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. ‘Wondirful 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.

2 The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Barry Windeatt (2000; Cambridge, 2004), lines 1389–42. 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). Pepwell’s characterization of Margery as ‘devout ancress’ 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’. Allen uses theories of Kempe as neurotic to explain her ‘suggestibility’ and reflection of ‘the highly spiritualised ideals of piety in her world’. Twenty-first-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). 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. Lynn Staley, indeed, suggests that Kempe invented an amanuensis in order more safely to critique religious and


4 Pepwell’s headings refer to Margery as ‘Ancress of Lynn’; he closes the extract with the words, ‘Here endeth a short treatise of a devout ancress called Margery Kempe of Lynn’.


social practices and injustices. For Staley, the ‘artfulness’ of the Book renders it comparable to secular fictions of individual conscience and identity. 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. 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’. 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. 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

8 See further Lynn Staley, Margery Kempe’s Disenting Fictions (University Park, PA, 1994).
Book for communities of readers engaged with visionary experience and voice-hearing. 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. 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. 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’. Qualitative studies have shown that supernatural or spiritual explanations remain some of the most available and powerful. 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.


Large-scale studies suggest c.1%, with higher rates for fleeting experiences: see McCarthy-Jones, Hearing Voices, pp. 170–88.


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.

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.
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. 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. 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. 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’. 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. 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

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.
26 Ibid., p. 16.
personal experience’. 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). 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). 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, Stimulis 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.

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. Yet even here there are resonances: the image of grace as a spark, ‘a sodeyn steryng … as sparcle from cole’ (ch. 4, 22), recalled in Kempe’s descriptions of the fire of love; the ‘scharp darte of longing 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. 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 voz’ (I, ch. 50, 1445). While Hilton’s sensory imagery and depiction of ‘the fier of love flaumynge’


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 inflammam 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. 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 ‘vetula plus experitur de Dei amore et minus de mundi voluptate 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 Prickynge of Love* in the late fourteenth century, perhaps by Hilton. The *Prickynge* is similarly characterized by sensual descriptions of divine love, urgings

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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 desire’, and an affective emphasis on the power of meditation to move the individual to a ‘sweetnesse of loue’ characterized as ‘dronkonnesse’. Contemplation of the Passion leads the narrator to share imaginatively in Christ’s wounds: ‘A ʒee 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 ʒen opened. me thouȝte þat myn ʒen were filled ful of his blod. and so i ʒeode 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 Prickynge 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.

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


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’

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 fantayse or ymagynacyone, she saw in soule sympl fourmey and dyuyne as in a clene myrror’ (158). Ecstatic experience presages her celestial crowning: ‘for feruour of spirite while she, criynge, was drawen oute of hirselye, 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 voyys’, and her example too helps to persuade Kempe’s priest to belief (5173). 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 appereide 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, ‘rauvshed’ (80–1)]. She employs images of ‘ful brennyng affecciown’ 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. 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

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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.

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 affeccions’, recounting how the Lord speaks to Catherine in contemplation: ‘Opene þe íʒe of þin intellecte, or of gostli vnderstandinge, & 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 affeccioune 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.


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 inwarde to þeire body aʒens þeours of kynde; & streynyn hem, as þei wolde see inwarde wiþ þeire bodily iʒen, & heren inwarde wiþ þeire eren, & so forþe of alle þeire wittes, smellen, taasten, & felyn inwarde’ (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 visiouns or revelaciouns 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.46

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 hoely spechys and dalyawns [conversation] that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle’ and her ‘many wonderful

45 Hilton, ‘Of Angels Song’, in *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, pp. 131–6 (pp. 132, 134).
revelacyons’ (1339–42). 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 neve f als’ (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 contemplacyons, 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 thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevr 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 myght 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 stabely 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] whech owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle’ (52–3). Such ‘dalyawnce’ 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 afternoon’ (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 fefyl 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’.