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8.

How We (Can) Remember Medieval Women in Biofiction: The Case of Victoria MacKenzie's *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*

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"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."
(L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*)

"'The Victorians,' Mrs. Swithin mused. 'I don't believe,' she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently'."
(Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*)

A tribute volume, like the current one, is inevitably a gesture of remembering, of re-membering (re-integrating into the community), of evoking the memory of the painfully deceased, in this case Kathleen E. Dubs, who was my professional predecessor. Professional-academic remembering means creating a meaningful bridge between the remembered one and the one doing the remembering. Knowing Kathleen E. Dubs's research areas and professional interests – the Middle Ages, Tolkien and fantasy literature, early American literature, and teaching writing – at first sight does not seem to provide ample grounds for establishing a solid basis for a bridge between us, with me focusing professionally on the literature by women writers from the late 18th century to the present. How can I, thus, do my part in remembering Kathleen, how can I reach out to her academically? In spite of these disciplinary distances, perhaps I can still remember her by asking the very same question: how we remember, and how we can remember – both Kathleen E. Dubs, her perhaps primary literary period, the Middle Ages, and the people in the Middle Ages. Or more specifically, incorporating myself and my own research areas into this act of remembering, I can ask the question: how we remember – or how we *can* remember – medieval women of whose lives so little is known, and whose world seems to have cultural codes so difficult to decipher for us, 20th–21st-century scholars – or lay readers, so our engagement with the medieval past

may equal the experience of visiting a foreign country, like in the opening sentence to L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* in one of the epigraphs (Hartley 1954, 1).

But how "foreign" is that country? What is "foreign" about it, and to what extent? Can we inhabit it? Can we make it homely and familiar or does it resist appropriation? Or shall we identify with Virginia Woolf's character in the other epigraph, Mrs. Swithin, who can only see the clothes as the distinguishing marks between herself and the Victorians (Woolf 1992b, 104)? Mrs. Swithin, however, looks back on the Victorians from the distance of about half a century, or at the most one century (*Between the Acts* supposedly takes place in June 1939). Can we extend Mrs. Swithin's position to the Middle Ages? Can we replace the "Victorians" with people from any past age? Are they as accessible as the Victorians? Or are they culturally as indecipherable as a foreign country? And is time – the past as time – the only difficulty? Do these spaces – and the people living in them – unproblematically offer themselves for revisitation, remembering, re-membering and evocation?

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's speaker famously reminds her fictitious woman writer, Mary Carmichael, of another problem: the lack of clarity of the life stories of women, yet she posits an almost ethical imperative that "[a]ll these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded" (Woolf 1992a, 116), and further elaborates that she

> went on in thought through the streets of London feeling in imagination the pressure of dumbness, *the accumulation of unrecorded life*, whether from the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo, and the rings embedded in their fat swollen fingers, talking with a gesticulation like the swing of Shakespeare's words; or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways; or from drifting girls whose faces, like waves in sun and cloud, signal the coming of men and women and the flickering lights of shop windows. *All that you will have to explore*, [she] said to Mary Carmichael, holding your torch firm in your hand.
>
> (Woolf 1992a, 117 – emphases added)

Woolf's speaker here calls on Mary Carmichael to record the lives of the mostly even unnamed, average women, whose lives are utterly subsumed in the routine of the everyday, and, as such, go unnoticed and unremembered: "[f]or all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie" (Woolf 1992a, 116).

In Woolf's writings, however, the issue of the obscurity of lives appears at another level too: in the case of creative and scientific women whose life and works are close to sinking into oblivion. In a shorter essay, "The Lives of the Obscure", she asks the imaginary librarian to help her dust the books – and thus also lives – of intellectual women like the Taylor sisters (writers of children's poetry), Maria Edgeworth (novelist), Laetitia Pilkington (poet and memoir writer) and Eleanor Anne Ormerod (19th-century entomologist), who in 1925 (at the time when the volume of essays *The Common Reader* appeared) were as good as forgotten. Because of their achievements, they are obviously different from the average woman, yet, as the essay puts it metaphorically, to be able to say anything about them, they – and their books – must be as good as unearthed from their graves: "Their backs are flaking off; their titles often vanished. Why disturb their sleep? Why re-open those peaceful graves, the librarian seems to ask, peering over his spectacles, and resenting the duty, which indeed has become laborious, of retrieving from among those nameless tombstones Nos. 1763, 1080, and 606" (Woolf 1953, 109). The metaphors of the sentence: books with flaking backs, the library as a peaceful grave – at another point as a "faded, out-of-date, obsolete library" (Woolf 1953, 109) – and, for an assistant in the labour of digging, an unwilling, resentful, bespectacled librarian, all suggest the close-to-impossible effort of resuscitating the lives of even the less obscure from past ages, particularly, in the case of women, due to the lack of sufficient sources and almost complete oblivion.

This laborious effort of evoking the past, of re-membering dissembled, fragmentary, obscure lives and of reimagining ages gone by is a major tendency in contemporary fiction, massively tangible from the late 1960s on, perhaps triggered by John Fowles' postmodern Victorian pastiche, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1987), and since then the imaginative re-creation of various past ages has been in vogue. Perhaps not by chance (proving that Mrs. Swithin is right?), the trend – and not only in Fowles' novel – started off with the Victorian period, creating terms like Neo-Victorian fiction and Neo-Victorianism, and perhaps even now going back to the Victorian period is the most productive and most widely read, most popular form of engagement with the past, taking various forms and attributes. Some Neo-Victorian novels, partly through their postmodern, self-reflexive narrative technique, create a consciously critical sense of historicity while maintaining a persistent connection to the present, implying that the Victorians are us, or, paraphrasing Jan Kott's classic, making the Victorians our contemporaries (Kott 1974). The Victorians, in this sense, differ from us only in their clothes: the Victorian age can be seen as the period when several forms of modernity, including our modern lifestyle, most directly emerged (and this is not disregarding all the historical processes that started off in the Early Modern period).

While the prevalence of Neo-Victorian fiction has never declined, novels reaching back to the past started to embrace other periods in fiction: the Edwardian period, World War I, World War II, the interwar period, and also previous ages, such as the 18th and 17th centuries, and even the Renaissance, producing a great variety of "neo-novels" or neo-historical novels (just to mention two recent biographical novels from the Renaissance period by Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet* on Anne Hathaway (O'Farrell 2020), Shakespeare's wife, and *The Marriage Portrait* on Lucrezia de' Medici, Duchess of Ferrara (O'Farrell 2022)). Seeing this process, it was only a question of time before fiction also reached back to evoke the Middle Ages – Kathleen E. Dubs's research area – from a contemporary perspective (incidentally providing me, partly a scholar of contemporary fiction, with a bridge to reach out to the medieval). All these novels – while usually focusing on fictitious characters – creatively combine the factual and the fictitious by presenting a well-researched "pastness of the past", while at the same time creating an imaginative fictitious narrative that frames the past from a contemporary perspective, and as such, can be seen as self-conscious (re-)discoveries, (re-)interpretations and (re-)visions of the past.

Particularly from the 2000s on, a new sub-trend emerged in reinterpreting the past: biographical fiction or biofiction, which focuses on a historical figure for a protagonist as a factual element, but following Lytton Strachey's re-readings of famous historical figures from the Victorian and Elizabethan age (like Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning, Thomas Arnold, General Gordon or Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex – Strachey 1985; 1990), contemporary biofiction usually has a stake of reinventing these lives. While doing so, biofiction, by definition, perfectly and consciously subscribes to the postmodern uncertainty considering the ever less clear boundaries between fact and fiction. In David Lodge's definition, biofiction "takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography" (cited by Lackey 2016, 3). Thus, biofiction, similarly to general neo-historical novels, provides a space for combining the factual and the fictitious, the objective and the subjective, the truthful and the imaginary. This seems a perfect combination for (re-)creating the lives of the Woolfian "obscure", in whose case even the minimally factual may be absent, or difficult to access: the genre not only allows and justifies the function of imagination, but even makes it the dominant element. As Michael Lackey argues, novelists of biofiction "do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth". Instead, "novelistic biographies, what we refer to as biographical novels, are irredeemable aesthetic forms, because the authors misrepresent biography and therewith history" (Lackey 2019, 7, 6).

Lackey, a major scholar of biofiction, consistently argues for the nonfactual aspect of biofiction, claiming that "[b]iographical novelists use rather than do history" (Lackey 2019, 15) – and, let us add, historical figures as well. In contrast, Maggie Gee, herself a writer of biofiction (like *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* – Gee 2014) articulates her unease (as summarised by Bethany Layne) at "the tensions between biofiction's reinventions and the impenetrable aspects of the subject's unique life" (Layne 2020, 3), which indicates that authors are aware of the inevitable fictitiousness of biographical novels. Biofiction, no matter how apparently truthful and well-researched, does feature a large degree of invention and the imaginary, which, in turn, may cause some discomfort for the authors of biofiction, even if they subscribe to the genre consciously. This unease and discomfort may be also caused by how readers relate to biofiction: they are more likely to take biofiction as true of – to go back to Layne's words – the impenetrable aspects of the subject's life. Put differently, readers may be more likely to read biofiction as a truthful representation of a subject's life, which, in turn, imposes an ethical responsibility on the author of biofiction, even in cases when a biographical novel is so obviously fictitious that it imaginatively takes Virginia Woolf into 21st-century New York and Istanbul, as Maggie Gee's text does. But as the author's comment implies, even a novel like this can be expected to reflect some in-depth truth of the subject.

The biographical novel – or biofiction – thus balances between verifiable facts and the imaginative reinvention of the past, and struggles with the issue of how to recreate the past. In this respect, however, autobiographical theories may give some relief for biofiction authors. Whereas autobiography is usually seen as the most taken-for-granted discourse of truth production for one's self, and as such the most truthful genre possible, theorists of autobiography argue for the inevitable fictionality of any autobiography. The reasons are multiple, but to focus on the most significant ones: in any autobiography one can distinguish three autobiographical "I"s: the author, the narrating I, and the narrated I (in various stages of their life); in addition, autobiography is greatly impacted by what is remembered, and also by the reasons for which an autobiography is written. Furthermore, considering how an autobiography is structured from the perspective of the narrative (what is the starting point of the narrative, how are the "plot" elements arranged, how is time treated, how is causality created, etc.) it is clear that depending on the narrative structure, an infinite number of plots can be created from "the same" material (Séllei 2001, 13–27). One can argue that the same applies to writers of biographies too: it is not only the discovery of new biographical materials that inspire a new biography of the same biographical subject but also a new, different "take" on a life story.

The awareness of this volatility of autobiographies and biographies can be a liberating idea for writers of biofiction as well, all the more so as – to go back to Woolf and the obscure lives – in many cases there are not enough accessible sources to rely on, but despite that (or perhaps because of it), figures from the past can appeal to writers' imaginations, and can inspire them to re-invent – or in some cases simply invent – most of their lives. Undeniably, as a central element, biofiction assumes the existence of a historical figure in the past, and in this sense there are always some elements of truth in biofiction. Just as inevitably, however, even in the case of well-documented biofictional subjects, invention and fictitiousness deriving from narrativity are integral parts of biofiction, just as much as historical factuality. In this way, biofiction combines scholarly research with both entertainment and education – and perhaps also blurs the boundaries between high and popular culture. Accordingly, readers turn to biofiction both to gain some "truth" about its subject and for the enjoyment of an imaginative narrative.

A further question concerns why writers turn to a figure of the past, what relevance they may bear for the contemporary readers, and what stakes are at play in re-locating them in the current discourse on history and subjectivity. Apart from the claims above that biofiction combines historicity and fictionality in the process of re-creating the subject, if a biographical novel aims to appeal to a contemporary audience, it seems a feasible strategy to approach the subject from perspectives that are relevant to contemporary readers. A such, while focusing on figures even from several centuries ago and exploring why they were significant in their own cultures, these texts may address issues that concern us contemporary readers just as much as (or perhaps even more than) the age when these biofictional characters actually lived. In this sense, biofictional texts do not only balance between the factual and the imaginative, but also between recreating the past and exploring it with contemporary stakes. The result is a vision of the past as re-created, re-invented, and re-imagined by the author with their own contemporary stakes, concerns, perspectives and approaches.

In the case of female biofictional subjects, how their gender functioned and was constructed in that particular historical age is a key question. Biofiction – due to the features analysed above – can have alternative takes on life narratives, and can freely explore how a female figure was not only constrained, but how she also challenged or played with her own contemporary gender norms in a historical context to create her agency, which does not mean disregarding the socio-cultural specificities of the age concerned. As succinctly summed up by the editors of a volume on early modern European women, "modern creators of biography and biofiction about women face cultural challenges in exploding stereotypes, while celebrating early modern women creators

who forged their own opportunities for materialising authorship, performing gender, and authoring identity" (Fitzmaurice et al. 2021, 19).

The relative lack or inaccessibility of biographical-factual materials about women's obscure lives, paradoxically, may even be an advantage: the fewer facts, the greater the space for imagination, for contemporary interventions, for new ways of seeing, and for interrogating history from a gendered contemporary perspective. This accords with Lackey's argument: "[t]he contemporary ethos always inflects the representation of a particular life" (Lackey 2020, 274). As a result, the impact of biofiction is always necessarily about the past and the contemporary age alike. To paraphrase and turn Lackey's rhetorical questions into statements, the value of biofiction is that it can be used "to advance knowledge and understanding of history, women, humans and life", and, specifically, "fictional texts about the lives of early modern women contribute to the scholarly record and knowledge about contemporary culture" (Lackey 2020, 272).

The issues, ambivalences, (im)balances and complexities of biofiction outlined above are multiply present in the case of medieval women, like Julian of Norwich, also known as Dame of St. Julian of Norwich (1343–after 1416), and Margery Kempe (c. 1373–after 1438), the two protagonists of Victoria MacKenzie's novel *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*. As stated in her accounts about the making of the novel, MacKenzie felt enticed to write Julian of Norwich's story primarily because of her several-year long fascination with "the anchoress experience". She wanted to explore what it meant to restrict one's life to a single room, which she saw as a counterpoint to the contemporary liberated lifestyle. In 2020, however, when she started writing her novel, it turned into an experience that resonated with the COVID restrictions: "[l]ockdown seemed the perfect time to write about a woman who lived in a single room for over thirty years," and while doing research on the anchoress, she came across Margery Kempe (MacKenzie 2023b, 11.26–15.30, MacKenzie 2023c).

Both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe were religious mystics, but neither of them made it to sainthood, though a dominant way of accessing their lives historically is through their religious convictions and mysticism, including how they are present in their own contemporary religious discourse and that of their posterity. This framing of their lives and visions causes problems, because – as Catherine M. Mooney argues – the difference between "female self-representations and male representations of sanctity" is crucial because one must "distinguish the voices and points of view of saints […] from those of their interpreters" (Mooney 1999, 1). She also raises the issue as "to what extent portrayals of sanctity are influenced not so much by gender as by genre" (Mooney 1999, 2), referring to the generic conventions – and thus constraints – and, more importantly, religious-conceptual interpretations of the hagiographic tradition

within which a certain relatively set rhetoric and a masculine perspective prevail. As she argues, "male-authored depictions of holy women, however sincerely intentioned, are likely to reveal far more about men's idealized notions of female sanctity and its embodiment in women's lives than they reveal about the female saints themselves" (Mooney 1999, 3), even if, as Tamás Karáth points out, within each specific religious genre, there is a surprisingly wide variety (Karáth 2020, 183), and even if for women in the Middle Ages religious visions were a form of self-expression.

Although Mooney's arguments above pertain to female saints, and neither Julian of Norwich nor Margery Kempe is canonised as a saint, as major mystics in medieval England they were also framed within the rhetorical tradition that reflects a religious disciplinary attitude the moment there were doubts about their non-compliance with religious orthodoxy. Margery Kempe's mysticism, for example, was often seen as heresy, and in some cases she was publicly exposed and chastised by preachers (Karáth 2020, 189). These two medieval mystics, however, also have their own voice and agency, as both of them are authors. Julian of Norwich was literate (rather rare among women in the 14th and early 15th century), and is the author of the first book in English written by a woman: *Revelations of Divine Love*, or as also known, *The Shewings of Divine Love*, and this is the only surviving text written by an anchoress. Julian of Norwich was a woman whose name is unknown: the name we know her by is given to her based on where she lived several decades of her life: walled into a small cell attached to St. Julian Church of Norwich, where she moved as an anchoress after a serious illness during which she had mystical visions: sixteen revelations. Her text, as explained by Karáth, is one of the very few mystical-spiritual diaries from the Middle Ages. It has two versions: the shorter one was most probably noted down after her illness of 1373, while the longer one is supposed to be the result of her contemplations on those "shewings" (meaning showings, visions, revelations) as an anchoress. The shorter version survived in a single manuscript, while the longer version, although its original was lost, survived in three 17th-century copies and in two further fragments (Karáth 2020, 202–203), and the longer version was first published in 1670.

Margery Kempe, in turn, is the first female autobiographer, even though she was illiterate: in her sixties, she dictated her autobiography first to her son, John, then to a priest, who also corrected the parts dictated to John because John lived for a long time abroad, and his writing skills in English were less developed (MacKenzie 2023a, 159). From the perspective of the narration, an interesting point is that the two scribes, as Karáth points out, present the autobiographical subject in the third-person singular, from their perspective. It is only at a later point in the text that, perhaps due to an oversight by the scribe-editor, there is an exceptional, and probably accidental switch to the

first-person singular (Karáth 2020, 203), i.e., to what we see today as "proper" autobiographical narration. In addition, the Kempe scholarship abounds in wide-ranging and contradictory theories as to the identity of the original and the later scribes (the ones who copied the original manuscript) and also as to their formative contribution to the final shape and wording of the text of the *Book* as it has been passed down to posterity (Bale 2017, 175–76). This, of course, raises questions concerning the extent to which we can really read Margery Kempe's text in her *Book of Margery Kempe*, yet, undeniably, this is a text considered her own autobiography, which was found in a single copy in 1934. As Victoria MacKenzie recalls, it was discovered in a country house, as when someone was looking for ping-pong balls it fell out of a cupboard (MacKenzie 2023a, 160), and was first published in 1940.

Comparing the two women's texts, one can discover a crucial difference from the perspective of biofiction and the issue of facts: while Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* (both the shorter and the longer versions) focus on her "shewings", i.e., her mystical visions, Margery Kempe's *Book*, in addition to her own visions, includes more personal details that can be used as a source for biography, including, obviously, biofiction. No matter how personal the origins of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* are – she had her "shewings" in her severe illness, when she thought she would die – her text includes her mystical visions only, even if, as Karáth notes, presented sometimes in surprising images while alternating various attitudes, like devotion, ecstasy, direct response to the visionary experience and meditations (Karáth 2020, 202–203). In contrast, from Margery Kempe's *Book*, one can get a rather broad picture of contemporary society, including details on the specificities of women's lives both in their families and in the wider social and religious-devotional context, which provided a relatively stable basis of "facts" for the Kempe line in MacKenzie's double biofiction.

The question is what Victoria MacKenzie makes of these two women's lives, whether she treats them as if from a "foreign country" or as "our contemporaries", what her take is on this more than 700-year-old joint narrative, how MacKenzie can make these two women's life stories speak to us, 21st-century readers, what the stakes are of re-telling, re-imagining and to a great extent – due to the lack of data of Julian of Norwich's personal life – inventing this story, and, finally, how these two stories are narrated to make them appeal to contemporary readers.

MacKenzie chooses a moment that can be seen as the culmination of the joint story of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe: the narrative is placed in 1413, when Margery Kempe went to visit Julian of Norwich, by then already an anchoress and famous spiritual adviser, a meeting documented in Chapter 18 of Kempe's *Book*, describing it in terms of edifying, spiritual conversation, and sisterly communion that

"they enjoyed for 'many days'" (Bale 2017, 183). The text uses a double, alternating first-person narration, providing both female characters with an – at least fictive – agency: they have a voice of their own in this biographical novel. The text has a structure that resonates with some medieval modes of discourse: while the prologue goes back to ancient Greek drama, it was also an integral part of medieval mystery and miracle plays, thus creating an implied link to contemporary stage traditions, and also giving the impression that these two lives are staged, like two alternating monodramas which, however, are closely interlinked, and not only because of their historic meeting. The novel rhetorically concludes similarly: it has an epilogue, which is culturally an effective solution because it was customary in the 15th century to conclude texts with an epilogue. MacKenzie's closure sums up the lives of these two women after their meeting (which in Julian of Norwich's case was just a few years, and in Margery Kempe's case about two and a half decades), and also the history of their books, in this way framing the text in the factual data of the lives of these two women and their writings, while the body of the narrative is the fictive re-imagination of their interlocking, sometimes parallel, sometimes deviating stories.

The "Prologue" is presented in Margery Kempe's voice, on her arrival at Norwich. This short, less than one-page-long text has a rhetorical frame of its own, expressing Kempe's fundamental fears and her spiritual doubts, and opens with the words "I fear that my neighbours are right, that it is the devil inside me, making me think that I see Christ" (MacKenzie 2023a, n. p.), and concluding with "[b]ut this is my last hope. The devil won't have my soul. The anchoress will surely help me" (MacKenzie 2023a, n. p.). As the reader will later know (and is also known from her *Book*), Kempe was several times accused of heresy, and her visions – partly due to the fact that she accompanied them with what was seen as improper body movements – were considered as the devil's making, so instead of considering her highly spiritual, in direct connection with Christ, she was seen as possessed by the devil. The rhetorical framing of the "Prologue" articulates this deepest fear of hers, and her own spiritual doubts that her accusers may be right, while it closes on notes on hope – the last hope – that the anchoress, i.e., Julian of Norwich, will help her. This rhetorical framework enacts the scenario of redemption: it is as if Kempe expected Julian of Norwich to be her redeemer, granting her salvation from her own personal, earthly purgatory, and as such, the "Prologue" reflects on the title of the novel, taken from Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, which is also about the possibility of redemption by Christ's crucifixion (*For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*). The opening and closing sentences of the "Prologue" outline a potential earthly redemption narrative but frame a series of ultra-secular scenes of blasphemy. A man is described in the street of Norwich as putting a live mouse in his mouth as

if taking – and parodying – the holy communion, symbolically Christ's body – while Margery undergoes experiences of humiliation – being called a strumpet in the street of Norwich – of discomfort – a filthy bed in the inn – and of a lack of homeliness: "[f]irst time in many years I wish I was home with my children" (MacKenzie 2023a, n. p.). All these details can be read as elements of the contemporary social context, in which and against which Margery Kempe, a lay woman, lays claim to having direct connections to Christ, and has to prove her true devotionality and the truth of her visions, almost against all odds. In this sense, the "Prologue" can be interpreted as the *mise-en-abyme* of the whole novel, and not only in terms of the Kempe line, but also that of Julian of Norwich, whose acceptance by the church authorities could not be taken for granted either due to her unorthodox theological ideas.

The novel is further structured into three parts: "The Shewings", "The Meetings" (Day I and Day II), and "The Books", of which the first part is the longest, presenting how these two women made it to this very time and space, in 1413 in Norwich, outlining both their personal lives and their mystical visions, and in their cases these two are fundamentally indivisible: their visions derive from their personal lives, and their personal lives are subsumed in these visions. The double, alternating narratives of the two women are formally separated and the actual speaker is always indicated: their names (Julian, Margery) appear at the opening of each new section. An intriguing aspect of the narrative arrangement is that the two narratives neither run in parallel with each other, nor do they have the same narrative sequence. They have different points of origin: while in the case of Julian of Norwich the narration starts off with her childhood and family, the Margery Kempe line opens with her giving birth to her first child, which is, at the same time, her first experience of Christ visiting her, and in this sense it can be seen as her own birth as a spiritual woman, as a mystic. This narrative opening may suggest a difference between their personalities: Julian of Norwich is presented as a more serene, contemplative woman who is more resigned to her fate, and handles her mystical visions in a more contained way. Margery Kempe, by contrast, is presented – in her own *Book* as well – as someone who falls into ecstatic states very easily, and is best known for her unstoppable and rather loud weeping and sobbing in her moments of spirituality, even disturbing the audiences at churches, at public preachings or on pilgrimages: in her case the spiritual and the bodily are utterly inseparable.

The opening of Julian of Norwich's section, in spite of her apparently comfortable, well-to-do childhood, is also related to her visions, even if only indirectly, because it starts off by noting that when she was seven "the great pestilence came to [their] city", i.e., the Black Death, the bubonic plague that devastated Europe between 1346 and 1353 (thus, considering her year of birth, her narrative starts off in 1350). The con-

trast between their lifestyle and the devastating Black Death is imagined succinctly: "We were rich, this had always been clear to me. We ate well and our house had many rooms. My clothes were made from Flanders linen, and my mother had a garden just for flowers. Just for beauty. Imagine. But we still died": her father, brother, sister and nurse fell victim to the epidemic (MacKenzie 2023a, 3–4) – an experience echoed by the COVID pandemic that raged while MacKenzie was writing the novel. This opening, apart from being an instance of *memento mori*, a common reflection in the medieval times, creates a connection to *her* spiritual rebirth as well, because she has her revelations while very ill, almost dying. At this point, the connection is not made, because illness, physical suffering, and death or almost death seem to be present in the opening of both narrative lines. What is more, the spiritual birth of both women is inscribed in the narrative of bodily suffering: illness and excessive labour pains.

In Julian's case, not having data about her life (as indicated above: not even her real name is known), MacKenzie invented – had to invent – a complete life story that both converges with and diverges from that of Margery Kempe. The common point is that – according to this partly fictive narrative – both come from relatively well-to-do families, which is a known fact in the case of Margery, who came from a family of the local elite (Karáth 2020, 203), but to create this background for Julian of Norwich was also inevitable, otherwise her literacy would be close to impossible to explain. According to the imagined life story, after the death of her family members in the pestilence, she lives with her mother, then as a teenager she falls in love with her future husband, who teaches her to write. Their marriage is presented – perhaps as a counterpoint to Margery Kempe's marriage – as a loving, harmonious relationship, but her husband, too, passes away in the epidemic, as does their child, and she goes on to live with her mother in shared widowhood. At the age of thirty she falls ill, she has a serious "sweating", and is even given the last unction, but – while having her visions – she comes back to life. Even before becoming an anchoress in the walled-up cell attached to St Julian Church of Norwich (a possible, but not the only possible reason why she is called Julian), her mind is intensively engaged with these fifteen plus one, altogether sixteen "shewings".

Living as an anchoress in the cell, not having any connection to the outside world except a maid taking care of her physical needs, and only talking to visitors (without seeing them) who come to ask for advice, obviously does not provide much plot for a narrative. Victoria MacKenzie, however, makes up ingenuous and moving parts focusing on her internal life: not only on her meditations on her revelations, but also how she experiences the decades of being confined to a very small cell. The transition from the world to the cell, though entirely her own wish and decision, is far from being

a smooth and tranquil process. Originally, she chooses this new life so that she can devote herself to spirituality and to interpreting her visions, whereas (understandably), for a long time this is impossible: "[i]nstead of thinking about my *shewings*, my mind kept running back to the past, like water flowing downhill" (MacKenzie 2023a, 76). She recalls memories of her family, her husband touching her, kissing her, and also abject memories of bodies rotting during the pestilence, and related to her traumatic losses, she asks "heretic" questions: "If God could resurrect his own son, why not my daughter? What harm would that do?" (MacKenzie 2023a, 82). She obviously has to work through her own life traumas, while also struggling with the size of the space:

> The walls of my cell seemed very close. I walked around it, my sleeve brushing bed, desk, cupboard. I could take ten paces in one direction, turn and take six paces, turn and take eight paces, turn and take six paces.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
> Ten, six, eight, six.
>
> (MacKenzie 2023a, 82)

The obsessive repetition indicates the struggle with the confinement, and also a mind compulsively revolving around the same traumas, going around the same life events, trying to come to terms with them. Not only is the space against her, so is time:

> Time has not been a steady friend to me.
> In the early years in my cell, the minutes between the bells ringing out for prayer were so long I used to wonder if the bell was broken or if the bell-ringer was distracted. But now the hours are minutes, the days are just hours, and winter approaches before I have even noticed the scent of freshly scythed hay.
>
> (MacKenzie 2023a, 114)

Gradually, as seen in her changing attitude to time, she reconciles to her space and time and can gain the focus necessary to write up her meditations on her visions. This process of calming down, however, is intertwined with her vision of her approaching death, which is increased by the fact that she is walled up – as if in a tomb – for several

decades, which may also contribute to her bodily decline: "I look at my brown-spotted hands, their swollen knuckles, and see that there is not much longer left to me on earth. *My body is stiff, as if already preparing for the grave*. My knees creak, and my fingers struggle with my beads. Indeed, Sara gives me broth and mashed turnips, but no meat because my teeth are crumbling" (MacKenzie 2023a, 123 – emphasis added). The stiffness of her body can be understood as a symbol of her self-incarceration, for the lack of life that being an anchoress implies, for a gradual loss of movement, space and time.

Her only connection with the outside world is that after a time she functions as a spiritual adviser: people come up to her cell, which has an opening, even if curtained, and she gives them counsel. Among these visitors, Margery Kempe also comes, which is a historically proven fact. Margery needs advice – as could be seen in the "Prologue" – because her status is questioned in her community. Her narrative line – or rather fragments of her life story, intertwined with that of Julian of Norwich – is based on her *Book*, but as MacKenzie claims, "[t]his work is a creative engagement with both texts [*Revelations* and *Book*] as well as a work of imagination" (MacKenzie 2023a, Author's note, n. p.). This creative engagement with the *Book*, in my interpretation, means a careful selection of details from Margery Kempe's private life that make sense for the 21st-century reader, while preserving Kempe's religious enthusiasm, devoutness, and all the conflicts that arise from her specific display of being touched by preachings or visions. Her private life is, unsurprisingly, controlled by the dominant male figures in her family: her father, and then her husband. Unlike Julian's invented marriage, hers is very far from being a marriage for love: a lot closer to an arranged marriage that facilitates the businesses of both the father and the husband. The control she is under is symbolically expressed in the opening of her narrative: she recalls that during her pregnancy, while wishing to eat weird things, her husband threatened her to imprison and shackle her, at which, as Margery recalls in the text, "I quite lost my reason. I ranted and screamed and tore my clothes and hair. And I was indeed restrained as my husband had threatened, and he took away my keys. Then my labour pains began and they were shackles themselves, pinning me down and causing me to roar" (MacKenzie 2023a, 5). The parallel between the husband literally incarcerating her and experiencing the labour pain as shackles is symbolic of her relation to her body, sexuality, heteronormativity and maternity: although she gives birth to fourteen children, she hardly ever feels emotionally attached to her children, admits to not being a devoted mother – or wife, for that matter – and on giving birth to her first child, "[w]hen the child emerged, [she] thought he was the devil come to split [her] into two and toss [her] entrails to the dogs" (MacKenzie 2023a, 5). While childbirth is indeed painful, the imagery of the devil born out of her labour pains and being tossed to the dogs expresses a disturbed relation to

female biology and sexuality, which Margery Kempe keeps struggling with, although – or precisely because – she has fourteen children. All through these consecutive births, however, she keeps yearning for a chaste marriage, which the husband is not willing to agree to: he lays claim to his own right to have access to her body.

Margery Kempe, no matter how much the husband wants to control her, cannot be confined to the domestic: she becomes what we would call these days a small entrepreneur as an "alewife" (MacKenzie 2023a, 37) to help her husband financially, and a public person, known by many. Although having spiritual visions, as a woman she is aware that she can never be a preacher or religious teacher ("As a woman I was not allowed to preach, as was declared by St Paul" – MacKenzie 2023a, 36). Yet, she manoeuvres in the space granted, she not only responds to preaching and teaching by her famous weepings, she is also aware that "[i]t was not the Lord's intentions that [she] be quiet about [her] visions" (MacKenzie 2023a, 37), which are undeniably unique because she claims that she was present both at Jesus's birth and his crucifixion, and though not authorised, she ultimately stands up in the street and tells of her visions. While her copious and loud weeping is "only" disturbing, her visionary claims go beyond the uncomfortable, meaning that her position in her community becomes more fraught, on a number of levels. Her family members become estranged from her, considering her dangerous both spiritually and economically, and feeling that she jeopardises the family businesses and family fortunes with her close to sacrilegious visions. Her husband, for instance, claims that it is due to Margery that he will not be elected an alderman (MacKenzie 2023a, 73). She becomes tainted and tainting: an element of potential contamination because she cannot be clearly placed in the relatively strict order of the Middle Ages because she is a woman with visions that not even the anointed priests have, and a woman expressing her devotion in bodily-visceral ways is a figure of suspicion for both her own community and the Church. She is questioned for heresy in York, a seat of one of the archbishops, the outcome of which can be the most frightening punishment in the medieval times: excommunication, and ultimately death. She is almost impossibly saved from prison and from further investigations by secular people, and she is released, but in spite of these lay people's faith in her, she is constantly beset by doubts. While in Norwich, her self-doubts are presented in this way, including the eponymous quotation from her *Book*: "I am constantly shriven but I can find no release, and I am nearly in despair. It cannot be written what pain I feel and what sorrow I have. And I say, 'Lord, for thy great pain have mercy on my little pain. Alas, Lord, you have said before that you would never forsake me. Where now is the truthfulness of your word?'" (MacKenzie 2023a, 127).

This is the state of mind she is in, and this is how the novel starts in the "Prologue": with her arrival in Norwich to seek Julian of Norwich's counsel and relief from her despair. The historical-psychological-narrative culmination of the novel is the meeting of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Its uniqueness is indicated by the fact that although on principle Julian of Norwich never allows anyone to come for counsel more than once, in Kempe's case she makes an exception, and she can come twice (in Kempe's *Book*: on "many days", as quoted before). During their meeting, the narrative changes: the interlocking but fragmentary narratives change into a dialogue between the two women, significantly the only dialogue sequence in the text, as if indicating that they could only communicate with each other. Julian of Norwich is not judgemental at all, believes that Kempe has holy visions, and supports her against archbishops and doctors of divinity, saying "[y]ou are a woman of great grace and courage" (MacKenzie 2023a, 137). Their dialogue is characterised by mutual empathy, recognitions, and new perspectives, on which both of them reflect as getting and giving comfort, and Kempe even feels the city of Norwich more welcoming after the meeting (MacKenzie 2023a, 143–44).

On the second day, before Kempe comes again, Julian is visited by priests who warn her not to receive heretics, plainly referring by this term to Kempe, even though she has never been officially declared a heretic. The rumours and suspicion surrounding her, however, are sufficient for the Church authorities to try to keep her away from Julian, who is more properly integrated into the system of the Church (thus, their narratives also demonstrate the haphazardness of whether someone will be condemned or – even if only on the fringes – incorporated, of which Julian of Norwich's cell attached to the church is a spatial equivalent). Yet the two women meet a second time, going against not only Julian of Norwich's own habits, but also against the prohibitions of authority. The exchange that takes place in the novel between them is a direct resistance to these authoritative voices, and even breaks some taboos. This time, it is not Margery Kempe who asks for Julian of Norwich's help, but the other way round. Namely, the novel plays with the historical possibility that Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* survived because she gave her manuscript to Margery Kempe on her visit. Passing over the manuscript is framed within terms of a dangerous gift that can be read as heresy, so taking it needs courage (MacKenzie 2023a, 146–49), which is justifiable in the contemporary religious context because Julian of Norwich's theological ideas on universal redemption (to which the title of the novel refers as well, even if taken from Kempe's *Book*, which is another link made by the text between the two women) was not an orthodox, canonical religious position at the time. The notions of heresy and danger up until this point in the text are primarily associated with Margery Kempe, not Julian of Norwich,

but now she characterises herself and particularly her book in these terms, creating fundamental parallels between their in many ways diverging life narratives.

At the moment of passing the manuscript over, they literally touch each other, which is an ultimate taboo for Julian of Norwich as an anchoress. The women's responses to this apparently accidental yet in the context of the whole text symbolical touch show the significance of the act. Julian describes it in this way: "I slid the papers, tied up with silk threads, under the curtain. Margery Kempe reached out to take the bundle but, as she did so, her fingers touched mine. It took all my wits not to cry out – no other person's flesh had touched mine for twenty-three years" and even after confessing this sin to Master Thomas, who disregards it as an accident, Julian of Norwich says: "[b]ut I cannot forget. My flesh feels seared, as if those hot fingers are on my skin still. It has unsettled me, and now I yearn more than ever to be embraced" (MacKenzie 2023a, 149, 151). Their spiritual meeting turns into an intensive emotional, and beyond that, bodily experience that results in a long-repressed desire for other bodies – for another woman's body – to embrace and to be embraced by. In this religious-cultural context this is the ultimate taboo, and not for nothing did the Bishop warn her that "the devil worked through that woman" (MacKenzie 2023a, 145).

Going against authoritative prohibitions, the two women courageously reach out to each other spiritually, emotionally and physically, and find solace, support, comfort, inspiration and genuine sisterhood in each other. "With [her] book in the world, [Julian of Norwich] is free to die" (MacKenzie 2023a, 151), while Margery Kempe cherishes Julian of Norwich's manuscript: even if illiterate, she takes it every day in her hand, wonders what it is like to write – and is inspired to write her own book. Raising the issue to her husband, his response is that "there would be no interest in such a thing. A woman knows little of life", and adds that "[w]omen cannot read […]. Their brains are too soft" (MacKenzie 2023a, 157). Margery, however, does not agree, and insists: '"Other women may be interested', I said. 'After all, I am well travelled and not everyone has had the good fortune to speak with Dame Julian", and she adds that "if there are words, there is no death. And I *will* write a book of my own. My words will live also" (MacKenzie 2023a, 157 – emphasis in the original). These two extraordinary medieval women's interlocking narratives can thus be read as the beginning of women's writing in English, and their persistence in the truth of their visions (in several meanings of the word) gave rise to a cultural matrilineage based on a supportive sisterhood. Their touching each other, meanwhile, can be interpreted as symbolical of a subversive cultural undercurrent going against the exclusion of women from culture, history and memory. So they not only *can* but *must* be remembered.

Epilogue: This text, in turn, is my humble scholarly attempt at trying to reach out to, touch and remember Kathleen E. Dubs in a scholarly field where she was an expert – while I am not even a laywoman.

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