

VISIONS: THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF MARGERY KEMPE

by

Rachael Jane Goddard-Rebstein

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## Abstract

My thesis project is an adaptation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* into the form of a play. Considered to be the first autobiography in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* tells the story of Margery Kempe, a fourteenth century woman who experienced visions of God, Jesus and the Devil and who became famous in England as a religious mystic. Her visions inspired her to travel alone throughout England, Europe and the Middle East and meet with some of the most powerful religious figures of her time. She inspired controversy through weeping copiously during religious ceremonies and speaking publicly of her visions and was put on trial at York, Cawood and Leicester for heresy. Margery Kempe recorded her experiences in the form of a book with the aid of a priest, as she was illiterate. Her book is one of the few existing examples of medieval women's writing, and provides a unique insight into the treatment of individuals who experienced visions during the medieval era.

My play examines how the tradition of female mystical piety influenced Margery Kempe's interpretation of her visions, and how her experience relates to that of individuals today who are diagnosed with conditions such as schizophrenia, temporal lobe epilepsy, postnatal psychosis and postnatal depression. In considering the latter, through the support of my supervisory committee member Dr. Todd Handy, I have read scholarly work from the fields of neuroscience and psychology. My play does not seek to diagnose Margery Kempe from the perspective of neuroscience and psychology, but rather to imagine how her experience of having visions might relate to that of individuals who are diagnosed with psychiatric and neurological conditions that are associated with hallucinations today. My play juxtaposes modern psychological perspectives on the phenomenon of hallucinations with medieval Christian beliefs regarding visions to demonstrate how cultural attitudes affect the treatment and perception of symptoms associated with madness, and how Margery Kempe coped with experiencing visions that set her apart from the rest of her community.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Rachael Jane Goddard-Rebstein.

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This thesis is dedicated to John Goddard

## **Neuroscience and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Approach to *The Book of Margery Kempe***

I first encountered *The Book of Margery Kempe* while completing my undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford. I was struck by the immediacy of Margery Kempe's narrative, which included details of Margery Kempe's daily life and her relationship with her husband John along with discussions of the religious beliefs of the period and extended descriptions of Margery Kempe's extraordinary visions. I thought that Margery Kempe's narrative would make for an engaging and well-structured play. Her story has a highly performative aspect that could be communicated effectively through adapting her *Book* into a play. In order to maintain her reputation as a religious mystic and defend herself against the life-threatening charge of heresy, Margery Kempe had to perform the role of a mystic in a manner that was perfectly aligned with doctrine of the Church. In my play, Margery Kempe performs the role of a religious mystic before the audience of the play in much the same way that she performed this role before individuals in her hometown of Lynn and powerful officials from the Church, who frequently viewed her with hostility and skepticism. My play dramatizes Margery Kempe's struggle to earn the approval of the Church and others within her community through effectively performing the role of a religious mystic.

In adopting the role of a religious mystic, Margery Kempe was following in the tradition of many other notable female mystics, including Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, and Marguerite Porete. Like Margery, these women reported experiencing visions of God and Christ, and took up ascetic lifestyles to prove their devotion to God. They performed acts of penance such as fasting and taking vows of chastity, cut themselves off from worldly ties, and dedicated themselves to praying for souls in purgatory. Margery Kempe describes her ascetic lifestyle in detail in *The Book of Margery Kempe* to demonstrate her legitimacy as a religious mystic. Soon after experiencing a vision of Jesus, she persuaded her husband to allow her to take a vow of chastity so that she could enter a mystical marriage with God. She also fasted for extended periods of time, wore a hair shirt as a punishment for her sins (an uncomfortable

garment made of coarse cloth or animal hair worn close to the skin), and prayed and performed rituals of penance on behalf of the souls of people in purgatory.

Her ascetic lifestyle was in part an imitation of the penitential practices of other female mystics, and in part an effort to experience compassion for the suffering of Christ, an emotion that female mystics believed was vital for true religious faith. Margery's copious weeping was an outward manifestation of her compassion, proof that she empathized with Christ's suffering. Margery Kempe performed the role of a religious mystic through copious weeping as well as penitential rituals and practices to demonstrate to others that she empathized with the suffering of Christ. When she visited the Mount of Calvary in Jerusalem, the site where it is believed that Christ was crucified, she had a vision of Christ hanging from the cross, his body mutilated and covered with wounds, and felt such strong emotions of compassion for his suffering that she fell to the ground and began to writhe and twist with pain and weep violently. Her extreme display of compassion for Christ's suffering was met, however, with a mixed reaction from others. Some believed that she was indeed experiencing the pain that Christ suffered while hanging from the cross, while others interpreted her extreme display of emotion as a sign that she was possessed by the devil, or suffering from a sickness of the mind or body. The mixed or outright hostile reaction of others to Margery Kempe's weeping on the Mount of Calvary and at other points in her book indicates the stigma attached to experiencing visions and displaying exaggerated or extreme emotions in the medieval era. During Margery Kempe's time, these emotions and behaviors were associated with madness or demonic possession. In spite of Margery Kempe's efforts to prove her legitimacy as a religious mystic, she could not prevent others in her community from attributing her visions to a bodily or mental sickness.

I increase the tension between Margery Kempe's desire to be perceived as a legitimate religious mystic and the tendency of others to perceive her behavior as a symptom of a mental illness by inserting the characters of four contemporary neurologists and psychiatrists into the play. The neurologists and psychiatrists represent more modern interpretations of Margery Kempe's visions, which are based on recent field developments. Through their characters, I explore the relationship between Margery Kempe's experience of having visions and that of individuals today who have



neurological and psychiatric conditions that are associated with symptoms of hallucinations and strong, overwhelming emotions of grief or religious epiphany. The inclusion of neuroscience and psychology in my play is not a means of diagnosing Margery Kempe, but rather of relating her experience to that of individuals today who experience what would have been more likely understood in the medieval era as divine visions and in the modern era as hallucinations and delusions. Schizophrenia entails hallucinations, typically defined as perceptions in any sensory modality without relevant and adequate external stimuli, and delusions, defined as beliefs held contrary to reality, firmly held in spite of evidence to the contrary. Margery Kempe's absolute belief that she can speak directly to God, and that she has been selected from the rest of the common people to receive Jesus' wishes and commands, would today most likely be diagnosed as a delusion arising from schizophrenia.

However, such a belief was held by powerful and influential mystics including Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena, whose visions were endorsed by the Church. In Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, she describes witnessing the Crucifixion, conversing with Christ, witnessing Virgin Mary during the Annunciation, and seeing an image of the devil. Hildegard of Bingen describes experiencing visions since the age of five. In her *Scivias*, published between 1151 and 1152, she records experiencing two types of spiritual visions: 'the Living Light' in which she saw nothing and 'the Shade of the Living Light', in which she saw a diffused radiance. For mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen, having visions entailed becoming unresponsive to and disconnected from the outside world, and completely immersed in mental images. Margery Kempe similarly records having visions of biblical figures and scenes from scripture, which appear to her to be more real than her immediate surroundings. The psychiatrists and neurologists in my play attribute her experience to schizophrenia, but Margery Kempe disputes their diagnosis. She viewed her visions as a gift from God and believed that they brought her closer to God, Jesus, and other biblical figures such as the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.

However, Margery Kempe viewed some of her visions in a more negative light. Her first visions took place shortly after the birth of her first child, during a period of prolonged physical illness and psychological suffering. She saw devils open their mouths

with burning flames and threaten to swallow her, and heard devils telling her to do the opposite of all Christian teaching and renounce her Christianity. She fell into despair, and tried to end her own life, believing that she was eternally damned. Her experience resembles that of individuals today who are diagnosed with postnatal psychosis and depression. Postnatal depression entails feelings of extreme hopelessness, guilt and despair that often lead to suicide and self-harm. Postnatal psychosis is a more extreme psychiatric condition that involves auditory, visual and olfactory hallucinations and delusions, and entails an increased risk of self-harm, suicide and infanticide. In my play, Margery Kempe's visions of hellfire and extreme feelings of guilt and despair lead the psychiatrists and neurologists to conclude that she suffers from postnatal psychosis. Their diagnosis reflects the response that psychiatrists would most likely have to an individual who displays symptoms similar to those of Margery shortly after childbirth. I relate Margery Kempe's experience to that of individuals today who suffer from postnatal psychosis and depression to reflect the severe impact that this condition has on individuals and their families, and to demonstrate how responses to symptoms such as seeing devils and experiencing emotions of extreme guilt and despair have changed between the medieval era and today.

Margery Kempe consistently rejects the neurologists' and psychiatrists' explanations for the causes of her visions in my play, as well as their attempts to describe her experience as the symptoms of a psychiatric condition such as schizophrenia or a neurological disorder such as temporal lobe epilepsy. Her resistance reflects her desire to be accepted as a medieval mystic, and her fervent belief that her visions proceed from God. Throughout her *Book*, Margery Kempe opposes the conclusion that her visions are the result of a bodily or mental illness. However, she goes through periods of self-doubt, in which she wonders if her visions are indeed from God or perhaps temptations sent by an evil spirit or the devil. When Margery Kempe meets with Julian of Norwich in around 1413, she seeks reassurance that her visions are indeed from the Holy Spirit. To Margery Kempe's relief, Julian tells her to trust her own feelings, and assures that her visions are indeed gifts from God. Margery Kempe's confessor also provides support for her visions by telling Margery that what she sees and hears is not the result of an evil spirit moving within her, but the working of the Holy Spirit. Female mystics such as Margery Kempe

depended on their confessors for legitimacy, particularly after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made confession a more integral part of medieval life. Female mystics traditionally discussed their revelations and visions with their confessor during confession, and the confessor often circulated the accounts of the mystic's revelations throughout the Christian community. Robert Spryngolde, the local priest of Margery Kempe's hometown of Lynn, fulfills this role for Margery Kempe. He transcribes Margery's autobiography on her behalf, so that the story of her visions can be communicated to the rest of the Christian community. He also legitimizes Margery Kempe's visions through his support, and advises Margery on how to interpret her visions.

Yet Margery Kempe's relationship to Robert is difficult and conflicted. His harsh response when Margery attempts to confess to a long concealed sin intensify the feelings of guilt and despair that she experiences during her long period of illness. He also regards her visions with initial skepticism, and is only persuaded of their authenticity when he reads of similar visions and emotions experienced by the saint Marie D'Oignes. His frequently critical attitude towards Margery contrasts with the unconditional love and support of Jesus, whom Margery converses with during her visions. In her book, Margery records receiving instructions from Jesus that contradict those of her confessor and choosing to obey Jesus first and foremost. In Chapter 2 of Book II, Margery travels to Danzig with her daughter-in-law without the permission of her confessor. When she expresses a wish to take leave of her confessor, Jesus tells her "Dowtyr, I wote wel, yf I bode the gon, thu woldst gon al redy. Therfor I wyl that thu speke no word to hym of this mater' (Kempe 391). When she returns to Lynn from Germany, her confessor is furious with her for having disobeyed him. Margery's willingness to override the authority of her confessor had serious implications for her status as a medieval mystic. Her independence was one of the many factors that led her to be accused of the heresy of Lollardy, a strain of anti-clerical thought that was regarded with fear and distrust by Church and government during her time.

The Lollard movement arose in late fourteenth century England, and its presence conditioned the response of secular and religious authorities to Margery Kempe. Lollards believed that everyone, including women, should be able to preach and access the bible in

the vernacular. They were characterized by anti-clericalism, a tendency to criticize the corruption of the Church, as well as skepticism of the sacrament of the Eucharist, a religious ritual that could only be performed by priests and that conferred special status on the clergy. They rejected the cult of the saints, pilgrimages, and all other aspects of late medieval Catholicism that were not grounded in scripture. Lollards made up only a small fraction of the population of England, but ecclesiastical and secular leaders viewed them as a serious threat to the social order. Lollard beliefs challenged the authority of the priesthood by contending that ordinary men and women could learn of God directly through scripture, without the aid of priests. Lollards also argued that preaching and educating others about the bible could be undertaken by any man or woman with sufficient knowledge of Christianity and should not be the preserve of priests.

Although initially popular in elite circles of government, Lollardy came to be associated with social unrest following the Great Revolt of 1381. In this major uprising, a wide spectrum of rural society, including many local artisans and village officials, rose up in protest of a royal official's attempt to collect unpaid poll taxes. Chroniclers blamed John Wyclif, the originator of the Lollard movement, for inciting the revolt and claimed that John Ball, a prominent preacher who was a leader of the rebels, was Wyclif's follower. Lollardy became politically and socially taboo and in 1382 the Church officially condemned Lollardy as the first major heresy to arise in England. In 1401 parliament passed *De Heretic Comburendo*, the first law providing for the burning of heretics. Heresy became a catchall term for anyone who could be perceived as nonconformist and anti-authoritarian, and was eventually applied by powerful religious and secular authorities including the Archbishop of York and the Mayor of Leicester to Margery Kempe.

Margery Kempe stood trial for heresy in Leicester, York, Cawood and Beverly in 1417 and was briefly imprisoned for the same offense. She also records being threatened with burning by a crowd of monks and laypeople outside a monastery in Canterbury, who pursue her crying 'Thow shalt be brent, false Lollare! Her is a cartful of thornys redy for the, and a tonne to bren the wyth!' (Kempe 95). The threat of burning was a very real one for religious mystics such as Margery. The Church's fear of nonconformity already claimed the life of the religious mystic Marguerite Porete (1250-1310). Marguerite Porete

published *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, an account of her visions and revelations, in vernacular French. It was subsequently widely circulated and translated into Latin, Italian, and Middle English. But Marguerite met with hostility from the Church and was arrested on charges of heresy in 1310. She was found guilty by the Inquisition and burned at the stake in the same year. Her story illustrates the risks involved in becoming a female mystic in the climate of unrest that characterized the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It is little wonder that in her description of her trial at York, Margery records that she trembled so much that she had to put her hands under her clothes so that her shaking might not be seen by the crowds of onlookers (Kempe 249).

Certain aspects of Margery Kempe's faith led secular and religious authorities including the archbishop of York and the mayor of Leicester to suspect her of the Lollard heresy. During her trial at York in 1417, a cleric accused her of violating St. Paul's doctrine that women should not preach, implying that she held the Lollard belief that ordinary men and women have the right to teach scripture. He believed that by publicly speaking of her visions and of God, Margery was usurping the traditional role of priests. In response, Margery stated "I preche not, ser; I come in no pulpytt. I use but comownycation and good wordys, and that wil I do while I live" (Kempe 249). She distinguished between the preaching of a priest and the form of communication that she used when speaking publicly of her visions, or when educating others as to the will of God. But in the eyes of the religious officials presiding over her trial, Margery Kempe's form of communication constituted a threat to the authority of the Church.

Margery Kempe could also be accused of anti-clericalism, another characteristic of the Lollard movement, because of her tendency to criticize members of the clergy and speak publicly against corruption within the Church. During her trial at York she related the story of a priest who witnessed a bear defecating beneath a beautiful pear tree, which she later revealed to be an allegory of corruption within the clergy. At other instances in her *Book*, Margery reprimanded members of the clergy for breaking God's commandments; she rebuked the Bishop of Lincoln for employing servants who swear oaths and chastised a monk for having sexual relations with married women. Even though she denied any desire to usurp the role of a priest, she adopted a position of moral authority akin to that of a member of the clergy, and spoke out publicly against

corruption within the Church. Her outspoken criticisms of the Church met with hostility and suspicion from powerful Church leaders. She called the Archbishop of York to his face a wicked man during her trial, and he replied ‘full boistowsly (roughly) “Why, thow....! What sey men of me?”’ (Kempe 250). Margery inspired outrage in one of the most powerful religious leaders of the country and spoke out against corruption within the Church in front of an audience of clerks, priests and laypeople, and during a time when her life hung in the balance. Her courage testifies to her belief in her power as a religious mystic, and her determination to speak out against corruption at all costs. Her strong, outspoken opinions made her a controversial figure in the eyes of the Church, and made her many enemies, including the Mayor of Leicester. The Mayor ordered her arrest in Leicester on charges of heresy in 1417, and spoke out against her during her trial. His opposition to Margery Kempe demonstrates that she remained a highly divisive figure, and that she alienated powerful secular leaders by speaking publicly of her visions.

In each of her trials, Margery Kempe attempted to counteract the opposition of hostile individuals such as the mayor of Leicester and prove that she was an orthodox Christian with no tie to controversial religious movements such as Lollardy. During her trial at Leicester, Margery Kempe was asked to describe her beliefs regarding the sacrament of the altar. Suspected Lollards were typically asked during their trials ‘whether a bishop or priest, being in mortal sin, can ordain, consecrate, transform, or baptize’ (Windeatt 234). Lollards questioned whether a priest who was in a state of sin could perform the sacraments effectively. Margery Kempe firmly refuted this Lollard belief in her trial when she stated that the sacrament of the altar was effective when performed by any priest, no matter how corrupt his manner of living. Margery Kempe frequently emphasizes her belief in the sacrament of the altar and in the importance of confession in her *Book* to defend herself from the charge of Lollardy. She cultivated a close relationship with her confessor, Robert Spryngolde, and gained the support of powerful Church leaders including the Bishop of Lincoln. In spite of her tendency to criticize the clergy for corruption and hypocrisy, Margery rejected the extreme anti-clerical sentiment of Lollardy and aligned herself with the Church. She valued the guidance provided by priests and friars, and was deeply hurt when her loud weeping led her to be shut out from the sermons of a famous friar who visited her hometown of Lynn.

Margery Kempe's status as a religious mystic depended on her ability to gain the support of powerful members of the Church. Her *Book* is in part an attempt to establish her reputation as a well-respected female mystic who is highly regarded by some of the most powerful and knowledgeable religious figures in medieval England. When Margery Kempe visits Julian of Norwich, she is reassured as to the validity of her visions and granted a place within the Church as a religious mystic. She continued to battle throughout her lifetime to maintain this place, but her meeting with Julian suggests that she believed that one existed for her within the Church.

The neurologists and psychiatrists in my play seek to undermine Margery Kempe's role as a religious mystic by attributing her experience to a psychiatric or neurological condition, rather than to divine influence. In my play, Margery Kempe views them as a threat to her status as a religious mystic. The individuals who attributed Margery Kempe's visions and weeping to sickness during her lifetime similarly threatened to discredit and undermine what she saw as revelations from God. They challenged Margery's core belief in the divine nature of her visions, a belief that fuelled her desire to become a medieval mystic. The neurologists and psychiatrists in my play embody a similarly antagonistic force to Margery Kempe. Their explanations for her visions as phenomena arising from chemical imbalances in the brain related to psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia or postnatal psychosis or depression or damage to neural networks related to neurological conditions such as temporal lobe epilepsy directly contradict Margery Kempe's belief that her weeping and visions are a gift from God. Any suggestion that Margery Kempe's experience was physical or mental in origin would fundamentally undermine her status as a medieval mystic, and her belief in the value and purpose of her visions.

I recognize that in inserting neuroscience and psychology into my play, I risk undermining what Margery Kempe saw as the fundamental purpose of her visions. Margery Kempe spent her life attempting to prove that her visions indeed proceeded from God, and the conclusions that modern psychiatrists and neurologists would draw when examining an individual who manifested her particular set of behaviors, emotions and perceptions would suggest exactly the opposite. My play explores the clash between Margery Kempe's beliefs and neuroscience and psychology. The tension between

Margery Kempe and the neurologists and psychiatrists who appear on stage demonstrates the conflict between Margery Kempe's beliefs and modern, scientific perspectives on the causes and nature of visions. To Margery Kempe, having visions was an exhilarating and sometimes terrifying experience that she believed brought her closer to God. From the perspective of modern neuroscience and psychiatry, Margery Kempe's experience might have more likely arisen from a chemical imbalance in the brain or damage to particular neural pathways. Rather than privileging one perspective over another, my play focuses on Margery Kempe's determination and resourcefulness in finding ways to navigate through a society that often viewed her with suspicion and hostility and her capacity to find meaning and comfort in her visions. My play invites modern audiences to reflect upon the discourses of psychology and neuroscience that condition their responses to Margery Kempe's visions, and to relate Margery Kempe's experience to that of individuals who experience visions today.

### **Following in the Footsteps of Margery Kempe: Fieldwork in the UK**

In April 2016, I was awarded the Graduate Student Research Award through the Faculty of Arts at UBC to help pay for a research trip to the United Kingdom. Prior to leaving for the UK, I applied for permission to view the one remaining fifteenth century copy of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is currently housed in the British Library in London. This manuscript was transcribed by a scribe named Salthows, whose signature appears on the final page. It was discovered in a home in Lancashire in 1934 by Hope Emily Allen. Prior to the discovery of the full text, all that was known of Kempe's book was a pamphlet by Wynkyn de Worde from 1501 that contained seven pages of excerpts from *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Modern editions of *The Book of Margery Kempe* are based on the Salthows manuscript. I wanted to learn more about the manuscript's appearance and its binding, script, and structure, so that I could use a prop for *The Book of Margery Kempe* in my play that physically resembles the Salthows manuscript. I wanted to incorporate physical aspects of the fifteenth century copy of *The Book of Margery Kempe* into my play, so that modern audiences could gain a sense of direct,



unmediated access to Margery Kempe's work and a deeper understanding of the form in which Margery Kempe's book has been passed down to modern readers.

I was granted permission to view the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and on August 3rd I met with Dr. Andrea Clarke, a curator of Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts at the British Library, to examine the manuscript. I immediately recognized the first paragraph of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as soon as Dr. Clarke opened the manuscript. The script was written in thick dark ink and the letters appeared slanted and indistinct. The scribe used traces of red ink to highlight particular words or phrases and marked the start of each new chapter with an enlarged letter decorated with wavy, ivy-like lines. The decorations suggested that great care had been put into enhancing the Book's visual appearance, an aspect of the fifteenth century manuscript that is lost in modern editions of the text. I was also surprised to see that practically every page of the manuscript was covered with symbols and illustrations, including hands in the margins pointing to particular paragraphs, small hearts, textual annotations, and even miniature drawings of Churches and bishops. Dr. Clarke explained that these annotations were added by later readers of the manuscript, as it was a common practice for readers from the fifteenth century onwards to mark texts as they were reading them. For instance, the small hearts were added to mark out sections of the book where Margery Kempe described the love of God burning in her chest, the drawings of Churches and bishops corresponded to sections of the book where Margery Kempe describes meeting members of the clergy, and the drawings of hands pointed to passages that readers wished to return to later. It was fascinating to observe how early readers had interacted with the text through drawings and annotations. I also noted that the Book was in very poor condition. The pages were dotted with mold, and the corner of each page was missing. Dr. Clarke explained that the manuscript had spent five centuries stored in dank, unheated conditions before it was discovered in 1934 and donated to the British Library. I incorporate physical details of the fifteenth century copy of *The Book of Margery Kempe* into my play. For the scenes in which the neurologists and psychiatrists examine the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the prop that they use closely resembles the actual manuscript in the poor condition of its pages. By including a version of the book within my play that closely resembles the fifteenth century copy of the manuscript, I give the

audience a clearer sense of the history behind the Book's discovery. I encourage audiences to reflect upon how the visual appearance of the Book and the circumstances of its discovery affect modern readers' responses to the text. Audiences would also feel closer to Margery Kempe because of their physical proximity to an object that closely resembles the fifteenth century copy of her text.

On August 6th, I travelled from London to Canterbury, where I visited the historic site of Canterbury Cathedral. Margery visited Canterbury in around 1413; in one of the most terrifying scenes in her Book, she attracted hostility and suspicion because of her violent weeping in a church in Canterbury, and was chased from the church by a crowd who threatened to burn her. I included this scene in my play, and I was especially eager to see the surroundings in which it may have taken place. I believed that visiting Canterbury Cathedral would give me a clearer mental image of the location where a key scene in my play takes place, and would enable me to empathize more with Margery Kempe's experience. Visiting Canterbury Cathedral gave me a deeper understanding of the significance of Churches and sites of pilgrimage for medieval individual such as Margery Kempe. I viewed stained glass windows that dated from as early as the twelfth century, and which Margery Kempe would have seen upon visiting the Cathedral. These windows were an important source of biblical knowledge for individuals such as Margery Kempe, whose inability to read or write meant that they could not access the bible directly. One of the windows depicted Adam digging the earth, wearing a peasant's costume. Another window depicted Jesus' ancestors wearing colorful medieval costumes and surrounded by intricate floral designs. The window depicting Jesus' ancestors had been placed on the East side of the Cathedral, so that it would be illuminated by the rising sun, symbolizing the death and resurrection of Christ. The striking visual displays within Canterbury Cathedral were calculated to arouse strong emotions in medieval onlookers, emotions of wonder and compassion that Margery Kempe describes experiencing during her visions. Viewing these images led me to reflect upon the importance of visual displays for individuals such as Margery, as a means of learning about the scripture and feeling connected to biblical figures such as Jesus and his ancestors. As I walked through the space that Margery Kempe had inhabited, I felt immersed in the medieval culture of pilgrimages and mystical piety that had influenced Margery Kempe. I took pictures of the

stained glass windows and other decorations within the cathedral, as well as notes. I incorporate these notes and images into the scene in my play that takes place in the Canterbury Cathedral. In this scene, I project an image of the interior of Canterbury Cathedral onto the screen at the back of the stage. The sight of Canterbury Cathedral immerses the audience in Margery Kempe's world, as they view the space where Margery Kempe experienced one of the most terrifying events recorded in her book. The audience can feel physically connected to the real-life events that occurred in Canterbury Cathedral by viewing images of the space, in the same way that the experience of visiting Canterbury Cathedral enabled me to more vividly imagine the event that Margery describes taking place in that space.

On August 9th, I travelled from Canterbury to Oxford. I met with Dr. Helen Barr, a fellow and tutor in English Literature and Vice-Principle of the college of Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford. We discussed my play, and Dr. Barr drew my attention to the lack of mention in my play of the sexual psychosis and sexual temptations described by Margery Kempe in her book. Margery Kempe describes some of her most horrific visions as being sexual in nature, with the devil presenting sexual temptations before her, and also describes her attraction to another man in her hometown of Lynn. In an earlier version of my play, I included a scene where the man who Margery is attracted to offers to seduce her and later spurns her, an incident that triggers some of Margery's most terrifying visions. The incident suggests Margery's fear and guilt regarding her sexuality, emotions that she expresses on multiple occasions when describing her most terrifying visions. The most recent version of my play suggests Margery Kempe's negative attitude towards sexuality by including multiple scenes where Margery declares her desire to live chaste. However, I cut the scene where Margery's friend offers to seduce her from the final draft of the play. I felt that the character of Margery's friend was not developed enough, and that he did not play enough of a role in Margery Kempe's story to justify including him in this play. In the final draft of my play, I focus instead on Margery Kempe's relationship with her husband John, and her negative attitude towards sexual relations with him. I also do not portray the sexual aspects of Margery Kempe's psychosis in my play. I felt that including explicitly sexual material in my play would mean that the play would be less likely to be performed for a general audience.

On August 13th, I travelled from Oxford to King's Lynn. Margery Kempe was born in King's Lynn in around 1373 and lived there for the majority of her life. She is a well-known figure in King's Lynn and the surrounding area; the local history museum contains an exhibit on her, complete with a map showing the route of her pilgrimages throughout Europe and the Middle East and a video display of an actress playing Margery. My main purpose in visiting King's Lynn was to conduct fieldwork in St. Margaret's Church, which Margery Kempe visited frequently. She describes having some of her most vivid and emotionally affecting visions within the Church. St. Margaret's Church was also the place where Margery Kempe was severely injured by a falling piece of masonry and roof timber. She attributed her miraculous recovery from injury to divine intervention. On another occasion, St. Margaret's Church caught fire and was saved by a sudden snowstorm, which Margery believed was brought on by her prayer for help. I remembered these incidents while surveying the interior of St. Margaret's Church. Viewing the medieval roof timbers of St. Margaret's Church, which were decorated with small carved faces for the amusement of medieval churchgoers, enabled me to better imagine the setting in which these key incidents from Margery Kempe's life took place. I felt physically closer to Margery Kempe while walking around a space that she had visited so frequently during her life, and that was so significant to her personal development. I viewed medieval stained glass windows bearing images of Mary Magdalene and St. Margaret of Antioch, figures whom Margery Kempe mentions in her book. She describes having visions of Mary Magdalene and her mental image of this saint may have been influenced by the visual depictions of these figures that she encountered every day in Church. Examining the stained glass depictions of Mary Magdalene enabled me to better imagine how Margery Kempe would have pictured this saint. Walking around St. Margaret's Church led me to reflect upon the incidents that took place within the Church that are mentioned in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, from the occasion on which Margery was severely injured by a piece of falling roof timber to the fire that destroyed the Church in 1421. I found that examining medieval artifacts and architecture within the Church enabled me to picture these incidents with more precision and detail and to more easily imagine and empathize with Margery Kempe's emotions on

these occasions. Surrounded by images and objects that Margery encountered in her day-to-day life, I felt physically closer to her and her world.

The final location I visited was Leicester. Margery Kempe was put on trial and briefly imprisoned in Leicester in 1417 on charges of heresy, mostly brought about by the mayor of Leicester. I included the scene of Margery Kempe's trial in Leicester in my play, as it struck me as one of the most gripping and suspenseful scenes in her book. Margery Kempe is questioned on her belief in the sacrament of the altar and her decision to wear white clothes, which were traditionally reserved for virgins and novice nuns. Her life hangs in the balance and her safety rests solely on her ability to prove the orthodoxy of her beliefs. Exploring the Church of All Saints in Leicester enabled me to better imagine the setting in which Margery Kempe's trial took place. I also found that exploring the Church enabled me to better imagine the experience of medieval churchgoers. Similarly to St. Margaret's Church in King's Lynn, the pews and wooden ceilings were decorated with small figures with grotesquely caricatured faces and distorted bodies. These figures were presumably intended to interest and amuse medieval churchgoers, and viewing them gave me a sense of the tastes and humor of their intended audience. I also took notes on particular features of the Church of All Saints such as the brick walls, the wooden altar, and the long pews, so that I could incorporate these details into the scene of Margery Kempe's trial at Leicester. By incorporating physical details of the Church of All Saints into my play, I would enable audiences to feel physically closer to the actual space in which Margery Kempe's trial took place. The set of that particular scene is designed to highlight for modern audiences the reality of Margery Kempe's experience. Viewing the architecture of the site where Margery Kempe's trial took place would lead modern audiences to perceive Margery Kempe as an actual person, rather than a fictionalized historical entity. Their heightened sense of the reality of Margery Kempe's experience would cause audiences to be more engaged with the drama of Margery Kempe's trial. Similarly, exploring the Church of All-Saints in Leicester gave me a renewed sense of the reality of Margery Kempe's experience. Details of the brickwork on the walls and the carvings on the pews led me to reflect upon the trial that had taken place within the building in 1417, and how Margery's perception of her surroundings must have affected her feelings. I imagined that the interior of the Church

would have appeared very imposing to Margery, and would have heightened her anxiety during her trial. I strove to communicate this understanding of Margery Kempe's experience in my play and I used details from the Church of All-Saints in Leicester to create a vivid and realistic depiction of the space in which Margery Kempe's trial took place.

## **List of Characters/Dramatis Personae**

**Margery Kempe:** Middle-class wife of burgess of Lynn, mother of fourteen children.

**Robert Spryngolde:** Margery's confessor and the local priest at Lynn.

**John Kempe Sr.:** Margery's husband. Works as a brewer with a tenement in Fincham Street. A bearded, middle-aged man.

**Jesus:** A handsome, bearded man in his early thirties.

**Demons:** Played by child actors wearing masks and horns

**Devil**

**Neurologists/Psychiatrists**

- **Dr. Baxter**
- **Dr. Brown**
- **Dr. Bones**
- **Dr. Boris**

**Minor Parts/Extras:** Can be doubled depending on the size of the cast

- **Bishop of Lincoln and four clerks**
- **Pilgrims**
- **Friar**
- **Abbot, Mayor and Dean of Leicester**
- **Other monks and laypeople**

## **The Set**

A large screen is set up behind the actors, onto which images are projected to suggest the interiors of different rooms or outdoor scenes. For instance, in the scene in which Margery Kempe meets with the Bishop of Lincoln, images of high medieval windows are projected onto the screen to suggest the grandeur of the Bishop's residence. In other scenes, such as the scene that takes place in Canterbury Cathedral or the Church of All Saints at Leicester, photographs from the actual locations are projected onto the back of the stage. Images of angels and devils can be projected onto the screen to suggest events taking place in the minds of the characters. In scenes that take place in character's inner lives, or in a space outside of the chronology of Margery Kempe's life, the screen is almost entirely black.

## **Props**

The main props are a bed that is placed in the center of the stage in scenes that take place in Margery Kempe's bedroom, a large wooden table that is used in scenes such as Margery Kempe's interview with the Bishop of Lincoln and Margery Kempe's dinner with other pilgrims, and a single pew and an altar with candles and a crucifix that is used to suggest the interior of a church. Another prop is the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is a stack of dried old papers that is carried by characters such as Margery Kempe and Robert Spryngolde.



## Act 1

### Scene 1

[Setting: The stage is dark and empty]

[Enter Margery from stage left, wearing a white dress and a white mantle that reaches down to her ankles. She wears a gold ring on one finger. She walks to the center of the stage and faces the audience. A spotlight switches on and shines on her, giving her an unearthly glow]

Margery: I am Margery Kempe of Lynn, a poor unworthy creature who received the visions of the Holy Spirit, and who dedicated her life to serving God and telling others of her visions. Here begins a short treatise for sinful wretches, wherein they might have great solace and comfort and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our Sovereign savior Jesus Christ. [calls] John? John!

[Enter John Kempe from stage left. He hurries over to Margery and takes her hand]

John: Yes, Margery, my dear? [squints into the spotlight]

Margery: I shall tell the story of how I was stirred to Jesus' love and how I passed through a time of great pain and suffering and was unstabled in my wits, and how I was afterwards inspired to follow in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ. John, are the children here?

John: I believe some of them are. [calls] John! Mary! Matilda! Come hither!

[three children enter from stage right and walk nervously towards the center of the stage, holding hands. They stand behind Margery, huddled close together.]

Margery: I married John Kempe, a respectable burgess in the town of Lynn, when I was around twenty years of age, and bore him fourteen children. And it was after I had conceived my first child, and was afflicted with a great sickness, that I was first inspired to enter the way of the Lord.

[Enter Dr. Baxter, Dr. Brown, Dr. Bones and Dr. Boris from stage right. They are dressed in the white coats of physicians, which appear to glow in the spotlight. Dr. Baxter carries a thick gray book under one arm. Margery stops speaking and stares at them]

Dr. Baxter: Carry on!

Dr. Bones: Don't mind us! We will merely observe and take notes.

Margery: W-who are you? Where have you come from? [clutches John's hand tightly]

Dr. Brown: I am a neurologist. My name is Dr. Brown. And these are my colleagues, Dr. Bones, Dr. Boris, and Dr. Baxter. [Each neurologist smiles and waves in turn when Dr. Brown says their name]

Dr. Bones: I am a psychiatrist, Margery.

Margery: A psy—a psy—

Dr. Bones: I treat disorders of the brain. Issues arising from chemical imbalances in the brain...[Margery looks at him blankly]...um...which produce symptoms that are commonly associated with madness.

Margery Kempe: [recoils] I am not mad!

Dr. Baxter: No, no, of course not. We just think that modern psychology and neuroscience—

Margery Kempe: [to doctors] Begone!

Dr. Baxter: If you would just wait one moment, we could discuss—

Margery: I do not wish to discuss anything.

[The doctors retreat to the back of the stage and whisper amongst each other]

Margery: I asked you to leave!

Dr. Bones: Of course. We will leave you to tell your story. Come along, gentlemen and ladies. [He exits, followed by the other four doctors. Dr. Baxter is still carrying the small gray book]

[John Kempe squeezes Margery Kempe's hand. She takes a deep breath]

Margery Kempe: I fell into deep despair... and I called for my confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde, because I wished to confess to a sin. [calls] Robert! Master Robert!

[Enter Robert from stage right.]

Robert: I am Robert Spryngolde, the local priest of Lynn and confessor to Margery Kempe. I wrote out *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as Mistress Kempe can neither read nor write.

Margery Kempe: May I continue? I called for Master Robert Spryngolde, for I feared that I would be damned if I did not confess before I died...I feared that it would soon be too late.

[Enter Dr. Baxter, reading from the Book]

Dr. Baxter: Aha, here is the passage I was referring to...now this could be a case of severe postnatal depression.

[John, Margery, Robert and the children turn and stare at him. He exits hastily.]

Margery: I remember it well...it was a time of great darkness.

## **Scene 2**

[Setting: Margery Kempe's bedroom]

[A large four-poster bed stands in the center of the stage, with two seats on either side of it. Margery lies in bed and John Kempe Sr. and Robert Spryngolde are seated on either side of her. Margery is moaning and twisting around in bed.]

[Enter Dr. Bones from stage right, carrying a notebook. He approaches the bed, seemingly unnoticed by the other actors, and begins taking notes]

John Kempe Sr.: What ails thee, Margery?

[Margery moans and turns away]

Robert: Methinks thou shouldst depart, Master John. Your wife is troubled in her soul—she desires to speak to me alone.

Margery: Yes—yes, you must go, John. I must speak with Robert. I have—I have something to confess.

John Kempe Sr.: Are you sure—

Margery: Yes, John. Please leave.

[John Kempe Sr. hesitates, then stands up and walks offstage from stage left. There is the sound of a door closing.]

Dr. Bones: [to Robert] She is exhibiting many of the signs of postnatal depression. Low mood, decreased appetite, excessive feelings of guilt and self-blame.

[Robert nods, and then leans closer to Margery]

Robert: What is it, Margery? What have you to confess?

[Margery opens her mouth and closes it again. There is a long silence]

Margery: I cannot—I cannot speak it—

Robert: But you must, Margery! On peril of your soul, you must be shriven of your sin! Come, what have you to confess?

Dr. Bones: Forcing her to speak might precipitate a psychological crisis. I would advise against it.

Margery: [begins to cry] Please—do not make me—it is so hard. I have thought of this for—for a long time and I cannot—

Robert: Come, enough of these hesitations! In the name of the Lord, I demand that you make your confession!

Margery: No! It is too much! I cannot! I cannot! [Begins to moan and twist around in bed]

Dr. Bones: [writing in notebook] Extreme distress and feelings of despair. Agitation, restlessness and anxiety.

Robert: [stands up] Then I cannot help you. Your soul is lost forever.

[Exit Robert from stage left]

Margery: No! Robert! Robert, come back! I am ready to confess!

Robert: [from offstage. His voice sounds abnormally loud and deep, like the voice of God] It is too late for that now, Margery. You have forsaken God and given your soul to the devil.

Dr. Bones: [Looking around to find the source of the sound] What was—?

Margery: No! It is not too late! I repent! I repent! Come back and let me confess my sin!

[There is the sound of a door closing. The stage darkens and a dim red light shines on Margery Kempe]

Dr. Bones: [writing in notebook] Disconnection from reality. Clear symptoms of psychosis.

Margery: J-John? Jesu? God? Where are you?

[Images of flames are projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. A faint heartbeat thuds in the background]

Margery: Robert! Robert, where are you? Please come back!

[Enter the Devil from stage left, played by the same actor who plays John Kempe. He wears a padded suit and a massive, horned headpiece that makes him look much taller than the other actors. He carries a long staff.]

Devil: Robert is gone, Margery. They are all gone. But I am here.

[Margery gasps]

Margery: Satan? Can it be?

Dr. Bones: Now this *is* interesting! [calling] Dr. Baxter! Dr. Baxter, could you come here?

[Enter Dr. Baxter from stage right]

Dr. Bones: Persistent hallucinations and delusions—I think we could be looking at a case of postnatal psychosis.

Dr. Baxter: Very likely. I fear this could be a psychiatric emergency. Not much we can do in this time and place, unfortunately. This is long before the era of medication.

Dr. Bones: Very interesting from a diagnostic perspective, however—I wonder if this woman could be suffering from schizophrenia? Or an extreme form of postnatal depression?

Dr. Baxter: Her thinking is clearly very influenced by the pervasive Christian culture of her time. She believes that she is eternally damned and that her visions of demons and devils have been sent as a punishment for her sins.

Devil: [to doctors] Quiet one moment! You are distracting her! [advances towards Margery] I have come to take you to hell, Margery Kempe!

Margery Kempe: Please, spare me! Christ, Jesu, have mercy upon me!

Devil: It is too late for that, Mistress Kempe. Many a time you have said you would confess and many a time you have instead kept your sin to yourself. Many a time you have listened to me when I told you that all should be forgiven, since God is merciful enough. But I lied! God sees you, Margery! God watches your deeds and hears your hidden thoughts! And God judges you, Margery! You are not worthy of His forgiveness! You have forsaken him, now and forever. You have lost the way to heaven!

Margery: But what can I do? How can I be forgiven for my sin?

Devil: There is no hope, Margery. No hope. [calling] Come demons! Come hither from the gates of hell!

[Enter five demons from stage left, played by the three children who appeared in the previous scene. Each wears a mask and a pair of horns.]

Demons: [chanting in sing-song voices] Hell and damnation! Hell and damnation! Hell and damnation await thee, Margery Kempe!

Margery: God, Jesus, save me!

Dr. Bones: What can we do? How can we help her?

Dr. Baxter: There is nothing to be done. We can only wait for this episode to pass.

[The stagelights go black. The heartbeats grow louder and faster. The sound of Margery Kempe's cries for mercy and the chanting of the demons can be heard from the bed. Suddenly everything goes silent]



[After a minute or two, a spotlight falls on Dr. Bones and Dr. Baxter.]

Dr. Baxter: W-what happened?

Dr. Bones: I believe she has become psychotic. And it appears she has entered a dysphoric state.

[The stage lights go up, so that the stage is fully lit. Margery is lying on the bed, completely immobile. The devil is standing on one side of the bed and the three demons are seated on the bed around her]

Margery: What would you have me do?

Devil: It is very simple. Forsake your Christendom, your faith, and deny God, His mother and all the saints in heaven. Deny all good works and good virtues. Slander your mother, your father, your husband and all your friends.

Margery: I will do all that you command and more.

Devil: We will return.

[Exit the devil and the three demons from stage left. Margery remains lying in bed, breathing heavily.]

[Enter John Kempe from stage right]

John Kempe Sr.: Margery? Margery, my dear? Are you all right?

Margery: Out, Satan! You are no husband of mine!

[John Kempe Sr. gasps and runs offstage. The stage goes black]

### Scene 3

[Setting: Margery Kempe's bedroom]

[The stage is dark. Margery is lying in bed, asleep. She has ropes wrapped around her arms and legs and her wrists and ankles are tied to the bedposts. Dr. Bones is seated in the same place at the far side of the stage, reading from the Book of Margery Kempe.]

[Enter Dr. Baxter from stage right]

Dr. Baxter: [to Dr. Bones] Any change?

Dr. Bones: [shakes head] She has remained psychotic with very little alteration for eight months now. Persistent delusions and hallucinations—reports hearing voices and speaking to the devil. And her depression has worsened. She has tried to kill herself several times and engaged in self-harm—it has become necessary to keep her restrained.

Dr. Baxter: Poor woman!

[Margery wakes up and begins to weep]

Margery: O Jesu—Jesu—why hast thou forsaken me?

[Enter Jesus from stage right, wearing a purple mantle and white robes. He walks over to Margery and sits at the foot of her bed. He gently takes Margery's hand.]

Jesus: Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, when I forsook never thee?

[Margery gasps. A spotlight falls on Jesus. He stands up and exits from stage right, passing Dr. Bones and Dr. Baxter. There is a blast of choral music]

Dr. Bones: Fascinating, fascinating!

Dr. Baxter: Another hallucination!

Dr. Bones: Yet this one is different from the others! I believe we need a second opinion!  
[calling] Dr. Boris! Dr. Boris!

[Enter Dr. Boris from stage right]

Dr. Boris: Yes?

Dr. Bones: This twenty-year-old woman presents with hallucinations, delusions and persistent, severe depression. But a moment ago she experienced another hallucination. She saw Jesus descending from heaven to speak with her and heard him say the words [reads from Book] ‘Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, when I forsook never thee?’  
What is your verdict?

Dr. Boris: Have you considered a possible diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy?

Dr. Bones: No, that had not even crossed my mind.

Dr. Boris: In this case I think you’ll find that partial seizures of the temporal lobes of the brain can cause visual and oral hallucinations as well as strong emotions, including a sense of profound religious epiphany.

Dr. Bones: It does appear to fit in this instance...

Dr. Baxter: I still stand by the diagnosis of schizophrenia!

Margery: John! John! Where are you, John?

[Enter John Kempe Sr. from stage left, holding a candle. He is trembling and looks very afraid]

John Kempe Sr.: H-here, Margery, my dear!

Margery: Come hither, John! I wish to speak with you!

[John Kempe Sr. hesitates, then slowly approaches Margery's bed. He remains standing a few feet away from her, shaking.]

John Kempe Sr.: W-what is it, Margery? What has happened?

Margery: John—might I have the keys to the buttery?

John Kempe Sr.: [thrown] The buttery? But why?

Margery: Just so I might take meat and drink as I did before?

[John Kempe Sr. begins to back away]

John Kempe Sr.: No, I don't think—

Margery: Please John, by all the mercy in heaven and for the sake of him that died on the cross, I pray you, fetch me the keys and unbind my hands. I am half perished of hunger and cold—please John, for my sake.

[John Kempe Sr. hesitates, then turns and begins to walk away]

Margery Kempe: John! Come back! It is the will of God!

[John Kempe Sr. stops, then turns back around and approaches Margery's bed. He begins untying her wrists and ankles, still trembling]

Margery Kempe: Thank thee, John! May God reward thee for this deed of charity!

John Kempe Sr.: [muttering to himself] I do not know why I always believe thee, Margery!

Margery: And where—where are the children?

John Kempe Sr.: [calling] John! Mat! Matilda! Boris!

[Enter three children from stage right. They are holding hands and look very afraid]

John Kempe Sr.: Where are the others? Mary and Tom, and the other John?

Child 1: They would not come.

Margery: Come here—John [hesitates] and Mary...

[The three children hesitantly approach Margery's bed]

Child 2: Are you all right, mother?

Margery: I am now, my child. I have spoken with God almighty.

[The children recoil]

John Kempe: It is all right, children. Mother is well again.

Margery Kempe: Yes, I am well...I am very well...I am... [begins to weep]

John—John, my love— [She sits up in bed and holds out her arms for John. Margery and John embrace. John begins to cry.]

John: [sobbing] Margery—I've missed you...

Dr. Boris: Interesting. The temporal lobe seizure appears to have altered her brain.

Dr. Baxter: Her mood has stabilized. And her hallucinations have ceased.

Dr. Bones: For the time being. But with such severe cases the outcome is always unpredictable.

Dr. Boris: Have some faith! All may yet turn out well!

[Dr. Bones shakes his head and exits from stage right, followed by Dr. Baxter and Dr. Boris. Margery and John Kempe continue embracing each other and weeping. The three children huddle close to them. The stage goes dark.]

#### **Scene 4**

Setting: An Anchorite's Cell

[The stage is dark. The image of the interior of a small room is projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. A single window lets in a thin stream of light. A chair and table stand in the center of the room, next to a narrow bed. A small crucifix hangs from the wall. Julian of Norwich is sitting on the chair, perfectly still, with her hands clasped together in prayer. Her eyes are closed]

[A faint knocking sounds from offstage]

Julian of Norwich: Come in.

[A door creaks open offstage. Enter Margery from stage right. She walks hesitantly into the room, looks left and right, and jumps when she sees Julian]

Margery: I am sorry—I did not mean to disturb—

[Julian of Norwich opens her eyes. She remains sitting perfectly still in her chair with her hands clasped together]

Julian: Are you Mistress Kempe of Lynn? The one who weeps and speaks to God?

Margery: I—I am. And are you—Dame Julian of Norwich?

Julian: I am.

Margery: I was bidden in my soul to come speak to you—to show you the grace that God has put in my soul—for you too have spoken with God—and—and you too have followed his commands—and I must know—whether the voice that speaks to me is indeed God or if the voice of an evil spirit. For I know you are an expert in such things and can give good counsel. I must know whether to obey this voice—whether it is indeed the voice of the Holy Spirit. Can you tell me this?

Julian: What does this voice tell you to do?

Margery: To worship God. To follow in the path of righteousness, and to do right by my fellow Christians.

Julian: Then it is the voice of the Holy Ghost.

Margery: Are you sure? I often wonder if it is an evil spirit. How can you know? How can you know if all these high speeches and contemplations indeed come from God almighty?

Julian: Because God almighty moves souls to chasteness and to charity, and I know that this is thy manner of living, Mistress Kempe. Thou hast a great gift—thou art truly blessed.

Margery: Thank thee.

Julian: Doubt not thy visions and revelations, Mistress Kempe. He that is always doubting is like the waves of the sea, which are unstable and unsteadfast and evermore moved by the wind. Such a man is not likely to receive the gifts of God. When a man receives such miraculous tokens as you have received, he must steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost resides in his soul. I have heard of thy great weepings and cryings in Church and in other places. And I know that no devil nor evil spirit can cause such great mournings and weepings, for tears torment devils and spirits more than the pains of hell. Thy tears are holy, Mistress Kempe.

Margery: Thank thee. I believe thee. I shall never doubt my visions again—I shall weep and pray and obey the commandments of the Lord! I have been granted a great gift—I shall use this gift to benefit my fellow Christians.

[Julian of Norwich nods and sits back in her chair. She closes her eyes. A few moments pass]

Margery Kempe: I must depart—I have much to do. But thank thee for thy wise and true sayings—I shall never forget thee. [weeps]

[Julian opens her eyes]

Julian: Mistress Kempe?



Margery Kempe: It is the Holy Ghost! I feel Him stirring within me at thy holy words!  
[weeps louder]

Julian: Trust thy feelings, Mistress Kempe. Only the Holy Ghost could move thee to such weepings and mournings.

Margery Kempe: I know—I know! I feel the Holy Ghost in my soul! I cannot stop—I cannot! I cannot!

Julian: I believe thee.

Margery Kempe: Thank thee! Oh, thank thee! [continues to weep louder and louder] I must go—my husband waits for me. God bless, keep and preserve thee!

Julian: God bless thee, Margery! Remember, trust in thy visions! They are from the Holy Spirit!

[Margery nods and hurries out, clutching her cloak to her face. The door slams behind her. Julian of Norwich winces at the sound and closes her eyes, leaning back in her chair. The stage goes dark]

## **Scene 5**

[The stage is bare. The stagelights are on to give the impression of daylight. The sound of birdsong can be heard in the background. Images of hills are projected onto the screen at the back of the stage.]

[Enter Margery and her husband from stage left. John Kempe is carrying a bottle of beer and Margery is carrying a cake. John Kempe reaches out and taps Margery on the shoulder]

John Kempe Sr.: Margery?

Margery: Yes, John?

John Kempe Sr.: Margery, if a man were to come with a sword and threaten to smite off my head unless we made love as we did before, tell me truly—for you say you will not lie—whether you would suffer my head to be struck off or else suffer me to make love to you again?

[A faint rumble of thunder sounds in the distance and the image of a devil is briefly projected onto the screen behind Margery and John Kempe Sr.]

Margery: Alas, sir—why talk you of such things when we have been chaste these eight weeks?

John Kempe Sr.: Because I would know the truth of your heart.

[Margery stops walking and puts down her cake.]

Margery: To be truthful, John—I would rather see you be slain than that we should turn again to our uncleanness.

John Kempe Sr.: [flinches and looks away] Then you are no good wife.

[John Kempe Sr. puts down his bottle of beer and walks over to the far side of the stage. He stands facing away from Margery, his arms folded over his chest and his head down. Margery comes up behind him]

Margery: John—what is the cause that you have not touched me these past eight weeks, when I have lain each night by your side in bed?

John Kempe Sr.: Because you would not let me, Margery! Because I was made so afraid by your cryings and your weepings that I dared not!

Margery: Good sir, I pray you, grant me that which I ask, and I shall pray for you to be saved by the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for you to have great rewards in heaven. I pray you, allow me to make a vow of chastity at the hand of a bishop.

[John Kempe Sr. turns around suddenly and grabs Margery by the wrists. She struggles against him. The sound of thunder again echoes in the background and more images of devils flash on and off on the screen behind Margery and John Kempe Sr.]

John Kempe Sr.: No. No, I will not grant you your desire. For now I may make love to you without it being a deadly sin and then I might not do so.

Margery: If it be the will of the Holy Ghost for you to fulfill my desire, I pray God that you consent to it!

[John Kempe Sr. lets go of Margery and steps back, breathing heavily]

Margery: I have spoken to the Holy Ghost, John. And it is his will that we should live chaste.

[John Kempe turns and walks away. After a few moments, he approaches Margery]

John Kempe: Margery, grant me my desire and I shall grant you your desire. My first desire is that we should lie in bed together as we did before. My second desire is that you should pay my debts ere that we travel to Jerusalem. And my third desire is that you should eat and drink with me on Fridays, as you used to do.

[Margery slowly shakes her head]

John Kempe: Please, Margery. All I desire is that we should lie together and take meals together, in the manner of a husband and wife.

Margery: No, sir. Never, not as long as I live, shall I consent to break my Friday fast. For my lord God has bidden me to never eat or drink on Fridays, and I must abide by his commandment.

John Kempe Sr.: Well—then I shall make love to you again.

[He tries to kiss her, but she pulls away]

Margery: Please John—please. At least let me say my prayers first. Let me alone, I pray you, for I must speak with Jesus Christ.

John Kempe Sr.: Very well—but I will return and then I will have my desire.

[Exit John Kempe Sr. from stage right]

[Margery kneels. She begins to cry. A spotlight falls on her and the screen at the back of the stage fades to black]

Margery: Lord God, thou knowest everything—thou knowest what sorrow and strife I have endured these past three years to remain chaste. And now I may have my desire at last if I should cease to fast on Fridays, but I dare not break thy commandment. Blessed Lord, thou knowest that I would not go against thy will, and much is my sorrow unless I can find comfort in thee. Blessed Jesu, make thy will known to me, that I may follow and fulfill it with all my might.

[A blast of choral music sounds and the light shining on Margery grows brighter. Images of angels flicker on and off on the screen behind her]

Jesus: [from offstage] Margery, my love—you shall have your desire. Go again to thy husband and tell him that you shall take meat and drink with him on Fridays as you did before. For, daughter, I bade thee fast so that thou might sooner obtain and get thy desire to live chaste, and now it is granted thee. I would that thou no longer fast, daughter. Therefore I bid you, in the name of Jesu, eat and drink as thy husband doth.

Margery: [closes her eyes] Thank you, Jesus, for thy grace.

[Enter John Kempe Sr. from stage right]

John Kempe Sr.: Margery. I have come to have my desire.

[Margery stands up and wipes away her tears]

Margery: Sir, if you like, you shall grant me my desire and you shall have your desire. Promise me that you will not come into my bed, and I promise to pay your debts ere I go to Jerusalem. Maketh my body free to God, so that you ask for no debt of matrimony to be paid to you after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink with you on Friday as I did before.

John Kempe Sr.: [hesitates] You shall pay all my debts.

Margery: Every last penny, I swear.

John Kempe Sr.: And we shall eat and drink together every Friday, just as we used to?

[Margery nods]

John Kempe Sr.: And you swear this?

Margery: By all the saints in heaven, and by the blood of him that died on the cross, I swear.

John Kempe Sr.: Then—then... [sighs deeply]. Then you shall live chaste, Margery. May your body be as free to God as it has been to me.

[Margery kneels down and clasps her hands in prayer. A spotlight shines on her and more images of angels appear on the screen behind her. A fanfare of trumpets sounds in the background.]

Margery: Thank you, God, for your deed of high mercy and charity to a poor unworthy wretch who does not deserve thy great goodness. Thank you, by all that is sacred and holy, for granting me my desire. Come, John! We must say the Lord's prayers in the worship of the trinity for the great grace that He has granted us today. And then we may eat and drink together in great gladness of spirit, before we go forth to Brydlyngton-ward.

[John Kempe Sr. kneels down beside Margery. The stage goes dark.]

## **Scene 6**

[Setting: The Bishop of Lincoln's residence]

[An image of the interior of the Bishop's room is projected onto the back of the stage. It is a large, well furnished room with high windows decorated with stained glass, stone walls and a high stone ceiling. A large table stands in the center of the room, covered with dishes full of colorful and artfully arranged food. The bishop and three clerks are seated around the table, eating and talking]

[Enter a servant from stage left]

Servant: My lord! [bows]

Bishop: Yes, what is it?

Servant: My Lord, there is a woman here to see you by the name of Margery Kempe.

[The clerks instantly fall silent]

Bishop: Margery Kempe? Bring her in quickly, man, and make haste! I would not have her wait a moment longer.

[Exit Servant. A door opens and closes offstage. A minute later, the servant re-enters from stage left with Margery Kempe. She bows low before the bishop and kneels upon the ground]

Bishop: Arise. Are you the famous mystic, Margery Kempe?

Margery: [stands] I am, my lord.

Bishop: I am truly honored to make your acquaintance. For what purpose do you seek an audience with me?

Margery: I have come to show you my meditations, and high contemplations, and other secret things that our Lord has showed to my soul. I also wish to speak of my desire to travel to the Holy Land and see the places where my Lord lived and died and suffered his passion.

Bishop: I would be right glad to hear thee.

Margery: [glancing at the Bishop's three clerks] I might not share such holy things, my Lord, in the presence of such diverse company. To your ear alone I must speak of God.

Bishop: [to the clerks] Leave us—I shall summon you again shortly.

[The clerks stand up from the table and file out from stage left, muttering amongst themselves and casting dark looks at Margery Kempe. Margery approaches the bishop and whispers in his ear. The bishop raises his eyebrows and exclaims ‘Indeed!’ and ‘the lord have mercy!’ several times. At last Margery falls silent and steps back]

Bishop: I thank thee, Mistress Kempe, for having come to speak to me today and for sharing the secrets of thy soul. These are high matters and full devout matters, inspired by the Holy Ghost—truly I have never heard the like before.

Margery Kempe: I am but a poor instrument of God’s will, my Lord, and I do not deserve such thanks.

Bishop: Thy feelings should be written, Mistress Kempe! Thou shouldst make a book to chronicle thy life, for the sake of thy fellow Christians!

Margery Kempe: No, my lord. It is not God’s will that my feelings be written so soon. But upon another matter, my Lord, I urgently require thy assistance.

Bishop: I will do anything within my power to assist you.

Margery Kempe: If it pleases you, my Lord, I am commanded in my soul that thou shalt give me permission to take the mantel and the ring and clothe myself all in white clothes as a token of my vow to live chaste.

Bishop: You wish to take a vow of chastity? Are you not married to John Kempe, a burgess of Lynn?

Margery: My husband also desires that I take a vow of chastity, my Lord.

Bishop: I have never heard of such a thing.



Margery: I have spoken to God, my Lord, and it is his will that I should live chaste.

Bishop: And your husband consents to your taking this vow, you say?

Margery: Indeed, my Lord.

Bishop: Have you proof that he has consented to this?

Margery: I pray you, let my husband come into your presence and you shall hear what he shall say. [calling] John! John, my dear!

[Enter John Kempe Sr. from stage left. He walks nervously, hesitantly, towards the bishop and kneels down at the bishop's feet.]

Bishop: Arise. [John Kempe Sr. stands] Master John Kempe, is it your will that your wife shall take the mantel and the ring and that ye both shall live chaste?

John Kempe Sr.: Ya, my lord. And in token that we both vow to live chaste, here I offer my hands into yours.

[He reaches across the table and takes the bishop's hands. The bishop holds his hands for a moment, and then abruptly drops them and steps back]

Bishop: I must consult with my clerks. I—I cannot act in haste. I shall return in a moment.

[Exit the bishop from stage left, looking worried]

[John Kempe Sr. takes Margery's hands. They remain holding hands in silence for the next few minutes. Raised voices can be heard from offstage]

[The bishop reenters from stage left with the three clerks. The clerks are saying things like ‘but Sir, ye must take better advisement’ and ‘sir, trust not this woman’s words’. The bishop sits back down on his chair and his clerks sit next to him. The bishop raises his hand and his clerks fall silent]

Bishop: Margery, you and your husband asked me to grant you permission to take the mantle and the ring and to wear white as a mark of your vow to live chaste. I have consulted with my clerks upon this matter, and I cannot grant your request.

[The stage suddenly goes dark. A single spotlight falls upon Margery. She turns away from the bishop, breathing heavily and fighting back tears, and walks towards the front of the stage. She kneels down.]

Margery: God, I pray thee—let me know how I should be governed in this matter, and what answer I might give the Bishop.

[There is a burst of choral music. Margery remains kneeling with her eyes closed. A smile slowly spreads over her face. After a minute, she stands up and crosses herself]

Margery: Lord, I thank thee. I shall do as you command.

[The lights come on again. The bishop, clerks and John Kempe are all staring at Margery]

John: Margery, are you all right?

Margery: Yes, John, yes. [to the bishop] My Lord bade me to tell you, sir, that thou darest more the shames of the world than the perfect love of God. Though ye will not grant me permission to wear white now, it shall be done another time when God will.

Bishop: [starts up] How dare you—

Clerk: My Lord! [pulls on his sleeve and shakes his head]

Bishop: [sits down and controls himself with difficulty] I—I am not accustomed to being addressed in such a manner. You are very bold, Mistress Kempe.

Margery: Sir, I am only a humble servant of God's will. I will wear white, my Lord, as the Lord has commanded me to take a vow of chastity and I shall obey his commands. I bid you good day, my Lord, and I pray that the Lord will forgive you for your mistake. Come, John!

[She takes her husband's hand and begins to lead him offstage]

Bishop: [calling after her] Wait! Mistress Kempe!

[Margery halts and turns to look at him. The bishop hurries towards her, fumbling with a bag of coins that he unearths from his robes]

Bishop: Here. Here is twenty-five shillings and eight pence for you to use to buy clothing for thy pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

[Margery takes the money and pockets it]

Margery: I thank thee, my lord, for thy good deed on this day. Thou shalt have thy reward in heaven. Come, John.

[She exits from stage left leading John Kempe Sr. offstage. The door closes behind them]

Bishop: I know not what to make of that woman.

## Act 2

### Scene 1

[The stage is dark. The silhouettes of three crucifixes appear on the screen on the back of the stage, against the backdrop of a shadowy mountain]

[Enter Drs. Bones, Baxter, Boris and Brown from stage right]

Dr. Baxter: Where are we?

Dr. Bones: On Mount Calvary in Jerusalem. Many believe this is the site where Jesus was crucified.

Dr. Boris: Look!

[The four doctors retreat to the far side of the stage. Enter a friar, three pilgrims and Margery Kempe from stage left, walking in single file. The friar walks at the front of the line, carrying a crucifix in one hand and a wax candle in the other. Margery Kempe walks at the back of the line, wearing a white dress and a long white mantle]

Dr. Baxter: How has she made it all the way from England to Jerusalem?

Dr. Boris: She is completely alone—I wonder where her husband and children are.

[The friar stops and turns to face the other pilgrims]

Friar: This is the place where our Lord suffered most. Where his precious body was raised up on the cross, all rent and torn with scourges.

[An image of Jesus hanging from the cross appears on the screen at the back of the stage.  
Low choral music sounds. Margery begins to weep]

Margery: Jesu—Jesu—I feel thy suffering and thy pain.

Dr. Baxter: What is happening?

Dr. Boris: I knew it! I knew it! This is just the sort of religious stimulus that could trigger a temporal lobe seizure.

Friar: He hung upon the cross, a crown of thorns upon his head, his blissful hands and tender feet nailed down, and blood flowing from the wound in his side.

[The image of Jesus grows louder, and a red stain spreads outwards from Jesus' body.  
Margery's weeping grows louder.]

Margery: Oh, Jesu—Jesu—how you suffered. Your poor body all torn and bleeding, more full of wounds than a dovehouse of holes. Oh, Jesu—oh, the pain! The pain!

Pilgrim 1: Hush, for God's sake! I cannot hear the friar.

Friar: So much suffering...so much pain...and also the pain of our Lady and Saint John and Mary Magdalene and all the others who loved our Lord.

[The image of Jesus at the stage grows even larger. It suddenly dissolves in a burst of red color. Margery howls and falls to the ground.]

Margery: [screams] Oh Jesus! Lord forgive me!

[All the pilgrims jump and stare at her.]

Friar: What ails thee, lady? Why dost thou weep so?

Pilgrim 1: It is a wicked spirit that vexes her.

Pilgrim 2: It is a sickness.

Pilgrim 3: Methinks she has drunk too much wine.

Dr. Boris: Temporal lobe epilepsy, undoubtedly.

Dr. Brown: You think so?

Dr. Boris: Certainly—temporal lobe seizures frequently manifest themselves as a progressive march of symptoms. There is the strong emotion—the weeping—and now a loss of motor control—

Dr. Brown: Her experience also resembles that of other female mystics, who describe feeling great pity and compassion for Christ's suffering and witnessing firsthand events from Christ's life during their visions.

Dr. Boris: You mean that she is also following the tradition of female mystical piety? Maybe so—but I would not rule out a neurological explanation. Can anything be done?

[The friar approaches Margery and kneels beside her]

Friar: Lady, canst thou hear me? Here--this may revive thy strength.

[The Friar reaches into the satchel by his side and takes out a small bag of herbs and spices. He empties them into his hand and holds them out to Margery.]

Dr. Boris: I doubt that giving her herbs to smell will make any difference. Better let her seizure take its natural course.

[Margery's weeping gradually quietens down and she grows still.]

Friar: Lady?

Margery: I have seen Jesus Christ, the Lord of Heaven. I have seen the day on which he died on the cross.

Friar: Can this be true?

[Margery Kempe nods]

Margery: I saw it just as clearly I see you now, sir.

Friar: This is a gift from God. Thou art truly blessed.

Pilgrim 1: Do not trust her, sir! She has a sickness in her mind!

Friar: I believe thee, lady. What is thy name?

Margery: M-Margery Kempe of Lynn, sir.

Friar: I greatly desire to hear more about thy visions, Margery Kempe of Lynn.

Margery: I—I would be most honored to speak with you.

Dr. Boris: And I would like to hear more as well!

Dr. Bones: And I too! This is a fascinating case!

[The friar helps Margery to her feet. He walks offstage with his arm around her. She walks unsteadily and appears weak and shaky. Drs. Boris, Bones, Brown and Baxter follow at a distance. The stage goes dark.]

## **Scene 2**

[Setting: An inn in Venice]

[The image of the interior of a small wooden room brightly lit by candlelight is projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. Laughter and music can be heard in the distance. An empty table stands in the center of the stage, with four wooden chairs around it. A servant enters bearing two goblets of wine, which he lays down next to each other. He exits and returns with two goblets, and continues to enter and exit bearing goblets and plates of food throughout the scene. ]

[Enter a priest from stage right, walking arm in arm with a friar]

Priest: I must thank thee, good sir, for consenting to join our little company for dinner. We are truly honored to have you amongst us.

Friar: No trouble, no trouble! I greatly desired to speak with you, especially after meeting with one of your company—a woman by the name of Margery Kempe.

[The priest's face falls. He lets go of the friar's arm]

Priest: We do indeed have a woman of that name in our fellowship.

Friar: Then you are truly blessed, sir! She is one of the most extraordinary people that I have ever had the good fortune to meet—such high contemplations and meditations of our Lord! Such revelations of heaven and of eternity! I venture to say, sir, that her extraordinary gifts might even inspire jealousy and envy among priests!



Priest: [coldly] You are mistaken, sir. I could never be jealous of one such as her. She is nothing. A nobody. Pay no heed to her visions and revelations, for they are only deceits and illusions, born out of the sickness of her mind.

Friar: [shocked] But—

Priest: Say no more, I pray you. She is coming this way.

[Three other pilgrims enter from stage right, talking and laughing, followed by Margery. Her head is down and her manner is despondent. She is dressed in a short, ragged gown that reaches just above her knees. She is barefoot.]

Friar: Mistress Kempe? Why art thou dressed in that manner?

Priest: Hush, sir. Do not speak to her. She is but a fool, sir, and will not answer in a rational manner.

Friar: But this is preposterous! I conversed with her not two days ago on many high matters of divinity and spiritual truth!

Priest: All lies, I promise thee. She knows not what she says—it is the devil that speaks through her mouth.

[Margery silently walks past the priest and friar sits down at the end of the table. She bows her head over her plate. The other pilgrims ignore her and continue to talk amongst themselves]

Friar: What ails thee, Mistress Kempe? What has happened to you?

[Margery does not answer. She continues to stare at her plate]

Pilgrim 1: It is no good talking to her, good friar! One might as well speak to a stick or a stone.

Pilgrim 2: [mouth full] Pay no heed to her, friar! She is always like this, when she is not weeping or speaking of God!

Pilgrim: Sir, canst thou command her to eat dinner with us and to leave off her weeping and speaking of God? Else we would not have her any longer in our company, for she has grown to be a great nuisance and attracts scorn and mockery wherever we travel.

Friar: No, good sirs. I will not make her eat flesh while she may abstain from eating it and be better disposed to love our Lord. Were any of you to vow to walk to Rome barefoot I would not persuade him out of his vow while he might fulfill it, so neither will I bid her to eat flesh while our Lord gives her the strength to abstain. As for her weeping, it is not in my power to restrain it, for it is the gift of the Holy Ghost. As for her speaking, I will pray her to cease only until she comes into the company of men who will hear her with better will than you do.

[The three pilgrims and priests start up from the table at once. Two of the pilgrims lay their hands on their swords]

Priest: How dare you, sir? You insult our hospitality!

Friar: You do not deserve to have such a holy woman in your company. Her high meditations and holy revelations are wasted upon thee.

Priest: You take her then! Take her as your own if you so admire her! We will have no more to do with her. Good day to you, sir! Come, fellows!

[Margery starts up]

Margery: No—I beg you—have mercy—

Priest: I have suffered your weeping and speaking of God for long enough, Mistress Kempe. You have no place in this company. Come, fellows.

[The priest marches out of the room, followed by the three pilgrims. Margery follows, weeping]

Margery: I beg you—for the sake of him that died on the cross—by all that is good and holy—

[The door slams. Margery stands for a moment in silence. Then she sinks to her knees and weeps louder, holding her head in her hands]

Margery: Oh Jesu—Jesu—what shall I do?

[The friar approaches Margery and stands beside her]

Friar: Fear not, Margery. The Lord is with thee, and thou hast many friends.

Margery: But, sir—I now have no money to travel with back to England. For I fear greatly that they shall withhold my gold and keep my belongings for themselves. I know not what to do, sir. I am all alone in this strange land.

Friar: I shall ordain for thee, Margery, and ensure that they return thy gold to thee. And I shall also arrange for thy English money to be exchanged, and help thee as though thou hadst been my mother.

Margery: Thank thee! God bless thee for thy kindness! [continues to weep louder and louder. The friar pats her shoulder.]

Friar: God shall provide for thee, Margery, for He knows that thy intents are holy. Have no fear.

### **Scene 3**

[The sound of seagulls and the ocean can be heard in the background]

[Enter Margery and the friar from stage right. They are covered with sand and dirt and browned by the sun.]

Margery: God be praised! I never thought I would set foot upon the shore of England again!

[Margery falls to her knees and kisses the ground. The friar does the same. He is weeping and shaking.]

Friar: Praised be to God for bringing us here in safety! I never thought we would survive the storm.

[Margery stands up and fumbles with a bag at her side. She flips it upside down and empties a handful of coins on the ground.]

Margery: Ah, God be praised! Now I have some money that I might offer for the worship of God when I come to the Church in Norwich.

Friar: Margery, I marvel that you can be so merry and yet have so few earthly goods and have travelled so far from thy home.

Margery: I have great cause to be merry and joy in our Lord, who has helped and succored me and brought me to England again in safety, blessed and worshipped must he be.

Friar: God bless and keep you, Margery. I would that I could help thee in thy journey to Norwich, but I have no pennies in my purse. I fear that we must part here.

Margery: The Lord Himself will aid me in my journey to Norwich, and from thence to my home in Lynn. I must thank thee for thy great kindness to me during my journey. The lord shall reward thee for the goodness thou hast shown.

[She embraces the friar]

Friar: Trust in the Lord, Margery, for he shall lead thee on the path of righteousness. Trust thy visions.

Margery: I will, I promise thee. Farewell! God keep and preserve thee!

[She turns and walks unsteadily off the stage.]

Friar: [weeping] Farewell, Margery! God bless thee and aid thee in thy journey!

## Act 3

### Scene 1

[Setting: Canterbury Cathedral]

[An image of the interior of Canterbury Cathedral is projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. The image shows the high vaulted ceiling of the Cathedral, the towering stone pillars, and the stained glass windows at the far end of the Cathedral. The interior of the Cathedral is filled with light, which appears to pour in through the stained glass windows. A high altar stands at the back of the stage, just in front of the screen. It is covered with a cloth made of richly decorated fabric, and a large gold crucifix stands in its center. There is a long wooden pew on the left side of the stage. Margery and John Kempe Sr. are seated side by side at the pew, praying silently. A monk and two laypeople stand beside the altar, talking in low voices. ]

[Margery begins to weep, loudly and copiously.]

Monk: Silence, woman! Cease that noise!

Layperson 1: Did you not hear the holy man, mistress?

[Margery continues to weep. The monk and laypeople approach her.]

Monk: [beside Margery] Are you deaf? Did you not hear me tell you to cease your weeping?

Margery: [weeping louder] John—John—tell them that I may not choose but weep when my Lord commands it! Tell them, John!

[John Kempe Sr. stands up and slides out from behind the pew. He walks towards the altar and stops in front of the crucifix. The monk follows him]

Monk: Is that your wife, sir?

John Kempe Sr.: No, sir. She is no wife of mine.

Margery: [gasps] John—John, how could you—?

[The monk walks back to Margery. He and the other two laypeople stand around her, staring down at her.]

Monk: [roughly] You have no place within this church, mistress! Get thee gone!

Layperson 1: If you do not leave now, we shall have to remove you from this Church by force.

Margery: You shall not lay a hand upon me! My Lord Jesus Christ will not allow it!

[The secular man seated beside Margery grabs her by the wrists and begins to drag her forcibly out from behind the church pew. She cries out and struggles against him]

Margery: John—John, help me! Help me, John!

[John Kempe Sr. kneels down before the altar. He clasps his hands in prayer and closes his eyes]

Margery: John, can you not hear me? Help me, John!

[Enter an elderly monk from stage left. He wears furred robes and appears more senior than the other monk]

Elderly Monk: Stop! Unhand that woman!

[The monk and laypeople freeze instantly and release Margery. The elderly monk approaches her]

Elderly Monk: Tell me mistress, what is thy name?

Margery: I am Margery Kempe of Lynn, sir.

Elderly Monk: And what is the cause of this disturbance?

Monk: This woman weeps and moans and sobs so much that none of us can hear to pray in this place of worship! She will not desist even when asked and she will not leave when commanded to do so!

Elderly Monk: Where is thy husband or father, Mistress Kempe, who should accompany thee in this holy place?

Margery: My husband is there, sir.

[She points to John Kempe Sr., who quickly exits from stage right]

Elderly Monk: I command you to leave this place immediately and return only when accompanied by thy husband or father.

Margery: [weeps] Please, sir—I have travelled from Norwich to see this sight...

Elderly Monk: Silence! Cease thy weeping!

Margery: Sir, if I weep, it is the will of God, and not mine own will.

Elderly Monk: What canst thou say of God, woman?



Margery: I both speak of him and hear of Him.

Elderly Monk: Heresy! No woman may preach the word of God! That is the task of priests and holy men.

Margery: I hear God's words each day, sir, and I feel the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Elderly Monk: Thy words are madness. I wish that thou were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no man should speak with thee or hear thee.

Margery: Ah sir, you should support God's servants, and yet you hold against them. I pray you, give me leave to tell you a tale.

Elderly Monk: I charge thee, leave this sacred space, or I shall have to take action against thee.

Margery: If you would listen, sir, you would know that I speak only God's truth.

Elderly Monk: [folds his arms over his chest] Very well then. Tell thy tale, and I will judge whether thou canst speak of God.

[Margery walks to the front of the stage and faces the audience.]

Margery: [addresses the audience] There was once a man that had sinned greatly against God, and when he confessed his sin to a priest, the priest commanded him as an act of penance to hire men to chide him and reprove him for his sins, and give them silver for their labor. And one day he came across a group of men who all despised him as you despise me, and spoke harsh, cruel words to him. But the man only laughed and smiled at their hard words. So the greatest master of them all said to the man: 'Why laughest thou,

wretch, when thou art greatly despised?’ And the man said to him ‘A, sir, I have great cause to laugh, for I have many days put silver out of my purse and hired men to chide me as a punishment for my sins and today I may keep silver in my purse, I thank you all.’

[Margery laughs and looks back at the men standing behind her. They remain stony-faced and silent]

Margery: Right so I say to you, worshipful sirs, that while I was at home I sorrowed that I had not the shame, scorn and reproof that I deserved for my sins. I thank you all, sirs, highly, for the shame, scorn and reproof you have bestowed upon me this afternoon, praised be God thereof.

Elderly Monk: [points to Margery] Heretic! Take her and burn her!

[The men rush forward, knocking over the Church pew with a tremendous crash]

Men: [in unison] Thou shalt be burnt! False Lollard! False Lollard!

[Margery cries out and runs offstage. The men pursue her, crying, “Thou shalt be burnt! False Lollard! False Lollard!” Their voices fade into the distance. The stage goes dark.]

## **Scene 2**

[Setting: Outside Canterbury Cathedral]

[The light is dim to suggest twilight. The stage is bare.]

[Enter Margery from stage right. She is panting and gasping and close to tears.]

Margery: Where am I? Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me!

[Margery staggers to the front of the stage and collapses to her knees. She clasps her hands together and closes her eyes]

Margery: Blessed Lord, help, keep and preserve me—I do not wish to be burned! Not even for thy love—I do not wish to be burned! [weeps]

[Enter two young men from stage right. They are dressed in aristocratic, courtly clothing, with tights, pointed shoes and trimmed hats. One of them is played by the same actor who plays Jesus (Young Man 1).]

Young Man 1: Who goes there?

[Margery gasps and leaps up]

Young Man 1: Art thou Margery Kempe of Lynn?

Margery: That—that is my name, sirs.

Young Man 2: I have heard much of you, Mistress Kempe. Art thou not a heretic and a Lollard?

Margery: N-no sirs, I am neither a heretic nor a Lollard.

Young Man 1: And where is thy husband? Master John Kempe, a burgess of Lynn?

Margery: I know not, sirs.

Young Man 1: And where is thy inn?

Margery: I know not the street, sirs, but I know it is in a Dutchman's house.

Young Man 1: We shall accompany thee to thy hostel, and there I trust thou shalt find thy husband.

[Margery breathes a sigh of relief and relaxes]

Margery: Thank thee, kind sirs. May the Lord bless thee for this deed of charity.

Young Man 1: No thanks are necessary, Mistress Kempe. It is our Christian duty.

[Margery begins to weep, loudly and copiously]

Young Man 1: What ails thee, Mistress Kempe? Why dost thou weep so?

Margery: I—I am reminded of the great goodness and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Take no heed of it, gentlemen—I—I might not choose but weep.

Young Man 2: [to young man 1] This is the great gift of the Holy Ghost that we had heard of. [to Margery] Thou art truly blessed, madam.

[Young Man 1 takes Margery Kempe's arm and escorts her offstage, as she continues to weep. Young Man 2 follows in solemn silence]

### **Scene 3**

[Setting: The Church of All Saints in Leicester]

[An image of the interior of the Church of All Saints in Leicester is projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. The image shows brick walls and a high wooden ceiling, as well an altar with a large gold crucifix resting in its center. Just in front of the screen is a row of stately, imposing-looking chairs. There are wooden pews on either side of the stage, with two or three monks and laypeople seated within them. There is the sound of crowds murmuring and distant organ music.]

[Enter the abbot of Leicester, the dean of Leicester, a friar preacher, and the mayor of Leicester. They take the seats behind the high altar.]

[Enter Margery from stage left, handcuffed and dressed all in white. She is led forward by a priest and is trembling violently]

Margery: [to herself] Please God, give me the grace, wit and wisdom to answer this day as might be the most pleasing and worshipful to You, the most profit to my soul and the best example to the people. Please God, let me be acquitted of any charge of heresy.

[The priest leads Margery towards the altar. The people seated at the pews fall silent. Margery kneels at the feet of the Abbot]

Abbot: Margery Kempe, you are brought here today to the Church of All Saints in Leicester to answer charges of Lollardy and heresy, brought against you by the mayor of this town. You may rise.

[Margery stands. The friar preacher places her hand upon the bible]

Friar: Do you swear, upon this holy book, that you shall answer truly the articles of the faith as you feel them in your soul?

Margery: I do.

Abbot: Do you believe that the blessed sacrament of the altar is always effective when performed by a priest? Or do you that a priest who is a state of sin cannot perform the sacrament?

Margery: I believe that when a man has taken the order of the priesthood, no matter how corrupt his manner of life, if he says duly the words over the bread that our Lord Jesus

Christ said when he celebrated the Last supper, I believe that the bread becomes the Lord's flesh and blood and is no longer material bread, and that the sacrament may never be unsaid once it is said.

Abbot: She speaks well.

Mayor: In faith, she means not with her heart what she says with her mouth!

Abbot: What say you, Mistress Kempe, to the charges of the mayor?

Margery: [to the Mayor] Sir, you are not worthy to have been mayor. Our Lord God said, ere he took vengeance upon Sodom and Gomorrah, "I shall come down and see". And that was only to show men such as you that you should punish no one without knowing if they deserve to be punished. And, sir, you have done the contrary to me this day, for you have caused me much pain and suffering for a thing I am not guilty in. God forgive you for it.

[The Mayor leaps up]

Mayor: You witch! You harlot! I know why thou goest in white clothes—thou art come hither to have our wives away from us and lead them with thee! You would have every woman wear white and leave her husbands as you have done!

Margery: [takes a deep breath] Most worshipful sirs, I will tell you the real reason that I go in white clothes. I had a vision of our Lord and he bade me wear white clothes, ere I went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And so I told my confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde, of my vision. And therefore he charged me that I should go thus to Jerusalem, for he dared not go against my feelings for fear of God. And therefore, sir, if the Mayor would know why I go in white, you may say that my confessor bade me to go so, and then you shall not lie and he shall know the truth.

Abbot: [to the Mayor] Sir, you have charged this woman for a crime of which she is not guilty. Her confessor charged her to wear white clothes and she has a duty to obey him.

[The Mayor stands up and points at Margery]

Mayor: [shouts] I will not let thee go hence for anything that thou canst say! Thou art a witch, and thou shalt be burned!

Margery: [to the mayor] Sir, I pray you, for the sake of him that died on the cross, be in charity with me and forgive me in any thing that I have displeased you. [weeps]

[The mayor opens his mouth to speak, but the Abbot shakes his head. The mayor sits down and he and the Abbot talk in low, hushed voices, the Mayor shaking his head and pointing at Margery while uttering suppressed exclamations. After a few minutes, the mayor sinks back into his chair, glaring at Margery, and the Abbot stands]

Abbot: The charges against thee are dropped, Mistress Kempe. We can find no evidence of heresy. But the mayor requires that you travel to the Bishop of Lincoln, and obtain a letter from him to secure thy release.

Mayor: Thou mayst go free, Mistress Kempe, as long as thou canst obtain a letter from my lord of Lincoln.

Margery: I will! I will! Thank you, my lords, for the charity and wisdom thou hast shown this day! God be praised for this verdict! God be praised! [bursts into tears]

[The people seated in the pews erupt into loud chatter. The stage goes dark]

#### Scene 4

[Setting: Robert Spryngolde's residence]

[The image of the interior of a small, darkened room is projected onto the screen at the back of the stage. The room is narrow and windowless and lit only by a few candles. There is a small table in the center of the stage with a quill pen, an inkpot, a bible and a pile of papers resting on top of it, and two small wooden chairs on either side of it. Robert kneels in front of the table, his hands clasped in prayer.]

[A loud knocking is heard from offstage]

Margery: [calling from offstage] Master Robert? Master Robert Spryngolde, are you at home?

[Robert sighs, crosses himself and continues to pray]

Margery: Master Robert! I have brought again the book! The book that you could not read!

[More knocking from offstage. Robert shakes his head and continues to pray.]

Margery: [In a deep, sonorous voice] Master Robert! Open this door! It is the will of God!

[Robert throws up his hands]

Robert: Lord have mercy!

[The knocking grows louder and more impatient. Robert slowly gets up, shaking his head, and walks offstage. There is the sound of a heavy door creaking open.]



Robert: [from offstage] Mistress Kempe?

Margery: [from offstage] Master Robert Spryngolde! God be praised! I feared you were not at home!

[Enter Margery from stage left, carrying a crumpled sheath of papers under one arm. Robert follows at some distance behind]

Robert: Mistress Kempe, thou knowest that thou shouldst not take the name of God in vain!

Margery: Ah, but Robert, who is better able to speak of God than one who has spoken with him? For Robert, God has commanded me—

Robert: Yes, I know, but—

Margery: To record my feelings and revelations—

Robert: Yes, Margery—

Margery: And most high contemplations—

Robert: Margery, I cannot—

Margery: For the profit of my fellow Christians—

Robert: Margery, stop—

Margery: In the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost, amen! Do you still doubt these words, Robert? Do you deny that I have been granted the grace of God to receive His visions and revelations?

Robert: Margery, I cannot read your manuscript! It is not written in good English or German, or any tongue that a man may make sense of!

Margery: So said the other scribe as well, the one that you sent me to. He would not for cowardice speak to me or write for me. Do you also refuse to write this treatise? Do you refuse to do the work of God?

Robert: I do not refuse—I cannot read it, therefore I will not do it. .

Margery: Cowardice! God shield me from the devil! You promised me, Master Robert, that you would write this treatise in plain English, so that any man might read it and learn from it. And through me you made a promise to our sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ, the living image of the Godhead!

Robert: How dare you speak to your confessor in such a tone?

Margery: How dare you refuse me, who has brought you this task at divine command? God save you, Master Robert, and forgive you for your sins!

[Exit Margery from stage left. A heavy door slams offstage. Robert breathes a sigh of relief and crosses himself]

Robert: [addresses ceiling] Praise Jesus! [sinks to his knees in prayer.]

[After a minute, the door creaks open.]

[Enter Margery from stage left, still holding the crumpled papers. She approaches Robert and gently taps his shoulder]

Margery: Robert?

Robert: [jumps up] God's blood!

Margery: Thou shouldst not take the name of the Lord in vain, Robert. The swearing of oaths is a great sin.

Robert: Margery, what are you doing?

Margery: I fear for thy soul, Robert. It is God's will that you should write this treatise. Do not refuse to do the work of God.

Robert: But Margery—[sighs and glances again at the ceiling]. Very well. I shall write out thy precious Book. But thou must leave me in peace, Margery. I cannot be disturbed while I am writing.

Margery: Of course, Robert! Of course! Thank thee! Thank thee! May God reward thee!

Robert: Now leave, Margery. Leave me to my writing.

[Margery hesitates, then nods and turns to leave. On her way out, she pauses and looks back at Robert as if to say something, then changes her mind and exits from stage right. Robert places the sheath of papers on the table in front of the candles and crucifix, then kneels down and continues to pray. The stage lights darken. A faint roaring sound can be heard in the background]

Margery: [from offstage. Her voice echoes around the stage] I fear for thy soul, Robert. It is God's will that you write this treatise. Do not refuse to do the work of God.

[Enter the Devil from stage left. Robert continues to pray with his eyes closed. The Devil advances towards him]

Devil: I have come to take thy soul, Robert.

[Robert gasps and opens his eyes. He jumps up and reaches for the crumpled papers that Margery left behind.]

Devil: It is too late, Robert. You cannot do the work of God.

[Robert leafs through the papers frantically. Pages drop to the floor at his feet]

Robert: It is no good. I can make neither head nor tail of it—it is so badly written! And my eyes [rubs his eyes]—I cannot see so well as before—I cannot see the letters!

[The Devil puts his hand on Robert's shoulder. The roaring sound grows louder. Suddenly a blast of choral music sounds and a spotlight falls on Robert. The Devil leaps back]

Jesus: [from offstage] Robert. See as you once did before.

[The devil howls and runs offstage from stage left. The roaring sound ceases]

Robert: [reading from papers] When this creature was twenty years of age or somewhat more, she was married to a respectable burgess by the name of John Kempe and was with child within a short time, as nature would have it [walks over to one of the chairs and sits down, still entirely absorbed in reading]. And after she had conceived, she was afflicted with great sickness until the child was born... and then what with the labor she had in childbirth and her preceding sickness, she despaired of her life, believing that she might

not live. And then she sent for her confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde, for she had a thing in her conscience that she wished to confess....

[Robert places the manuscript on the table, then picks up a quill pen, dips it in ink, and begins to write on one of the papers, glancing back and forth between the manuscript and the papers]

[Enter Drs. Boris, Bones, Baxter, and Brown. Dr. Baxter is carrying *The Book of Margery Kempe*.]

Dr. Baxter: And is that—[nods at the manuscript that Robert Spryngolde is writing]—is that the Book?

Dr. Boris: It is indeed! The one you have is a fifteenth century copy of the manuscript he is transcribing—the only copy we still have.

Dr. Bones: Didn't it go missing for around five centuries? I remember reading that they found it in a drawer in an aristocratic house in 1934, before it was sold to the British Library.

Dr. Baxter: That would account for the poor quality of the pages! They look like they have been devoured by mice!

[Robert pauses with his quill on the page. He glances in the direction of the doctors]

Robert: Who's there?

[The doctors freeze. After a minute, Robert shakes his head and resumes writing]

Dr. Bones: [in a low voice, to Dr. Baxter] And this is the source of our clinical observations! It's not even written by the woman herself!

Dr. Boris: [still in a low voice] Well, I for one am looking forward to reading it!

Dr. Brown: And I as well!

Dr. Baxter: We had best leave him to his writing. But did you hear, Margery Kempe has just opened a twitter account?

[Exit Dr. Baxter, Boris and Brown, chatting softly amongst themselves. Robert Spryngolde continues writing furiously. The stagelights fade to black]

[END]

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