

**Thoughts and Tears**  
**The Manifestation of Ascetic Piety in the Lives and Writings of**  
**Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich.**

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### Abstract

Piety was an important part of daily life in the Late Middle Ages. However, Piety is a very broad term. In order to find out what was deemed a pious life in this period the focus of this paper will be on two women, who lived in the late 14<sup>th</sup>- early 15<sup>th</sup> century in East England. This thesis investigates how religious devotion manifested itself in the daily lives of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. The contrasting choice they make to either travel through the world or to remove themselves from the world is the most obvious difference between them. This choice influences and explains all the other forms of piety in their lives. However, when the different circumstances which exist as a result of being an anchoress or not, are not taken into account, it becomes clear that, in essence, they follow the same principles of ascetic piety. The relationship with Christ is what brings Margery and Julian together, but since they have different attitudes towards being the bride of Christ they make different choices in their piety. Margery can be labelled as more worldly, whereas Julian is more focused on the metaphysical. *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Revelations of Divine Love* attract different readers, just like the women did during their lives. Julian and Margery have different means to communicate their piety. They share the goal to teach their audiences about their personal relationship with God and what this has learned them. This is essentially what binds these two very different women together. The manifestation of their piety might be contrasting but the focus of it their pious life is the same God.

**Keywords:** Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Ascetic Piety, Mysticism

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## **Thoughts and Tears**

### **The Manifestation of Ascetic Piety in the Lives and Writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich**

#### **Introduction**

In the Late Middle Ages religion was an important part of daily life. The calendar was centred around holidays such as Easter, as well as the remembrance days for numerous saints. Living a pious life was important. Piety is defined as “Strong belief in a religion that is shown in the way someone lives” (CED1 piety, n). Suggested synonyms are adoration, devoutness, and churchgoing. This suggests that piety might mean contrasting things to different people and might manifest itself differently in the lives of those people. For this reason scholars such as Zemon Davis and Beckwith have differentiated between so called official or learned piety and popular piety. Popular piety is often described as the devotion of believers outside the official church services. Official or learned piety is performed inside these institutions (Zemon Davis 308; Tamburrino 9-10). Scholars such as Boyle have shown how problematic this tendency is, since such a strict dichotomy is artificial (185). The most important reason for this is that both official and popular piety have the same objective. To be exact, piety focusses on God. Through living a pious life believers manifest their personal faith in their lives (186). Furthermore, over time, popular piety often becomes part of the official piety within the Church. An example of this is the veneration of relics, which started out as a tradition outside of the church, but over time it was incorporated within the church official faith (Brown 102). In order to study how people in the Late Middle Ages interacted with their faith, in other words were pious, we have to start a lot smaller by looking at what was deemed pious in a certain region in a given period. One form of piety is ascetic piety which involved abstinence from sensual pleasures such as food, wealth, and sex, in order to pursue contemplative ideals. This paper will explore the manifestations of ascetic piety in the autobiographical work of Margery Kempe and Julian of

Norwich. These two women lived and worked in the late 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> century in the East of England.<sup>1</sup> Margery Kempe is the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (henceforth *The Book*) and Julian of Norwich wrote *Revelations of Divine Love* (henceforth *Revelations*)

The authorship of *The Book* is quite a complicated one since Margery did not write down her own story but recited it to someone else who wrote it down for her. *The Book* is written with two goals which seem for modern readers, at times, in conflict with each other. These two motivations are telling her own spiritual history and teaching others about God (Petroff qtd. in Beckwith *Problems of*, 174). To write about the self was simply to reveal God's work in the soul (174). Thus for the writer it would not have been a conflict. Both *The Book* and *Revelations* can be classified as autobiographies. Abbot argues that this term is problematic and misleading since autobiographies as modern readers know them were not written in the fifteenth century (5). *The Book* is closer to a modern day autobiography than *Revelations*. Yet, Julian's writing style is not impersonal. She writes in the first person and the text is presented as a true record of events in her own life. Even though Julian does not write anything like the narrative memoirs that the term autobiography has come to designate, the text is overly dedicated to the representation of personal experience, and thus it invites an analysis of it as a life story (6). In comparison to the work of Julian of Norwich, *The Book* is non-intellectual.

There is little or no analysis, little or no examination of philosophical causes, effects, or questions. Instead, we find a primarily emotional reaction, personalized, focusing on Margery herself: her feelings, reassurances from God about her own worth, her involvements with the most sacred personages of Christian theology. Also, the world is

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis the in-text references will be to the modern English translations of the texts. For *The Book of Margery Kempe* I use the translation by Anthony Bale from 2015. For *Revelations of Divine Love* I use the translation by Elizabeth Spearing from 1998. When a direct quote is used in the text the Middle English can be found in the footnotes. For both *The Book* and *Revelations of Divine Love* the Middle English text from TEAMS have been used. Margery's text is edited by Lynn Staley in 1996 and Julian's text by Georgia Ronan Crampton in 1994. The exact reference can be found in the works cited list at the end of this work. It should be noted that the modern translations do not use line numbers whereas the Middle English texts does.

much with her. As the centre of attention and as a non-recluse, Margery of necessity must deal with worldly matters. (Stone 29)

Julian on the other hand is an analytical mystic. She carefully examines her visions, formulates the conclusions, and writes about the questions she has about both the visions themselves and what they might mean (29).

The comparison of the works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe is not a unique one. After all, these two women are “the two most prominent female writers of Middle English devotional prose” (Meech qtd. in Stone 12). This is the most appealing argument to compare these two women; furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that they both lived and wrote at the same time and approximately close to each other (Bale 20). This means that we can expect them to be influenced by the same ideals and expectations of womanhood, specially what it meant to live a pious life as a woman. In addition, Margery wrote about visiting Julian, and gives her readers an account of their conversation. Both individual women have been studied extensively. Studies on Julian of Norwich focus on her writing style (Stone) and her theology (Turner; Sheldrake). The research on Margery Kemp centres around her social status (Aers), her pilgrimages (Bowers) and the way in which her work was perceived (Oliver). The two women have been compared based on their authorship (Ellis; Fisher), their writing style (Stone), their visions (Beckwith *Christ's Body*) and of course their gender (McAvoy *Authority and*). All these themes tie into the idea of living a pious life. However, how religious devotion manifested itself in their daily lives has not received much attention in the literature, even though the two went about their religious devotion using very different methods. After all, Margery travels the world and Julian locks herself in to be isolated from the world. For this reason, this study will investigate how piety manifested itself in the lives of these women. What binds them together, in spite of their differences? This will be conducted by comparing and contrasting themes in their work that deal with ascetic piety. To start, piety and its

manifestations in general in The Middle ages will be explored. In the second chapter, Margery and Julian will be compared by studying the appearance of their piety. Specifically, the influence of ascetic piety. First, the performance of piety will be analysed. Furthermore, doing physical penance and abstaining from food and wealth will be discussed in chapter two. Subsequently, chastity will be studied in the following chapter since it is linked to the relationship with Christ. This is what binds Margery and Julian together, but also highlights their differences. At first glance the manifestation of piety in the lives of Margery and Julian seem contrasting. However, they both use principles from ascetic piety and the focus of their pious lifestyle is the same God.

## **Chapter 1: Theoretical framework**

In order to study piety in the lives of Julian and Margery we need to know what was deemed a pious life in the period these two women lived in. As mentioned before, piety is a difficult term to use due to its many different definitions. The present paper uses the term piety in the sense of people living, or intending to do so, with a focus on God. Piety is, that believers look beyond their ordinary tasks within this world, and instead focus on the world that is to come in the afterlife. Piety thus gives an extra dimension to the actions of the devout. With this definition it is still possible that a pious life might look very different for individuals, but there is a clear shared goal. This is in line with Boyle. He states that piety is closely linked to one's individual faith, and one either has faith or not. "There is no in-between. And if one has it, there are no grades of possession. From this point of view the faith of the medieval peasant, the faith of the ignorant or unlettered, the faith of believers at large, is exactly the faith of the learned, the intellectual, the theologian" (184). Working with this definition means that the main focus lays on the expressed intention of the person, instead of the practical side of it and how their piety is perceived by their contemporaries, even though this still is an important influence. This means that this paper will not judge the piety, but follow the line of reasoning of both Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. For example, it is assumed that the authors gave an honest account of their way of life.

### **1.2 Personal Piety**

Like all devotional developments, there were strands of piety within later medieval Catholicism which were received more enthusiastically by some communities, and some individuals, than they were by others (Peters, 3). Catholicism offered a menu of options for the believers. People were encouraged to select particular saints for their own personal devotion, and to seek saintly aid by going on pilgrimages, fasting or lighting candles before the images of 'their' saint. "This was both a strength and a weakness. It catered for a range of tastes, whilst



also making it very difficult to police the boundary between orthodoxy and lollardy” (41). Even within one community there were differences, particularly between male and female piety. To start, there was a popular assumption that piety was much more a part of female nature, than of the nature of men. For that reason, it was deemed far worse when a woman did not live piously (Vives qtd. in Peters 11). An example of what female piety could mean in practice is found in a poem about a mother’s instructions to her daughter. It is a wife’s duty to go to church, to worship God on holy days and to pray regularly. The poem suggests that piety is an essential attribute for a young woman wishing to secure a good husband (Peters 10). This form of piety is not the focus of this thesis since it does not have God as its main focus. Nonetheless, it does influence the contemporary outlook on piety for Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Furthermore texts like this poem do show how relatively mundane living pious can be. Often scholars focus on the impressive, extraordinary deeds of piety, but the smaller form of piety should not be overlooked. The extraordinary ways of piety received more attention in their own time and for that reason they are documented in more detail. Scholars investigating piety can thus only catch a glimpse of what piety meant in its totality. The frequency of prayer and saying of the rosary, or the adoration of the Eucharist, for example, often remains hidden for this reason (Peters 41).

## **1.2 Ascetic Piety**

A form of piety which has received great interest from scholars is ascetic piety, mainly because of its visibility. Ascetism is a lifestyle that is characterized by abstinence from pleasures. This can be practiced in various ways. For many present-day people, an ascetic life would be seen as too harsh, rigorous and involve the submission to irksome rules; in the past it was seen by many as a way to freedom, beauty and joy. By retreating from the ways of the world an ascetic is free to focus on the spiritual world (Ware 4). Julian and Margery can both be labelled as ascetics, but in different ways. Because of this, we will take a closer look at the

pilgrimages and the lives of anchorites. Schein claims that the pilgrimages, and pilgrimages to Jerusalem in particular, were one aspect of the ideal ascetic piety for women in the Late Middle Ages. The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand there is the severe asceticism, after all travelling was dangerous and there were many temptations on the road for a devout traveller. On the other hand it was expensive and thus it was deemed to be a good renunciation of wealth and worldly lifestyle (45). The pilgrimages were sometimes an imitation of the lives of other ascetic women, some of whom later were regarded as saints. In the Late Middle Ages, the number of female pilgrims to Jerusalem increased significantly. The reason for this might be the rising influence of devout laywomen. This is an interesting change in religious life. Because, the fourth century women were discouraged to travel. Indeed, even the Church Fathers, such as Jerome, argued profoundly that in order for a woman to remain spiritual, she should be cloistered. For nuns, the council of Friuli in 796-97 decreed that permission should never be given to an abbess or a nun to visit Rome, or another holy place. The council went as far as to state that the desire to go on a pilgrimage was inspired by Satan in the form of an angel (47). Despite the opposition, a number of women went on pilgrimages. In the High Middle Ages a number of the female pilgrims were ascetics, but none of them were nuns. Monastic writings from this period seem to agree that pilgrimages did not suit monks, even less so nuns (48).

However, within ascetic piety the women did not necessarily need to travel outside their country. On the contrary, they could become anchorites as well. The lives of these anchorites were modelled after the Desert Fathers (Dyas 29). Because of the lack of wilderness, the Church in England developed a rich variety of different interpretations of what retreating in the wilderness could look like. In order to be suitable for pious women, the wilderness needed to be domesticated in some sense, and thus an anchorite could live in a city, but still secluded (31). There were a small but significant number of English men and women who lived in such a way

throughout the late Middle Ages. Some records indicate 214 anchorites, both recluses and hermits in the fourteenth century (Baker 148).

### 1.3 Mysticism

Similar to asceticism, both Julian and Margery are heavily influenced by mysticism. This term however, seems to be used very loosely. Sometimes it is used as an equivalent for symbolism or allegorism, sometimes for theosophy or even occult science; and sometimes it merely suggests the mental state of a dreamer, or vague and fantastic opinions about God and the world in general (Inge 8). It is a surprising, but nonetheless significant detail that, even though medieval Christians mystics talk about both mystical theology and a mystical sense of scripture, they never talk about mysticism as a broader term or refer to themselves or others as mystics (Nelstrop *et al.* 1). Instead of mysticism, authors such as Margery Kempe talk about contemplation. For this reason it is sometimes thought that mysticism and contemplation are interchangeable terms. However this simplification is troublesome (3). The main reason for this is that in that case a subtle distinction falls away. Mysticism is seen as a way of being, contemplation on the other hand of seeing and knowing.<sup>2</sup> Mysticism and contemplation are difficult terms to capture in an overall description. Especially since many texts are so personal. Nelstrop and others thus conclude their book with noting that “Christian mysticism is a form of prayer, it is that which cries out of humanities deepest place to the divine. We must never forget that prayer cannot be a solitary activity. It is thus part of the nature of these texts that they continually bring us to dialogue with that which lies outside ourselves, across time and space” (256). In line with these scholars, in this thesis the main focus lies on the personal relation between God and the mystic instead of engaging in the theological debate around the visions of these women. The interpretation and the implications of the visions and the explanations that Margery and Julian give for them, lays outside the scope of this present paper.

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<sup>2</sup> It would go to far to dive into this distinction for this thesis. I refer to the work of Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi, for a more detailed discussion of the terms.

## Chapter 2: Ascetic Piety

Both Kempe's and Norwich's way of being pious seems to fit, for the most part, into the category of ascetic piety as described by Ware. It involves the following aspects: physical penance, abstinence from food, wealth, and sexual pleasures. There is a great difference of approach to ascetic piety in *The Book* and *Revelations*. This difference can partly be explained by the different characters of the women but, perhaps more importantly, the lives they led. Margery's struggles in the world and resulting piety, even the performance of piety, labelled by some as showiness, can be seen as a direct response to the fact that she is not a recluse and engages with the world. Margery's piety has various manifestations. After all, she finds herself in many different circumstances and every new setting asks for a different approach. Since Julian is an anchorite and thus enclosed from the world, her piety is much more stable. She does not move through the world and so her circumstances do not ask for her to change her ways of being pious. In other words, the audience influences piety. Since Julian does not provide her readers with details of her daily life we have to rely on other sources. Before an anchorite was enclosed they would usually pledge allegiance to following the rules for anchoresses. These rules would guide the piety of the anchorite. An example of a detailed manual is the text *Ancrene Wisse* written in the early thirteenth century (Mulder-Bakker 203). Even though there is no direct proof that Julian followed the rules from this particular book, they do give an impression of what her life might have looked like (McAvoy *And Thou* 105).

### 2.1 Performing Piety

Before comparing different aspects of ascetic piety, the performance of piety will be discussed. After all, it is crucial to reflect upon the fact that both Julian and Margery wrote about their pious lives. Due to the distinctive styles, the writings of Julian and Margery attract divergent readers, this was similar during their lifetime. Julian most likely had no large following in her lifetime. The lack of early manuscripts suggests as much. Margery's text is

evidence that she had some kind of local fame as a spiritual counsellor (Abbot 1). An anchoress is withdrawn from the world, in order to focus on God, but she was still part of society. Julian's position within the community would have changed after she was enclosed. This is the paradox of the life of an anchorite. The anchoress became more important to the well-being of the whole community, instead of a limited number in her role as intercessor and advisor (Sauers 158). Since Julian stayed in one place it is unlikely that her audience was as diverse as Margery's.

Throughout *The Book* Margery is surrounded by people who function as an audience. This audience is pivotal for Margery and her piety. On many occasions Margery is slandered for her way of life. Modern critics complain that Margery is showy, she craves an audience and likes a scene. Furthermore, "she competes with other saints, she is vain in her piety, possessive about Jesus, too loud, too boisterous, too noisy" (Beckwith *Problems of 177*). Throughout the whole *Book*, she is confronted with scepticism from her contemporaries. Margery spoke openly about her faith and that was not appreciated by everyone around her. Her fellow pilgrims, for example, leave her alone on the road to Jerusalem (Kempe 59,61,69). Morrison claims that public movement is, like public speech, a declaration of faith, and in this way pilgrimages were looked on with suspicion (129). The most obvious reason why Kempe's travelling is seen as something close to criminality and why it meets such hostility from the people around her who do not believe her, is because independent travel undertaken by women, works against traditional female social functions (Bowers 3). But even when Margery travels in company of her husband she is mistrusted and slandered. In Canterbury for example, a crowd follows her and screams: "You shall be burned, false Lollard! Here's a cartful of thorns ready for you, and a barred to burn you with!" (Kempe 30).<sup>3</sup> In other places Margery is received in a more positive manner, and at times she moves the people around her with her tears, weeping and words. Seeing Kempe's public expressions of piety as a performance leads to the question why she

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<sup>3</sup> Thow schalt be brent, fals lollare. Her is a cartful of thornys redy for the and a tonne to bren the with (Idem. 649-50).

would perform it. Perhaps it is intended as an example for her audience of how to live a in close relation with God and give up everything in life for him. Even when this means that Kempe gets shamed and slandered she will not stop living her life for God. Glen argues that when Margery distances herself from society around her by not living up to the expectations they have of her, she is free to create herself and gains power and influence (541). At different points in *The Book* there are performative elements to be found in the way Margery behaves. Her performance of piety can be seen in the way she communicates with the people around her, the very public and loud weeping, the pilgrimages she goes on, the way she dresses and perhaps most of all in the fact that she lets her story be written down. The fact that Margery is loud in comparison to Julian can, once again be explained by the fact that Julian is an anchoress and Margery is not. Julian did not have to be loud since her enclosure did much of the talking for her.

## 2.2 Physical Penance

In *The Book* Kempe describes a transition in her faith and her piety. One way in which she tries to focus her mind more on God and his ways is by doing physical penance. At the start of *The Book* the change in Margery's life is explained. Margery describes that she receives her first vision at the age of 20 shortly after she has given birth. She sees devils around her that, amongst other things, tell her to

[...] forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, His mother, and all the saints in Heaven, her good works and all good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did (Kempe 2005, 11).<sup>4</sup>

These visions distress her so much that she harms herself by biting and scratching herself. She describes these sights as temptations (12). In the middle of these temptations Jesus Christ appears to her and says to her "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook

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<sup>4</sup> "[...] forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth, and denyin hir God, hys modyr, and alle the seyntyngs in hevyn, hyr goode werkys and alle good vertues, hir fadyr, hyr modyr, and alle hire frendys. And so sche dede. (Kempe 1996 154-7).

you?"(12).<sup>5</sup> After this vision, her mind is clear again and she is recovered. This vision is the start of the change in Margery's life, even though she struggles with pride and envy and does not change her life immediately afterwards. She starts to do physical penance by wearing a haircloth on her back that is constantly irritating her (Kempe 17). Throughout *The Book* it is clear that Margery is searching for a good way in which she can manifest her piety. It is interesting that she changes her ways over time, this shows the growth in her faith. For example, later on she receives a vision in a chapel of St. John of Jesus where he tells her "And daughter you have a haircloth upon your back. I wish you to take it off, and I shall give you a haircloth in your heart that will please me much more than all the haircloths in the world" (Kempe, 19).<sup>6</sup> Instead, Margery has to refrain from eating meat. After this instance there are no other instances where Margery physically hurts herself in order to live a more pious life.

In general, the life of an anchoress was a life of asceticism. The places where the anchorites lived was a form of physical penance in itself, since it limited the freedom of movement drastically. The anchorites lived in a different manner than the hermit, in the sense that the anchorite was not free to travel at will and thus lived in stricter seclusion. Enclosed persons were usually attached to a church. The place was important because spiritual advantages could be derived from it (Clay 73). The average anchorite's cell, sometimes also called anchorhold, was probably no more than twelve feet square (Wellesley). Mulder-Bakker vilifies how nineteenth century handbooks often describe that an anchoress would live with the door of their cell bolted and a black curtain covering the light, and thus being completely isolated from the outside world. This description might be accurate for some, but does give the wrong impression that there was no contact at all with the outside world (3). She gives the example of an anchoress in Delft who would, at night crawl on hands and knees around the

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<sup>5</sup> "Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?" (Idem, 173).

<sup>6</sup> "And, dowtyr, thu hast an hayr upon thi bakke. I wyl thu do it away, and I schal give the an hayr in thin hert that schal lyke me mych bettyr than alle the hayres in the world" (Idem, 376-8).

church. Her confessor had the key to her cell and he would go to her to hear her confession (Oosterbaan qtd. 232). Nonetheless, the life of an anchorite was physically challenging. Choosing to endure physical hardship in a small cell, meant that the anchorite could better contemplate God. The physical body was seen as a sinful vessel that needed to be controlled through self-denial and hard discipline. In this light it is remarkable that the *Ancrene Wisse* advises against self-harm as punishment for sin.

No one should gird herself with any kind of belt except with her confessor's permission, or wear any iron or hair, or hedgehog skins, or beat herself with these or with a lead whip, or make herself bloody with holly or brambles (*Ancrene Wisse* qtd. in Wellesley). Wellesley describes that elsewhere in the text the recluses are advised to shave their heads and wear only simple clothing. By living in this way the recluses were partially emulating the so-called 'Desert Fathers' of third century Egypt. Sauer adds that there were during this period numerous 'Desert Mothers' as well (155). These hermits retreated to the desert in order to contemplate the martyrdom of Christ and his followers. This contemplation made them suffer, in addition to being cut off from society. Similarly Julian dwells on the suffering of Christ with so much intensity that the images in her head fill her with pain (Norwich 67). In *Revelations* Julian does not mention harming herself on purpose. Her body was extremely important for her visions. In a sense her bodily experiences give a deeper meaning to the visions she experiences (Lichtmann 12). Furthermore the physical struggles facilitate the readers with a deeper understanding of her mystical insight and theology (McAvoy *Authority and* 132). There are numerous instances where she eagerly wants to be sick and die. In the second chapter of the long text she writes:

The second gift came to me with contrition: I longed eagerly to be on my death-bed, so that I might in that sickness receive all the rites of Holy Church, that I might myself believe I was dying and that everyone who saw me might believe the same, for I wanted



no hopes of earthly life. I longed to have in this sickness every kind of suffering both of body and soul that I would experience if I died, with all the terror and turmoil of the fiends, except for actually giving up the ghost (Norwich 1998 43).<sup>7</sup>

This passage implies that Julian wants to suffer for God as if she is dying, without actually dying because that would be a good state to live in as she is completely dependent on God alone. Her suffering in the body turns into the joy of illumination as she is able to come closer to God through her pain (Lichtmann 13). Yet, Julian is still human and at other instances she struggles with the suffering.

[...] I sometimes thought it more than I could bear, and this made me grieve an earnestly yearn, and so did my own sinfulness, sloth and weakness, so that it did not please me to live and suffer, as it was my lot to do (148).<sup>8</sup>

Julian comes to the conclusion that she should no longer long for her suffering to be taken away, but look forward to death instead. She writes that God wants her to take the distress and waiting as lightly as she can, so she will receive more thanks and reward for her suffering. Death itself was a prominent figure in the life of the anchoress. Once entombed, the anchorite became liturgically dead (Sauer 156). At the moment of the enclosure, a priest would recite the office of the dead, that is to say, the set of prayers said at someone's funeral (Wellesley). After the ceremony, the anchorite retreated to the cell and was walled up, where they would spend the rest of their days (Sauer 156). There is evidence that some anchorites did not even leave their cells after they died. Archaeologists have found the remains of people in some anchorholds who presumably had lived there as well (Wellesley).

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<sup>7</sup> The second came to my mynde with contrition frely desireing that sekenesse so herde as to deth that I might in that sekeness underfongyn alle my rites of Holy Church, myselve weneing that I should dye, and that all creatures might suppose the same that seyen me, for I would have no manner comfort of eardtly life. In this sekenesse I desired to have all maner peynes bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should dye, with all the dredes and tempests of the fends, except the outpassing of the soule. (Norwich 1994 54-60)

<sup>8</sup> [...] methowte it was sumtime mor than I myte baren, and this made me to morn and besyly to longen. And also of myn owen wretchidnes, slawth, and wekehede, that me lekid not to leveyn and to travelyn as me fel to don (Idem. 2664-7).

### 2.3 Abstinence from Food

Closely related to doing physical penance is the abstinence from food. In a sense eating, or refusing to eat certain food, can be a way of communicating. Food and drink, and the abstinence from them is one of the ways in which Margery presents herself as an everyday, simple, yet strong witness to God (Mazzoni 177). Margery loved her food and her wine. Her positive attitude and even delight in food distinguishes her from numerous medieval women who fasted prodigiously and feasted on the eucharist exclusively. Margery does not reject regular food, nor does she feel sick in its presence. Although she fasts at times, and abstains especially from meat and wine, like many other Christians of her time, Margery does not starve herself in the way holy women such as Christina Mirabilis and Mary of Oignies did (176). Nonetheless, God asks Margery to give up meat and wine, foods which inspire desire in her and not revulsion. For example, Margery abstains from meat and wine before her pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Kempe 58). Vegetarianism was for strong people. It was closely allied with fasting and retiring from human fellowship. In Margery's case it meant that the company she was travelling with refused to eat with her, and even her confessor is displeased with her because of this (58). Thus food plays an important social role. Mazzoni claims that the food that is mentioned in *The Book* functions in the same way as her tears. "[...] binding together the *Book* itself and, at times, the women represented in it" (Lavezzo qtd. in Mazzoni 172). Margery's tears both attract and repel people, in the same way her eating pattern does. Where she is banned from her fellow travellers, she is invited by others such as the Franciscans who invite her so she does not have to eat alone (Kempe 70). The sealing of friendships through food becomes even clearer in Margery's relation with Margaret of Florentine. The two women, even though they do not speak the same language, seal their friendship by sharing food (86).

Whereas Margery had the temptation of all sorts of food around her, this was not the case for Julian. As an anchorite the personal choices are very limited. In theory she would

receive her food from someone who would give it to her via a window (Sauer 159). The focus in *Revelations* is quite different from *The Book*. Julian does not fixate attention to food in the way that Margery does. Julian tends to focus more on the suffering of Christ, his mother Mary, and other saints than on her own. When she does talk about thirst, for example, she is contemplating the passion of Christ. When thinking about his dying words “I thirst” (John 13:28 qtd. in Norwich 16), she meditates about the physical and spiritual thirst. It is pivotal to realise that Julian has this vision while she thinks she is dying. In her own thirst she suffers with Christ. She ponders about her pain and that of Christ and concludes that her bodily thirst and pain is nothing compared to the pain she feels when she sees how Christ is suffering (Norwich 67). In regard to the food that Julian would have eaten while she was enclosed, there is no proof to be found in her own writings. Based on what other anchorites would have eaten it is unlikely that her meals were luxurious. It is possible that she restrained from eating meat and perhaps even from eating dairy like some other anchoresses did (Mulder-Bakker 104). However none of this can be certain. There are signs however that there were discussions among people what was the right thing to do for an anchoress when it came to abstinence from food. For example, in *Ancrese Wisse* (Wellesley).

#### **2.4 Poverty**

Similarly to the meat, Margery gives up worldly possessions. She does so by spending her money on going on pilgrimages and giving away her fortune to less fortunate. This becomes clear when she is in Rome and gives away all her money, even the money that she had borrowed from Richard the hunchbacked man who went with her (Kempe 84). Her answer to Richard when he confronts her emphasizes the reason, she is giving up worldly goods. “Richard, by the grace of God we’ll get home to England soundly. [...] I shall pay you in full and honesty by the grace of God, for I trust very well that He who charged that I give it away for His love will help

me to pay it back" (85).<sup>9</sup> In other words, being freed from worldly possessions, Margery has to fully trust God and is completely dependent on his help, which brings her closer to him. Something the women have in common is that they are both financially stable enough to dedicate their lives to God. In *The Book* this is more explicit than in *Revelations*. Wellesley claims that a woman should, in order to become an anchoress, to apply to her local bishop and provide evidence that she had a fund to support her while she was enclosed. Furthermore, she would have had one or two servants to look after her. These servants would have been there only for one woman (Sauer 160). There is not much certain when it comes to investigating Julian's life before her enclosure. It has been considered by modern scholarship that she was a Benedictine nun, however more recent work tends to argue that she had probably been a lay woman from the gentry class or the lower nobility (McAvoy *And Thou* 102). Nonetheless, she would have needed the financial support. Thus, while Julian was enclosed she would have relinquished wealth but the paradox is that without wealth she would not have been able to live the life that she led. In a sense the same goes for Margery. Devoting one's entire life to God was a privilege that not everyone could afford.

Considering the different ways in which Julian and Margery spend their lives, it is striking how many elements of their piety overlap. This might be because of the great influence of ascetic piety. The way in which the two women dealt with physical penance and the abstinence from wealth, shows a resemblance. However, it can only be assumed that Julian abstained from food in a similar way to Margery, since she does not write about the matter. Instead, she spiritualizes the matter. In this aspect Margery is far earthlier. Similarly, it is God's suffering that makes Julian suffer, whereas Margery inflicts pain on herself, at least for a while. Ultimately, they both adhere to ascetic piety, but Julian's approach is more focused on the

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<sup>9</sup> "Richard, be the grace of God we schal comyn hom into Inglond ryth wel. And ye schal come to me in Bristowe in the Whitsunwoke, and ther schal I pay yow ryth wel and trewly be the grace of God, for I trust ryth wel that he that bad me gevyn it away for hys lofe wil help me to payn it ageyn" (Kempe 2153-6).

metaphysical. The same goes for the abstinence from sex and living chastely. This will be discussed in the next chapter since it is related to their relationship with Christ as bridegroom.

### Chapter 3: Chastity and relationship with God

The relationship and interaction with Christ as bridegroom connects and differentiates Julian and Margery. This becomes clear from studying their stance towards chastity and how they see themselves in relation to the Trinity.

#### 3.1 Chastity

Sexual pleasure is a great temptation for Margery, more so than alms giving and abstinence from food. This is illustrated by the time that she is approached by a man who says he would do anything to sleep with her. This is a test for Margery, and she fails because “[t]he Devil put it into her mind that God had forsaken her, or else she would not have been so tempted. She believed the Devil’s persuasions and began to consent because she could not think any other good thoughts” (Kempe 18).<sup>10</sup> Whereas Kempe thinks that sex with her husband is abominable as she lays next to him, she does “want to sin with [the other man] in the way in which he had said to her” (18).<sup>11</sup> She goes to the man and tells him that he can have his way with her, but then he reveals that he had been testing her, and in fact would “rather be hacked as small as meat for the pot” than to sleep with her (18).<sup>12</sup> Shortly before this passage Margery wrote that “[...] she would have rather eaten or drunk the slime, the muck, in the gutter than consent to any sexual contact, except out of obedience”(15).<sup>13</sup> And now she sees how unsteady she is. The temptations greatly distress her, yet, she does write how these tests make her live closer to God. Throughout *The Book* Margery receives numerous visions that encourage her to abstain from sex. The wish to live chastely is even seen as a sign that God is working in Margery. This is in line with Julian’s teachings. It does not mean that all allusions to sexuality are wrong. Instead of an earthly marriage Margery focusses more on the marriage with Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> “The devyl put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not so ben temptyd. She levyd the devyls suasyons and gan to consentyn for because sche cowde thynkyn no good thowt” (Idem. 331-3).

<sup>11</sup> But evyr sche was labowrd wyth the other man for to syn wyth hym inasmuch as he had spoke to hir. (Idem. 340-1).

<sup>12</sup> he had levar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to the pott (Idem. 344).

<sup>13</sup> “sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkynthe wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyens” (Idem. 257-9).

Since Margery cannot be her husband's bride, while simultaneously being Christ's bride, she strikes a deal with her husband for a celibate marriage (Beckwith *Christ's Body* 81; Fisher 219). The fact that she is no longer a virgin bride for Jesus distresses her greatly, however, God says to her:

[...] Yes, daughter, but rest assured that I love wives too, and especially those wives who want to live chastely (if they might have their wish), and busy themselves to please me as you do; because, although the state of virginity is more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood is more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet, daughter, I love you as much as any virgin in the world (Kempe 47).<sup>14</sup>

In order to show that she is the bride of Christ, Margery wants to wear white clothes, something that was a sign for purity and virginity usually limited to young girls. She is moreover slandered for this. After all, she is an older woman, married and has given birth to fourteen children. Nonetheless, she is not afraid to stand up for her decision. Her white clothes signal her honorary, spiritual virginity and signal that she must not be approached sexually (Mazzoni 172). Margery feels like God speaks through her and with this extraordinary power she is able to persuade powerful ecclesiasts like Philip Repyngdon to allow her to wear white clothes (Beckwith *Christ's Body* 91).

Whereas Margery is very outspoken about her relationship with Christ, Julian is subdued about it. The same goes for sexuality in general. Spearing suggests that Julian's silence on these matters is telling. He notes that her complete silence on the subject of chastity and celibacy is striking because so many male Church teachers, from Paul and Augustine onwards had been very vocal on the subject (17). However, from Margery's account it is known that Julian did

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<sup>14</sup> Ya, dowtyr, trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys which woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thow dost, for, thow the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state of edlake, yet dowtyr I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world. (Idem. 114-9).

not stay completely silent. As mentioned before, Margery went to Julian for advice and good conversation. One of the topics they addressed was chastity. *The Book* quotes Julian as follows.

Also, He [ Holy Ghost] moves a soul to chastity, for those who live chaste are called to the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost makes the soul stable and steadfast in the right faith and the right belief (Kempe 42).<sup>15</sup>

This conversation took place quite early in Margery's life and Curtis claims that it was Julian's counsel that prepared Margery for her later visions on the importance of love towards God instead of strict chastity (66).

### 3.2 Christ as Bridegroom

As an anchoress Julian lived chastely. Whereas Margery's relationship with Christ becomes increasingly intense and "erotic", as her confidence in her own faith grows (McAvoy *Authority and* 126), Julian envisages her relationship with Christ more metaphysically. Nevertheless, the language she uses for this is firmly rooted in the language of the physical (151). While investigating these topics however, researchers should be aware of the tradition Julian and Margery were part of. Peters ascribes the focus on the believers being the bride of Christ to the increasing Christocentric focus of late medieval piety in general (74). The erotic tone of Julian's encounters with Christ are entirely orthodox within the tradition of female mysticism (Hamman 169). McAvoy argues that Julian's emphasis on the body as "a desirable, valuable and God-given commodity which can be used as a means of purchasing a mutual and reciprocal love" should thus not be seen as overly sensual or erotic (*Authority and* 153). An important characteristic of Christ in Julian's visions is his gentleness, nurturance, compassion, and unconditional love. These characteristics are often seen as feminine qualities. Julian sees herself, in a sense, in the position of a child in need of Christ's mothering (Hamann 169). The body of Christ is definitely male, but his character is overwritten by the feminine. Julian

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<sup>15</sup> Also he mevyth a sowle to al chastnesse, for chast levars be clepyd the temple of the Holy Gost, and the Holy Gost makyth a sowle stabyl and stedfast in the rygth feyth and the rygth beleve (Idem. 967-9).



demonstrates how the feminine can be redefined and redirected to constitute a potent adversary of evil (McAvoy *Authority and* 161). This feminization of God is an important feature of Julian's theology in general. She underlines the nourishing and nurturing side of God. In God's revelations to Julian of his own nature, fatherly anger plays no part; this is repeatedly stressed (Spearing 14). In addition, she insists that God is not only a father, but a mother as well (11). She begins associating God's motherhood especially with the second person of the Trinity, Christ. "And our Saviour is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed" (Norwich 136).<sup>16</sup> At a later point she is less abstract, by focussing on creation and nourishment, and writes "Thus Jesus Christ who does good for evil is our true mother; we have our being from him where the ground of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which follows eternally" (139).<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Margery Julian applies a Trinitarian view of God as composed of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost not only to God's work but to his role as a bridegroom (Sheldrake 89). "And in this binding and union he is a real and true bridegroom, and we his loved bride and his fair maiden, a bride with whom he is ever pleased" (Norwich 137).<sup>18</sup> In other words she does not see Christ as an individual god-person as her bridegroom, but the whole Trinity is her spiritual spouse. Margery is not as focused on contemplating the Trinity, but tends to focus merely on the Son. This is illustrated by the time she is in Rome and receives a vision where the Father tells her:

'Daughter, I am very pleased with you, inasmuch as you believe in all the sacraments of Holy Church and in all the beliefs that relate to them, and especially because you believe in the manhood of my Son and for the great compassion you have for His bitter

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<sup>16</sup> And our Savior is our very moder in whom we be endlesly borne and never shall come out of Him (Norwich 2373-4).

<sup>17</sup> Thus, Jesus Criste, that doith good agen evill, is our very Moder. We have our beyng of Him wher the ground of moderhed begynnyth, with al the swete kepyng of love that endlessly folowith (Idem. 2444-7).

<sup>18</sup> And in the knittyng and in the onyng He is our very trewe spouse, and we His lovid wif and His fair maiden with which wif He is never displesid. (Idem. 2393-5).

Passion'. The Father also said to this creature, 'Daughter I will have you married to my Godhead' (Kempe 79).<sup>19</sup>

Even though Margery feels comfortable to converse with the Son, she is afraid of the Godhead. It becomes clear that she perceives the Godly bridegroom to be just Christ, and not the full Trinity. This becomes clear from her reaction to her marriage to the Godhead. She feels that by marrying the Godhead, she is being separated from Jesus (80).

The most straightforward explanation for their differences can be found in the fact that Margery thinks in an earthly manner about her bridegroom, and Julian in a more metaphysical way. It seems as if the heavenly marriage to Christ is a direct replacement of Margery's earthly marriage. She acts like a jealous wife who only wants her husband and is not willing to share him with anyone. This is seen in her reaction to the marriage proposal by the Godhead, but also in the competition she has with other saints (Beckwith *Problems of* 177). Margery even competes with a saint by whom she is heavily influenced, Saint Bridget (Bale 12). Margery is moreover comforted by the thought that Jesus is especially fond of her. She is reassured when she hears in a vision that "my daughter, Bridget, never saw me in this way" (Kempe 46).<sup>20</sup> This is in great contrast to Julian who stresses that all the believers are Christ's bride. As she writes about this bride she does not stress her individuality, but the community that she is part of. This is seen by the use of the plural "we his loved bride" (Norwich 137).<sup>21</sup> This could be related to the fact that Julian is, overall, more focused on the community. Sauers analyses the community around anchorites in a rather broad sense. She points at the fact that by participating in the burial ceremony, Julian becomes a bride of Christ. Thus the ritual that separates her from the external community, leads her into new ecclesiastical companionship (157). It should be noted that

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<sup>19</sup> "Dowtyr, I am wel plesyd wyth the inasmeche as thu belevyst in alle the sacramentys of Holy Chirche and in al feyth that longith therto, and specialy for that thu belevyst in manhode of my sone and for the gret compassion that thu hast of hys bittyr Passyon." Also the Fadyr seyde to this creatur, "Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede (Kempe 2001-5).

<sup>20</sup> My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse (Kempe 1085-6).

<sup>21</sup> we His lovid wif (Norwich 2394-5).

Margery tells her readers that she and Julian had spent several days with each other and talked about these subjects. “The anchoress and this creature had much holy conversation in talking about the love of our Lord Jesus Christ for the many days that they were together (Kempe 42).<sup>22</sup> Even though this is scarce evidence it seems that the two could still find each other in their mutual love for Christ, despite their contrasting interpretation of what it meant to be Christ’s bride.

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<sup>22</sup> Mych was the holy dalyawns that the ankres and this creatur haddyn be comownyng in the lofe of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist many days that thei were togedyr (Kempe 986-8).

## Conclusion

Returning to the question that started this thesis there are several things to be said about the manifestation of piety in the lives of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. The contrasting choice they make, to either travel through the world or to remove themselves from it is most obvious difference between them. This choice influences and explains all the other forms of piety in their lives. While researching piety, the performance and the audience is pivotal to study as well. Julian and Margery have different means to communicate their piety, which are again a result of their position within society. Both women can be seen as part of the tradition of ascetic piety. Considering some base principles of this movement, such as physical penance, abstinence from food, wealth and sex, Julian and Margery have a lot in common. In essence, they follow the same principles, even though they are in different circumstances. The focus of the piety of Julian and Margery is God. On the surface it might seem that this is the aspect where there is not a strong division between Julian and Margery. After all, Margery describes this as the topic of which she and Julian spend many days talking (Kempe 42). However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that with this topic the difference between the two women is most evident. The relationship with Christ is at the centre of piety and since there is a discrepancy all the other differences can be explained as well. Margery can be labelled as more worldly and this is reflected in her relationship with Christ. She is possessive like a jealous wife and only has eye for Christ. In a way this divine marriage seems to be a direct replacement of her earthly marriage. Julian on the other hand, contemplates the Trinity more intensely and is more focused on the metaphysical aspects of being the bride of Christ. This might also be explained from the fact that she is more focused on the female characteristics of God. Instead of selfish possessiveness she shows inclusion when she writes that the church is the bride (Norwich 137). Julian and Margery both want to teach their audiences about their personal relationship with God and what this has taught them. This is essentially what binds these two

very different women together. The manifestation of their piety might be contrasting but the focus of their pious life is the same God. Further research could be conducted into how piety, in a broader sense manifested itself in the lives of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, as well as into the piety of their contemporaries in order to understand piety in the Late Middle Ages.

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