Navigating Space as a Disabled Creature: Undergoing Medieval Womanhood, Disability, and Spiritualism in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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Abstract

In The Book of Margery Kempe*, medieval English mystic Margery Kempe continually refers to herself in the third person by using "creatur" [creature], which this article views as part of Kempe's engagement in the practice of* imitatio Christi*. Whilst scholarship has studied her engagement in this practice of self-injurious behaviour to become like Christ, it fails to consider Kempe as a disabled woman. By adopting a disability studies perspective this article views Margery Kempe as disabled with her use of creatur and her engagement in* imitatio Christi *as expressions of her disabilities. Finally her Book will be considered her ultimate 'space' for her disabled body through which Margery Kempe reinvents ableist notions.*

Keywords: Margery Kempe, disability, imitatio Christi, autobiographical writing, ableism, medieval women's writing

To matter is not only to be of importance, to signify, to mean, but also to claim a certain physical space, to have a particular presence, to be uniquely embodied.

Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters* (2012)

Born in the late fourteenth century, Margery Kempe was an English mystic famous and infamous for her intense public displays of religious devotion. She would later create what is widely considered to be the first English-language autobiography. Her *Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter *Book*) provides readers with insights into not only the life of fourteenth and fifteenth century Lynn; but also of the many pilgrimages Kempe took during her lifetime. Kempe painted a picture of how she experienced medieval womanhood. A close reading of the text, however, reveals more, namely a woman who was disabled by both her body and society. It also reveals a woman with a strong emotional connection to Jesus Christ, which she expressed through engagement in the practice of *imitatio Christi*. This connection is present in her narrative, her embodied experiences, and in her constant references to herself in the third person using the word "creatur" [creature].[1] To understand the argument that Margery Kempe attempts to claim her 'own' space as a disabled woman, this article adopts a disability studies perspective to demonstrate that the *Book of Margery Kempe* is her ultimate expression of her disabled body, with *creatur* and *imitatio Christi* also being considered expressions of her disabilities.

Connected to the ideas of *imitatio Christi, creatur,* and disability, is the notion of space. Margery Kempe's bodily experiences dictate how she navigated and reinvented literary space in the creation of her book. Her disabilities and her public displays of them caused her to be excluded from physical space and society. Tied to this struggle are her enactments of *imitatio Christi.* Despite there being evidence of women's engagement in *imitatio Christi,* Kempe's version of it is unique and is often negatively remarked upon by her peers. As a result, she struggled to take up space in society. Additionally, the constant referral to herself as *creatur,* reflects and reaffirms her status as an outsider. With space being such a ubiquitous feature of these key aspects of Kempe's life, this paper will view each component of the thesis statement in its relationship to space.

Through dictating her own life in the third person to three scribes, Margery blurs the lines between author/character and was

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

fundamentally involved in the production of the text. Whilst some scholarship separates the character Margery Kempe from author Margery Kempe, this paper will side with Kim Phillips' approach to acknowledge three Kempes: the character, the writer, and the historical subject, and treats the text as a collaborative production of a holy woman's life. Her approach is in accordance with Margery who separated her written self from the writer self by for example referring to herself in the third person. In line with Phillips this article will also alternate between using 'Margery', 'Kempe', and 'Margery Kempe' for stylistic purposes and not for meaningful reasons.[2] It is worth noting that is it is not entirely clear whether Kempe was literate, with literacy then having different and more complicated definitions than it does today. It is also possible she was literate but lacked the physical ability to write by hand.

Moreover, it helpful to view the *Book* not just as an autobiography, but as an autohagiography. Whilst acknowledging that Kempe's writing has autobiographical impulses, such as Margery's everyday activities, Tory Vandeventer Pearman argues labelling the *Book* purely as an autobiography, which many scholars do, is "inherently problematic as autobiographical writing as we define it today did not exist in the Middle Ages."[3] In arguing against the assumption the *Book* is a hagiography (i.e., writings of a saint's life) or work of fiction, Pearman notes the following: "Relegating the text to the status of a hagiography or a fiction erases [autobiographical] impulses, vacating Margery Kempe the historical woman from the text."[4] As each option seems to limit, Pearman considers the *Book* a hybrid or as some call it an 'autohagiography.'[5] Julian Yates describes his choice for the term hybrid as follows: "[autobiography refers to] details in the text which, while they

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[2] Kim M. Phillips, "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 18.

[3] Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 117.

[4] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 117.

[5] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 117; Barry Windeatt, introduction to *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004): 12.

contribute to the hagiographical impulse, enforce an awareness of Margery's social and material position. I view 'autobiography' as one impulse among many in this self-divided and hybridized text."[6] As Yates indeed notes, through an approach that enforces an awareness of Kempe's social and material position, the audience is reminded that knowledge production is only possible from such a material position. There is a double marginalisation Margery experienced through her gender and ability, but she still benefited from a position of economic security that grants her access to pilgrimages and producing her *Book.* This article will then view Margery Kempe's *Book* as a hybrid text with autobiographical impulses.

Through first exploring disability as theoretical framework, then discussing the expressions of her disabilities, this article will then engage with the space that Kempe creates for her disabled body.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Disability

Through an analysis of the term *creatur* and *imitatio Christi,* this article aims to demonstrate Margery Kempe was a disabled medieval woman whose *Book* contributes to a fuller understanding of these disabilities. To help substantiate these assertions a theoretical framework is necessary.

At the foundation of disability studies lie the models of disability, with the medical and social model being the most influential, the latter being more relevant for Kempe. This paradigm asserts it is not the disability that makes a body or mind 'dysfunctional', but inaccessible architecture, social infrastructures, and physical and non-physical ableist barriers.[7] Using the social model, it is then clear how disabled people are excluded from physical space due to inaccessible environments, ranging from staircases to there being no accommodation for neurodivergent behaviour. Non-physical ableist barriers include discriminatory legislations and discrimination from society. Society can exclude

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[6] Julian Yates, "Mystic Self: Margery Kempe and the Mirror of Narrative," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995). 85n22, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2g27r8vk

[7] Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability,* ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 5.

disabled people from space just as much as inaccessible architecture can. As a result, the social model emphasises "it is society's interpretations of and responses to bodily and sensory [and mental] variations that are the problem, not the variations themselves."[8]

Additionally, it is vital to adopt a cross-cultural understanding of disability rather than a universalising definition as there is no monolithic experience of disability, making it hard to define. In her convincing attempt to define disability, Susan Wendell calls for "cross-cultural comparisons and criticism of structure, function, and ability to perform activities."[9] She describes ability and cross-cultural comparisons as follows:

> How much ability is basic, like how much ability is normal, seems to depend on how much is necessary to perform the most common tasks of daily living in a particular physical and social environment. For example, far more strength and stamina are necessary to live where there is no water on tap, where it gets cold and there is no central heating, where a fire has to be built every time a meal is cooked, and all the clothes are washed by hand.[10]

Despite Wendell's claims pertaining to her own lived experiences in North America versus an example of a woman in Kenya, these words can be applied to Margery Kempe.[11] By using universalising

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[8] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 75; Found on page 129 of *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* Kafer's criticism of the social model is relevant for Kempe for she argues the "pervasiveness of the social model has prevented disability studies from engaging with a wider environment of wilderness, parks and nonhuman nature." Indeed, much of the social model's physical aspects are found in the built-environment, postdating the *Book's* medieval context making the social model, and its solutions, not suitable for all the settings Margery found herself in.

[9] Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (Routledge, 1996) 16.

[10] Wendell, *Rejected,* 15.

[11] Susan Wendell is disabled as a result of ME and on page 14 of *Rejected,* she writes how "in some societies, in Eastern Africa for example, where women normally walk several miles a day to obtain water for the household, I would be much more severely disabled." She continues on page 15 to explain that by using

contemporary understandings of disability, the way Margery's disabled bodied functioned, or did not function, changes. Kempe's disability therefore must be understood in the context of her society.

As well as contemporary models, scholars have also created models specifically for the Middle Ages, such as Pearman's gendered model. Her model allows for analysis of biblical, religious, and medical discourses and how these are intertwined with the disabled female body. Merging these discourses with the Aristotelian construction of the female body as a deformed male body, reveals an embodied Otherness between gender, sex, ability, and ethnicity, demonstrating the subversive power female bodies have to challenge these discourses.[12] Thus, a feminist disability perspective offers a "historicized consideration of the links between sociocultural production of gender and bodily ability."[13] In applying feminist disability theory to Margery, Pearman views Kempe's bodily differences as inextricably linked to the medieval notions of the female body and its moral makeup.[14] In the case of Kempe specifically, her bodily differences are especially linked to textual production as argued below.[15] A similar feminist approach can be seen in disabled women's life writing where writers exhibit critical awareness of the intersection between gender and disability in their crafting of literary spaces for their lives.[16] Importantly, Pearman's

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universalising descriptions for disability "a woman in Kenya who can walk only as much as I can will still not be considered disabled with respect to walking, because her ability falls within the worldwide range considered normal."

[12] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 5.

[13] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 1-2.

[14] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116-117; Pearman uses Karma Lochrie's feminist theoretical work *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Lochrie's work views Kempe's written text as one that articulates her bodily experiences, with particular attention being paid to associations of the leaky female body and associations of female flesh. Lochrie makes no mention of disability and Pearman adapts Lochrie's work to associate it with disability. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 3, https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.9783/9780812207538.

[15] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 114.

[16] Sami Schalk, "Disability and Women's Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 177.

chapter on Kempe in *Women and Disability* is the only text in a vast assortment of research into Margery Kempe that labels Margery as disabled. This research builds upon Pearman's work, extending it further to include other disabilities as well as linking Margery's disabilities to the notions of *creatur, imitatio Christi,* and space—which Pearman notably does not do.

Another medieval model of disability is the religious model in which medieval people understood disability through the institutional practices of the church and its doctrine.[17] This model acknowledges the religious discourses on disability and sinfulness, however, research into medieval disability studies has demonstrated the elasticity of these beliefs and the agency of disabled people living in the Middle Ages.[18] Simply put, in a deeply Christian society, bodily or mental difference was not necessarily linked to sin. These two medieval models help to view Margery's disability within her cultural historic context.

It is worth noting this article considers disability a neutral experience. Pearman draws from Wendell to describe disability as a process "wherein cultural standards for normalcy dictate whether those who do not fit such standards can fully participate in society."[19] It is "a form of difference from what is considered normal or usual or paradigmatic in society."[20] Furthermore, "labelling disability as difference allows for a value-neutral description while recognising that both stigma and being 'the Other' are aspects of the social oppression of people with disabilities."[21] In other words, describing disability as neutral does not imply it negatively impacts people,

[17] Edward Wheatley, "Monsters, Saints, and Sinners: Disability in Medieval Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability,* ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 19.
[18] Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, Joshua R. Eylerand, introduction to *A Cultural History of the Disability in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, Joshua R. Eylerand (Bloomsbury, 2020) 4, 11.
[19] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.
[20] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.
[21] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.

instead, it demonstrates that its presence does not predict quality of life.[22]

Margery Kempe and Creatur

Margery addressed herself almost exclusively in two manners in her *Book*: through the third person singular feminine pronoun 'sche' [she], which she uses a handful of times in over 6000 lines, and by using *creatur.* Kempe first used *creatur* to refer to herself in line 16: "and hys creatur turnyd helth into sekenesse", with "hys" referring to Christ.[23] In fact, her use of *creatur* often occurs in conjunction with the mention of Christ. Despite her striking use of *creatur,* not much research into her usage has been done other than to remark upon *creatur* as signifier for humility before God.[24]

Dictionaries primarily define *creatur* as something that has been created. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in Margery's lifetime, c. 1373 to sometime after 1438, *creatur* could be used to mean an individual with modifying words used to express admiration, compassion or commiseration.[25] *Creatur* could also refer to someone without qualification or a despicable person, but in Kempe's lifetime this meaning depended on the modifying noun. The Middle English Dictionary yields comparable results with the definitions ranging from a 'created thing' to a 'living creature, i.e., a person'.[26] Many examples of *creatur* here refer to women, whilst others have clear biblical references like the commandments or being created by God. Some denote a despicable person with modifying words like "lathly" [loathly] or in combination with "sorweful" [emotionally distressed]. In contrast to the *Book*, the results from the dictionaries do not show examples of *creatur* being used to refer to oneself. These databases reveal how *creatur* was

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[22] Harriet McBryde Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations" in *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century,* ed. Alice Wong (Penguin, 2020) 9.

[23] [and his creature turned health into sickness]; Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. Lynn Stanley (Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1996) 1, l.16.

[24] Yates, "Mystic Self", 85.

[25] Oxford English Dictionary online, 2000, s.v.,"creature". Accessed 4 June 2025.

[26] Middle English Dictionary online, 2000, s.v. "creatur". Accessed 4 June 2025.

used during the late Middle Ages and how Margery adapted this word to suit her needs.

It is helpful to analyse Kempe's contemporary Julian of Norwich to understand Kempe's use of *creatur*. The *Book* contains a meeting between Margery and the anchoress, making it plausible that Julian inspired her to use this term.[27] In her writing, Julian also referred to herself using creature, but where Margery used 'the' or 'this' creature, Julian portrayed herself as 'a' creature. Julian used a modifier, for example: "a simple creature unlettered."[28] Interestingly, whilst Julian did use creature to indicate herself, she also used it to address other people in her *A Revelation of Love*.[29] Margery's *creatur* is never modified with an adjective, the only words attached to it are the article and the demonstrative. When she uses *creatur,* she only refers to herself. Whilst it is possible that Julian of Norwich may have inspired Margery Kempe's word choice, both women use it differently. Julian's usage complies with the dictionary, whereas Margery's appears to be quite unique.

Margery also frequently places *creatur* with the proximal deictic 'this'. In pragmatics, "deictics are words such as 'this', 'I', 'now', 'here', 'today' that do not have a constant meaning but depend for their meaning on the time, place or situation in which a speaker is speaking (or writing), and which are to be interpreted from the position of the speaker."[30] According to Ruth Evans, most readers are aware Margery is talking about herself when using the third person due to the autobiographical impulses in the *Book.*[31]

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[27] Kempe, *Book* 1 l.955

[28] Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich, A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love,* (n.p., Brepols and Penn State University Press, 2006) 7–8.

[29] Ruth Evans, "*The Book of Margery Kempe*: Autobiography in the Third Person," in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Laura Kalas and Laura Varnam (Manchester University Press, 2021) 91, https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146625.00014.

[30] Evans, *Autobiography,* 93; An example in the following sentences is 'this' implies something different based on the situational position of the listener/reader: I am going to do 'this' tomorrow / "this creatur whych many yerys had gon wyl" [this creature whom for many years had gone wayward].

[31] Evans, *Autobiography,* 85.

Despite this awareness, her rhetoric has an alienating effect on the text as if Margery is "interposing another narrator between Kempe and the reader, not the second scribe translating Kempe's words for the reader, but Kempe ironically dissociating herself from who she was and marking the intervals of the self."[32] Evans stresses the necessity of 'this' to mark Kempe as the narrator of the text, highlighting a semantic deficiency: "'this creatur' is never contrasted with 'that creatur' [a distal deictic], revealing the extent to which the narrative sees events from Kempe's point of view and not that of her scribes or her audience."[33] In sum, by adding the proximal deictic 'this' to *creatur,* Margery narrows the space of the author/narrator gap and stimulates the reader to observe the unfolding narrative from her viewpoint.

Furthermore, the advantage of *creatur* being a gender-neutral term must also be acknowledged. Kempe's *creatur* is "in accordance with the widespread medieval belief that men and women are spiritually equal in God's sight."[34] However, Evans notes one effect of Margery's rhetoric the suggestion that "there is no place in her culture—in late medieval, female, devotional culture—from which she can speak as an I."[35] Whilst men and women may have been created equally by God, Hetta Howes asserts women's speech or in Kempe's case, women's 'writing' was problematic in the Middle Ages: "Jesus may have appeared first to a woman after her [*sic*] resurrection, and relied on her voice to spread the good news, but medieval women were far more likely to hear about the destructive power of Eve's voice...than of the potential transformative power of women's words."[36] She argues the belief was held devout women should keep quiet.[37] Margery, through her loud fits of tears, does not keep quiet and is constantly confronted with

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[32] Evans, *Autobiography,* 89.
[33] Evans, *Autobiography,* 93.
[34] Quoted in Evans, *Autobiography,* 91.
[35] Evans, *Autobiography,* 91.
[36] Hetta Elizabeth Howes, *Transformative Waters in Late-Medieval Literature: From Aelred of Rievaulx to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, 2023) 91, https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1017/9781800102941.
[37] Howes, *Transformative Waters,* 92. She bases her research off, amongst others, prolific medieval writer John Chrysostom's commentary on Paul.

people who wish to silence her. For example, she is banned from a sermon by a visiting friar, where she wept, howled, and roared in response.[38] It is also likely that her exclusion from the sermon, as well as exclusion from other social spaces, are reflected in her alienating lexical decision to use *creatur*. Howes makes no mention of Kempe's lexical choices, but it is entirely possible that choosing to use a gender-neutral term in a time when women were expected to remain silent was one of Kempe's innovative ways for subverting to expectation to be quiet. In viewing the autohagiography as Margery's safe and sacred space, her use of *creatur* as a reflection for her experiences can certainly be understood.

Imitatio Christi

To understand *imitatio Christi,* an explanation will first be given on medieval asceticism and historian Caroline Walker Bynum's work. Medieval asceticism is the denial of worldly pleasures including sex, money or food. In her highly influential work *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum explores an area of medieval ascetism which involved women renouncing food to live a pious life. *Imitatio Christi* is a major component of this renouncement. Bynum emphasises it is mostly women who engage in penitential ascetism, a more extreme variant of asceticism. Mystics, like Margery Kempe, were more inclined to self-inflicted suffering and their engagement in this suffering surfaced in medieval women's writing through, for example, erotic nuptial themes.[39] Bynum creates a model for women previously labelled as masochistic and offers a view of them through medieval ascetism.

Imitatio Christi is, put simply, a desire to become the suffering body of Christ. According to Bynum women were "more likely than men to inflict injury on themselves systematically with flails or thorns, stones or nettles, and that they were a great deal

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[38] Howes, *Transformative Waters,* 108; Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 122; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.3533-3534.

[39] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (University of California Press, 1988), 26; In Kempe's writing, examples can be found of her practising basic aspects of ascetism such as abstinence from sex (*Book* 1, ll.255-259) as well as examples of penitential asceticism including erotic devotional writing (*Book* 1, l.2102-2111).

more likely than men to have their desire for pain result in somatic changes and to have these changes scrutinized and recorded by admirers and biographers of both sexes."[40] As for Margery, she too engaged in this self-punishment, and the *Book* is evidence of her commitment to her *imitatio Christi* being recorded. Bynum iterates that for the medieval women in her research, *imitatio Christi* was eucharistic ecstasy, with *imitatio* being more than an imitation: it was a union with the ultimate body of Christ: "[These women] strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation."[41]

Reworking Bynum's theory, Karma Lochrie distinguishes between two types of *imitatio Christi*: the imagination/memory and the body.[42] Both these types are relevant for discussing Kempe. Margery engaged with the memory form of *imitatio Christi* in numerous manners, most notably through creating the *Book.* Lochrie argues the act of remembering in the Middle Ages is a kind of *imitatio Christi*: "The human faculty of remembrance constructs a region of images or similitudes and, in so doing, enacts an imitation of Christ."[43] She asserts one method medieval people could re-enact Christ is through pilgrimages: in visiting the sites where Christ both lived and suffered, they re-live key moments from his life.[44] Kempe undertook many pilgrimages including visiting sites connected to Jesus. During one pilgrimage, Kempe fell into an intense fit of tears when visiting Mount Calvary: "sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hlr armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr".[45] Sarah Salih writes how Margery

[40] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 212.
[41] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 246.
[42] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 36.
[43] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 29.
[44] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 28.
[45] [she fell down as though she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, broadly spreading her arms, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would burst apart]; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 1572-1574.

brought these roarings home, almost like a souvenir.[46] In line with Bynum and Lochrie's research, it was not rare for women to display an extreme emotional reaction when visiting a holy site, but it was rare to continue to do so back home.[47] Ultimately, Kempe's *Book* is the greatest expression of memory as *imitatio Christi*, with Lochrie suggesting her corporeal narrative can be read as a series of readings of Christ's body and Margery's desire to suffer.[48] Barbara Zimbalist also argues the blurring of Margery's speech with that of Christ is in itself an imitation of Christ.[49]

Moreover, Kempe engaged in the bodily aspect of *imitatio Christi* that Lochrie describes. Her self-inflicted sufferings ranged from wearing a hair shirt to sexual abstinence.[50] She also renounced food to control not only hunger and thirst, but also erotic desire for her husband.[51] Instead, she experienced erotic desire for Jesus Christ as was frequent in medieval women's devotional writing. She was so attracted to Christ's maleness that she would weep whenever she saw a male baby and had visions in which Christ asked her to take him as her wedded husband.[52] Tears are her most obvious bodily expression of Christ's suffering. Kempe had uncontrollable fits of tears for which she received public scorn, at the same time; however, other pious women also had similar fits of tears, albeit in different circumstances such as only at holy sites. She was unsupported in her tears, as the discussion on disability will demonstrate below.[53]

Her uncontrollable tears served a purpose in *imitatio Christi,* with them acting as a means to purge moisture in a similar

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[46] Sarah Salih, "Margery's Bodies: Piety, Work, and Penance," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Brewer, 2004), 173.
[47] Salih, *Margery's Bodies,* 173.
[48] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 168–169.
[49] Barbara, Zimbalist. "Christ, Creature, and Reader." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41, no. 1, (2015) https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.41.1.0001, 2–3.
[50] Salih, *Margery's Bodies,* 168.
[51] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 215.
[52] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.2104.
[53] Cf.: Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 197.

manner to Christ's bleeding body on the cross.[54] According to Lochrie, Kempe's articulation of her bodily experiences draw attention to the medieval associations of the leaky female body and female flesh. In translating their bodies into discourse, as Margery does in the *Book,* "the woman writer has recourse to a power derived from the taboo which defines her and which she breaks with her speech".[55] With the belief being that Christ's blood is redemptive, it is understandable that devout women like Margery would want to identify her excessive tears with Christ's leaking fleshy body. Their desire is reminiscent of Bynum's basic idea of ascetism: "No wonder women manipulated their bodies; in doing so, they became God—a God who feeds and saves."[56] Margery's tears of *imitatio Christi* literally brought her closer to Christ.

Interestingly, disability can be seen as a component of *imitatio Christi* with extremely devout women not only desiring to suffer, but also wishing to be ill. Kempe's contemporary Julian of Norwich, for example, prayed to receive a sickness.[57] After falling ill, Julian had visions of Christ's passion.[58] In addition, women in this group prayed specifically to receive an illness to abstain from food, similar to Margery's behaviour. Some women were already disabled before becoming mystics and viewed a cure as a temptation.[59] Kempe never sought a cure for her disabilities, but did look for reassurance in her meeting with Julian that her fits of tears were appropriate. According to Bynum, illness was a valid form of *imitatio Christi* as "[w]omen's illness was "to be endured," not "cured," and patient suffering of disease or injury was a major way of gaining sanctity for females.[60] In fact, a body marked with a disability, i.e., the physical reality of stigmata, was considered

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[54] Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings,*" in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature,* ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 155.
[55] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 4.
[56] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 275.
[57] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 200.
[58] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 115.
[59] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 200. Lidwina of Schiedam is an example of one of these women.
[60] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 199.

spiritually superior.[61] Disability cannot be ignored in a discussion of *imitatio Christi.*

Creatur and Imitatio Christi

Imitatio Christi is an inherently gendered activity. Interestingly, it is the gender-neutrality of *creatur* where the connection between these concepts lies. Bynum claims women writers saw themselves as a symbol for all humanity, subsuming the male/female dichotomy into a more cosmic divine/human dichotomy through, for example, using androgynous imagery for the self, ignoring their own gender. For them, "the notion of the female as flesh became an argument for women's *imitatio Christi* through physicality."[62] In this same passage, Bynum argues Margery embraced the male/female dichotomy through her use of traditionally female imagery. However, this article disagrees with Bynum's assertion because Kempe enforces the divine/human dichotomy through using the gender-neutral *creatur* in her text. She forces her readers to view her as the subject by adding the proximal deictic 'this' making it clear that she is the human created by the divine being. *Imitatio Christi* and *creatur* are thus inextricably linked and, as key components of the *Book,* contribute to a fuller understanding of Margery's disabilities.

Disability

Margery Kempe had a list of disabling health problems, ranging from her fits of tears to her experiences giving birth, as well as an injury. Using Kafer's terms Kempe's disabled body is an assemblage, in which disability is not an attribute of Margery, but rather an encounter between bodies and categories.[63] She first falls ill after one of at least fourteen pregnancies and sees visions of Christ during her recovery from giving birth. In her *Book,* she recalls a confession of her experience of being ill after childbirth, showing the true extent

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[61] John P. Sexton, "Atypical Bodies: Seeking after Meaning in Physical Difference" in *A Cultural History of the Disability in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, and Joshua R. Eylerand, (Bloomsbury, 2020) 31.
[62] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 263.
[63] Kafer, *Crip,* 10.

of her illness: "this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd with spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days.[64] These severe symptoms, like suicidal ideation, scratching her skin, and seeing visions, led to her family restraining her.[65] Interestingly, her use of "labowryd" in that line is synonymous with labour of childbirth. In fact, her fits of tears in which her body flails and she loudly cries resemble a woman in labour.[66] She also experiences weakness after each fit and describes comparable weakness after giving birth.[67] If her crying fits were disabling to her, then her pregnancies certainly were too.

Similar to her having no control over her mind and body postpartum, Kempe later also experienced uncontrollable crying fits, and the Mount Calvary passage discussed in the section on *imitatio Christi* demonstrates how incapacitated she was during these fits. Their frequency differed: she sometimes would have them once a month or seven times a day, and sometimes the fits would occur fourteen times in one day.[68] It is due to these fits that most early scholarship tries to diagnose her with hysteria.[69] Recent feminist works maintain the medicalisation by diagnosing her with postpartum depression or psychosis.[70] This article follows Pearman and Bynum in their approach by acknowledging that Margery was disabled within the *Book*'s fifteenth-century context and observing medieval notions of bodily and mental responses to spirituality.[71] Simply put, this article refrains from diagnosing her with anachronistic diagnoses.

Nevertheless, both the scholarship that tries to medicalise Kempe's body and the scholarship that defines her as disabled fail to discuss that Margery also sustained a severe physical injury. Whilst praying in church, Margery dictated how a stone and wooden

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[64] [this creature went out of her mind and was very afflicted and laboured with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some days]; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 149-150.
[65] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.157–165.
[66] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 136.
[67] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.867.
[68] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1592-1594.
[69] Windeatt, introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 3.
[70] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116.
[71] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116.

beam suddenly fell from the highest parts of the church vault and landed on her head and back. The shock and pain left her wondering for a moment if she had died. After crying out "Jhesu mercy", her pain went away.[72] A couple of lines later, she admitted it took twelve weeks to fully recover and both she, and a doctor, consider it a miracle of God.[73] Despite claiming she no longer felt pain, it is easy to assume such a severe injury could cause a long-term disability especially given the historical context Margery lived in. It is also plausible this injury is the reason for her dictating the *Book.* As was briefly mentioned, it is possible she did not have the physical ability to write, perhaps due to a disability. Scholarship tends to assume she was illiterate, however, just before the stone and beam fall from the church, she dictated how she was holding a book in her hand.[74] This brief remark indicates that she could have been literate after all. As well as sustaining an injury, she then possibly lost the physical ability to write at some point in her life.

Furthermore, for Kempe, her disabilities serve as a catalyst for her spirituality and writing her *Book.* During the period following her postpartum illness(es), she saw Christ stand at her bedside, an image that restored her.[75] This comforting vision of Christ, as well as the extreme physical reactions to Christ that would plague her, prompted her to document her experiences. Research into the practice of life writing and disability studies reveals a link between the disabled body and the desire to create a safe literary space for oneself.[76] In this narrative form, disabled writers recover their bodies and memories to offer a counterrepresentation to stigmatised depictions of disability.[77] Kempe employed self-narration in her *Book* to explain her disabilities: she recounts, for example, how her post-partum health problems lasted the best part of a year, but she deviated from the present-day life writing tradition

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[72] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 485-489.
[73] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 493-502.
[74] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 483-484.
[75] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.177.
[76] G. Thomas Couser "Signifying Selves: Disability and Life Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 200.
[77] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 126.

of trying to transcend one's disability through text.[78] Margery's main objective was instead to glorify the works of Christ, which she merged with her lived experiences. In doing so, she used the format of life writing to create a sacred space for herself. Similarly, her retelling of her experiences to scribes, other peers, and Christ is indicative of her trying to bridge the space between her inner self and outer world created by her bodily aberrances.[79] Drawing from Lochrie's idea that medieval women writers occupied and exploited the ideology of the flesh in translating their body into discourse, Pearman asserts Kempe's "body becomes her text and her text becomes her body—and her body, in its excessiveness, resists normalization."[80] That is to say, her disabled body initially produces the texts and causes her spirituality.[81] These expressions of her disabilities are both disabling and freeing: it motivates her to write and purges her emotions.

As a consequence of her public displays of her disability, Margery was treated as an outsider and was excluded from physical and societal spaces. Suffering upwards of fourteen (mostly) public fits a day resulted in her being infamous in Lynn and on pilgrimages. Her loud tears and roarings were seen as an annoyance. Kempe suffered abusive remarks wherever she went, ranging from the assumption she was inebriated to claims she was possessed by an evil spirit. The abuse was so severe that some people wished she were dead and others spat on her. In this same passage, she notes that people, such as the aforementioned visiting friar, banned her, and how her former acquaintances avoided her and also barred her from their property.[82] It is unclear exactly how often she was forbidden to enter various places but it is clear she was excluded from social and physical spaces. Additionally, she was arrested multiple times on the suspicion of heresy and Lollardy—keeping the social model in mind, it is likely her (bodily) differences played into these suspicions.

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[78] Couser "Signifying Selves", 205.
[79] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 119.
[80] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 118.
[81] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 127.
[82] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1599-1602; Kempe, *Book* 1, l.2480.

Though the *Book* was created to glorify Christ, it can be seen as being written in response to the scorn she receives. Kempe initially tried to control her fits but learned that controlling them only increased their severity.[83] Christ functioned as a comfort for Margery and she compared her own suffering to Christ's torments. By creating her *Book* as a form of *imitatio Christi,* she put herself in charge of her narrative; she changed the negative space into a positive one. Moreover, she learned she can navigate the space that scorned her in her quest of devotion by comforting others: some began to see her tears as holy, and she used her tears to visit those on their deathbeds, increasing her "spiritual merit" with every insult.[84] Notions of abled-mindedness/abled-bodiedness prevail in research done on Margery Kempe and this discussion has shown that disability can not only be found in the *Book*, the *Book* itself can be understood as her expression of her disabled body. In true disability fashion, she demonstrated that she could reinvent negative space by turning a life of exclusion into one of self-fulfilment. Her *Book* became her safe-space; a place where she could be *creatur* and show her love and inspiration of Christ.

Conclusion

Whilst there has been a considerable amount of work done on Margery Kempe's life, research into her disabilities has been extremely limited and not inclusive of all her conditions. Likewise, research done into the practice of *imitatio Christi* and into Kempe's rhetorical use of *creatur* is insufficient as it fails to connect it to disability. This article used disability studies to establish Margery Kempe as disabled and viewed *creatur, imitatio Christi,* and her *Book* as expressions of her disabilities. Accordingly, she embodied the disability aspects of *imitatio Christi* with her visions of Christ starting after her health problems and her disabling fits of tears bringing the hopeful prospect of sanctity. In addition, her constant use of the gender-neutral *creatur* to refer to herself is a unique feature, distinct from her contemporaries, reflecting her place as an outsider and the dichotomy many women who engaged in *imitatio*

[83] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1611-1612.
[84] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 125; Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 128.

Christi strove for. These components therefore contribute to a fuller understanding of Margery Kempe as a disabled medieval woman.

The greatest expression of disability for Margery is the literary space she created. As disability studies scholar Simi Linton writes: "[Disabled people] found a voice not to despair at our fate but outrage at our social positioning. Our symptoms, though sometimes painful, scary, unpleasant, or difficult to manage are part of the dailiness of life. They...have existed in all communities throughout time."[85] The *Book* more than exemplifies the statement Linton makes. The autobiographical impulses of it are, as the prefix suggests, a deeply personal medium. Kempe's word choice from the narrowest sense of using *creatur* to the broadest sense of writing in the vernacular are all personal reflections of her daily life. She included all the painful, scary, unpleasant, and difficult symptoms her disabilities brought her, including ableist exclusion. She turned her outrage over her treatment into an imitation of and love for Christ. The *Book* is her space for her disabled body.

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[85] Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York University Press, 1998), 4.

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