“Be more strange and bold”:
Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in
The Book of Margery Kempe

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Literary critics increasingly embrace fifteenth-century English mystic Margery Kempe as queer, despite her superficially normative status as housewife, mother, and widow. In The Book of Margery Kempe (c. 1436), as many have noted, the protagonist’s concern for wedded chastity thwarts conventional notions of marital sexuality: Margery negotiates her way out of the “marital debt” that she owes her husband (chap. 11); she wears white clothing to signify a chaste existence despite her legal status as wife and mother (chaps. 15 and 34); and she exhibits desire for—and transgendered identification with—the “manhode” of Christ (chap. 35).1 Scholars of medieval drama and gender have variously characterized Margery as a “performance artist” and “master thespian,” and an avowedly queer Margery Kempe lies at the very heart of influential work on pre- and postmodern temporality, community, and cultural identity.2

This essay examines an episode in the Book when Margery’s external displays of desire (spiritual, affective, and erotic) once again register as queer—but unlike passages most frequently discussed, this chapter concerns interactions between women. In chapter 74, Margery expresses an inordinate desire for contact with lepers. At first glance, such behavior appears consistent with Margery’s modus operandi. Throughout the Book, Margery identifies intensely with lepers, filtering leprosy (or leper bodies) through a spiritual lens; sometimes she perceives wounded male lepers on the “stretys” as figures for Christ, and elsewhere lepers inspire
acts of charity. In this chapter, Margery seeks permission to kiss lepers (to demonstrate her piety), and her confessor grants her request with one titillating qualification. She may kiss lepers, but only females: “Than sche teld hir confessowr how gret desyre sche had to kyssyn lazerys [lepers], and he warnyd hir that sche shulde kyssyn no men, but, yyf sche wolde algatys kyssyn, sche shuld kyssyn women” (chap. 74, 1489–91). How are modern readers to understand this mandate of female-only contact in this text, this unexpected “turn” to queer acts?

This puzzling episode may appear to “make sense” once we consider the immediate spiritual issues at stake and how the text participates in well-established hagiographical literary traditions. Demonstrating humility through exposure to bodily wounds or fluid from open sores (and thereby contagious diseases) could actually be seen as an orthodox spiritual practice, particularly for holy women. Helen Mills, for instance, has explored the role of such seemingly transgressive displays of piety in the illustrated vitae of premodern women. Nonetheless, a complex host of local considerations informs the confessor’s nuanced response. In his capacity as a confessor, the priest most likely circumscribes Margery’s leper-kissing not out of fear of bodily infection per se but rather a concern that kissing might facilitate illicit contact between Margery (a married woman) and unknown men. Long-standing associations between leprosy and lechery may additionally inflect the confessor’s reluctance to give Margery carte blanche to kiss as freely as she pleases. Elsewhere, in the first chapter of Book 2 of the text, Margery’s son exhibits physical symptoms of leprosy, features coded as signs of venereal disease and non-marital transgressions: “he fel into the synne of letchery. Sone aftyr hys colowr chawngyd, hys face wex ful of whelys and bloberys as it had ben a lepyr” (chap. 1, 26–28). Throughout premodern English literature as well, leprosy comprises an overt symptom (or consequence) of a range of sexual sins including lechery, adultery, and sodomy.

As commonsensical as this approach may seem, the text leaves unresolved the confessor’s own perception of homosocial female relations. Does he consider the possibility that physical contact between women might also spark illicit sexual “desyre” or lead to spiritual transgression? Does the priest simply dismiss sexual desire between women as non-existent, incon-
sequential, or (alternatively) tolerable, even exciting? In any case, the Book carefully circumscribes the desires of the women once their interactions begin: “Than was sche [Margery] glad, for sche had leve to kyssyn the seke women and went to a place wher seke women dwellyd . . . and fel down on hir kneys befor hem, preying hem that sche myth kyssyn her mouth for the lofe of Jhesu” (chap. 74, 1491–94). In this episode, the Book offers orthodox somatic gestures of piety with a distinctly queer twist. Tweaking the performance of St. Mary Magdalene who (elsewhere in the Book) falls on her knees at Christ’s feet to show “worschip and reverens,” Margery falls on her knees and prays to kiss women’s mouths. Although Margery’s actions are rendered in detail, the Book leaves the precise location of these acts undisclosed; “a place wher seke women dwellyd” could suggest anything from an enclave within the city to an institutionalized setting beyond it. Margery’s remarkable performance might gain additional legibility when we consider that the leper hospital nearest to Kempe’s hometown of Lynn was probably in Gaywood—an institution explicitly dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene herself.

However we conceive Margery’s entry into an unconventional social (if not institutionalized) space, the text asserts that her desires remain orthodox: “so sche kyssyd ther two seke women with many an holy thowt and many a devowt teer” (chap. 74, 1494–95). The other women’s desires, on the other hand, are not so safely contained. One woman’s response to Margery’s physical and verbal displays of intimacy takes a provocative form: “the oo woman had so many temptacyons that sche wist not how sche myth best be governyd” (chap. 74, 4199–4200). As if this explanation weren’t sufficient, the text—in an apparent series of non sequitur statements—reports the leper woman’s internal state: “And sche was labowryd wyth many fowle and horibyl thowtys, many mo than sche cowde tellyn. And, as sche seyd, sche was a mayde” (chap. 74, 4202–3). While content of this woman’s “horibyl thowtys” remain elusive, modern critics have asserted that this confessional turn in the Book perpetuates premodern associations between leprosy and lechery.

While allusions to lechery would not be surprising here, something unexpected does transpire: the text suggests a causal relationship between Margery’s actions and the leper woman’s “temptacyons” and “thowtys.” In
other words, Margery’s mouth kissing and intimate conversation have actually generated (“labowryd”) the undisclosed “temptacyons” in this leper woman—an unspecified desire (say) for men on the streets, for women who frequent or reside in her community, or even for Margery herself (among many possibilities). As much as this passage intimates lechery, its evasive prose style also evokes the discursive specter of sodomy, “that utterly confused category” that gathers together any number of non-heteronormative acts and desires. Indeed, premodern texts often insinuate sodomy precisely through an overt refusal to name it, and this woman’s “horibyl thowtys” are emphatically non-enumerated (“many more than sche cowde tellyn”). Moreover, the parataxis in the text’s reckoning of internal thoughts (“And . . . And . . .”) subtly suggests a conjunction between the women’s external actions and the women’s internal reactions. In whatever space these women inhabit, the initial non sequitur of the leper woman’s inner turmoil is, in retrospect, a natural outcome.

I would like to pursue the possibility that Margery elicits (unspecified) erotic desires in the leper in this moment, and further posit that this woman’s unarticulated desire—like leprosy—might be conceived as contagious. In an exceptional early foray into female same-sex desire in the Book, Kathy Lavezzo traces “the homoerotic valences of female-female identifications” in Margery’s displays of affective piety; through Marian devotion and the performance of sorrow for Christ’s passion, the protagonist often figures as “an object of identification and desire in her own right, available for consumption by other Christian women” (178). Extending Lavezzo’s reading, one might say this leper episode reveals just how much “a woman’s desire to be like another woman may slip into the desire to have that woman, or . . . desire may even underwrite an identification, and vice versa” (178). Not only does the Book present the possibility that Margery’s actions may provoke illicit desires in other women, but this episode also leaves open the possibility that such performances could invite illicit desires between women.

The transference of desire through female-female contact (with or without the intermediary of Christ or Mary) takes complex forms throughout the text, and modern scholars are not the first readers to recognize the potentially transgressive aspects of this particular episode.
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Indeed, premodern readers’ responses to the *Book* indicate they could imagine the text as fully capable of transferring “horibyl” desires. The only surviving manuscript of the *Book*, London, British Library, MS Additional 61823, was associated with a Carthusian monastery at Mount Grace and is annotated by four hands (c. 1450); a seldom-discussed marginal note regulates the reader’s interpretation of this passage: “nota A sotel & a sore temptacion. In sich a case we shold be more strange & bold aga[n]ste our gostly enmy.”17 Rather than clarifying matters, this gloss rearticulates the woman’s “thowtys” in tantalizingly oblique terms (“sotel & a sore temptacion”), asserting an orthodox spiritual reaction to unspeakable desires: “we” (readers) must “be more strange & bold” (i.e., actively resist temptation).

The injunction to “be more strange & bold” may strike modern readers as, well, strange. In the fifteenth century “strange” (or “straunge”) carried a wide range of meanings, typically entailing anything “foreign” or “unfamiliar” but here a more limited sense of “aloof, distant, or unwilling.”18 In the context of premodern courtly love traditions (and attendant heteronormative social conventions), the ideal maiden must remain “straunge” or disdainful—i.e., regulate her behavior and desires, resisting the advances of a (male) suitor—and perhaps the maxim “be more strange & bold” targets female readers along the lines of this cultural script.19 To put things another way, the manuscript annotator inhabits the position of the leper in this scenario, this enigmatic figure who “seyd [sche] was a mayde” (virgin or chaste woman). One might even say that the rare use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” compels the readers of the *Book* to assume (adopt, or even contract) the very same desires as the anonymous leper maiden in the text.20

Ultimately the *Book* denies modern (and premodern) readers any claim to empirical or transcendent truth regarding this episode. “We” can only infer or imagine the leper woman’s desires; the text establishes distance from the woman’s comments (“as she seyd” she was a “mayde”); and the narrative resists closure: Margery “went to hir many tymys to comfortyn hir and preyd for hir, also ful specialy that God schuld strenth hir ageyn hir enmye, and it is to belevyn that he dede so” (chap. 74, 4203–5). Cryptically stating that “it is to belevyn” that God set the other woman’s desires straight—but not necessarily clarifying whether this actually hap-
pened—the Book abandons the leper story and the next chapter abruptly shifts to new material. For whatever reason, the Book permits its readers to imagine that the leper woman’s desires just might persist unchanged, even as the narration leaves her behind.

I conclude this essay with a few thoughts about this Book’s female leper chapter and possible directions for future scholarship. In my examination of this episode, I ask that we continue attending to the queerness of the protagonist of the Book (as many have done so well) but go farther in acknowledging how this woman’s non-normative or socially unorthodox desires disperse and inflame unexpected desires in others—including readers of the Book itself (I deliberately invoke reading and “flaming desire” here, as the Book often aligns flames, reading, and desire). While portrayals of desire between premodern women have received significant scholarly attention, I contend that such representations in English texts and the full consequences of their affective “touch” on readers warrant more exploration, particularly in female-generated texts like The Book of Margery Kempe.

Most importantly, this episode in the Book challenges us to consider how cross-disciplinary inquiry might reshape primarily literary approaches to premodern texts. For instance, anthropology and archaeology have yet to offer insights into the unique negotiation of urban space and leprosy in the Book. What is the significance of discrete “leper spaces” throughout the Book—from the fleeting encounters with male lepers in the “stretys” to the more sustained interactions that transpire in exclusively female spaces? Other expanding fields, like premodern disability studies, may very well alter the tenor of future criticism. Lepers and others with “non-normative” bodies in premodern literature often appear as if they were solely “sygnys” or “tokynys” to be imbued with spiritual significance by outside observers. However, as I suggest above, a leper woman’s desires (and subjectivity) are not necessarily circumscribed by her gender, nor are they entirely predetermined by her perceived disability or social status. Like so many passages in The Book of Margery Kempe, the female leper-kissing chapter invites many more questions than it answers, and future interdisciplinary conversations may increase our engagement with premodern texts like these, however “strange” or distant they initially appear.
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Notes


3. When Margery encounters male lepers “in the stretys” of her hometown of Lynn, their bodies trigger “in the syght of hir sowle” the image of “[Christ’s] wondys bledyng” (chap. 74). Barry Windeatt furthermore observes that Margery’s will to visit lepers has precedent in other saint’s lives, male and female; see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (London: Longman, 2000), 326. For more local context on lepers in Lynn, see Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 290.

4. Unless indicated otherwise, all citations are from Book 1 of the text. All quotations follow the TEAMS edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1996). For ease of reference, I cite Staley’s edition by chapter and line number; the entire text is also available online: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm>.

5. Helen Mills, “Demure Transgression: Portraying Female ‘Saints’ in Post-


7. It could be the case that female relationships fail to register in the priest’s mind at all, as Karma Lochrie astutely states in a broader context: “relationships between women [were often rendered] a meaningless or even illegible aspect of femininity. Female interactions simply did not register on the medieval radar screen” (70); see “Between Women,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Women’s Writing*, ed. David Wallace and Carolyn Dinshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70–90.

8. While she does not happen to read Margery as particularly queer, Coletti provides a lucid and engaging reading of the protagonist’s *imitatio* of Mary Magdalene throughout the Book (*Drama of Saints, 80 et passim*).

9. Margery’s hometown of medieval Lynn was in proximity to a number of hospitals, and it is “possible that the leper hospital at Gaywood was at St. Mary Magdalene’s” (*A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John Arnold and Katherine Lewis, 180); see also Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in England*, 129; but note many other hospitals dedicated to Mary Magdalene existed in Norfolk (Coletti, *Drama of Saints*, 39). For a detailed examination of the *Digby Mary Magdalene* and resonance with medieval hospital communities, see also Coletti, “Social Contexts of the East Anglian Saint Play: The Digby Mary Magdalene and the Late Medieval Hospital?” in *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 287–301.

10. Staley tersely states that “Kempe draws here upon the ancient and false link between leprosy and lechery,” apparently implying that the leper woman’s “horibyl thowtys” must be of a sexual nature (note to 74.4202). Coletti further observes (in a slightly different context) that the notion of a female placed at the nexus of lechery and leprosy was widely familiar to medieval people; the “conflated scriptural vita” of Mary Magdalene, for instance, made her an iconic “profligate woman linked with leprosy, the disease of lechers” (*Drama of Saints, 39*).


12. Many premodern writers identify sodomy as a “horrible” and “unspeakable” (and strategically undefined) vice; see for instance the intimate connection between the

13. Kellie Robertson invokes the “bureaucratic regimen of parataxis, the ‘and then and then and then’ of bureaucratic time,” a common “idiom” in Middle English that “implies causality even where none exists” (456). Although Robertson discusses Chaucer’s *General Prologue*, this rhetorical feature is also widespread in other texts involving spiritual reckoning (e.g., devotional lyrics, confessional manuals); see “Authorial Work,” in *Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 441–58.

14. I invoke the “natural” deliberately, because premodern thinkers often grouped same-sex sodomy and (heterosexual) extra-marital fornication as crimes *contra naturam* or “agaynes nature” (Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 6–7).

15. As stated previously, premodern writers often depict leprosy as a venereal disease, acquired and transmitted through sexual activity.


17. The manuscript annotations are fully transcribed in Windeatt, 439–52. See also Kelly Parsons, “The Red Ink Annotator of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and His Lay Audience,” in *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 2001), 143–216. Note that my use of the verb “regulate” specifically recalls the *regula* (rules) that were established to govern monastic life.

18. See *The Middle English Dictionary* def. 3(a): “Aloof, reserved, distant; estranged, unfriendly, hostile; with inf.: unwilling (to do sth.); also, of thoughts” (from OF estrange, AF *estraunge*, stra(u)nge).

1998), 220.

20. Of course the community of readers of the Book could be configured in infinite ways, as the word “we” might readily encompass not only (imagined) female readers but also a male monastic community or even contemporary scholars.

21. I would paraphrase the Middle English phrase “it is to belevyn” as something along the lines of “it must (or ought to) be believed.”

22. It is worth noting that medieval female lepers could feature as protagonists of texts in their own right and be afforded complex subjectivity (particularly if they originated from a high social class or could claim a holy vocation). See the Carthusian account of Alice the Leper translated by Martinus Cawley, Lives of Ida of Nivelles, Lutgard, and Alice the Leper (Lafayette: Guadalupe Translations, 1994).

23. For instance, when the text relates Margery’s experience of a “flawme of fyer wonder hoot and delectably...brennyng in hir brest and at hir hert, as verily as a man schuld felyn the material fyer yyf he put hys hand or hys finger therin,” the so-called “red ink annotator” of the Kempe manuscript (or “marginal annotator 4”) writes next to this passage “ignis divini amoris” (“fire of divine love”). The annotator also includes wavy red lines representing flames and provides a reference to the literary source Richard Rolle. See Windeatt, 193–94.

24. Dinshaw’s influential work identifies “a queer historical impulse” in modern scholarship and a desire for “partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time” (Getting Medieval, 1 and 21); and Heather Love’s exploration of affect in queer historiography attends to the nuanced, and at times conflicted, impulses of premodern scholars including Dinshaw and Valerie Traub. Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), chap. 1, “Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer Theory,” 1–52. My comments here do not imply that female same-sex desire is neglected in premodern scholarship; I only suggest that Kempe still invites other social considerations yet to be explored. On medieval French literary contexts, see (for instance) the groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn, Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave, 2001); see also Anna Klosowska, Queer Love in the Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave, 2005). As for English literary scholarship, Lochrie lucidly delineates a spectrum of “spiritual friendships” and female bonds in The Book of Margery Kempe, although she does not mention the female leper community (“Between Women,” 70–90).

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see Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in England*, and Coletti on East Anglian hospitals (see n. 3).


27. While he does not address Margery Kempe in any way, Byron Lee Grigsby offers lucid reflections on disciplinary approaches to leprosy in premodern literary texts; he specifically addresses social constructivism in anthropology and the philosophy and history of science; see Grigsby, *Pestilence*, 1–10.