

Reimagining This Creature: Hospitality and Autohagiography in the Visions of Margery Kempe

JOAN FITZPATRICK

Loughborough University

Abstract

The Book of Margery Kempe tells the apparently true story of a medieval wife and mother of fourteen children who, following religious conversion, leaves her old life behind in order to dedicate herself to God. Apparently dictated to scribes by Kempe herself, the *Book* traces her treatment at the hands of her contemporaries, many of them hostile to her claims of religious visions and her odd behaviour as a result. While there has been some critical work done on the significance of food and drink in the *Book*, little has been observed about the role of food and drink in Kempe's visions. Specifically, critics have hitherto overlooked how it is via food, drink and performing the role of hostess in her visions that Kempe presented herself as an active and valuable participant in the Christian narrative and thus worthy of sainthood. Kempe is often unfavourably compared to Julian of Norwich, the calm and intellectual mystic who lived the solitary and dignified life of the anchoress. This article argues that the two women are more alike than is usually acknowledged. Kempe too withdrew from the world in her visions, in order to play a role in the Christian story and so promote her special status as a holy woman and her own narrative as a work of late medieval autohagiography.

In *The Book of Margery Kempe* the titular medieval mystic to whom the *Book* is attributed is both subject and creative originator of her own remarkable history. We know little about the life of Margery Kempe, née Burnham, of Bishop's Lynn, Norfolk, beyond what we learn from her *Book*, which is usually considered the first autobiography written in English. The main objective of the *Book* is to describe Kempe's conversion to piety, the trials she experienced, and the comfort she found in those who accepted what she believed: that she had been conferred special status as a holy woman experiencing a personal relationship with Christ and his mother. Since the *Book* first came to light in the early twentieth century, Kempe has interested readers for what her story reveals about medieval English society, in particular the role of religion and the status of women. She has been compared to Julian of Norwich, the English mystic who, like Kempe, described her religious visions but, unlike Kempe, said little about herself and the times in which she was living. Kempe has also been

compared to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Alisoun, the only secular female pilgrim in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. As Derek Brewer put it drolly, 'religion was to Margery what sex was to Chaucer's Wife of Bath' and as Lynn Staley, perhaps more astutely, observed, 'where the Wife talks, Margery acts'.¹

Critics have considered Kempe's treatment at the hands of her contemporaries, and some have discussed the nature of her visions, but there has been little attention paid to the significance of food and hospitality in Kempe's role as a protagonist in the Christian narrative. Although she is usually considered as merely a foil to Julian of Norwich who withdrew from the world to devote herself to prayer and contemplation, there is more overlap between these two women than has usually been acknowledged. This article will consider Kempe's withdrawal from medieval English society to become an active participant in the visions she described. Of particular interest are those visions where she cared for Christ and his mother, thus transcending the quotidian nature of domestic duties ordinarily expected from women, and provided by Kempe, to her husband, children and ale-house customers before her religious conversion. We will then see how she thus subverted one of the period's most important forms of historiography, hagiography, which told the story of a saint's life and their remarkable deeds or miracles, by promoting her own narrative as a work of late medieval autohagiography and thus herself as a saint.

Kempe's *Book* is written in the third person; she is referred to as 'this creature' throughout, and she describes dictating her life-story to two scribes, the first an unnamed Englishman living in Germany and the second an unnamed priest. Staley's view of the *Book's* narrative strategies led her to refer to 'Margery' as a character written by 'Kempe', but this tends to emphasise unduly the *Book* as a work of fiction. Anthony Bale considered 'autobiography' too rigid a term to describe Kempe's *Book* since it 'was not physically written by Kempe and it is unclear how far she controlled or approved of the *Book* as we now have it', adding, moreover, that modern notions of authorship do not take into account the 'collaborative, and sometimes haphazard, way in which medieval writing was produced'.² The only extant manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a fifteenth-century copy of the original, which was found in the private library of the Butler-Bowdon family near Chesterfield in 1934 and identified by Hope Emily Allen. It consists of two books divided into chapters: Book I is the longer of the two, with eighty-nine chapters, and Book II contains only ten chapters. It was written by a scribe who signed himself 'Salthows' and contains annotations in four hands. The annotations are corrections and emendations as well as comments on the *Book's* content. On the first page is written '*Liber Montis Gracie*. This

¹ Derek Brewer, *English Gothic Literature* (London, 1983), p. 253; Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Philadelphia PA, 1994), p. 4.

² Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford, 2015), pp. xviii, xx.

boke is of Mountegrace', which suggests that the annotations were made by the monks in the Carthusian priory of Mount Grace in Yorkshire. The last page of the manuscript contains a recipe, in a different hand from Salthows's and the four that provide the annotations, which is from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.³ Before Allen identified this copy of the work, the only known text of *The Book of Margery Kempe* was a pamphlet consisting of seven pages of extracts, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501.

According to her *Book*, Kempe was a married mother of fourteen children when she experienced the religious conversion that made her leave her old life behind and dedicate herself to God. During pregnancy and following the birth of her first child she became ill, suffering mental torment, seeing devils and contemplating suicide. In the *Book* she claims that at this time Christ appeared and spoke to her, saying 'Dowtyr, why hast þow forsakyn me and I forsoke neuyr þe?', after which she recovers but 'wold not leeuyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray þat sche had vsyd be-for-tym'.⁴ After failing in two business ventures involving brewing and the grinding of corn in a horse mill, she reported hearing a heavenly melody that prompted a regime of bodily penance: refusing to have sex with her husband, fasting, keeping vigil and wearing a hair shirt.

After several years of these discrete privations, Christ told Kempe to stop eating meat and to receive the Eucharist every Sunday, which was more regular than the usual medieval practice of receiving it once a year. Subsequently, her outward displays of religious devotion became more marked. From this point onwards she talked excessively about God, cried uncontrollably and dressed in white, a practice which irritated her critics since they deemed it unseemly for a middle-aged mother to wear a colour more commonly signifying youth and virginity. As part of her spiritual journey she travelled from her home in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) to Lincoln, Canterbury, Norwich, and then abroad to Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela in Spain and later to Norway and the region that is now modern Germany. Her odd behaviour and appearance provoked hostility from her fellow pilgrims who refused to dine with her and when she returned to England she was interrogated by the Church authorities as a suspected Lollard.

The Book of Margery Kempe is part of what has become known as the English mystical tradition of the late medieval period, which included

³ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London, 1940), pp. xxxii–xlvi. All quotations of the *The Book of Margery Kempe* are from this edition and unless otherwise stated, all come from Book I of the text. As well as page numbers, the relevant chapter from which the quotation is taken is provided so that readers using another edition can easily find it. After each quotation in Middle English, a modern translation is provided within square brackets in the footnotes to aid readers unfamiliar with Middle English, which is from Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Bale.

⁴ [Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?] ... [would not put aside either her pride or her pretentious costumes that she had been used to] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* pp. 8, 9; chs 1, 2.

the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* (*The Fire of Love*) and *The Form of Living*, and Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*. Kempe has been compared with Julian of Norwich, the mystic and author of the earliest surviving book written in English by a woman, yet their works are very different in terms of what they tell the reader about the world at large and Christian history. Where Kempe's *Book* is full of details about her travels, including her imaginative voyage into Christ's past, we learn nothing of Julian's life beyond a brief description of the sickness that preceded her visions in *Revelations of Divine Love*, when on 8 May 1373, at the age of thirty, seriously ill and apparently close to death, she experienced what she calls the 'showings' described in her book.⁵ We do not even know Julian's real name; she is called after the church of the male saint in Norwich where she lived as an anchoress for most of her life. Choosing a life of seclusion, Julian would have undergone a ceremony or rite of enclosure which signalled her death to the world. Mari Hughes-Edwards explained that 'anchoritic enclosure was a permanent undertaking which could, in theory, only end in death' and extant ceremonies reveal how 'the corpse-like candidate is given the sacrament of Extreme Unction, is sprinkled with dust and is processed into the anchorhold to the sound of the same prayers and psalms that would have accompanied the dead body into the graveyard'.⁶ Extant documents indicate that 'anchorites were not entirely cut off from society, but that they did attempt, in England at least, *as much as was possible*, to withdraw from it'.⁷

It is usually acknowledged by critics that Julian was very different from Kempe in her withdrawal from the world to live a life of prayer and contemplation, yet an interesting confluence between the two women is precisely the withdrawal from medieval society that is an important, and hitherto overlooked, aspect of Kempe's narrative too. Readers of *The Book of Margery Kempe* have always been interested in Julian because the *Book* describes God directing Kempe to visit Julian in her cell in Norwich and part of their conversation is reported in the *Book*. Julian is quoted on the nature of the Holy Ghost before assuring Kempe that 'þe sowle of a rytful man is þe sete of God, & so I trust syster, þat 3e ben', adding that she should trust God and 'feryth not þe langage of þe world, for þe mor despyte, schame, & repref þat 3e haue in þe world þe mor is 3owr meryte in

⁵ Julian's text survives in two versions: an earlier 'Short Text', probably composed not long after her visions and a later 'Long Text' with revisions and additions. There is no reason to believe that Julian did not write the *Revelations* herself. The narrative in both versions is in the first person throughout and her claims to be uneducated are most likely in the tradition of feigned modesty. Julian's *Revelations* were little known until the publication of Grace Warrack's modern-spelling edition of 1901 and gained further exposure with T. S. Eliot's 'Little Giddings', the fourth of his poems in *Four Quartets* (1943), which quotes from the *Revelations*: 'All shall be well, and | All manner of things shall be well' (Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love (Short Text and Long Text)*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London, 1998), p. 79; ch. 27).

⁶ Mari Hughes-Edwards, 'Anchoritism: the English tradition', *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 131–52, at p. 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

be sygth of God'.⁸ Although we learn that the two women were together for many days, we hear nothing more of their encounter and nowhere is it described in Julian's *Revelations*. Critics have tended to judge Kempe more harshly than Julian, for example David Knowles noted:

however interesting a figure [Kempe] may be to the student of religious sentiment or psychology, [she] is clearly not the equal of the earlier English mystics in depth of perception or wisdom of spiritual doctrine, nor as a personality can she challenge comparison with Julian of Norwich.⁹

Liz McAvoy complained of the tendency amongst critics to characterise Kempe as 'hysterical, hyperbolic, noisy and undignified' in contrast to Julian as 'the peaceful, serene woman of intellect and dignity'.¹⁰ There is a clear sense that Kempe's physicality and emotionality were framed as unacceptable characteristics, perhaps because too feminine for a creator of religious history. Yet it was Kempe's withdrawal from the world via her visions that allowed her to validate her holiness as much if not more than her visit to and endorsement from Julian. As Kathleen Ashley observed, 'within the late medieval hagiographic code that Margery's text employs, visions were the mark of the holy person', largely replacing the earlier sign of holiness, which was the miracle.¹¹ Kempe's meditations and visions consisted of lengthy conversations with Christ and, to a lesser extent, the Virgin Mary, but it is those visions where she became an active participant in the Christian story that are especially pertinent to autohagiography.

Critics have been drawn to *The Book of Margery Kempe* for what it tells us about the role of women in a protocapitalist society where religion was one of its central organising features. As Marion Glasscoe put it, Kempe's *Book* has been used 'to illuminate a particular approach to, and view of, cultural development' in order to 'explain, and thus to some extent patronise, Margery in terms, however valid, that she would not have recognised'.¹² Glasscoe cited as an example Sheila Delaney's estimation of Kempe as witness to 'the special oppression of women in early capitalist society' and studies by D. Ellis and S. Beckwith that consider her to be someone who internalised the values of bourgeois society, investing in her own salvation and thus asserting her power to transcend her marginal household role and social roles and integrate them into a new power-base in which the mould of female subjection and victimisation is vindicated by the Passion of Christ.¹³

⁸ [the soul of a righteous man is the seat of God, and so I trust, sister, that you are] ... [do not fear what the world says, because the more spite, shame, and rebuking that you have in the world, the more merit is yours in the sight of God] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 43; ch. 18.

⁹ David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London, 1960), p. 139.

¹⁰ Liz McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 25.

¹¹ Kathleen Ashley, 'Historicizing Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe* as social text', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 28 (1998), pp. 371–88, at p. 378.

¹² Marion Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London, 1993), p. 275.

¹³ Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics*, p. 275; Sheila Delany, 'Sexual economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and the Book of Margery Kempe', *Minnesota Review*, 5 (1975), pp. 104–13, at p. 109; D. Ellis,

Glasscoe observed that critical efforts to describe Kempe's experiences in such terms miss the joy that is evident in the *Book* as well as its avowed aim to reveal God's goodness to the world.¹⁴ This is true, yet critics have also missed the significance of Kempe's reimagining, and rewriting, of religious history as told by the Christian Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

As a woman describing her own life-story, Kempe had a precedent in the medieval German visionary Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) whose Latin *Vita S. Hildegardis* is described by Barbara Newman as 'the first 'autobiography' of the Middle Ages' since 'the core of the vita is a first person memoir written or dictated by Hildegard herself'.¹⁵ More usual was the male-authored hagiography of female saints or holy women, for example the prominent female medieval mystics Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213) and Saint Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303–73) both of whom are mentioned in Kempe's *Book*.¹⁶ Hildegard was a prophet and her visions enabled her to influence powerful men. As Frances Beer pointed out, Hildegard claimed to speak for God when she warned the German King Frederick Barbarossa (1152–90) that he would be punished for his perpetuation of the papal schism, which had caused 'widespread ecclesiastical squabbling within Germany'.¹⁷ Unlike Hildegard, Kempe reimagined the past, specifically the Christian story whereby she played a key part in the early life of the Virgin Mary and the birth of Christ, and it is here, where she cast herself as an extended and invaluable member of the Holy Family, that she most overtly expressed her claim to authority and sanctity. Significantly, Kempe's claim was expressed primarily via food and drink in her role as a provider of sustenance and care to the Holy Virgin and Christ. Yet, as we shall see, she extended her influence as the ultimate hostess even further by providing sustenance to celestial beings as well as to Christ and his human family on earth.

In Kempe's *Book* social relationships are often described in terms of hospitality and a pattern emerges whereby those who love Kempe are depicted inviting her into their homes to dine, or otherwise providing her with food, while conversely those who dislike her behaviour and reject her

'Margery Kempe and the Virgin's hot cauldre', *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, 14 (1985), pp. 1–11; S. Beckwith, 'A very material mysticism: the medieval mysticism of Margery Kempe', in D. Aers (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 34–57.

¹⁴ Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics*, p. 275.

¹⁵ Barbara Newman, 'Hildegard and her hagiographers: the remaking of female sainthood', in Catherine M. Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999), pp. 131–152, at pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ Marie d'Oignies was a Beguine saint known for her married chastity, wearing of white clothes, and copious tears and so would have been an important role model for Kempe. Her biography, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies* by Jacques de Vitry, is described as being read to Kempe in chapter 62 of the *Book*. Saint Bridget (or Bergitta) established a religious community after the death of her husband and so would have provided another example to Kempe of a life devoted to God after a life of marriage and several children. In chapter 20 of the *Book* Kempe is told by Christ that she has been privy to a vision the likes of which Saint Bridget never experienced; later, in chapter 39, on a pilgrimage to Rome, she visits the chamber in which Bridget died.

¹⁷ Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 20.

claims refuse to eat with her. On their way to the Holy Land, her confessor and fellow pilgrims are annoyed because she refuses to eat meat, weeps inordinately and speaks constantly about God. For these conspicuous displays of faith they treat her with contempt, cutting her gown short and making her wear something like a sackcloth, and ‘madyr hir to syttyn at þe tabelys ende be-nethyn all oþer þat sche durst ful euyl spekyr a word’. In contrast their host was solicitous of her needs and ‘sent hir of hys owyn mees of swech seruyse as he had’.¹⁸ When Kempe’s efforts to remain cheerful and avoid discussing the Gospel at meals prove unsuccessful she is compelled to eat alone in her chamber for six weeks. This would have had a particular resonance because in the medieval period solitary eating was generally considered antisocial and uncharitable, but the narrative suggests that the hostile behaviour of her fellows was the cause of her isolation and not Kempe’s excessive displays of faith.

Given the prominence of food, hospitality and dining in the *Book*, allowing Kempe to signal those moments in the narrative when she was admired or persecuted, it is surprising that more has not been made of it by critics. Notable exceptions include Cristina Mazzoni, who argued that food and eating were key motifs that worked to ‘unify the various parts of the book, as well as connecting the women represented in it’.¹⁹ Melissa Raine explored ‘the importance of food-related activities to the negotiation of Margery Kempe’s spiritual identity’, observing that these negotiations ‘rely on the communal nature of eating, where the hierarchised rules of conduct in play at the medieval table constantly demonstrate social status through seating and serving arrangements, and through inclusion and exclusion’.²⁰ More recently, Hwanhee Park considered how the meals in which Kempe participated functioned as ‘important stages for asserting her connection to divine authority, and defending her from accusations of heresy’.²¹ Laura Kalas Williams also focused on the ‘myriad references to God’s sweetness’ in Kempe’s *Book*, using the recipe that appears on the last page of the only extant manuscript as ‘a lens through which to explore the sweetness of confection and divine love in the *Book*’.²² Yet the role of food and hospitality in Kempe’s visions has attracted little critical attention. Elizabeth Light considered Kempe’s visions in relation to her diet, but focused mainly on Christ’s instructions to her on what she ought to eat and her diet’s impact upon the social and religious communities she encountered. Light

¹⁸ [made her sit at the end of the table below everyone else, so that she hardly dared speak a word] ... [sent her what he could from his own meal] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* p. 62; ch. 26.

¹⁹ Cristina Mazzoni, *The Women in God’s Kitchen: Cooking, Eating, and Spiritual Writing* (New York, NY, 2005), p. 105.

²⁰ Melissa Raine, ‘“Fals Flesch”: food and the embodied piety of Margery Kempe’, *New Medieval Literatures*, 7 (2005), pp. 34–5.

²¹ Hwanhee Park, ‘Mealtime sanctity: the devotional and social significance of mealtimes in *The Book of Margery Kempe*’, *Parergon*, 36 (2019), pp. 61–80, at p. 64.

²² Laura Kalas Williams, ‘The *Swetenesse* of confection: a recipe for spiritual health in London, British Library, Additional MS 61823, *The Book of Margery Kempe*’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 40 (2018), pp. 155–90, at pp. 156, 158.

regarded Kempe's feeding of the Holy Family primarily as 'loving acts of domestic care'²³ rather than as reimaginings of religious history as a means to autohagiography whereby her homely generosity to Christ and his mother was not so much altruism as a means of staking her claim to sanctity.

In Rome, after God had asked her to give away all her goods and 'makyn hir bar for hys lofe',²⁴ Kempe met Dame Margaret Florentine, who responded to her poverty by welcoming her into her home every Sunday, seating Kempe at a table above herself, serving a meal with her own hands, and providing her with a hamper 'as meche as wolde seruyn hir for a too days mete, and fille hir botel wyth good wyn'.²⁵ On her return to England, where people who had previously shown generosity now spurned her, Thomas Marchale was another charitable host who 'ofte-tymes bad þis creatur to mete for to heryn hir dalyawns' and paid for her to get to Santiago.²⁶ The hospitality shown to Kempe says as much about her as her fellow-Christians, for as Park noted, 'the people who appreciate and protect Margery are depicted as the more virtuous ones; Margery, who receives such good treatment from good people, must be just as virtuous, if not more so'.²⁷ This pattern of hospitality by good people toward Kempe continues throughout the *Book*.

Kempe was also characterised as the recipient of sacred sustenance when she visited an anchorite, as instructed by Christ, who told her 'Dowtyr, 3e sowkyn euyn on Crystys brest'.²⁸ Late medieval devotional literature often figured Christ using feminine or nutritive language.²⁹ As Caroline Walker Bynum observed:

Both men and women . . . saw the body on the cross, which in dying fed the world, as in some sense female . . . To medieval natural philosophers, breast milk was transmuted blood, and a human mother – like the pelican that also symbolized Christ – fed her children from the fluid of life that coursed through her veins.³⁰

Kempe also received sacred sustenance after she gave away all her goods in Rome:

Than on a nyth sche say in vision how owyr Lady, hir thowt, sat at þe mete wyth many worshepful personys & askyd mete for hir. And þan thowt

²³ Elizabeth Light, "'That sche schulde not etyn alone': food, community, and authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*", *Comitatus* 48, (2017), pp. 73–93, at p. 90.

²⁴ [make herself penniless for His love] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* p. 92; ch. 37.

²⁵ [enough for her to serve herself two days' food, and filled her bottle with good wine] *Ibid.*, p. 93; ch. 38.

²⁶ [often invited this creature to dine with him, in order to hear her conversation] *Ibid.*, p. 108; ch. 45.

²⁷ Park, 'Mealtime sanctity', p. 74.

²⁸ [Daughter, you are sucking even at Christ's breast] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* p. 18; ch. 5.

²⁹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Lynn Staley (New York, 2001), p. 14 n. 3; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 270–6.

³⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 270.

pis creatur þat ovr Lordys wordys wer fulfilled gostly in þat vision, for he behestyd þis creatur a lityl be-forn þat he xuld preyn hys modir to beggyn for hir.³¹

As Raine observed, Kempe's *Book* is indebted to *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (*Meditations on the Life of Christ*), a fourteenth-century devotional work translated into Middle English by Nicholas Love as *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, in which Mary gives food to the poor and feeds the Holy Family on simple foods.³² Love's *Meditationes* encouraged the affective piety in which Kempe excelled, using her imagination to experience fully the life, suffering and death of Christ and thereby heightening the emotional impact of his passion. Yet Kempe's affective piety also served as a means to self-promotion and, as Raine pointed out, her *Book* ignores Love's insistence on Mary's low social status and poverty.³³ Placing Mary amongst people of high rank and regard, Kempe was careful to tell the reader that Christ's mother did not simply request food on her behalf, but specifically 'begged' for it. Just as Kempe exploited the genre of religious history, specifically moments from Christ's life, to elevate herself to sanctity, so here too she exploited the tradition of Mary's poverty, generosity, and her status as Queen of Heaven and Earth to emphasise the special nature of her own relationship with Christ.

Kempe rarely provided nourishment to others, but when she did it was to promote herself as a key player in the Christian story and thus prove herself worthy of sainthood. In her first meditation on the Virgin Mary, Kempe carried a container of pyment (spiced, sweetened wine) for Mary during the Visitation.³⁴ Raine considered this in terms of Kempe's preoccupation with rank: although this seems to be a lowly activity for her, she was presenting herself as 'a member of an aristocratic household' since 'sweetened wines were a fashionable luxury item during the early fifteenth century, and spices were also expensive and highly desirable'.³⁵ Yet Raine did not mention the earlier part of this vision, which is arguably more significant in terms of food provision, Kempe's self-esteem and her narrative as a work of medieval autohagiography. Earlier in this chapter, Kempe was not simply a courier of fine wine, but played a much more prominent role: that of hosting the Virgin Mary.

After Christ had directed Kempe to think about his mother 'for sche is cause of alle þe grace þat þow hast', she had a vision of Mary's mother,

³¹ [Then one night she saw in a vision how our Lady, she thought, sat at dinner with many worshipful people and asked for food for her. And then this creature thought that our Lord's words were fulfilled spiritually in this vision, for a little earlier He had promised this creature that He should ask His mother to beg for her.] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* p. 93; ch. 38.

³² Raine, "'Fals flesch'", pp. 21–2; Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. Michael G Sargent (Exeter, 2004), p. 22, ll. 11–13; p. 64, ll. 2–4.

³³ Raine, "'Fals flesch'", pp. 21–2.

³⁴ 'The Visitation' is the term used to describe Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, as recounted in the New Testament Gospel of Luke, 1:39–56).

³⁵ Raine, "'Fals flesch'", p. 23.

Saint Anne, ‘gret wyth chylde’ to whom she prayed, asking ‘to be hir mayden & hir seruawnt’.³⁶ After the birth of Mary, it appears that Kempe takes on the role of hostess, indeed of surrogate mother, to the Holy Virgin: ‘& þan sche besyde hir to take þe chyld to hir & kepe it tyl it wer twelve 3er of age wyth good mete & drynke, wyth fayr whyte clothys & whyte kerchys’.³⁷ At this point in Bale’s edition of the *Book*, the source for modernised quotations throughout this article, the Middle English is modernised to: ‘And then *St Anne* busied herself taking the child to herself and looking after her until she was twelve years of age, with good food and drink, with fine white clothes and white kerchiefs’ (my italics), so that the indeterminate pronoun ‘sche’ [she] in the original, which might refer to either Kempe or Anne, definitively refers to the latter. By removing the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘she’, Bale removed the possibility that it was Kempe who took on the role of caregiver to Mary and ‘busied herself’ with the sort of tasks that might ordinarily be expected to fall to a mother, a role she will also adopt later with the Christ-child.³⁸ The ambiguity suggests that it might be Kempe and not the angel Gabriel, or Anne, who was responsible for the Annunciation. Immediately following the description of providing Mary with food, drink, and white clothes and kerchiefs, the *Book* states ‘And þan sche seyde to þe blyssed chylde, “Lady, 3e schal be þe Modyr of God”’, which Bale modernised to: ‘And then she said to the blessed child, “My Lady, you shall be the mother of God”’, suggesting that the ‘sche’ [she] referred to here, as in the previous sentence, remains Saint Anne. Here Bale retained the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘sche’ but by prefacing the word ‘Lady’ with ‘My’ he added to the sense of deference with which Kempe, rather than Anne, might address Mary. Crucially, when Mary declared herself unworthy to be the mother of God, Kempe’s answer, ‘I pray 3ow, Lady, 3yf þat grace falle 3ow, forsake not my seruysse’ [I pray, my Lady, if that grace should befall you, do not relinquish my service], appears to refer back to the earlier provision of meat, drink and white clothing. By calling this ‘my seruysse’, Kempe claimed to be the provider.

Mary leaves for a while before returning and telling Kempe ‘Dowtyr, now am I be-kome the Modyr of God’, at which point Kempe ‘fel down on hir kneys wyth gret reuerens & gret wepyng and seyde, “I am not worthy, Lady, to do 3ow seruysse”’.³⁹ This moment functions as a sort of Annunciation in reverse whereby Kempe temporarily usurped the role of Mary, honoured with an important announcement, in much the same way that she earlier appeared to usurp the role of Anne as the mother

³⁶ [for she is the cause of all the grace that you have] ... [pregnant] ... [if she might be her lady-in-waiting and her servant] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 18; ch. 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18; ch. 6.

³⁸ Staley retains the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘she’ in her modernisation of the *Book* (Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, p. 21).

³⁹ [Daughter, now I have become the mother of God] ... [fell down onto her knees with much reverence and much weeping and said, ‘I am not worthy, my Lady, to serve you’] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 18; ch. 6.

of Mary and the Angel Gabriel in the role for which he is best known. Kempe's identification with the Holy Virgin becomes even clearer later in the narrative when Christ tells her 'I wyl þat þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colour, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl'.⁴⁰ Sarah Salih observed that wearing white might indicate specifically a virgin martyr or the member of a religious order,⁴¹ yet Kempe surpasses a simple virgin martyr: an attentive reader will recall that her wearing of white aligns her with not just any virginal holy woman but with the virgin mother of God himself and further reinforces the sense that Kempe, and not Anne, provided Mary with white clothes, amongst other things, when caring for her as a child.

Immediately following the Visitation and the birth of John the Baptist, Kempe accompanied the now pregnant Mary on her journey to Bethlehem. With Joseph absent, the reader's attention inevitably focuses fully on Kempe as Mary's companion and helper: she arranges and pays for Mary's lodging and begs for food on behalf of mother and newly born child, which signals both her generosity and her humility. Moreover, the reader is reminded of the potent symbolism of the colour white: 'sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys & kerchys for to swathyn in hir Sone whan he wer born'.⁴² It is Kempe and not Mary who behaves in a motherly fashion towards Jesus:

sche swathyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassyon, hauyng mend of þe scharp deth þat he schuld suffyr for þe lofe of synful men, seyng to hym, 'Lord, I schal fare fayr wyth 3ow; I schal not byndyn 3ow soor'.⁴³

Joseph is mentioned only after the three wise men have visited, twelve days after the birth of Christ, and an angel bids the Holy Family to go to Egypt.⁴⁴ Joseph then disappears from the narrative again and it is Kempe who accompanies Mary to Egypt, 'day be day purueyng hir herborw wyth gret reuerens wyth many swet thowtys & hy medytacyons & also hy contemplacyons'.⁴⁵ Towards the end of the *Book* we are reminded of Kempe's role in the provision of sustenance to Christ when he congratulates her on her piety for which she will have reward in heaven, adding 'And also, dowtyr, þu clepist my Modyr for to comyn in-to þi sowle

⁴⁰ [I wish you to wear clothes that are white and of no other colour, for you shall be dressed according to my wishes] *Ibid.*, p. 32; ch. 15.

⁴¹ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 217–24.

⁴² [she begged for our Lady fair white cloths and kerchiefs in which to swaddle her son when He was born] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 19; ch. 6.

⁴³ [with bitter tears of compassion, she swaddled Him, mindful of the harsh death He would go on to suffer for the love of sinful people, saying to Him, 'Lord, I shall treat you tenderly; I shall not bind you tightly'.] *Ibid.*, p. 19; ch. 6.

⁴⁴ The Gospel of Matthew (2:13–23) tells how Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream that Herod intended to kill the child Jesus and so he fled with his family to Egypt for safety.

⁴⁵ [day by day organizing her accommodations most reverently, with many sweet thoughts and high meditations, and also high contemplations] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 19; ch. 7.

& takyn me in hir armys & leyn me to hir brestys & zeuyn me sokyn'.⁴⁶ At this point, significantly, it is Kempe who provides Christ with shelter:

And þan þu preyist my blissyd Modyr, Mary Mawdelyn, alle apostelys, martiryrs, confessorwrys, Kateryne, Margaret, & alle holy virginys þat þei xulde arayn þe chawmbre of þi sowle wyth many fayr flowerys & wyth many swete spicys þat I myth restyn þerin.⁴⁷

Notably, both male and female holy figures do the work of preparing Kempe's soul so that it should be a welcoming place for Christ.

The only other times Kempe is described as a provider of sustenance is when she tended to an old woman in Rome and shared her food and drink with a poor friar who has been robbed. Here we are told how the old woman was well-served by Kempe who 'fet hom watyr & stykks in hir nekke . . . and beggyd mete and wyn bothyn for hir', drinking the old woman's sour wine and providing her with the good wine she has bought for herself.⁴⁸ Yet even here the reader is pushed to reflect on how this direct recipient of Kempe's charity was little more than a proxy, since we are told that she served the old woman 'as sche wolde a don owyr Lady'.⁴⁹ The experience was an unpleasant one: for six weeks Kempe 'had no bed to lyn in ne no clothys to be cured wyth saf hir owyn menty. & þan was sche ful of vermyn & suffyrd gret peyn þerwyth'. The description here works to demonstrate Kempe's piety since she was instructed to serve the old woman by her confessor, 'be vertu of obediens & also in party of penawns'.⁵⁰ In a later episode, when she travels with a company of poor people to Aachen, in modern Germany, she is again infected with parasites and the company causes her 'fret angwisch & disese & meche lettyng'.⁵¹ In addition, in an encounter with a poor friar, the company tell Kempe that the friar may not eat with them because they 'wer robbyd as wel as he & þefore ych man must help hym-self as wel as he may', to which she responded 'he xal haue part of swech good as God sendith me' and shares her food and drink with him.⁵² As Light pointed out, Kempe here

⁴⁶ [And also, daughter you call for my mother to enter into your soul, and to take me in her arms, and to lay me on her breasts and give me suck] Ibid., p. 210; ch. 86.

⁴⁷ [And then you pray to my blessed Mother, to Mary Magdalene, to all apostles, martyrs, confessors, to Katherine, Margaret, and all holy virgins that they should adorn your soul's private chamber with many fair flowers and with many sweet spices so that I may rest therein.] Ibid.

⁴⁸ [fetched home water and sticks on her shoulders . . . and begged for both food and wine for her] Ibid., p. 86; ch. 34.

⁴⁹ [as she would have done our Lady] Ibid., p. 85; ch. 34.

⁵⁰ [had no bed to lie in, and no bedclothes to be covered with, except her own cloak. And then she was full of parasites and suffered much pain from them] . . . [by virtue of obedience, and also in part out of penance] Ibid.

⁵¹ [great anguish and distress, and much difficulty] Ibid., p. 237; Bk 2, ch. 6.

⁵² [were robbed as well as him, and therefore each man must help himself as best as he can] . . . [he shall have part of such money as God sends me] Ibid., p. 239; Bk 2, ch. 7. Bale's modernisation of 'good' to 'money' in his translation of the Book (p. 216) seems rather too specific since Kempe might here be referring to good fortune in general, including possession of provisions that she was willing to share, and implies also that God has made her a good person.

taught her fellow-pilgrims ‘the importance of mutual aid and solidarity, especially in critical situations’,⁵³ yet the reader soon understands her motivation in helping the friar. What appeared to be an act of selfless, Christian generosity was in fact also beneficial to Kempe, who would subsequently make a deal with the friar to pay his costs in return for him accompanying her on the journey.

After Kempe had a vision of the Passion and crucifixion of Christ she aided a privately mourning Virgin Mary: ‘whan ovr Lady was comyn hom & was leyd down on a bed, þan sche mad for ovr Lady a good cawdel & browt it hir to comforyn hir’.⁵⁴ Providing nourishment to the mother of God is consistent with the *Book’s* narrative strategy so far: across the text Kempe performs the role of hostess, surrogate mother, companion and helper to Mary to establish and illustrate her right to sainthood. Staley offered ‘hot drink’ as a modern translation of ‘cawdel’⁵⁵ but more specifically it was a hot drink served to the sick and weak, made from thin gruel mixed with wine or beer, and egg, and usually sweetened and spiced. As Gail McMurray Gibson observed, the source for this detail is the *Meditationes*, where a Franciscan nun meditating on Mary’s sorrow is urged to ‘serve, console and comfort so that she might eat a little’, yet it was typical of Kempe’s ‘practical and concrete fifteenth-century East Anglian spirituality’ that she should actually name the food that she prepares and brings to Mary. Additionally, Gibson wondered if the recipe on the last page of the manuscript of the *Book* was perhaps intended to be Kempe’s caudle since it listed ingredients typical of that drink.⁵⁶ Like Gibson, Raymond A. Powell noted that these ‘envisioned acts of service’, which are an aspect of the *Book* that unsettles modern readers, were in line with medieval ‘*Meditationes*-style devotional practice’.⁵⁷ Yet Powell seems over-generous in considering Kempe to have cast herself as a participant in the Christian story ‘the better to feel, to experience, and to be affected by, the events of Christ’s life’⁵⁸ since her motivation is apparently as much self-promotion as self-reflection. He may be closer to the mark when later observing that references to Kempe’s persecution by her neighbours echo ‘biblical accounts of the persecution undergone by the Apostles and Christ’ and are thus part of the process whereby she constructs herself as a future saint.⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that Kempe was unaffected by the intense spiritual experiences reported in the *Book*, merely that she used

⁵³ Light, “‘That sche schulde not etyn alone’”, p. 92.

⁵⁴ [when our Lady had come home and was lying down on a bed, then she made for our Lady a nice hot broth and brought it to her to comfort her] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 195; ch. 81.

⁵⁵ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, p. 142.

⁵⁶ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1989), p. 51.

⁵⁷ Raymond A. Powell, ‘Margery Kempe: an exemplar of late medieval English piety’, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 89 (2003), pp. 1–23, at p. 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–22.

them to her advantage. By promoting herself as an active participant in the Christian story, her affective piety works as a means both to remind the reader of the power of Christ and his mother and to reinforce the sanctity of Kempe herself.

Serving a caudle to Mary is not the first time Kempe is said to have provided a sacred subject with a drink. Early in the narrative she told Christ of her concern about getting to heaven because she is not a maiden and has sinned, and he assured her ‘þu xalt be ryte wolcome to my Fadyr & to my Modyr & to alle my seyntyngs in Hevyn for þu hast 3ouyn hem drynkyn ful many tymes wyth teers of thyn eyne’.⁶⁰ Later Christ again assured her that she would find joy in heaven as a reward for her piety and suffering on earth. Moreover,

þer is no seynt in Heuyn but 3yf þu wilt speke wyth hym he is redy to þe to comfortyn þe & spekyn to þe in my name. Myn awngelys arn redy to offryn thyn holy thowtys & þi preyeris to me & þe terys of thyn eyne also, for þi terys arn awngelys drynk, & it arn very pyment to hem.⁶¹

As with the wearing of white clothes by the Virgin Mary, which she herself later adopted, Kempe here drew the attentive reader to an earlier aspect of her narrative by recalling the container of pyment that she carried for Mary during the Visitation. Yet by providing wine-like tears to celestial beings rather than to the human Elizabeth, Kempe surpassed the Virgin Mary in her hospitality. She also engaged, albeit briefly, with theological debates on the nature of angelic diet, thus further underlining her status as a person of authority.⁶² The narrative strategy at work here is one of escalation: by showing herself to be an essential actor in the Christian story on earth, providing help and nourishment to Christ and his mother, Kempe finally established for herself the important role of providing sustenance in heaven.

Raine observed that ‘Margery does not offer hospitality in her own home’ and by providing the old woman in Rome with the good wine that she has purchased for herself, she reminds the reader that ‘she retains superior economic and social powers’.⁶³ Yet we know that before her religious conversion Kempe brewed ale for a time, and ‘was on of þe

⁶⁰ [you shall be very welcome to my father and to my mother and to all my saints in Heaven, for you have very many times given them the tears of your eyes to drink] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 52; ch. 22.

⁶¹ [there is no saint in Heaven who, if you wish to speak with him, is not ready to comfort you and speak to you in my name. My angels are ready to offer holy thoughts to you and your prayers to me and the tears of your eyes too, for your tears are angels’ drink, like spiced wine to them.] Ibid., pp. 160–1; ch. 65.

⁶² For the relative status of angels and saints in the medieval period: Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1480–1700*, (London, 2016), pp. 13–40. For analysis of ancient Jewish and early Christian commentaries on moments from scripture where angels have apparently eaten food: David Goodman, ‘Do angels eat?’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37 (1986), pp. 160–75.

⁶³ Raine, “‘Fals flesch’”, p. 26.

greatest brewers in þe town of N.’⁶⁴ Women brewers, known as brewsters or alewives, produced most of the ale consumed in medieval England and ale-brewing was mainly a domestic endeavour with women brewing ale in small batches and selling it from home; alehouses might also provide fairly basic food such as bread, cheese, spiced buns and cake.⁶⁵ Kempe was apparently successful in her brewing venture for three or four years when, despite her own ‘cunnyng in brewyng’ [knowledge of brewing] and having good servants, she could no longer produce ale, a predicament she and her neighbours interpreted as punishment from God for her pride and sin.⁶⁶ Mazzoni detected evidence of trauma from the failed venture, which ‘left its mark on Margery’s psyche and taste buds’ since in the rest of the book ‘she no longer refers to ale but prefers wine – the eucharistic drink – and on an occasion, even the still uncommon beer’.⁶⁷ She might also have been distancing herself from ale production and consumption to establish her status as a more elevated kind of hostess.

Brewsters had a bad reputation in the medieval period and were suspected of adulterating their ale with water, and even with salt and resin, as well as cheating their customers by selling short measures.⁶⁸ In William Langland’s late medieval poem *Piers Plowman*, Gluttony is on his way to church and confession when he is waylaid by a brewster called Betty who tells him ‘I haue gode ale, gossib’ [I have good ale, gossip] while Avarice describes how his wife, Rose the Brewster, sells her customers cheap and inferior ale that she passes off as the best.⁶⁹ In John Skelton’s poem ‘Elynour Rummyng’ (1550), the alewife is physically unattractive, described as being ‘ugly of chere, | Droupy and drowsy, | Scurvy and lowsy’, evoking the parasite-ridden poor that Kempe found so unpleasant.⁷⁰ We are not told whether Kempe sold ale or merely made it for private consumption, but it makes sense that she would want to distance herself from any association with alewives. Keen to assert her spiritual rebirth, wearing white with all its connotations of youth and virginity, Kempe would not wish to dwell on her ale-brewing or selling days. In her spiritual interactions with Christ, his mother, and celestial beings, she could play the part of a very different kind of hostess,

⁶⁴ [was one of the greatest brewers in the town of N.] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 9; ch. 2.

⁶⁵ Peter Clark, ‘The alehouse and the alternative society’, in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds), *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 47–72, at pp. 51, 54; Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (New York, NY, 1996).

⁶⁶ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 9; ch. 2.

⁶⁷ Mazzoni, *The Women in God’s Kitchen*, p. 106.

⁶⁸ P. W. Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Stroud, 1993), pp. 84–7.

⁶⁹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The Prologue and Passus I–VII of the B Text as Found in Bodleian MS. Laud 581*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett, (Oxford, 1976), passus 5, I. 310, ll. 219–25.

⁷⁰ John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 214, ll. 14–16. It was ordinarily women from the lower ranks who dominated the production and selling of specific food and drink, including dairy produce, in the period.

demonstrating Christian charity on her own terms and without the taint of commercialism while, crucially, presenting herself as a key player in the Christian story.

The pairing of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, discussed at the beginning of this article, is perhaps inevitable given their statuses as English medieval female mystics writing in the vernacular language. Yet unlike Julian, who only briefly recounted her experience of sickness at the beginning of her *Revelations*, Kempe was both creative originator and subject of her own historical narrative, assuming the *Book's* attribution to the woman from Bishop's Lynn is accurate and notwithstanding the third-person narration. When Kempe provides sustenance to the old woman in Rome and the friar who was robbed she gains in piety and security as much as she gives in effort and expense, and throughout her travels she is more often the recipient of hospitality than its provider. The *Book* is perhaps most remarkable when Kempe extracts herself from her medieval environment to participate in the biblical story and thus reimagines, and rewrites, religious history to her own advantage. Julian describes her experience of sickness by way of introducing the circumstances that led to her visions, but the main objective of her book was to explicate the mysteries of creation and salvation. When she famously describes holding the universe in the palm of her hand and observes that it is a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut and apparently as fragile, the reader is aware that only an exceptional individual would be granted such insight, but the focus is less on Julian herself than the permanence of the universe as a result of God's love.⁷¹

Like Julian, Kempe was apparently intensely affected by her visions, yet inserting herself as an active participant in the Christian narrative means the visions served as evidence for her claim to prospective sainthood as much as a means of revealing God's love. By describing herself as the provider of sustenance to Christ, his mother, and even the angels in heaven, Kempe subverts the traditional, male-authored, and officially sanctioned, genre of medieval hagiography. Where Julian uses food as a metaphor to assert God's love for the world and humanity in general, Kempe uses food and hospitality to assert his love for her specifically. Where Julian remains in seclusion, secreting herself from any hostility she might have faced, Kempe meets and eats with others, often, though not always, at the tables of her betters. Yet Kempe too removed herself from the world and it was specifically her active participation in those visions, where she was the recipient of sacred sustenance and herself provided sustenance to the sacred, that allowed her to create and control her narrative. By choosing and receiving the guests for whom she might perform the role of hostess, Margery Kempe rose above medieval social

⁷¹ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, p. 47.

and religious hierarchies to present herself as an ideal candidate for sainthood.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/1468-229X.13204>