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Writing Revelation: The Book of Margery Kempe

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THE MATERIAL AND LITERARY WORLDS of the medieval period remain richly alive in the twenty-first century. Can lived inner experience also speak across the centuries? Julia Boffey describes evocatively ‘the difficulty of writing about individual inner lives without many of the written sources available for more recent periods’; yet, she suggests, ‘the pendulum may be swinging the other way’.¹ Boffey’s recent research has extended her seminal work on the fifteenth century to chronicle and life-writing. *The Book of Margery Kempe* speaks in unique ways to the exploration of inner lives, as well as to Boffey’s interests in the intellectual contexts of books. It is a book of feeling, shaped by but also startlingly different from the books Kempe knew. Its powerful affect has surprised, compelled and alienated its readers. ‘Wondrous revelacyons’, the moving of the soul through visionary experience, are the subject of Kempe’s narrative.² The *Book* is shaped by the struggle to discern the cause and meaning of such experience, and the challenge to interpret and convey it. Read as an inner life, it is newly animated.

1 Julia Boffey and Virginia Davis, ‘Preface’, in *Recording Medieval Lives: Proceedings of the 2005 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Julia Boffey and Virginia Davis, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 17 (Donington, 2009).

2 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (2000; Cambridge, 2004), lines 1339–42. All references to *The Book of Margery Kempe* will be from Windeatt’s edition and cited by line number. Margery was born *c.*1373; her book is dated *c.*1436–38. The unique manuscript, a copy written by a Norfolk scribe named ‘Salthows’, dates to *c.*1450.

Reading Kempe

The anxieties and risks of Kempe's book have coloured readers' perceptions, sometimes evoking unease. When rediscovered in 1934, the *Book* proved startlingly different from the pamphlet of extracts printed by Wynkyn de Worde (c.1501, STC 14924), reprinted by Henry Pepwell as one of seven mystical treatises in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge* (1521, STC 20972).³ Pepwell's characterization of Margery as 'devout ancess' was difficult for Hope Emily Allen, one of her first editors, to sustain: '[the *Book*] does give remarkably elevated spiritual passages, but they are interspersed with others highly fanatical'.⁴ Allen uses theories of Kempe as neurotic to explain her 'suggestibility' and reflection of 'the highly spiritualised ideals of piety in her world'.⁵ Twentieth-century feminist scholarship, eager to discard the label 'hysteric', shifted the focus from interior to exterior, to claim Kempe as proto-feminist, a woman who refused to 'go spynne and carde [wool] as other women don' (4330-1).⁶ Recent scholarship has focused on Kempe's radical Christianity: she has moved from anchorite to dissenter, her role on the public stage taking precedence over her private spiritual experience.⁷ Lynn Staley, indeed, suggests that Kempe invented an amanuensis in order more safely to critique religious and

- 3 The modern title of the work is drawn from that of the pamphlet, *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of Lynn*: see Barry Windeatt, 'Introduction', in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 1-35 (p. 1). See further *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises, printed by Henry Pepwell, 1521*, ed. Edmund G. Gardner (New York, 1966): <ccel.org/ccel/gardner/cell/files/cell.html> [accessed 7 March 2018].
- 4 Pepwell's headings refer to Margery as 'Ancess of Lynn'; he closes the extract with the words, 'Here endeth a short treatise of a devout ancess called Margery Kempe of Lynn'.
- 5 Hope Emily Allen, 'Prefatory Note', in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS OS 212 (London, 1940), pp. lxiv-lxv, and 'A Medieval Work: Margery Kempe of Lynn', Letters to the Editor, *The Times*, 27 December 1934, p. 15. For reviews of Butler-Bowdon's modernized version of the *Book*, see Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The Tablet*, 24 October 1936, and 'Margery the Astonishing', *The Month*, November 1936, pp. 446-56.
- 6 On the history and reception of the *Book*, see Marea Mitchell, *The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community and Criticism* (New York, 2005). On views of Kempe as hysteric, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The 'Book' and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, NY, 1983), pp. 197, 200, 210; Sarah Beckwith, 'A Very Material Medievalism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (New York, 1986), pp. 34-57; and Eluned Bremner, 'Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction', in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York, 1992), pp. 117-35.
- 7 Beckwith, 'A Very Material Medievalism', and Sheila Delany, 'Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Minnesota Review* 5 (1975), reprinted in *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature Medieval to Modern*, ed. Sheila Delany (New York, 1983), pp. 76-92, establish this approach,

social practices and injustices.⁸ For Staley, the ‘artfulness’ of the *Book* renders it comparable to secular fictions of individual conscience and identity.⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw’s argument that the *Book*’s ‘visionary nature is crucial to its new place in the twenty-first-century literary canon’ is not typical of current criticism.¹⁰ The predominantly historicist emphasis is demonstrated by *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (2004), which focuses on socio-cultural and political contexts. Embodied experience is viewed in terms of performance and economics: Kempe’s ‘involuntary somatic manifestations’ such as her compulsive ‘cryings’ are seen as responses to ‘the received picture of medieval women’s bodily piety’.¹¹ Affective piety is rewritten as a set of behaviours to be adopted when required, ‘pick[ed] from a menu of practices’ to publicly perform holiness.

Readings that have kept in view Kempe’s embodied spiritual experience have largely been pathological, with suspicions of madness or possession in her own time rewritten as diagnoses of hysteria, psychosis or temporal lobe epilepsy.¹² Kempe’s early illness is easily placed as post-natal psychosis and her compulsive crying may have been connected with epilepsy, yet neurological and psychopathological readings remain limited: they neither fully explain Kempe’s spiritual experiences nor take into account her thought world. The interdisciplinary *Hearing the Voice* project (based at Durham University and funded by the Wellcome Trust), which explores the phenomenon of hearing voices without external stimuli, has drawn attention to the relevance of the

adopted by David Aers in *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430* (London, 1988), pp. 73–116.

- 8 See further Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA, 1994).
- 9 Lynn Staley, ‘Introduction’, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Staley, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 2001), pp. xv–xvi.
- 10 Carolyn Dinshaw, ‘Margery Kempe’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 222–39 (p. 223).
- 11 Sarah Salih, ‘Margery’s Bodies: Piety, Work and Penance’, in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 161–76 (pp. 170, 173–4, 176).
- 12 See further Richard Lawes, ‘The Madness of Margery Kempe’, in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland, and Wales. Exeter Symposium VI: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 1999*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 147–67: Lawes argues that a diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy is most fitting. For an analysis drawing on contemporary disability studies, see Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, 2010), pp. 113–49. On the limits of psychopathological diagnoses, see Alison Torn, ‘Madness and Mysticism: Can a Mediaeval Narrative Inform Our Understanding of Psychosis?’, *History and Philosophy of Psychology* 13 (2011), 1–14; and ‘Looking Back: Medieval Mysticism or Psychosis’, *The Psychologist* 24.10 (2011), 788–90.

Book for communities of readers engaged with visionary experience and voice-hearing.¹³ While Kempe's experiences partly fit contemporary medical models of voice-hearing experience, non-medical accounts of unusual experience in the healthy population provide closer analogues, particularly accounts of religious experience within evangelical communities.¹⁴ While auditory-verbal hallucinations can be symptoms of psychosis, and are associated in the popular imagination with violent schizophrenia, they are experienced by a proportion of the 'healthy' population, and while frequently distressing, can be benign or positive experiences.¹⁵ Kempe's account of the challenge of understanding abnormal experience has immediate relevance for modern voice-hearers, who must find an explanatory frame for inexplicable, intrusive, often frightening voices, and other kinds of unusual experience, such as that of an invisible 'felt presence'.¹⁶ Qualitative studies have shown that supernatural or spiritual explanations remain some of the most available and powerful.¹⁷ Kempe's narrative offers perspectives beyond the bio-medical framework of delusion and hallucination that can be both resonant and enabling. There are also intriguing differences between past and present: Kempe's spiritual experience is profoundly multisensory, whereas accounts of 'fused vision' are currently rare, and hearing voices is privileged. The *Book* opens onto a thought world in which 'vision', often multisensory, is a usual aspect of spiritual experience – though voice plays a special role.

- 13 Research for this essay has been generously funded by Wellcome Trust Strategic Awards WT086049 and WT098455MA, and grows out of collaborative work on the projects 'Hearing the Voice', <hearingthevoice.org> [accessed 7 March 2018] and 'Life of Breath', <lifeofbreath.org> [accessed 7 March 2018]. I am grateful to my colleagues for their insights. See also my essays 'Voices and Visions: Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Writing', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods (Edinburgh, 2016), pp. 411–27; 'The Mystical Theology of Margery Kempe: Writing the Inner Life', in *Mystical Theology and Contemporary Spiritual Practice: Renewing the Contemplative Tradition*, ed. Julienne McLean, Peter Tyler and C. C. H. Cook (London, 2017), pp. 34–57; and, with Charles Fernyhough, 'Reading Margery Kempe's Inner Voices', *Postmedieval* 8.2 (2017), 139–46. I am grateful to the editors for permission to draw on this work.
- 14 See further Simon McCarthy-Jones, *Hearing Voices: The Histories, Causes and Meanings of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations* (Cambridge, 2012). For a general study applying contemporary biological and psychological ideas to mystical experience, see Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics* (New York, 2005). On voice-hearing in modern evangelical tradition, see T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York, 2012).
- 15 Large-scale studies suggest c.1%, with higher rates for fleeting experiences: see McCarthy-Jones, *Hearing Voices*, pp. 170–88.
- 16 See Ben Alderson-Day, 'The Silent Companions', *The Psychologist* 29 (April 2016), 272–5.
- 17 See C. C. H. Cook, 'Religious Psychopathology: The Prevalence of Religious Content of Delusions and Hallucinations in Mental Disorder', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 61.4 (2015), 404–25.

The early history and reception of the *Book* are revealing for their emphasis on such experience. The unique manuscript, copied in the mid fifteenth century, was held by the Carthusian priory of Mount Grace. While Kempe's *Book* might not seem to correspond with the order's emphasis on contemplation, solitude, silence and humility, the Carthusians had a sustained interest in psychic experience.¹⁸ Annotations by four fifteenth- and sixteenth-century readers suggest that Kempe was viewed as a mystic and contemplative.¹⁹ One fifteenth-century annotator may, like Kempe's own amanuensis, have connected her crying (glossed 'nota de clamore', 2216) with Richard Rolle's notion of spiritual 'clamor' ('quod clamor iste canor est'), drawing attention to the embodied and affective nature of spiritual experience.²⁰ The latest, most extensive, annotator refers both to Rolle (1258, 2898) and to the sixteenth-century Carthusians Richard Methley and John Norton (929, 2224), all of whom describe the bodily manifestation of spiritual experience: 'R. Medlay was wont so to say' glosses 'ardowr of loue'; 'so s. R. hampull' glosses 'sche felt' (2898).²¹ Annotations and marginal drawings indicate the annotator's devout responses: he adds the monogram for Jesus ('Ihc'), signals with pointing hands, faces or 'nota', sometimes with comments such as 'feruent loue' (glossing 'I dey', 1270), or adds brief prayers. Phrases such as 'fyer of loue' or 'welle of teerys' are echoed in the margin (e.g. tears, 4750; fire, 3667, 4935) or glossed: 'in hir sowle' (5910) and 'to ben wyth our Lord' (6665) are glossed 'langyng loue'. 'Flawme of fyer' is annotated 'ignis divini amoris' with a drawing of a flame (2894), and glossed as 'A tokyn of grace' (7370); hearts are drawn to accompany references to Margery's heart (2961, 5408, 7124, 7364). Particularly striking is the gloss 'mentall praer' (7291), signalling recognition of the spiritual life of thought. The emphasis is not on performance but on intensely affective spiritual experience.

- 18 Vincent Gillespie, 'Dial M for Mystic', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition*, ed. Glasscoe, pp. 241–68.
- 19 On the manuscript annotations, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 439–52. Three (Windeatt's Annotators 1, 2 and 3) write in late-fifteenth-century hands; one (Windeatt's Annotator 4) is palaeographically later and writes over the hands of other annotators. These annotations may date to after the deaths of Richard Methley (d. 1527/28) and John Norton (d. 1522), to both of whom the annotator refers in the past tense.
- 20 Annotator 2, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 440, and see *The 'Incendium Amoris' of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. Margaret Deanesley (Manchester, 1915), ch. 34, p. 243, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 296, n. 5171. References to *Incendium Amoris* are to chapters and page numbers of the text and translation.
- 21 For discussion and a full transcription of the manuscript annotations, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 439–52.

De Worde's pamphlet is likely to have been directed to audiences similarly interested in the contemplative tradition.²² The *Book's* survival suggests the spiritual value it held: perhaps entrusted to them by the Carthusians at the dissolution of the monasteries, it was acquired by the ancient Catholic Butler-Bowdon family.²³ Its rediscovery in 1934 'coincided with a renewed interest in mystical writing', reflected in the writings of W. R. (Dean) Inge on Platonic spirituality, William James on the psychology of religion, Friedrich von Hügel on divine transcendence, and Evelyn Underhill, who in addition to her study of mysticism edited *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*.²⁴ The spiritual weight placed on the *Book* by readers from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, then, should not be dismissed. As Windeatt writes, 'it is time to read Margery Kempe's inner voices as a projection of her own spiritual understanding of divine interaction with her, and hence as an insight into her own mentality'.²⁵ Windeatt signals the irony that the outer life so nebulously portrayed across Kempe's book, 'variously bitty, petty and largely shapeless', even 'a distraction', has come to be the focus of contemporary readers.²⁶ Reading the *Book* in the twenty-first century merits returning to the interior life of the spirit, to Kempe's inner voices and the writing of revelation.

Books of Contemplation

The turn from Kempe's spirituality to her worldliness reflects not only unease about her excesses, but also a perceived mismatch between the *Book* and the mysticism it was expected by early readers to convey. Kempe's practices were far from fulfilling the *via negativa* of Dionysian tradition, which rejected affective experience and ultimately, intellect itself. Kempe, by contrast, embraces the senses. As Clarissa Atkinson argues, however, the *Book* fits a definition of mysticism as 'immediate knowledge of Ultimate Reality or "God" by direct

22 See further G. R. Keiser, 'The Mystics and the Early English Printers: The Economics of Devotionalism', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 9–26.

23 For Butler-Bowdon's suggestion that the family may have been given the manuscript for preservation on the grounds of their Catholicism, see 'Margery Kempe's Own Story: The First English Autobiography. A Literary Discovery', *The Times*, 30 September 1936.

24 Windeatt, 'Introduction', in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 1; and see in particular Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 5th edn (London, 1914, originally published 1911).

25 Barry Windeatt, 'Introduction: Reading and Re-reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 1–16 (p. 15).

26 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

personal experience?²⁷ Though so often singled out as unique, Kempe belongs with the late-medieval writers subsequently termed mystics, who used English ‘with a new level of intensity and complexity’ to illuminate their theology – the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (late fourteenth century), Richard Rolle (d. 1349), Walter Hilton (d. 1396), Julian of Norwich (d. post-1416) and Nicholas Love (d. 1424).²⁸ The *Book* is deeply informed by and enters into dialogue with such works and with the devotional emphases and practices underpinning them.

It is possible that Kempe had some degree of literacy. The *Book* both upholds and complicates her claim that she is ‘not lettryd’ (4290). She objects that she cannot understand Latin when it is spoken to her (3725–9), requests ‘a maystyr of dyvynite’ (1445) to write a letter for her, has a ‘good man’ (3676) write to her husband on her behalf, asks the angelic child who shows her the Book of Life, ‘Wher is my name?’, and is shown it ‘at the Trinyte foot wretyn’ (6968–70). She also, however, depicts herself as kneeling in church, ‘hir boke in hir hand’ (659), the *Book* includes some fragments of Latin, a priest reads to her for seven or eight years (4826–7), and Christ assures her that he is pleased with her ‘whethyr thu redist er herist redyng’ (7342).²⁹ Most importantly, whether or not she herself had some ability to read, she had extensive knowledge both of devotional works and culture, including of the lives of holy women. The *Book* describes her extended programme of reading with a priest of Lynn: ‘He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys [glosses] therupon, Seynt Brydys [Bridget’s] boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, [Rolle’s] *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other’ (4818–21). In Kempe’s account of her experience to Richard of Caister, vicar of Norwich, she describes it as surpassing any book, ‘neythyr Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amoris*, ne *Incendium Amoris*’ (1257–8). Kempe was immersed in the thought world of late-medieval devotional texts, through the works which she heard read, paraphrased, discussed or treated in sermons, and through decades of religious discourse, stored in memory and revisited in recollection.

27 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, 3rd edn, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford, 1997), p. 1127, and see Atkinson, pp. 40–1, 48.

28 Barry Windeatt, ‘Introductory Essay’, in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Windeatt (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 1–14 (pp. 1–2). On Kempe’s place in fifteenth-century contemplative culture, see further Barry Windeatt, ‘1412–1534: Texts’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 195–224, and John Hirsh, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe: Paramystical Practices in Late Medieval England* (Leiden, 1989): Hirsh emphasizes the influence of mystical practices, in particular affective prayer, on secular devotional tradition.

29 See further Windeatt, ‘Introduction’, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 9.

Comparison of Kempe's *Book* with contemplative works signals both influence and originality. Though it may be seen as following the stages towards union with God, it does not neatly fit this pattern; nor is it presented as an instructive treatise. Yet the tradition and language of individual, feeling piety are formative. The *Book* differs most strikingly from *The Cloud of Unknowing* (not named by Kempe but closely associated with Hilton's writings), which urges contemplation based in denial. The soul is prompted to enter 'a derknes or a cloude'; 'a cloude of vnknowyng, þat is bitwix þee & þi God', leaving behind thought and memory.³⁰ Yet even here there are resonances: the image of grace as a spark, 'a sodeyn steryng ... as sparle from cole' (ch. 4, 22), recalled in Kempe's descriptions of the fire of love; the 'scharp darte of longyng loue' (ch. 6, 26). The *Cloud* also provides a model of the Lord's voice speaking in the heart (ch. 20, 56), and a vivid depiction of the 'goostly crie' bursting from the heart in response to sin (ch. 40, 78). For the *Cloud*-author, however, weeping does not compare with 'þis blinde steryng of loue' (ch. 12, 39), and the senses, finally, are dangerous.

The influence of 'Hyltons boke' (1257, 4820), probably *The Scale of Perfection*, is more certain. Its direct address to a female recluse in the first book may have appealed to Kempe, as may the development of the teaching on contemplation in the second book for a wider audience. The work resonates with the *Book* in its endorsement of the power of 'affeccioun' or 'feelynge' (I, ch. 6, 116), the affective rather than intellective part of the soul.³¹ While affect may be negative, a stirring of appetite or desire, it may also stir the soul to devotion. The degrees of contemplation move from reason to 'affeccioun', 'fervour of love and gostli swettenesse' (I, ch. 5, 92, 95), vividly evoked in metaphors of tears, burning, taste and drink. In the third degree, knowledge 'bothe in cognicion and in affeccion' (I, ch. 8, 147), the individual leaves earthly affections, 'as it were mykil ravysschid out of the bodili wittes' (I, ch. 8, 151). Bodily feeling is replaced with spiritual, depicted in profoundly sensory images: longing for Jesus brings 'gosteli savour, and swettenesse' (I, ch. 46, 1329); Jesus silently stirs the heart 'with His swete prevy vois' (I, ch. 50, 1445). While Hilton's sensory imagery and depiction of 'the fier of love flaumyng'

30 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing' and 'The Book of Privy Counselling'*, EETS OS 218 (London, 1944), ch. 4, pp. 23–4. References are to this edition by chapter and page number. The *Cloud* dates to the last quarter of the fourteenth century.

31 Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas H. Bestul, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI, 2000), Bk. I, ch. 84, line 2413. References are to this edition by book, chapter and line number. Like the *Cloud*, the *Scale* was written in the late fourteenth century in the north-east Midlands, and the writers may make reference to each others' works.

in the soul (II, ch. 46, 3566) must have been compelling for Kempe, the *Scale* is also critical – in a passage usually read as directed to Rolle – of those ‘so symple’ that they expect the physical sensation of fire: ‘it is neither bodili, ne is it bodili feelid’ (I, ch. 26, 676, 671). The *Scale* is not a personal, experiential narrative, and like the *Cloud*-author, Hilton is suspicious of physicality, advocating not literal but spiritual pilgrimage (‘It nedeth not to renne to Rome ne to Jerusalem’, I, ch. 49, 1429–30). The work’s urging of moderation could not be said to govern Kempe’s mode of being in the world, yet its empathetic tone and affective emphasis create a strong impression of dialogue with her narrative.

Most analogous is Rolle’s depiction of ardent, embodied desire. The *Incendium Amoris* takes up many of Hilton’s themes, but in more personal and experiential terms, from Rolle’s striking opening account of touching his breast to see whether his heart is literally on fire: ‘nam ita inflammat animam meam ac si ignis elementaris ibi arderet’ (‘It set my soul aglow as if a real fire were burning there’, Prologue, 145; trans. p. 45). Though in no sense an autobiography, it is punctuated with references to Rolle’s eremitic life and experience, combining rhapsody with instruction.³² Rolle’s fervent extremes, praise of tears, and deeply sensual descriptions of the joys of love resonate strikingly with Kempe’s account. Experience of the fire of love is fully embodied (‘cui cuncta corporis et spiritus applaudunt’, ‘which my whole being, physical as well as spiritual, so much approves’, Prologue, 146, trans. p. 46). Music and fire interweave: God is melody and song (ch. 11); his lovers burn and sing like the fiery seraphim (ch. 22). The inner eye is ravished by contemplation of heaven. Rolle’s materiality and affective extremes seem to speak directly to Kempe’s *Book*. She perhaps also remarked Rolle’s assertion that ‘uetula plus experitur de Dei amore et minus de mundi uoluptate quam theologus, cuius studium uanum est’ (‘an old woman can be more expert in the love of God – and less worldly too – than your theologian with his useless studying’, ch. 5, 160, trans. p. 61).

Comparable in tone is the composite meditative treatise *Stimulus Amoris*, misattributed to Bonaventure and translated and adapted as *The Prickyngge of Love* in the late fourteenth century, perhaps by Hilton.³³ The *Prickyngge* is similarly characterized by sensual descriptions of divine love, urgings

32 See further Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge, 1991), in particular pp. 113–91 on *Fervor*, *Dulcor* and *Canor*. Watson argues that *Incendium Amoris* was completed before 1343; see p. 277. The work was translated into English by the Carmelite Richard Misyn in 1435.

33 The *Stimulus* is a composite work comprising a series of meditations on the Passion, a treatise on the contemplative life by the thirteenth-century Franciscan James of Milan, and a set of meditations on prayers.

to ‘feruent disire’, and an affective emphasis on the power of meditation to move the individual to a ‘swetnesse of loue’ characterized as ‘dronkonnese’. Contemplation of the Passion leads the narrator to share imaginatively in Christ’s wounds: ‘A zee woundes of ihesu. crist. þat are so ful of loue. & þat mai I wel seie. For on a time as i entrid in him. with mine ezen opened. me thouzte þat myn yzen were filled ful of his blod. and so i zeode in gropande til I come to þe innerest of his herte.’³⁴ Kempe’s *Book* instances the *Pryckynge*’s urging to compassion and the stirring of the soul through love (5162–4). Such fervent response and engaged meditation are notable features of Kempe’s inner life.

She may also have known the Carthusian Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a translation of the early-fourteenth-century *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, written for a Franciscan nun.³⁵ Love’s translation, with its numerous refutations of Wycliffite doctrine, was one of the most widely read of medieval works, rivalling *The Prick of Conscience* and the *Canterbury Tales*. The work promotes the Franciscan practice of imaginative meditation: the lives of Mary and Jesus, and the events of the Passion and Resurrection, are dramatically depicted to ‘þe innere eye of þe soule’ (174).³⁶ The *Mirror* highlights the individual, embodied affect of compassion stimulated by ‘deuoute ymaginacion of þe soule’, ‘so grete likyng not onely in soule bot also in þe body þat thei kunne not telle ... bot onely he þat by experience feleþ it’ (179). The emphasis on spiritual and bodily feeling, individual experience and active meditation, ‘projecting oneself into, and empathizing with, the scenes of Christ’s life’, perhaps most of all shaped Kempe’s spiritual life.³⁷ In the *Book*, meditations of the kind recounted in the *Mirror* are dramatically lived in the first person, recounted with the fervency of Rolle and *The Prickyng of Love*. Autobiography replaces instruction: Kempe, unlike the writers who inspired her, does not set out the path to God or offer theological analysis. Most strikingly different are the *Book*’s spontaneity and its intense focus on lived spiritual experience.

34 Harold Kane, ed., *The Prickyng of Love*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies, 2 vols (Salzburg, 1983), I, ch. 2, p. 14; I, ch. 1, p. 13; ch. 27, p. 134; ch. 1, p. 9. For a modernization, see Walter Hilton, *The Goad of Love: An Unpublished Translation of the ‘Stimulus Amoris’ Formerly Attributed to St Bonaventura*, ed. Clare Kirchberger, Classics of the Contemplative Life (London, 1952).

35 Copies of the *Mirror* record that Love presented his work to Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, in 1410.

36 Michael G. Sargent, ‘Introduction’, in Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. Sargent, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter, 2004), p. 174. References to Love’s *Mirror* are to this edition, cited by page number.

37 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 11. See further Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, *Margery Kempe’s Meditations: The Context of Medieval Devotional Literature, Liturgy and Iconography*, Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages (Cardiff, 2007).

Visionary Lives of Women

The models offered by English devotional writing were complemented by explicitly gendered texts tracing the spiritual experience and lives of holy women. As Sarah McNamer notes, whereas native writers were suspicious of ‘enthusiastic piety’, continental writers endorsed it.³⁸ Such piety, attended by visionary experience, is characteristic of the lives of Bridget of Sweden (1303–73) and Mary of Oignies (c.1177–1213), both named in the *Book*. Both were married but persuaded their husbands to adopt chaste lives, Bridget after bearing eight children; her asceticism was complemented by her involvement in papal politics, travels to Jerusalem and foundation of the Bridgettine order devoted to the Virgin; she was canonized in 1391. Her cult was promoted by the influential Bridgettine house of Syon Abbey, which Kempe visited. Bridget’s visionary life is conveyed in the 700 revelations recorded in her *Liber Celestis*, dictated by her in Swedish, translated into Latin by advisors, and widely circulated and translated, including into English. Despite the differences of class, learning and political engagement, there are clear resonances with Kempe’s narrative, including the book’s construction by clerics, Bridget’s spiritual marriage to Christ and her revelations, most of which take the form of extended speeches by or dialogues between Christ, Mary, the saints, angels and devils. Bridget herself, however, speaks comparatively little and the *Liber*, recounted in the third person and most often referring to Bridget as ‘the spouse’, is notably lacking in biographical elements. While many of the disquisitions vividly describe the life of Christ, this is rarely experienced directly by Bridget.³⁹ Bridget is more often a listener than a participant in a book most of all comprising the revelatory words she hears, though the verbs most frequently used are those of vision.

Her brief *Life* mentions, though without detail, the appearance to her of St John, St Dines and the Virgin, and of Christ ‘in one white cloud’, assuring her ‘it was none illusion’ (2). Bridget herself is transfigured and lifted up physically like Ezekiel. Some parts of the *Liber* similarly describe individual visionary experience. Bridget sees Mary as crowned queen of heaven: the vision

38 Sarah McNamer, ‘Introduction’, *The Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St Elizabeth of Hungary*, ed. McNamer, Middle English Texts 28 (Heidelberg, 1996), pp. 42–5.

39 For the Middle English Revelations and life of St Bridget, see *The Liber Celestis of St Bridget of Sweden*, ed. Roger Ellis, EETS OS 291 (Oxford, 1987), I; references are to this edition, cited by page number. Latin copies of the *Revelations* are recorded in England before Bridget’s death in 1373; the Middle English translation ed. Ellis (London, BL, MS Cotton Claudius B I) dates to c.1410–20. Another Middle English version (c.1450) is found in *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, ed. William Patterson Cumming, EETS OS 178 (London, 1929).

is extensively elaborated by St John the Baptist (I.30, 55). The later books are particularly germane to Kempe's narrative: Book V recounts Bridget's ravishment as she lifts her mind in prayer 'in manere aliende fro bodely wittes, suspended in extasy of gostly contemplation'; she sees Christ seated as judge (V, prologue, 366), waking from her 'trauns' and 'rauvyshynge' to experience great 'swetenes' (366). Place, like liturgy, stimulates vision: the climax of Bridget's account is, at Calvary, Christ's revelation of the Crucifixion, graphically recounted in a manner that recalls Julian's *Revelations* (VII.16, 479–81). Revelation is experienced through other senses in a series of instances occurring close together and late in the collection, from a vision of the Holy Ghost as fire from heaven and a man's face burning at the altar (VI.83, 459) to the 'wondir stinke' of a cursed man (VI.85, 460), and the feeling of love's warmth (VII.1, 470), but multisensory experience is overall rare and words take clear precedence over sight.

The life of Mary of Oignies (c.1170–1213) provided a similarly compelling model: like Bridget, Mary entered into a chaste marriage, in which she and her husband served in a leper colony; she eventually joined a Beguine community in Liège. Like Kempe, she may not have been literate. Jacques de Vitry's Latin life, written partly in defence of the Beguines and presented to the pope, was widely circulated, probably brought to England in the thirteenth century through trade with the Low Countries. The fifteenth-century manuscript of a Middle English version places Mary's life alongside those of Elizabeth of Spalbeek and Christina Mirabilis, translated around the same time; their lives were perhaps also known to Kempe.⁴⁰ The emphasis is more conventionally hagiographical than that of the *Liber Celestis*. Jacques de Vitry as Mary's spiritual friend emphasizes her imitation of Christ through her ascetic extremes, placing her poverty, miracles and visions in Biblical contexts. It is comparisons with Mary's 'plentyvows teerys' (5131) that persuade Kempe's priest to believe in her holiness, and ultimately, to write her treatise. Like Kempe's, Mary's 'aboudauns of teerys' (93) is highly vocal. Throughout, she is presented as prophet and visionary 'enflaumed with houge heet of loue' (97), receiving revelations both within the spirit and through physical miracle, in sleep and waking. The Lord answers her prayers 'in spirit' and is made manifest, as are the Holy Ghost, the Virgin, saints, angels and devils. Again place and time stimulate revelation: in Bethlehem she sees the Nativity and Purification, and 'in the Passyone vmwhile oure Lorde apperyd in the crosse'

40 See Jennifer N. Brown's edition of Oxford, Bodl., MS Douce 114, *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d'Oignies*, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 23 (Turnhout, 2008). References are to this edition, cited by page number. The manuscript dates to the second quarter of the fifteenth century.

(166). The frequency of divine presence, also a feature of Kempe's *Book*, is emphasized. Spiritual sight is carefully distinguished from the working of the imagination: 'Purged fro euery cloude of bodily ymages, withouten any fantasye or ymagynacyone, she saw in soule sympil fourmes and dyuynne as in a clene myrror' (158). Ecstatic experience presages her celestial crowning: 'for feruour of spirite while she, crynge, was drawn oute of hirsselfe, she semed as firy in visage' (174). As in *Stimulus Amoris*, metaphors of drunkenness (174) and sweetness (118, 167) figure. Jacques's account both authorizes and venerates such extremes of experience.

There are analogies too between Kempe's *Book* and the *Revelations of St Elizabeth of Hungary*, now attributed to the Dominican nun Elizabeth of Töss, daughter of King Andreas III of Hungary and great-niece of the saint, translated into Middle English in the fifteenth century. Elizabeth's devotion, like Kempe's, is marked by compulsive weeping, 'owtwardys sobbyng and clamor of voys', and her example too helps to persuade Kempe's priest to belief (5173).⁴¹ The *Revelations* are briefer than the lives of Bridget and Mary, recounting Elizabeth's dialogues with the Virgin. Though they are presented in terms of vision ('þe blessyd Virgine Marye apperede to here, hauyng wyt here Seyn Ion þe Wangelyst', 60), the work is most focused on aural revelation, as the Virgin vividly recounts her own experience in 'homely spech' (68). Conception is depicted as 'mystical ecstasy': 'I was all takyn owt fro myself' [de Worde, 'rauysshed' (80–1)]. She employs images of 'ful brennyng affecioun' and drunkenness (78, 68), her own tears echoed in Elizabeth's. Voice is the most prominent metaphor of revelation: 'sodeynly a voys sownede to here heris' (92), revealed to be that of Jesus. Vision is rare: later on, Elizabeth sees Christ's wounded hand (97), and the book concludes when Christ appears to her. In striking contrast to Jacques's account of Mary's visions, this is narrated in terms of mental experience: 'her thowte þat wondyr thykke blod flowede fro hys syde largely' (98), suggesting unease with the physicality of vision even in Continental tradition.

Kempe may also have known of the *Dialogue* of St Catherine of Siena (1378), translated as *The Orchard of Syon* (early fifteenth century) for the nuns of Syon Abbey.⁴² This work is more extensive in its theological discussion, which ranges over perfection, truth, charity and the mystic body of the church. Its construction as a dialogue between the soul and the Lord, however, resonates

41 *The Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St Elizabeth of Hungary*, ed. McNamer, p. 60 (Cambridge University Library, MS Hh.1.11). This version dates to the first half of the fifteenth century. The *Revelations* were also translated and printed by de Worde in 1483 (STC 24766). References are to this edition by page number.

42 See Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, eds, *The Orchard of Syon*, EETS OS 258 (London, 1966), pp. 1, 16.

with Kempe's *Book*. Catherine's spiritual marriage, mortifications, prophetic voice and revelations could not but have appealed to Kempe. The opening chapter emphasizes the raising up of the soul 'wip heuenli and gostli desires and affeccious', recounting how the Lord speaks to Catherine in contemplation: 'Opene þe ize of þin intellecte, or of gostli vnderstondinge, & biholde in me' (I.i, 18–19). At the heart of the book, responding to Catherine's 'greet longynge desir', is an extended disquisition on tears as reflecting the stages of the soul (IV.v, 192ff). Especially striking is the discussion of how to discern between 'goostly cumfortis or visyouns' and those resulting from 'disceyt of þe feend' (V.ii, 237–8). Tokens, as Julian of Norwich will instruct Kempe, must 'walke with affeccoun of vertu': only through their spiritual outcomes can 'visyouns and visitaciouns' be judged. The focus of the work, however, is on visions manifest in words, in the extended dialogues between Catherine's soul and the Lord.

Alongside English devotional writers, then, continental holy women represent literary authorities, generic and life models to which Kempe's *Book* can aspire. Julian of Norwich provided a powerful example nearer to home. While Kempe is unlikely to have known the *Revelations*, she certainly knew of Julian's reputation as a visionary, and there are numerous parallels between Julian's and Kempe's narratives. The *Revelations* too are founded on affect, recounting 'many privy tuchyngs of swete, gostly syghts and felyng'; Julian defends the power of tears to Kempe (1361–71).⁴³

The inner experience and embodied articulation of revelation characteristic of lives of holy women, then, shapes, inspires and authorizes Kempe's spiritual and imaginative experience.⁴⁴ At the same time, the process of the *Book's* construction renders it uncertain: the 'booke of hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons' (79–80) is not written until twenty years after Kempe's first visionary experience, probably with two intermediaries, and may be best seen as a negotiation between Kempe and her amanuensis. Even as the narrative creates a remarkable sense of vivid recollection, it draws attention to what is lost: 'in a schort tyme aftyr sche had foryetyn the most party therof and ny every deel' (6800–1). Though so frequently termed the first autobiography in English, this generic label does not convey the book's literary qualities, nor its interior focus; a more fitting term is 'life-writing' – and most of all, spiritual life-writing.

43 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love: The Short Text and the Long Text*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford, 2016), Long Text, ch. 43, p. 98. Subsequent references to Julian's *Revelations* are to this edition.

44 Nancy Bradley Warren places Kempe's life writing within a later English tradition of embodied female spirituality, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350–1700* (Notre Dame, IN, 2010).

Risking Vision

The radical quality of this unstable spiritual life should not be underestimated: English mystical writers refer repeatedly to the dangers of such sensory experience, and the possibility that revelations may be sent by the devil rather than God, a possibility to which Kempe returns repeatedly. Readers of the *Cloud* are warned against physical expressions of ecstasy. The contemplative must beware the extremes of behaviour that may result from confusing bodily and spiritual: ‘For þei turne þeire bodily wittes inwardes to þeire body azens þe cours of kynde; & streynyn hem, as þei wolde see inwardes wiþ þeire bodily igen, & heren inwardes wiþ þeire eren, & so forþe of alle þeire wittes, smellen, taasten, & felyn inwardes’ (ch. 52, 96). The imagination, argues the *Cloud*-author, has the ability to project ‘feynid & fals’ ‘fantasye’ onto the mind (ch. 65, 117); the devil can both take bodily form and inflame the imagination (ch. 55, 104). Yet it is precisely physical, sensory experience that characterizes Kempe’s visions, and leads her on her spiritual journey. The contrast points up just how suspect this experience may have seemed.

Hilton articulates similar suspicion of the senses, warning against ‘visiones or revelaciouns of ony maner spirite, bodili apperynge or in ymagynynge, slepand or wakand’ and against other physical manifestations of the divine (I, 10, 200–6). Hilton recognizes that the fire of divine love may affect, even afflict, the body (I, 31), and that visions may be good, but warns they may be caused by ‘a wikkid angel’ or demon (I, 10, 210). He might seem to have Kempe in mind as he argues that, as the heavenly Jerusalem should take precedence over the earthly (I, 49), so should pure desire for Jesus over bodily penances and ‘alle visious or revelacions of angels apperynge, songes and sownes, savours or smelles, brennynges and ony lykynges, bodili felande, and schortli for to seie, alle the joies of hevene and of erthe’ (I, 47, 1355–8). Hilton’s treatise *Of Angels’ Song*, perhaps written in response to Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris*, similarly cautions against ‘al bodyly ymaginaciouns, figurs and fantasis of creaturs’, and ‘wonderful sownes and sangs’, which may be caused by ‘trublyng of the brayn’, as opposed to spiritual song, heard in the heart.⁴⁵

Rolle’s embodied spiritual experience, along with the examples of holy women, must have offered valuable assurance that multisensory revelation could be licit. Kempe’s *Book* returns repeatedly to the question of discerning the nature and origin of vision. Her dialogue with Julian of Norwich focuses on whether there is ‘any deceyte’ in the ‘ful many holy spechys and dalyawns [conversation] that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle’ and her ‘many wondirful

45 Hilton, ‘Of Angels Song’, in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, pp. 131–6 (pp. 132, 134).

revelacyons' (1339–42).⁴⁶ Julian's response is that of Catherine: revelations may reflect 'nowt the mevyng of a good spyryte, but rathar of an evyl spyrit' (1349–50), and their origin can be discerned only by their effects. Kempe consults too the Carmelite William Southfield, said to have been the recipient of visions and visitations, including of the Virgin: again, meekness and virtuous living are commended as proof that revelations reflect God's grace. John of Ruusbroec's *The Chastising of God's Children*, written to instruct a female religious and translated into English in the late fourteenth century, emphasizes the circumstantiality of discernment: 'for the devel in his illusions sumtyme seith sooth to disceyve and sumtyme fals, but the Hooli Goost shewith and telleth alwei sooth and nevere fals' (179–80). The *Chastising's* description of the need to examine revelations 'to knowe whether thei comen of a goode aungel or of a wicked spirit' (181–2) is echoed in Kempe's question to Julian. The *Chastising* upholds Bridget as an example, if partly for her obedience to virtuous and discreet older men (178). Kempe's *Book*, then, also charts a journey of discernment in dialogue with the works that influenced her.

The *Book* functions as a discourse on the nature of vision, its combination of spontaneity and intentionality, its contexts and connections. Kempe's visions, like those of Bridget and Mary, and as in the meditations of the *Mirror*, are connected with liturgical festivals – Easter, Candlemas – and with places, especially Jerusalem. The multisensory quality of her revelations, however, is more prominent, perhaps most resembling that of Julian's *Revelations*. Seeing with the 'gostli' eye means entering into a three-dimensional spiritual world, where Kempe participates in central episodes related to Christ's life: looking after the child Mary, swaddling Jesus, caring for the Virgin after the Crucifixion. That seen with the inner eye is repeatedly described as surpassing bodily sight. The model fits that advocated by *Stimulus Amoris* and the *Mirror*. Kempe, however, is less active imaginer than willing recipient. The Lord is carefully identified as the source of imaginings, putting them into the soul's eye: 'owyr Lord schewyd to hir sowle' 'hyr medytacyons, and hy contempla-cyons, and other secret thyngys' (1066–7). Her direct question, 'Jhesu, what schal I thynke?' (544), inspires a vision of St Anne, and Jesus' instruction, 'Dowtryr, thynke on my modyr', opens onto vision of a fully multisensory kind (545); similarly, she sees the Passion 'as yf Crist had hangyn befor hir bodily eye' (2266). The practices advocated by the *Mirror* are animated in Kempe's *Book*.

Active meditation is balanced by spontaneous event, most strikingly in Kempe's first vision, where illness, as in Julian's extreme sickness of 1373, opens

46 Annotator 4 has written 'dame Ielian' in the outer margin. Margery's meeting with Julian took place in c.1413.

the soul to revelation. Vision is characteristically material, Christ in the likeness of a ‘most bewtyvows, and most amyable’ man, seated by Kempe’s bedside and speaking directly to her: ‘Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?’ (224–32). The vision enacts Love’s injunction to imagine Christ as ‘a faire yonge man at the age of xxxiii yere’ (161). The episode also establishes the structural model of deeply personal conversations with Christ and accompanying experiences of revelation – in part that of Bridget’s *Revelations* and Catherine’s *Dialogues* but with considerably more autobiographical material and without their theological complexity.

Despite the emphasis on vision, the work explores different kinds of sensory spiritual experience. Sounds retain a special quality, from the melody ‘so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr myght be herd in this world’ that moves her to high devotion (46) to that ‘so hedows ... that sche mygth not ber it’ (1242), and the ‘sowndys and melodiis’ that overwhelm others’ voices (2868–70). Such experiences recall Rolle’s account of hearing a heavenly melody and his repeated use of similar imagery to convey celestial joys (ch. 15, 189–90; 93). But the differences are also striking: Rolle hears music as his soul reaches in prayer to heaven and his meditation becomes a song, while Kempe’s experience is unsought and purely affective. Rolle specifies that his ‘clamor’/‘canor’ is interior (‘vocem ... interiorem’, ch. 34, 243; 152); in the same way Julian of Norwich’s ‘understondyng’ is lifted to heaven, to see the Lord ‘with mervelous melody of endles love’ (ch. 14, 52). By contrast, a series of sounds heard with the bodily ear signal to Kempe the presence of the Holy Ghost: the sound of bellows, the voice of a dove, the song of a robin, all followed by ‘gret grace’ (2965–74). Late in the book, the involuntary revelation of dream is introduced: unable to resist sleep, Kempe sees visions of the Book of Life and Christ’s crucified body. Physical miracles also provide evidence of grace: she sees with the bodily eye the Sacrament fluttering as a dove (ch. 20, explicitly recalling Bridget’s Eucharistic vision). The *Book* recounts precisely the kinds of bodily revelation of which English writers were suspicious: ‘gret comfortys’ both ‘gostly’ and ‘bodily’ – sweet smells, sounds and melodies, delicate and comforting white specks tokening angels (2863–89). As for Rolle, the flame of love is physically felt, burning in Kempe’s breast for sixteen years (2893), causing her cryings to break out (ch. 46) and connected with physical ‘fallyng’ (2190). As in so many other works, ravishment is repeatedly depicted in sensory terms, especially as ‘swetnesse’ (2189, ‘swet terys of hy devocyon’, 927), but its physical force is more extreme. Julian’s evocation of full knowledge of the Lord, ‘hym verily seand and fulsumly feland, hym gostly heryng, and hym delectably smellyng, and hym swetely swelowyng’ (ch. 43, 98), is rendered in bodily terms. It is the power of ‘affeccyon’ that draws Kempe into the life of Christ, the ‘mynde’ of his Passion and ultimately his ‘Godhed’ (7022–5).

Yet as in the lives of holy women and Julian's *Revelations* the voice of the Lord is pre-eminent. Like Elizabeth of Hungary, Kempe questions the origins of the voice she hears; as in Catherine's *Dialogue* it is placed in terms of its edifying effects: 'And sche stably and stedfastly belevyd that it was God that spak in hir sowle and non evyl spiryt, for in hys speche sche had most strength and most comfort and most encresyng of vertu, blissyd be God!' (7238–41). The *Book* develops distinctions not just between kinds of revelation but between kinds of voice: exterior, interior, in the mind, in the soul. The primary emphasis is on the 'wonderful spechys and dalyawns [conversations] which owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle' (52–3). Such 'dalyawnc' ravishes her spirit: it is 'so swet and so devowt that it ferd as sche had ben in an hevyn' (7258). Hearing the Lord's voice is both spontaneous and requires active participation and examination. The soul must be receptive: it is 'in silens' (2922) and 'in gret rest of sowle a gret whyle' that she has 'hy contemplacyon day be day, and many holy spech and dalyawns of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst bothe afornoon and aftyrnoon' (924–6). Kempe seems to probe the nature of her experience as well as its origins in describing to the English friar she meets at Assisi 'how owyr Lord dalyed to hir sowle in a maner of spekyng' (2577–8). The experience is perhaps that of a soundless voice of the kind described by contemporary voice-hearers. Julian of Norwich depicts a similar phenomenon, 'Than he, without voice and openyng of lippis, formys in my soule these words' (ch. 13, 50). The *Book* also distinguishes between interior and exterior voices: lying in bed, Kempe hears 'wyth hir bodily erys a lowde voys clepyng: "Margery"'; on waking, God speaks directly to her, 'Dowtyr' (4381, 4386: the moment between sleeping and waking is a particularly common context for voice-hearing). Like Mary, Catherine and Julian, she also hears negative voices: the devil 'bad hir in hir mende' (4869–70) to choose with which man she will prostitute herself, a description that suggests the experience of intrusive thoughts. Kempe's prayer provokes the return of 'her good awngel' (4887) and of the Lord's voice.

These experiences are strikingly dialogic. While the emphasis on voice parallels that of Bridget, Mary, Catherine and Julian, Kempe plays a more active role. As well as with the Lord, she speaks extensively with the Virgin, and other saints – Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, Katherine, Margaret (7245–53). The Lord's voice also functions as a familiar aspect of Kempe's mind, offering a dialogic commentary on her life, experiences of the kind described by some contemporary voice-hearers. He offers assurances of well-being, interpretative frames for events, and practical advice on topics of all kinds, from where Kempe should go and what she should say to ascetic practices and attire. While the conversational mode is present throughout, it becomes more prominent, by contrast to fused or multisensory vision, later in the narrative.

Charles Fernyhough has argued that Kempe's voices may be seen in terms of scientific accounts of inner speech, the conversation with the self typical of individual reflection on inner experience. Voice-hearing may result when condensed inner speech is temporarily re-expanded. In its condensed form, Kempe's internal dialogue is a state of 'being with' God; in its expanded form, it becomes a conversation with God: God speaks as an interlocutor, and she speaks back.⁴⁷ The concept of inner dialogue offers a new perspective on the psychology of spiritual meditation and the cognitive processes of prayer.

The *Book of Margery Kempe* is founded on voices – the voices Kempe hears, but also the voices of mystical writers, of the holy women who inspired her, and of Kempe herself. Yet ineffability remains a central theme. Words are always at a remove from experience: 'Ne hyrself cowd nevyr telle the grace that sche felt, it was so hevenly, so hy aboven hyr reson and hyr bodyly wyttys, and hyr body so febyl in tym of the presens of grace that sche myth nevyr expressyn it wyth her word lych as sche felt it in hyr sowle' (61–4). Affect is 'so mervelyows that sche cowde nevyr tellyn it as sche felt it' (7055–6); her thoughts 'so sotyl and hevynly that sche cowde nevyr tellen hem aftyr so as sche had hem in felyng' (6436–7); her experiences 'secretys of her sowle' (1064). Yet if the gap between earthly and celestial can never fully be bridged, Kempe's writing of her inner life merits being read as a remarkable attempt to articulate spiritual experience, to capture the strangeness and rapture of revelation, and to signal the possibility of drawing the divine into conversation with the self.

47 Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves* (London, 2016), and see Saunders and Fernyhough, 'Reading Margery Kempe's Inner Voices'.

