by ecclesiastical authorities indicates that laywomen still have no right to preach.

In view of the foregoing, it comes as no surprise that the Archbishop of York tries to make Kempe swear not to teach people in his diocese, "a massive area from Derbyshire to Westmorland" (Bale 2021, p. 106). Nevertheless, Kempe refuses and quotes the Gospel saying, "the Gospel mentions that, when the woman had heard our Lord preach, she came before him and said in a loud voice, 'Blessed be the womb that bore you, and the teats that gave you suck.' Then our Lord replied to her, 'In truth, so are they blessed who hear the word of God and keep it" (Kempe 2019, p. 128).[46] The biblical quote strongly supports Kempe's claim to teaching. Firstly, the woman's loud voice suggests that Christ values women's existence and approves of them articulating their comprehension of his sermon in assemblies. That is to say that women are allowed to interpret the word of God. Secondly, the woman's compliments on the Virgin Mary show the recognition of Mary's authority that is from her womb containing the union of the Trinity and her breasts nursing the Saviour. For some women who uphold the traditional tenets of medieval Marian devotion, Mary functions as a foundation of spiritual authority. Garí (2001) points out that *The Hours of the Virgin* has spread in England since the second half of the fourteenth century (p. 71). It is therefore unsurprising that Kempe recognizes the crucial role of Mary in the Incarnation and the Passion. From this point of view, it can be argued that Kempe consciously seeks to proclaim her authority to preach through referring to Mary's authority over spirituality. Based on the two levels, Kempe's quotation can amply justify her teaching and preaching.

Kempe tactfully utilizes the knowledge about biblical passages to counter the Archbishop of York, a spokesman for ecclesiastical authority. Her struggle for the right to preach is a personal assertion of her public teaching authority, and more importantly, can be counted as a brave attempt to extend preaching to laywomen. Kempe's efforts further open up possibilities for laywomen in attaining spiritual authority. Over the centuries after Kempe, Anabaptist women have been "active in informal leadership, proselytizing, reading the Bible, teaching, preaching, and writing hymns" (Muir 2019, p. 179); Baptist women have imparted revelations from the Holy Spirit to people through their works; Sarah Sauer Smith (1822–1908), an illiterate woman, has led a small band of people and preached throughout ten countries. Laywomen, who are marginalized by the Church, persist in preaching the word of God for the salvation of the world.

To sum up, medieval women carve out a space in the male-dominated Christian communities by serving as vessels for the gospel. Their visions inspired by the Spirit are credentials for their peaching and serve as manifestations of their spiritual authority, a gift given by God. Situated in the larger context, Margery Kempe and her *BMK*, as Atkinson (1983) asserts, "reflect not only a singular life but an image of possibility" (p. 220).

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined how Margery Kempe makes a special sanctity accessible to herself through the designed narrative discourse and the imitation of hagiography. By analyzing Kempe's arrangement of visionary experience and her deployment of hagiographic tradition, this paper offers a new approach to studying medieval female spiritual authority. Whereas previous studies tend to take the content of medieval women's visions as evidence of their spiritual authority, this paper pays extra attention to the way Kempe organizes her visions. It reveals that Kempe takes the initiative to order her visions for the purpose of establishing spiritual authority, or more specifically, charismatic authority which is regarded as of divine origin and rests on magical powers (Weber 1978, p. 241). Furthermore, this paper argues that Kempe's visionary experience would contribute to the betterment of Christendom, given that her visions are divine instructions for improving the human condition.

BMK is a product of a movement called "new mysticism", which appeals to all Christians to recount their own visionary experiences. In this trend, laywomen like Kempe are allowed to produce autobiographical accounts of their feelings, revelations, and interpretations of holy speeches. They even could be spiritual advisers and help others attain spiritual perfection because of the more democratized and secularized tendency of mysticism. As McGinn (1996) points out, women pioneer much of the new movement (p. 219). They take advantage of the drastic changes in late medieval mysticism to achieve greater power, autonomy, and authority in the patriarchal Christendom.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

BMK *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Notes

1 This paper follows the Middle English edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kempe 2004), while employing the Modern English edition of the text (Kempe 2019) for readability in the main sections.
2 "sumtym helpyng where ony difficulte was" (Kempe 2004, p. 49).
3 "telde hym hir felyngys what schuld befallyn in swech materys as he askyd hir yyf hir felyngys wer trewth" (Kempe 2004, p. 142).
4 "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don" (Kempe 2004, p. 49).
5 "Whan this creatur was xx yer of age or sumdele mor" and "was wyth chylde wythin schort tyme" (Kempe 2004, p. 52).
6 "sche was comyn of worthy kenred—hym semyd nevyr for to a weddyd hir—for hir fadyr was sumtyme meyr of the town N. and sythyn he was alderman of the hey Gylde of the Trinyte in N." (Kempe 2004, pp. 57–58).
7 "labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng beforn" (Kempe 2004, p. 52).
8 "in lyknesse of a man. . .syttyng upon hir beddys syde, lokyng upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere that sche was strengthyd in alle hir spyritys" (Kempe 2004, p. 55).
9 "had etyn no flesch ne drunkyn no wyn iiii yere er sche went owt of Ynglond" (Kempe 2004, p. 151).
10 "had redde hir abowte vii yer" (Kempe 2004, p. 286).
11 "recuryd and went abowte wher hym lykyde" (Kempe 2004, p. 286).

12 "sche toke hom hir husbond to hir and kept hym yerys aftyr, as long as he levyd, and had ful mech labowr wyth hym" (Kempe 2004, p. 332).
13 "thu schalt have meche mede for to kepyn hym and helpyn hym in hys need at hom as yyf thu wer in chirche to makyn thi preyerys" (Kempe 2004, p. 331).
14 "thow schalt etyn my flesch and my blod, that is the very body of Crist in the sacrament of the awter" (Kempe 2004, pp. 71–72).
15 "thow receyve my body every Sonday" (Kempe 2004, p. 72).
16 "a Fryday beforn Crystmes Day" (Kempe 2004, p. 70).
17 "schal no man sle the, ne fyer bren the, ne watyr drynch the, ne wynd deryn the" (Kempe 2004, p. 98).
18 "schal I wasch the in my precyows blod fro alle thi synne" (Kempe 2004, p. 99).
19 "thow schalt have thi desyr er Whitsonday, for I schal sodeynly sle thin husbonde" (Kempe 2004, p. 82).
20 "was so made aferde whan he wold a towchyd hir that he durst no mor don" (Kempe 2004, p. 87).
21 "were clothys of whyte and non other colowr" (Kempe 2004, p. 102).
22 "durst non otherwyse do than sche was comawndyd in hir sowle" (Kempe 2004, p. 103).
23 "spak so evyl of this creatur and slawndryd so hir name in the hospital that, thorw hys evyl langage" (Kempe 2004, p. 182).
24 "sche sufferyd meche despyte and meche schame in many dyvers cuntreys, cyteys, and townys" (Kempe 2004, p. 218).
25 "hir gostly faderys had chargyd hir to weryn white clothis and sche had bowndyn hir to her obediens" (Kempe 2004, p. 237).
26 "cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr, for in the cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed." (Kempe 2004, p. 163).
27 "I wolde this woman wer owte of the chirche" (Kempe 2004, p. 288).
28 "Now wote I wel that thu hast a devyl wythinne the, for I her hym spekyn in the to me" (Kempe 2004, p. 188).
29 "I schuld be newe crucifyed in the be schrewyd wordys" (Kempe 2004, p. 189).
30 "Why gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?" (Kempe 2004, p. 249).
31 "comawndyd hys mene to fettyn a peyr of feterys and seyd sche schulde ben feteryd, for sche was a fals heretyke" (Kempe 2004, p. 249).
32 "ful lekely to a brent the parysch cherch dedicate in the honowr of Seynt Margarete, a solempne place and rychely honowryd, and also al the town, ne had grace ne myracle ne ben" (Kempe 2004, p. 307).
33 "preyn hir of contynuacyon, ful trustyng and belevyng that thorw hir crying and wepyng owr Lord wolde takyn hem to mercy" (Kempe 2004, p. 307).
34 "God grawntyd hem for hir preyerys to be delyveryd owt of her gret perellys" (Kempe 2004, p. 308).
35 "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" (Kempe 2004, p. 41).
36 "boldly undyrname hem and seyd thei schuld ben dampnyd but thei left her sweryng and other synnes that thei usyd" (Kempe 2004, p. 109).
37 "suffred hir to sey hir entent and yaf a fayr answer" (Kempe 2004, p. 111).
38 "Serys, I drede me ye schul be brent in helle wythowtyn ende, les than ye amende yow of yowr othys sweryng, for ye kepe not the comawndementys of God" (Kempe 2004, p. 248).
39 "Madam, owyr Lord Jhesu Crist bad me telle yow that yowr husbond is in purgatory, and that ye schal ben savyd, but it schal be long er ye come to hevyn" (Kempe 2004, p. 127).
40 "schuld be xxx yer in Purgatory les than he had bettyr frendys in erthe" (Kempe 2004, p. 128).
41 "don almes for hym iii pownd er iiii in m[essys] and almes-yevyng to powyr folke" (Kempe 2004, p. 128).
42 "the grace that God put in hir sowle of compunccyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon, compassyon wyth holy meditacyon and hy contemplacyon, and ful many holy spechys and dalyawns that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wondirful revelacyons" (Kempe 2004, p. 120).
43 "Sche wept, sche sobbyd, sche cryed wyth gret plente of teerys and many holy thowtys" (Kempe 2004, pp. 180–81).
44 "for to purchasyn grace, mercy, and foryevenes for hirself, for alle hir frendys, for alle hir enmys, and for alle the sowlys in purgatory" (Kempe 2004, p. 181).
45 The Epistles of St. Paul are passages traditionally attributed to Paul in the New Testament.
46 "the Gospel makyth mencyon that, whan the woman had herd owr Lord prechyd, sche cam beforn hym wyth a lowde voys and seyd: 'Blyssed be the wombe that the bar and the tetys that yaf the sowkyn.' Than owr Lord seyd ayen to hir:' Forsothe, so ar thei blissed that heryn the word of God and kepyn it'" (Kempe 2004, pp. 251–52).

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