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The Failed Pursuit of Religious Expectations: Compulsory Heterosexuality, Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, and Queer/ Disabled Existence in The Book of Margery Kempe (ca. 1373-1440)

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"The Failed Pursuit of Religious Expectations: Compulsory Heterosexuality, Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, and Queer/Disabled Existence in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1373-1440)" by John Tobin (he/him)

ABSTRACT. *The Book of Margery Kempe (ca 1450-1500) details the life of Margery, a medieval woman who seeks to purify herself before God while simultaneously exhibiting non-normative behavior regarding church expectations of chastity, purity, the body, and conformity. In her story, Margery enacts many unusual forms of worship that toe the line of Church expectations: she bestows healing kisses upon women, spends exclusive time healing a woman who refuses to be attended by men, she strikes up a celibacy pact with her husband, and starves herself as a form of penance. Margery's motives for such behavior are up for debate. With previous scholarship on Margery in mind, Tobin turns to the work of Robert McRuer regarding compulsory able-bodiedness and the work of Adrienne Rich regarding compulsory heterosexuality as vehicles for the exploration of Margery's inability to attain the Church ideal of normal behavior at the time, as well as her resistance to deviance. Although compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness originate in a contemporary context and are therefore born of a different socio-cultural conception of the body and sexuality, they open the potential to perceive sexuality and able-bodiedness in medieval texts in new ways. In this essay, Tobin explores how Margery, to free herself from heteronormative and able-bodied expectations perpetuated by the Church, uses the legitimacy of God and Jesus' divine intervention in her life as an attempt to simultaneously be perceived as normal, while also living as a queer, disabled woman.*

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The Failed Pursuit of Religious Expectations: Compulsory Heterosexuality, Compulsory Able-Bodiedness, and Queer/Disabled Existence in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1373-1440)

The Book of Margery Kempe (ca. 1373-1440) details the life of Margery, a medieval woman who seeks to purify herself before God while simultaneously exhibiting non-normative behavior regarding church expectations of chastity, purity, the body, and conformity. In her story, Margery enacts many forms of worship that toe the line of Church expectations: she bestows healing kisses upon women, spends exclusive time healing a woman who refuses to be attended by men, she strikes up a celibacy pact with her husband, and starves herself as a form of penance. Margery's motives for such behavior are up for debate. Scholars like Jessica Hines explore Margery's language as a form of passionate devotion through which a person must suffer as Christ does, a concept that Hines claims is part of a cultural shift that focuses on Christ's more human qualities. Some scholarship, like that of Laura Saetveit Miles, brings to light the idea of "queer touch:" a concept Miles argues Margery experiences in pursuit of healing others. Miles' exploration of queerness among holy women like Margery opens the door for new readings on Margery's nonnormative acts of devotion as forms of queer behavior.

With this previous scholarship in mind, I turn to the work of Robert McRuer regarding "compulsory able-bodiedness" and also the work of Adrienne Rich regarding "compulsory heterosexuality" as vehicles for the exploration of Margery's inability to attain the Church ideal of normal behavior at the time, as well as her resistance to deviance. McRuer and Rich's terms highlight the problematic implicit societal expectation that people cannot help but strive to be able-bodied and heterosexual and therefore also strive not to be perceived as deviant or aberrant according to perceived socio-cultural norms. Although compulsory heterosexuality and

able-bodiedness originate in a contemporary context and are therefore born of a different socio-cultural conception of the body and sexuality, they open the potential to perceive sexuality and able-bodiedness in medieval texts in new ways. Using Disability Studies in this way is part of a broader movement to explore disability in medieval literature. In the case of Margery, she exhibits several behaviors that might yield insight as to whether she achieves a queer/disabled existence. Such behaviors include her relationship with penance as starvation, how she bargains with God to bestow healing kisses on sick women over men, her celibacy pact with her husband, and her virtual performativity of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. In this essay, I argue that Margery, to free herself from heteronormative and able-bodied expectations perpetuated by the Church, uses the legitimacy of God and Jesus' divine intervention in her life as an attempt to simultaneously be perceived as normal and live as a queer/disabled woman.

McRuer and Rich's concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are particularly applicable to Margery not only because of the ways in which the terms intersect with one another, but also in the ways both queerness and disability intersect within Margery. In this context, "impairment" is the physical experience of disability, while "disability" is the social experience. McRuer draws a clear link between the terms in what he calls a "queer/disabled existence," noting that: "the most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability (metaphorized as queerness); the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by queerness (metaphorized as disability)" (McRuer 400). Both queerness and disability are considered deviations of cultural norms that can be exhibited with varying levels of success and Margery's struggle to be perceived as normal is a result of what might be perceived an attempt to live an

authentic queer/disabled existence. While McRuer's norms are defined in a contemporary context as heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, in Margery's time, they are more closely aligned with Church values. In Margery's case, there is no clear self-adopted term for queerness or disability. Instead, she exhibits what we might view today as queer behaviors in her interactions with women, but also what we might view today as either disability in her visitations from Christ or what could be post-partum depression after bearing children. For the purposes of understanding Margery and the forces that compel her, it is helpful to view Margery using these terms. She virtually performs a heterosexual/able-bodied existence in line with the Church while also achieving a form of queer/disabled existence in the late medieval era.

To understand the forces that compel Margery to behave within the heterosexual and able-bodied expectations of the time and place, it is first important to define these expectations in relation to the Church, which is the dominant cultural power structure during the time. To do this, I first turn to Diane Walt's "Mary the Physician: Women, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages," in which she extends the concept of *Christus medicus*, or "Christ the Physician," to what she calls "*Maria medicus*" or "Mary the Physician." Through a series of connections between Margery and medical practices, Walt says, "The Virgin Mary seems to have had particular associations with medicine that went beyond her more generally recognised associations with intercessory healing and with childbirth" (27) and also that "Mary was central to the everyday life of the woman in the late medieval household" (27). Considering that *Christus medicus* is the idea that Christ is a physician who can heal physical and mental ailments, Walt traces how Margery is exposed to visions of Christ as a physician in the book and argues that she simultaneously fulfills expectations of the Virgin Mary as a healer. Thus, there

are two cultural forces working on Margery that influence her behavior: the idea that Christ is a physician who can heal a person like Margery, but also that Margery, as a woman, is expected to have an intimate spiritual relationship with the Virgin Mary. Margery can be a chaste physician like Mary: a *Maria medicus*. Considering Walt's work, Margery therefore experiences a cultural compulsion to heal and be healed. Margery exercises her healing ability in ways that meet these expectations, but she also attempts validate a type of queer/disabled existence. The way Margery meets these compulsions leads to several instances of queer behavior in the text: her relationship with penance, her chastity involving her husband, and her exclusive healing of women.

The Pursuit of the Heterosexual/Able-Bodied Norm

In the pursuit of the heterosexual/able-bodied norms defined by the Church, Margery draws an early link between divinity and disability that serves as a justification of her disability. Yet she fails to be perceived as normal in the eyes of a religious-oriented society. As is often the case in medieval texts, Margery describes her disability as "madness" (Kempe 330) and "bodily infirmity" (Kempe 330). Of her penance in the form of starvation, she justifies her bodily harm through "great promises of fasting with many other deeds of penance" and attributes it to "the way of high perfection, which perfect way Christ Our Saviour in His proper Person, exampled" (Kempe 330). The use of the word "perfect" here in relation to self-harm illustrates how Margery is using Christ to reshape her bodily illness in a more positive light. "Perfect" is rooted in two Latin words "per," meaning "thorough" or "complete" and "facere" which means "to do" or "make." If we put these two definitions together, the word "perfect" which is used twice, might also mean "to be made whole or complete." This definition then aligns with the cultural concept of *Christus medicus*. Margery invokes Christ as a physician to make her body whole. It is notable

that Margery is not healed of her “bodily infirmity,” but instead her starved body becomes perfect just as it is; her body is now Christ-like. In this case, Margery uses Christ’s medical prowess and authority to redefine what makes a person complete, or rather, what makes a body healthy, to include her disabled body. Thus, Margery is simultaneously physically impaired as starving and, but not quite, socially disabled because she is a “perfect” Christian.

But Margery’s logic is internal and does not translate to broader social contexts, which is why she remains disabled in her community and therefore indicates a failure to achieve a socially constructed, able-bodied norm. Ellen Samuels describes this phenomenon in relation to "passing" as a heterosexual, able-bodied woman:

> Such condemnations of passing often conflate two dynamics: passing deliberately (as implied by the term hidden) and passing by default, as it were. Passing subjects must cope with a variety of external social contexts, few of which welcome or acknowledge spontaneous declarations of invisible identity. (Samuels 240)

Margery deliberately “passes,” or hides, her queer/identity using Christ as justification, but she is still subject to a “variety of social contexts” regarding condemnation if she were to reveal her queer/disabled existence more openly without divine backing. For example, in the very same section that Margery redefines disability in Christian terms, she also describes how her visible bouts of starvation and madness are treated in her social circle. Margery’s peers, “...before had worshipped her afterwards full sharply reproved. Then she, considering this wonderful changing, seeking succor under the wings of her Ghostly Mother Holy Church,” turned to her, “ghostly father,” and did “great bodily penance” (Kempe 330). Margery is “reproved” for her actions by those closest to her—her “kindred” or family and her friends. To Margery, the change is

"wonderful" because, by her internal logic, it means that she is accepted by God. Thus, she endeavors to invite more "bodily penance," which therefore brings her closer to Christ. Internally, Margery no longer feels disabled, but societally, Margery continues to be perceived as a disabled woman by her peers. She remains in pursuit of the Christian able-bodied norm but fails to redefine her disability before her community. Christian ideology compels Margery to be "perfect," and to redefine her disability to achieve some sense of belonging, but when the Christian community judges her, they still deem her deviant. Margery, however, considers her most important company to be that of God, and therefore Margery is more concerned with the opinion of God over the layperson. If God is the community Margery prioritizes, then she is successful in living what she deems a "perfect" queer/disabled existence, even if she is not cured or socially accepted.

But the idea of *Christus medicus* is not the only cultural compulsion acting on Margery's behavior and concept of disability. Watt's "*Maria medicus*" strengthens Margery's internal spiritual justification of her disability by giving her a type of spiritual authority. Margery, as she becomes more infirm, "seeks succour under the winds of her ghostly Mother Holy Church" (Kempe 330). This indicates a compulsion to cultivate an image of herself that is not only closer to Christ, but also aligns with Watt's idea that women during the time are expected to have a close relationship with The Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ (Watts 27). Margery describes how she meets this expectation under the "succour" of the Mother, where she "knew and understood many secret and privy things" that made her feel "so high above her reason and her bodily wits, and her body so feeble in time of the presence of grace that she might never express it with her word as she felt it in her soul" (Kempe 330). Margery cultivates her relationship with Mary and

sets herself up to become a healer later in the book. This situation aligns with the way Watt explains Mary's role in a medieval woman's life as "central to the everyday religious life of women in the late medieval household, and prayers to Mary and other forms of Marian devotion were connected not only to motherhood but also to healthcare more broadly" (Watts 27). Margery's womanhood also aligns with Tory Pearman's idea that there is a "conflation of the female body, femininity and disability" regarding women in medieval texts (Pearman 2). Thus, Margery's life as a medieval woman eventually links to Margery's behavior as a healer, in which she explicitly uses her body to heal other women.

In addition to pushing Margery to be a *Maria medicus*, Margery's penance via starvation and her visions and closeness to Christ also align with the cultural expectation of bodily purity. Watts references Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa to explain that there is a "centrality to women's mystical writings of visions of and meditations on the Purification of the Virgin (Watts 28). Thus, Margery's attempt to purify herself via starvation is her link to the "Purification of the Virgin," which provides the very "visions and meditations," of Christ that give her access to, "secret and privy things" (Kempe 330). Margery is compelled by her societal expectation to cultivate a relationship with Mary as a woman, and in doing so, can experience "secret" holy knowledge. Her visitations from Christ enable Margery to rationalize her non-normative behaviors. Margery's compulsion to be a *Maria medicus* situates her disability among divine will and enables non-normative behaviors that are in-line with cultural expectations: a woman can be a healer like Mary, and she can starve herself as a form of purity. But Margery takes liberty with this by later using the purity of her body to partake in queer behavior with women under the guise of meeting Christian ideals.

Social Implications and Economic Utility of the Body

Thus far, Margery has used the purification of her body as the subject of her attempt to create a foundational internal ideology that permits her to live a queer/disabled existence while remaining in line with a heterosexual/able-bodied Church norm. Margery achieves this state by using religion to recast her body as pure. But Margery also uses her purified body to navigate complex social situations by leveraging her body's economic utility in the eyes of the Church. In a contemporary context, McRuer explains how, in an "emergent industrial capitalist system, free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else" (McRuer 398). McRuer further explains that there is an "appearance of choice" in how the heterosexual/able body is used in such a system (McRuer 398). Although the economic utility of the body is meant to be applied to contemporary conceptions of labor and capital, some parallels can be drawn in the way that Margery employs what Laura Seitveit Miles calls the "Queer Touch between Holy Women" in the medieval era. Under Church-driven compulsions for heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, for Margery to experience a socially acceptable type of queer touch, she must perform a transactional agreement wherein Margery uses her body, made able by God, to perform healing services for sick women. In exchange, Margery is paid with spiritual capital: which I define as her reputation, experience as a healer, and permission to be a healer, which she claims comes from Christ. Margery then spends this spiritual capital as a healing woman, or *Maria medicus*, to then heal more sick women, and thus experience more of the queer touch with them. Margery capitalizes on this spiritual currency to remain in that liminal space between queer/disabled existence and the heterosexual/able-bodied norm. This is most evident in Margery's bargain with God to kiss sick

women, the way in which her body is used in relation to her husband to enact a celibacy pact, and in the reaction of the public to her role as a healing woman and celibate wife.

Margery spends 15 years building up her spiritual capital in a search for acknowledgment by Christ. In an effort that begins with the purification of her body, Margery then travels to holy sites across the world, speaks with many priests and preachers, and tells stories of her dedication to God along the way. Still, Margery's mental illness persists, and in Chapter 74, when she is experiencing a suicidal episode, she experiences a visitation from Christ that at once bans her from healing men, but also legitimizes her healing of women instead. This enables her to freely experience what Miles calls a queer touch between holy women. Margery describes the visitation as follows:

> Thus, Our Merciful Lord Christ Jesus drew His creature [Margery] unto His Love, and to mind of His Passion, so that she could not endure to behold a leper or other sick man, especially if he had any wounds appearing on him… then she had great mourning and sorrowing because she might not kiss the lepers when she saw them… he warned her that she should kiss no men, but if she would anyhow kiss, she should kiss women. Then she was glad… (Kempe 336-337).

There are several key moments in this description. First, Margery is forbidden by Christ to "behold a leper or other sick man" which establishes a strict no-contact rule with men. Second, Christ specifically clarifies that she should "kiss no men," which validates her celibacy pact with her husband. Lastly, she is specifically permitted to "kiss women" which makes her "glad." Each of these moments indicates a certain queerness about Margery that is validated in her visitation from God. What is most queer is that Margery is "glad" that she "should kiss women," especially

considering Margery's complicated history with men. At this point, she's had 14 children with her husband, which might suggest she is done with childbirth. She also experienced what might be seen as a type of postpartum depression after childbirth, which wreaked havoc on her mental health. Next, she was delegitimized in her pursuit of purity by a male friar when telling her story. Thus, this visitation serves as a type of justification for Margery to turn away from men, and by nature of it being a vision from Christ himself, makes this charge to kiss women saintly or divine. Margery veils her queer behavior under expectations to be chaste and pure, which allows Margery to at once experience a suicidal, hallucinatory visitation in a divine context, and explore queer behavior. As a result, she legitimizes her queer/disabled existence while remaining within heterosexual/able-bodied church doctrine.

Margery's use of divine intervention to experience queer touch is most visible in her experience with another woman who undergoes mental illness after childbirth. In this scene, Margery is approached by a man while she is praying, who asks her to aid him with his wife who, after delivering a child, is "out of her mind" (Kempe 337). Margery describes her condition as such:

> And when other folk came to her, she cried and gaped as if she would have eaten them and said that she saw many devils about them. She would not suffer them to touch her, by her own good will. She roared and cried so, both night and day, for the most part, that men would not suffer her to dwell amongst them, she was so tedious to them. (Kempe 337)

There are some striking similarities between Margery and the woman described. Both women experience a form of mental illness after childbirth, both turn away from the presence of men,

and both are glad to be in the presence of women. The woman in question specifically refuses the "touch" of men and viscerally reacts to their presence, such that she "roared and cried so" that men would not "dwell amongst them." The "them" in this instance is inclusive of only the woman and Margery. At once, this opens the door for a queer interpretation of the relationship between the two women. Margery has already established that she is, by divine decree from Christ himself, able to kiss and comfort only women. Then, Margery meets another woman who wants nothing to do with men. Using Christ's decree, Margery secludes herself with this other woman "each day, once or twice at least" (Kempe 337). Margery does not describe exactly what happens during this time of seclusion with the other woman, but we know that the result is that the other woman is eventually "brought to church and purified as other women are" (Kempe 337). The significance of this is that both women can achieve a queer/disabled existence together that remains aligned with Church values.

Eventually, both women achieve a sort of ideal standard of purity within the Church, but it happens by way of the queer healing touch, which might include the healing kisses Christ allows as a sort of middle ground between queer/disabled touch and the heterosexual/able-bodied norm. Margery, whose spiritual capital that was built over 15 years, is clearly identified as a *Maria medicus* by the other woman's husband, who asks Margery to heal his wife. Margery then spends her spiritual currency to enable a queer healing experience for the other woman, which after the woman is healed, is described as a "miracle" (Kempe 337). Thus, Margery spends spiritual capital, receives a queer experience in exchange, and gains more spiritual capital as a result, such that she might spend this capital further on other queer/disabled experiences.

Margery does exactly that in the celibacy pact with her husband. She uses her spiritual capital as a miracle-working healing woman to initiate and maintain a celibacy pact with her husband. The deal between the two is described in Chapter 74 as follows, "They dwelt not together nor lay together, for, as is written before, they both with one ascent and with the free will of each, had vowed to live chaste. Therefore, to avoid all perils, they dwelt and sojourned in diverse places" (Kempe 338). Throughout Margery's life, she strives to achieve a sort of bodily purity. What began with starvation then moved to healing women over men also manifests in a total rejection of male intimacy. Margery's compulsion to be like the *Maria medicus* extends to her relationship with her husband. In a sense, Margery is emulating The Virgin Mary, even if Margery is no longer a virgin. Margery and her husband "dwelt not together nor lay together" and even "dwelt and sojourned in diverse places" (Kempe 338). It's as though Margery and her husband might as well be divorced, but a divorce would risk going against the idea that marriage is a sacred act. Instead, Margery navigates this situation carefully under the guise of a desire to "live chaste" (338).

But what is chastity if Margery is allowed to have intimate physical contact with women? Tara Williams specifically comments on Margery's sexuality as "never far from her mind" (Williams 1). Williams further notes that Margery's "revulsion [to sex with her husband] is the result of a spiritual awakening, but Margery soon reveals that she has not lost her sexual passion: sex becomes more significant in her spiritual life than it was in her earthly one" (Williams 1). Building off this idea that sex remains important to Margery, sex is not just spiritual to Margery. Instead, her spiritual sexuality is conflated with her sexual desire and promiscuity toward women. Bestowing healing kisses on women even serves to increase her spiritual capital as a

holy woman and successful healer. Margery is simultaneously using her spiritual capital to have physical intimacy and thus queer experiences—with women. Even after her vow of celibacy with her husband, Margery has enough spiritual capital to make an agreement with her husband that chastity is the most heterosexual/able-bodied way of moving forward because it is so aligned with the Church's conception of bodily purity. Through this promise to her husband, which he presumably agrees to because of its framing within Church doctrine, Margery can live a queer/disabled existence. Margery successfully situates her mental illness, visitations from Christ, and queer desires among heterosexual/able-bodied norms. Although this reasoning works for Margery's in justifying her sense of purity and appears to convince her husband, her queer/disabled existence remains supplementary or subordinate to religious heteronormativity and able-bodiedness.

Queerness and Mental Illness as Supplementary or Subordinate to Religious Heteronormativity and Able-Bodiedness

Despite Margery's attempts to live a valid queer/disabled existence, her queerness is still supplementary or subordinate to religious heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, which is made most clear in her social ostracization whenever she engages in non-normative behaviors. McRuer explains this phenomenon, saying that:

> Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality. But precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of being disrupted. (McRuer 402)

Margery spends over 15 years of her life rationalizing her non-normative behavior under the guise of divine will, which works to "(re)produce the able body and heterosexuality" as internal justification for her existence. But because her actions are fundamentally that of a queer/disabled woman, she does not quite contain her queer/disabled existence, but instead expresses it under the pretense of able-bodied and heterosexual behavior, which puts the "able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony…in danger of being disrupted." It is precisely because she attaches her queer/disabled existence to her divine, healing experiences that she never fully lives an authentic queer/disabled life. She situates her mental illness among visitations from Christ, and her queer behavior is situated among the miraculous healing of sick women. On some level, Margery is aware of her inability to live a queer/disabled existence without the presence of divine intervention in her life. This is perhaps most visible in the way she refers to herself as "creature," which she claims is because she is not worthy of God's presence. Yet, it also manifests socially when some of her peers react negatively to any outward manifestations of her queer/disabled behavior. At each turn, Margery is usually tolerated, but at key points she is socially criticized for her actions. This happens when a preaching friar criticizes her extensive bouts of tears, and when she violates the expectation to lie with and care for her sick husband.

Margery frequently comments on the public response to her non-normative behavior, which falls into two categories: it serves as a justification of her holy nature, or it is met with harsh criticism and public humiliation. These unstable and unpredictable responses serve as a clear indicator of how her queer/disabled existence is either perceived as religious piety or threatens the religious able-bodied heterosexual hegemony. Elan J. Pavlinich describes Margery's authoritative performativity of identities as such:

> Margery Kempe performs motherhood, wifehood, virginity, mysticism, and sanctity in excess of her social class and the exemplars who may have informed her text. She employs authorizing conventions multiple times and with hyperbolic style, and so the authenticity of her experiences is simultaneously validated and undermined by the constructedness of her literary authority. Her text exposes the performativity of identity categories and opens the mystical life to participation. (Pavlinich 35)

While this performativity "opens the mystical life to participation," such virtual performativity of heterosexual/abled-bodied existence by a queer/disabled person, according to McRuer, is "bound to fail" (McRuer 400). This failure is evident in the ways in which perceptions of Margery move from intolerable to mixed after Margery undergoes her bodily purification via starvation, but never to total acceptance. Margery's turn toward God attains a certain measure of success when it comes to her non-normative behavior, but it never fully meets heterosexual/able-bodied expectations. Such is also the case when it comes to Margery's weeping and the friar who at first rejects public displays of weeping, but who later comes to accept her weeping once it is aligned with divine precedent. Margery frequently weeps when praying and "thanked God forasmuch" (Kempe 334) for the bouts of weeping she experiences. To Margery, this indicates that the weeping is an affliction borne from God, though to others it might be a sign of mental illness or overzealousness with God. In this sense, Margery is socially disabled by others due to her excessive Christly devotion.

Whichever the case, the preaching friar initially finds her weeping off putting, and uses it as the source of his sermon against her, but Margery describes how the "Lord drew him back in a short time, blessed may He be, so that he loves her more and trusted more to her weeping and her

crying than ever he did before" (Kempe 335). The friar then learns "of a woman called Maria de Oegines" which likens her weeping to "His [Christ's] Passion" (Kempe 335). Thus, Margery's weeping now has textual evidence that supports her claim that her weeping is reflected in Christ's "Passion." And to take it a step further, the friar himself has a bout of weeping after a visit from "Our Lord." (Kempe 335). It is significant that the weeping is seen as non-normative behavior; it is harshly criticized by the friar, but the moment Margery's weeping is situated in a divine context, likened to Christ's "passion" and "grace" (Kempe 335), it is suddenly made acceptable to the friar. Margery is thus simultaneously othered for her queer/disabled behavior, but subsequently accepted if it is attached to divine precedent. Had Margery simply wept, the friar might not have had a change of heart and would have continued to socially ostracize her.

Another key moment in which Margery's behavior does not conform with religious able-bodied/heterosexual expectations that conflicts with her queer/disabled existence is when she refuses to take care of her husband when he falls ill and eventually dies. As mentioned, Margery and her husband dwell apart and do not lie together as most couples do because of a purifying celibacy agreement. This pact appears to be tolerated until Margery's husband trips and falls down the stairs to nearly die. Margery notes of this incident, "the people said, if he died, his wife was worthy to be hanged for his death, forasmuch as she might have kept him and did not" (Kempe 338). Thus, Margery is shamed and threatened with hanging because of her pact with her husband. While in Margery's mind, the pact is justified, it does not supersede a woman's perceived duty to her husband in this situation, and her queer/disabled existence is therefore subordinated to heterosexual/able-bodied expectations. After the husband's fall, he suffers mental illness until his death. Margery comments that she, "prayed to Our Lord that her husband

might live a year, and she be delivered out of slander, if it were His pleasure" (Kempe 338). The key word here is "slander," which is also mentioned when her peers judge her for starving herself to purify her body. The friar slanders her for weeping before it is situated among divine will. And here, Margery is yet again slandered by her peers for not fulfilling wifely expectations. Clearly, when Margery does not act in agreement with the forces that compel her into a heterosexual/able-bodied existence, she is ostracized and threatened with harm. Thus, while her divine visitations, her weeping, and her kissing of women are successfully situated among divine intervention, all this achieves is a sort of tenuous existence wherein Margery is still threatened but tolerated for her non-normative behaviors. She never quite gets to live a queer/disabled existence and her queerness and disability remain subordinate to heterosexual/able-bodied norms.

Margery's Failure to Achieve an Authentic Queer/Disabled Existence

If we perceive the behavior Margery with compulsory able-bodiedness, and compulsory heterosexuality in mind, then Margery subverts the expectations of the church to achieve a type of queer/disabled existence that is simultaneously performative and a failed attempt at normality. Given that such performativity, as McRuer and Rich explain, is doomed to fail, Margery is unable to exist in a society that values these aspects of her physical, mental, and social reality. At each step of her journey, Margery's queerness and disability must contend with the socio-cultural expectations of the church. As a result, she veils her queer behavior under the guise of divine will and healing ability, starves her body as a means of religious purification, convinces her husband into a celibacy pact, and strives to achieve sense of stability by visiting religious sites to acquire spiritual capital and experience religious visitations from Jesus. Margery can cultivate a

life that successfully achieves certain queer experiences during a time of conservative church rule and is successfully able to situate her mental illness among divine inspiration, but Margery is never quite normal, never quite humanized, and perhaps in a very self-aware act of the restrictive circumstances of her life, writes the entirety of her story referring to herself as "creature."

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