

A Female Body

Margery's construction of her female body is indebted to the general stereotypes of her time: i.e. the major difference between women and men is that the former are imperfect, weak, inferior. Remember that the anti-feminist writings would draw on the medical tradition (deriving from Aristotle and Galen), according to which a woman was a defective man. Women are more closely linked with the material (vs. the spiritual); they are closer to animals, the body is more central than in the case of men; their body is full of moisture (menstruation blood, milk, plus tears!).

Consequently,

- * they cry a lot (see Margery!);
- * they are lustful (vs. the Virgin Mary, an emblem of chastity);
- * their beauty is only external: Odo of Cluny (C10) wrote that if men could see under the skin of women, they would be frightened by the sight they would get...they are even compared with sacks of dung;
- * they are proud, are chatterboxes, and never utter interesting things
- * they are irrational;
- * they lack education. Of course, they are not responsible for that: remember that the education of average girls at the time would hardly ever include writing and reading skills.² Keep also in mind that Latin was generally unknown to all of them (which, incidentally, accounts for the development of English works for women: they fostered, as it were, a private, home culture of the native language,³ and medieval texts often say that they have been translated from Latin for the benefit of women).

Girls were frequently taught by their mother, but Margery does not seem to have been. Although she came from a well-off bourgeois family,⁴ Margery could not write, and probably she could not read either; in addition, there is but a single allusion to her mother in the whole book (ch.1, 209). Let me add, however, that she was definitely longing for some kind of symbolic/spiritual mother figure. She had access to the contents of many spiritual books through the help of various people: a priest (ch.58) made her familiar with a whole body of texts typical of late medieval piety,⁵ esp. the spiritual writings of St Bridget of Sweden, a very popular saint in fifteenth-century England (in 1415 a Bridgettine house was founded in Middlesex; there are several Middle English versions of her visions). St Bridget will become a role model for her (she too abandoned children and husband to become Christ's bride): she partly modelled her life on the saint's. Margery might also have wanted to imitate Elizabeth of Hungary's noisy weeping; and she was also definitely influenced by our fellow countrywoman Marie d'Oignies (c.1177-1213), born into a wealthy Nivelles family. Marie and her husband also lived in chastity; and, quite significantly, she too had the gift of tears,⁶ mortified her flesh, and did not eat meat. Her life had also been translated into Middle English, and a version of it has survived in a manuscript that also contains the lives of two other 'holy women of Liège', i.e. Christina the Astonishing (even closer to us: she was also called Christina of Saint-Trond) and Elisabeth of Spalbeck,⁷ plus that of the Italian mystic St Catherine of Siena. These are just a few examples. Female mysticism was widespread in the late Middle Ages, and many mystics were undeniably well-known in England. Margery's spiritual advisers must have been go-betweens between her and the current body of female textual authority, those 'foremothers'. In her Book she also mentions a visit to Julian of Norwich: she was anxious about the origin of her visions and wanted to make sure that they were inspired by God, and not by the devil.

* The male clergy endeavoured to maintain women in a state of illiteracy; they were not allowed to express their voices, esp. not in religious matters. Remember St Paul⁸ and the Fathers of the Church.⁹ As Luce Irigaray has argued in her seminal *Speculum de l'autre femme*,¹⁰ mysticism allowed women to escape the space that was ascribed to them. It was the only place in Western history where woman spoke and acted in such a public way. Visionaries could pretend that they were in direct contact with Jesus/God; their detractors were frequently afraid of interfering because they could not make sure that these female mystics did not actually report God's words. So, most of them were carefully examined by the male ecclesiastical authorities, and the latter endeavoured to contest the validity of their relationship to God, and frequently argued that they were lying. The result was that some of them were judged as heretics and burnt.¹¹

She frequently refers to various physical experiences, such as health problems: hurting feet, pains in her side (the number of hours they would last, how they would stop for shorter or longer periods, etc.), a severe episode of dysentery, how she vomited frequently. Elsewhere she provides detailed descriptions of her accommodation during her pilgrimages, the meals they took, the place where she sat at table, the vermin in the bed, etc. She addresses the issue of her clothes throughout the whole book. Before having her visions she was highly interested in what she wore, was arrogant and had a showy manner of dressing (ch. 2: gold pipes on her head, fashionable hoods, etc.). But in her first vision, Christ ordered her to live in chastity¹² and to wear white clothes.¹³ He explained to her that she was a maiden in her soul and that from then on her white garment would be the external sign of her new virginity. We ought to keep in mind that the concept of virginity was highly debated and controversial at the time. What is it? Is it shared by men and women? Is it limited to the physical presence of a hymen? Is it rather a matter of humility and obedience? Can it be regained once it is lost? What Christ orders her reflects a distinction between a physical/technical/ physiological virginity (it was difficult to argue that after 14 children, she had never had sexual intercourse) and a moral and social construction. The mode of expression of this new virginity is not coincidental; in a way this is, again, a concrete, and I would say feminine way - remember the stereotypes of physical beauty and clothing- of physically and visually insisting on her new state.

All her physical senses are highly sensitive, and she insists on her sight, her hearing (the spirit of the Holy Ghost becomes the song of the turtle dove; she hears sweet melodies), her sensitivity to temperature, and also her appreciation of delicate scents. In ch.35, she perceives her sensorial experiences as bodily comforts sent by God, and she enumerates a number of them in a rather long passage

Sumtyme sche felt swet smellys wyth hir nose; it wer swettyr, hir thowt, than evyr was ony swet erdly thyng that sche smellyd befor, ne sche myth nevyr tellyn how swet it wern, for hir thowt sche myth a levyd therby yf they wolde a lestyde. Sumtyme sche herd wyth hir bodily erys sweche sowndys and melodiis that sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyde to hir in that tyme les he spoke the lowder.

Thes sowndys and melodiis had sche herd nyhand every day the terme of twenty-five

yere whan this booke was wretyn, and specially whan sche was in devowt prayer, also

many tymes whil sche was at Rome and in Ingland bothe. Sche sey wyth hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al abowte hir on every syde as thykke in a maner as

motys in the sunne; it weryn ryth sotyl and comfortabyl, and the brygtare that the

sunne schyned, the bettyr sche myth se hem. Sche sey hem many dyvers tymes and in

many dyvers placys, bothe in chirche and in hir chawmbre, at hir mete and in hir

praerys, in felde and in towne, bothyn goyng and syttyng. And many tymes sche
 was
 aferde what thei myth be, for sche sey hem as wel on nytys in dyrkenes as on
 daylygth.
 Than, whan sche was aferde of hem, owir Lord seyde unto hir, 'Be this tokyn,
 dowtyr,
 beleve it is God that spekyth in the, for wherso God is hevyn is, and wher that
 God is
 ther be many awngelys, and God is in the and thu art in hym. And therfor be not
 aferde, dowtyr, for thes betokyn that thu hast many awngelys abowte the to kepyn
 the
 bothe day and nygth that no devyl schal han power ovyr the ne non evyl man to
 der the.'
 Than fro that tyme forwarde sche usyd to seyn whan sche saw hem comyn,
 'Benedictus
 qui venit in nomine domini.' Also owr Lord gaf hir an other tokne, the which
 enduryd
 abowtyn sixteen yer and it encresyd evyr mor and mor, and that was a flawme of
 fyer
 wondir hoot and delectabyl and ryth comfortabyl, nowt wastyng but evyr
 incresyng,
 of lowe, for, thow the wedyr wer nevyr so colde, sche felt the hete 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 fynger therin. Whan sche felt fyrst the fyer of love 14 brennyng in
 her brest,
 sche was aferd therof, and than owr Lord answeyde to hir mend and seyde,
 'Dowtyr,
 be not aferd, for this hete is the hete of the Holy Gost'.¹⁵

You must have noticed the number of times that she cries, weeps, shouts, falls
 down, i.e. behaves in a way that can be called hysterical.¹⁶ While all this is
 obvious, I want to add that it is also a form of body language that is fairly
 convenient since expressing oneself in such a way requires neither education,
 nor excellent verbal proficiency. Significantly, she explains that some of her
 visions were so strong, 'so saintly and elevated' and 'would stand so high above
 her bodily spirit that she could not find words to express the intuitive
 knowledge she acquired'. Moreover, as already mentioned, her behaviour probably
 also imitated the powerful model of her foremothers, esp. Marie d'Oignies.

Her body language is sometimes accompanied by a set of other strange phenomena,
 and some people thought that she had epilepsy, for when she cried she hurled her
 body about and turned blue and grey all over, like 'the colour of the lead'...!

Since it is impossible to examine here all the facets of Margery's insistence on
 her body in her book, I want to explore specific dimensions of the female body,
 i.e. motherhood and sexual life.

1. Motherhood

Obviously, her personal motherhood had been a traumatic experience that she
 wanted to repress. She was married when she was about 20, and was pregnant
 within a short time, 'as nature would have it' (ch.1).¹⁷ She was very sick, her
 childbirth was very difficult, and she thought that she was about to die. She
 wanted to confess her sins, esp. something she had on her conscience and that
 she had never revealed before. Many scholars have tried to guess the nature of
 that sin and some argue that it might be connected with Lollard 'heresy', while
 others assume that it was a sexual sin. The point is that her confessor was so
 tactless that she was eventually unable to express her sin. As a result, 'she
 went out of her mind, was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for

half a year, eight weeks and odd days' (ch.1), because she thought that she was going to be damned, and also because the confessor rebuked her sharply. In other words, she developed what we would call a severe postnatal depression, also suffered from postpartum psychosis, and was in a state of delirium. In her crises, she forsook her faith, denied God, the virgin and the saints, and also her father, mother and friends; she slandered her husband. She mutilated her own body (she bit her hand violently, tore some skin from her body with her nails), and would have committed suicide if she had not been bound.

Elsewhere she mentions the fact that she has given fourteen children to her husband, but it is obvious that she is not interested in her own motherhood. The only child that is mentioned in her autobiography is the priest (he might be the scribe of the first version of her autobiography). We would expect her, for instance, to have spoken of her first-born child: in her delirium she seems to have mentioned everybody around her, but not a word of the baby.

In ch.21 there is another very brief allusion to her maternity. As we are going to see, she tried to avoid having sex with her husband, but had to for a couple of years, and became pregnant. 'What shall I do about looking after my child?' Our Lord said: 'Daughter, don't be afraid, I shall arrange for it to be looked after'.

It is obvious that she rejected her own motherhood. Strangely enough, in a way she displaced that feeling/instinct, and in her visions she attended on a number of small babes and children. For example:

- ch.6: she meets St Anne when she is pregnant. The episode is followed by the birth of the Virgin Mary, and Margery takes care of the little girl until she is 12, provides food and white clothing for her...

- ch.6: when Mary is expecting Jesus, Margery goes to Bethlehem with her, and gives her kerchiefs in order to swaddle the little baby.

- and, most interestingly, when she is in Jerusalem, at the Calvary, she identifies with Christ in a number of ways. Not only does she experience Christ's agony (we'll return to this), which is already quite important, she also gives birth to him (she speaks of a 'ghostly labour'). Subsequently, the sight of any male baby in his mother's arms will revive that feeling, e.g. in ch.35:

Sche was so meche affectyd to the manhode of Crist that whan sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her armys, yf sche myth wetyn that thei wer ony men children [i.e.boys], sche schuld than cryin, roryn, and wepyn as thei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode. And, yf sche myth an had hir wille, oftyntymes sche wolde a takyn the childeryn owt of the moderys armys and a kyssed hem in the stede of Criste. And, yf sche sey a semly man, sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym les than sche myth a seyn hym that was bothe God and man. And therfor sche cryed many tymes and oftyn whan sche met a semly man and wept and sobbyd ful sor in the manhod of Crist as sche went in the stretys at Rome that thei that seyn hir wondryd ful mych on hir, for thei knew not the cawse

This passage is rich in signification; notice her love of Christ, not only as a baby, but also the fully grown handsome male adult, definitely an object of different love for her.

2. Sexual life: expression of her heterosexual desire

It is clear that she is attracted by Christ as a man: already in the first chapter, when she was raving, he healed her, and she writes: 'Jesus Christ...appeared to this creature...in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beautiful...', he was beautifully dressed and sat upon her bed. One night, as she was lying in bed with her husband, she heard a delicious melody and thought that she was in paradise. She shed abundant tears (she will do it again and again), and felt that she was drawn towards God:

and after this time, she never had desire to have sexual intercourse with her husband, for paying the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, have eaten and drunk the ooze and muck in the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of obedience (ch.3),
and

And so sche seyde to hir husbond, 'I may not deny yow my body, but the love of myn hert and myn affeccyon is drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys and sett only in God.' He wold have hys wylle, and sche obeyde wyth greet wepyng and sorwyng for that sche mygth not levyn chast. And oftyntymys this creatur levye chast, counseld hir husbond to levyn chast, and seyde that thei oftyntymes, sche wiste wel, had dyspleysyd God be hir inordynat love and the gret delectacyon that thei haddyn eyther of hem in usyng of other, and now it wer good that thei schuld be her bothins wylle and consentyng of hem bothyn punschyn and chastysyn hemself wylfully be absteynyng fro her lust of her bodys. Hir husbond seyde it wer good to don so, but he mygth not yett, he schuld whan God wold. And so he usyd her as he had do befor, he wold not spar. And evyr sche preyde to God that sche mygth levyn chast, and three or four yer aftyr, whan it plesyd ower Lord, he made a vow of chastyté, as schal be wretyn aftyr be the leve of Jhesu.

She decided to speak to her husband, but the poor man was not ready to live in chastity. Notice the terminology: 'I may not deny you my body'; 'he wants to have his will'; 'she obeys'; she remembers the pleasure they enjoyed in their earlier inordinate sexual life'; 'in using the other's body'; 'the lust of their bodies'; 'he used her as he had done before'. But, he will eventually make a vow of chastity three or four years later.

I want to dwell a moment on her reference to their earlier sexual life. It seems to me that she experiences some nostalgia for those good old days of their excessive desire ('inordinate love'), and, in a way, this is confirmed by the fact that she will return to this topic at the end of her husband's life, when he is very sick

Than sche toke hom hir husbond to hir and kept hym yerys aftyr as long as he levye and had ful meche labour wyth hym, for in hys last days he turnyd childisch agen and lakkyd reson that he cowd not don hys owyn esement to gon to a sege, er ellys he wolde not, but as a childe voydyd his natural digestyon in hys lynyn clothys ther he sat be the fyre er at the tabil, whethyr it wer, he wolde sparyn no place. And therfor was hir labour meche the mor in waschyng and wryngyng and hir costage in fyryng and lettyd hir ful meche fro hir contemplacyon that many tymys sche schuld an yrkyd hir labour saf sche bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinat lovys to hys persone. And therfor sche was glad to be ponischyd wyth the same persone and toke it meche the mor esily and servyd hym and helpyd hym, as hir thowt, as sche wolde a don Crist hymself. (ch. 76).

This is another flashback to that time, and it is significant that she should repeat the same formula: 'inordinate love'. There are other obvious signs that, although she rejects sexual desire, she is obsessed by it. See ch. 4:

In the secund yer of hirtemptacyons yt fel so that a man whsch sche lovyd wel seyde onto hir on Seynt Margaretys Evyn befor evynsong that for anythyng he wold ly be hir and have hys lustof hys body, and sche schuld not wythstond hym, for, yf he mygth not have hys wylthat tyme, he seyde, he schuld ellys have it another tyme, sche schuld not chese. And hedede it for to preve hir what sche wold do, but sche wend that he had ment ful earnestas that tyme and seyde but lytyl therto. So they partyd asondyr as than and wentynbothen for to here evensong, for her cherch was of Seynt Margaret. This woman wasso labowrd wyth the mannys wordys that sche mygth not heryn hir evynsong, ne seyde hir Pater Noster, er thynkyn any other good thowt, but was mor labowrd than evyr sche was befor. The devyl put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not so ben temptyd. She levyde the develyngs suasyons and gan to consentyn for because sche cowde thynkyn no good thowt. Therfor wend sche that God had forsake hir. And, whan evensong was do, sche went to the man befor seyde that he schuld have hys lust, as sche wend that he had desyred, but he made swech simulacyon that sche cowd not knowe hys entent, and so thei partyd asondyr for that nygth. This creatur was so labowrd and vexyd al that nygth that sche wist nevyr what sche mygth do

Although she thought that all physical desire was dead, when she met a man who said that he would sleep with her she was troubled and eventually agreed, in spite of her bodily penance. The point is that (and she repeats it) she could have satisfied this physical desire with her husband, but it is clear that she definitely rejected making love with him. During that period of temptation, she lay beside her husband, and to have intercourse with him was so abominable to her that she could not bear it, and yet it was permissible for her. She was obsessed by the other man. However, when she told him that she had made up her mind, he refused, and she was ashamed...

- Her hallucinations are also quite significant. In ch. 59: God sends her 'horrible and abominable visions'...despite all her efforts to avoid them: 'she saw, as she really thought, various men of religion, priests and many others, ... coming before her eyes so that she could not avoid them or put them out of her sight, and showing their naked genitals,¹⁸ and with that the devil ordered her in her mind to choose which of them she would have first, and she must prostitute to them all.....she thought that these horrible sights and accursed thoughts were delicious to her against her will. Wherever she went or whatever she did, these accursed thoughts remained with her'.

3. From her husband's wife to Christ's bride

She repeatedly explains how she rejects her husband. In ch.9 she prays God, asking that she may live in chastity, and Christ answers that if she fasts on Friday he will slay sexual desire in him. In ch.11 she has an argument with her husband:

Margery, if her come a man wyth aswerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kendly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens - for ye sey ye wyl not lye -whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth yow agen as I dede sumtyme?' 'Alas, ser," sche seyde, 'why meve ye this mater and have we ben chast this eight wekys?' 'For I wyl wete the trewth of yowr hert.' And than sche seyde wyth gret sorwe, 'Forsothe I had levar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne agen to owyr unclennesse.' And he seyde agen, 'Ye arn no good wyfe.' And than sche askyd hir husband what was the cawse that he had not medelyd wyth hir eight wekys befor, sythen sche lay wyth hym every nygth in hys bedde. And he seyde he was so made aferde whan he wold a towchyd hir that he durst no mor don. "Now, good ser, amend yow and aske God mercy, for I teld yow ner three yer sythen that ye schuld be slayn sodeynly, and now is this the thryd yer, and yet I hope I schal han my desyr.

Good sere, I pray yow grawnt me that I schal askyn, and I schal pray for yow that ye schul be savyd thorw the mercy of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst, and ye schul have mor mede in hevyn than yyf ye weryd an hayr or an haburgon. I pray yow, suffer me to make a vow of chastyté in what bysshopys hand that God wele.¹⁹'Nay,' he seyde, 'that wyl I not grawnt yow, for now may I usyn yow wythowtyn dedly synne and than mygth I not so'.

So, when he asks her whether she'd rather have his head cut off or make love with him, she does not hesitate and would indeed prefer the first alternative. Notice the word 'uncleanness'. She would like him to make a vow of chastity. He will eventually agree, but this is going to be a bargain: she will have to pay his debts and he will renounce his 'conjugal debt', i.e. rights.²⁰ The conclusion of the, as it were, commercial agreement is remarkable: 'May your body be as freely available to God as it has been to me'.

As we have seen, after her nervous breakdown, she felt attracted by Christ as a man. Ch. 5 provides a number of other hints at the nature of her feelings: 'Boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love and shall be your love without end.²¹ Also, 'instead of meat you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar...you shall receive my body every Sunday'. This is, of course, the Eucharist, and we know that it is the body of Christ, but the point here is that it is going to replace real meat. Finally, in that same chapter, there is also the anchorite's statement 'you are sucking even at Christ's breast'. You may remember that suckling at Christ's breast was not uncommon in spiritual writings of the time (cf the iconography). See also Julian of Norwich (ch. 60). But the point is that Margery takes all this literally.

It is clear that in her mind God sees her as a full woman, and the whole panoply of femininity is present. In ch.14: 'daughter, there was never child so meek to its father as I shall be to you', and 'I prove that you are a daughter indeed to me, and a mother also, a sister, a wife and a spouse'. Or, again, he sees himself as her mother: ch. 21: 'Daughter, I am your mother, your lady and your mistress, to teach you in every way how you shall please God best'.

In ch.36, Christ goes ahead and develops his marital relationship with her: And, yyf I wer in erde as bodily as I was er I deyde on the cros, I schuld not ben aschamyd of the as many other men ben, for I schuld take the be the hand amongs the pepil and make the gret cher that thei schuldyn wel knowyn that I

lovyd the ryth wel. For it is conveyent the wyf to be homly wyth hir husband. Be he nevyr so gret a lorde and sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth hir, yet thei must ly togedir and rest togedir in joy and pes. Ryght so mot it be twyx the and me, for I take non hed what thu hast be but what thu woldist be. And oftyntymes have I telde the that I have clene forgove the alle thy synnes. Therefore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husband, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kysen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt. And, as oftyntymes as thu thynkyst on me er woldyst don any good dede to me, thu schalt have the same mede in hevyn as yyf thu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body which is in hevyn, for I aske no mor of the but thin hert for to lovyn that lovyth the, for my lofe is evyr redy to the.

The theme of Christ as bridegroom and lover was widely developed in medieval mysticism, and although male mystics also cultivated the position of spouse of Christ, it appealed mainly to women mystics. For Margery, however, the traditional mystical marriage became an actual matrimony; instead of assuming that she was a metaphoric sponsa Christi, she imagined that she was concretely married to God. In ch. 35, Margery entertains the company of dancing celestial virgins at her own wedding feast, and receives their best wishes for the happiness of their new couple. Of course, in her vision, she makes Christ express the words she wants to hear. Her spiritual longing for Christ is full of sensual and even sexual desires, not to mention the incest of the physical love between brother and sister, mother and son, and father and daughter. When God the Father wants her to be 'wedded to his Godhead' (ch.35), she is silent, because 'all her love and affection were fixed on the manhood of Christ'. Then the second person of the Trinity, 'whose manhood she loved so much' asked her why she did not answer his father, and eventually the father took her by the hand in the presence of Jesus and the Holy Ghost, saints, and apostles', and pronounced a marriage formula. Similarly, in ch.86 she returns to the idea of a relationship of husband and wife, allowing them, for example, to go to bed together. There are numerous other distortions of the traditional mystical metaphors, and she definitely created a world in which she was physically united to Jesus the man.

4. *her body: mortification, identification with Christ*

She does great bodily penance and mortification: she fasts a lot, and also keeps the virgils. She wears a hair-cloth 'from a kiln, the type used for drying malt on, and put it inside her gown so discreetly and secretly as she could, so that her husband should not notice it. And nor did he, although she lay beside him every night in bed and wore the hair-shirt every day, and bore him children during that time' (ch.3). Her contrition involves lots of tears and violent sobbing.

It is undeniable that she experiences empathy with Christ, and there are periods of mimesis. For example, when she is on the site of the Crucifixion (ch.28), she has her first fit of spectacular crying because 'she had as true contemplation in the sight of her soul as if Christ had hung before her bodily eye in his manhood', and

it was grawntd this creatur to beholdyn so verily hys precyows tendyr body, alto
rent and toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wowndys than evyr was duffehows of
holys, hangyng upon the cros wyth the corown of thorn upon hys hevvyd, hys
blysfyl handys, hys tendyr fete nayled to the hard tre, the reverys of blood
flowyng owt plenteuowsly of every membr, the gresly and grevows wownde in hys
precyows syde schedyng owt blood and watyr for hir lofe and hir salvacyon, than
sche fel down and cryed wyth lowde voys, wondyrfully turnyng and wrestyng hir
body on every syde, spredyng hir armys abrode as yyf sche schulde a deyde, and
not cowde kepyn hir fro crying, and these bodily mevyngys for the fyer of lofe
that brent so fervently in hir sowle wyth pur pyté and compassyon

This passage is highly dramatic, she is one of the participants of the Passion. She identifies with Christ, stretches her arms as if she were nailed to the cross, and bodily experiences the sufferings of the Passion.

In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath opposes female experience to the authority of books, and especially the long tradition of patristic writings. Margery is another woman of experience, and much of it is based on her body. Her autobiography is not written in the manner of a traditional book. The structure is not chronological, and does not follow any other logical sequence (such as her pilgrimages, her difficulties, etc.) and is definitely not traditional. She is guided by her feelings and her intuitions, sometimes by the saint that is celebrated on the day (she starts her book on St Bridget's day and devotes a lot of space to her), or by the contiguity of some episodes. I am tempted to argue that in a way she is a pioneer of the technique of stream of consciousness. But in her case, this was not a technique, simply the direct form of expression of a female voice that had not been trained in the canons of rational writing. In order to express her mental processes and her wide range of sensual/sexual perceptions she mostly relied on her bodily experience.

1 He argued, for example, that the father supplied the form - making the offspring rational -, and the mother the matter.

2 By average girls, I mean women that did not belong to the nobility or other privileged circles (such as religious women, living in monasteries or nunneries).

3 See, for instance, J. Wogan-Browne/ N. Watson/ A. Taylor and R. Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular. An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280-1520*, University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State UP, 1999.

4 the father was a successful burgess - i.e. a citizen of a town with full rights and privileges; also, often, a magistrate or other official of a town - who held a number of influential positions. Margery is very aware of belonging to a high social class, far above her husband's: see what she angrily retorts to him in ch.1.

5 Middle English translations of most of these texts circulated in England and were read aloud to women.

6 When Marie gazed at an image of Christ's Cross or heard people speak of Christ's Passion she could not restrain floods of tears. When she thought that she had committed a little venial sin, she would often shout aloud, like a woman in the throes of childbirth (Jacques de Vitry's *Life of Marie d'Oignies*, transl. by Margot H. King, in *Two Lives of Marie d'Oignies*, Toronto, Peregrina publishing, 4th ed., 1998, chapters 16-19, pp. 58-60.

7 See Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds., *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality. The Holy Women of Liège and their Impact* (Turnhout, Brepols, 1999), esp. the Introduction by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Marie-Elisabeth Henneau.

8 1 Timothy 2:12-15 ('I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp the authority over a man') and 1 Corinthians 14:34 ('Let your women be silent in churches: for it is not permitted to them to speak').

9 Cp. the *Wife of Bath's* discussion of marriage and her quotations from St Jerome. So also Alcuin Blamires, et al., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, London, OUP, 1992.

10 Paris, éds. de Minuit, 1974.

11 Think of the thirteenth-century Valenciennes woman, Marguerite Porete, who was tried and publicly burnt in Paris.

12 Chastity is a dominant issue throughout the book; it reflects the Church's teaching on virginity and sexual abstinence.

13 But sometimes her confessor orders her to wear her black clothes again (e.g. in ch. 34).

14 This is the title of a treatise by Richard Rolle (first half of C14).

15 My quotations of Margery Kempe's *Book* are borrowed from the website <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/kempe2.htm>, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, edited by Lynn Staley, originally published in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1996. Underlining mine.

16 Remember the etymology of hysteria: 'the womb'. According to Freud, hysteria was the uncontrolled behaviour of a woman ruled by her womb.

17 My English translations are from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, translated by Barry Windeatt, London, Penguin Classics, 1985.

18 'bar membres'.

19 Such a vow of married chastity was a sacrament that would cancel marital sexual unions.

20 The phrase goes back to Saint Paul. *The Wife of Bath* uses it as well.

21 Incidentally, in ch.31, she wears a wedding ring that she said that the Lord had asked her to have made, and "Jesus est amor meus" was engraved on it.