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Cover Page Footnote

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Experience and Authority:

Knowledge, Gender, and the Creation of the Self in *the Book of Margery Kempe* and Late Medieval Travel Literature

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IN the late fourteenth century, while traveling in York, an ordinary woman of no particular birth, wealth, or education—but of considerable spirituality—was reprimanded for preaching without clerical authority:

Then the Archbishop said to her, ‘You shall swear that you shall neither teach nor censure people in my diocese.’

‘No, sir, I shall not swear this,’ she said, ‘for wherever I go I shall speak of God and censure those who swear grave oaths, until such time that the Pope and Holy Church have ordained that no person should be so bold to speak of God, for God Almighty does not forbid, sir, that we should speak of Him. Moreover, the Gospel mentions that, when the woman had heard our Lord preaching, she approached Him with a loud voice and said, “Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck.” Then our Lord said again to her, “Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it.” Therefore, sir, I think that the Gospel permits me to speak of God.’³

The bold woman in this scene is Margery Kempe, an English pilgrim and mystic. Remarkably, she considers herself qualified to argue with an Archbishop, despite lacking many of the credentials, as a laywoman, that he would respect. To the Archbishop, she lacks the proper authority, which, in his mind, means *auctoritas*: the authority based on the spiritual and intellectual writings of men. Kempe though, with her pilgrimages and visions of Christ, evidently disagrees. While Terrance Bowers—a Kempe scholar interested in the status of traveling women—sees her actions as a grab for masculine self-definition, I see something even larger at stake. Kempe, along with

other real and imagined late medieval travelers like Marco Polo, John Mandeville, and Alisoun (Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*), is making a claim to a different kind of authority than *auctoritas*: the authority of experience. However, unlike the other three, Kempe does not submit to a masculine model of travel in order to stake her claim, but instead expands and adapts that model so that her particular experiential authority is uniquely feminine. In doing so, she not only contends with written authority, but makes a place for herself within it.

In the foreword to their book on authority in the Middle Ages, Sini Kangas, Mia Korpiola, and Tuija Aiononen acknowledge that the medieval idea of *auctoritas* is difficult to define. Although *auctoritas* had personal and legal connotations, the primary understanding of authority had to do with the origin and continuity of knowledge and truth, namely in Classical and Biblical texts:

In certain [medieval] encyclopedias, authority is only discussed in the context of texts, their authorship, and power to influence by esteem and reputation. As an author had to write his/her own text with reference to those of others, relying on sources that gave a clear and reliable account of the truth was essential. Ultimately, this element of veracity made God the fount of all authority in the Middle Ages, while Scripture and the Church Fathers were also considered highly authoritative as witnesses of truth.²

Auctoritas—written authority—placed all *auctores* in a chain of knowledge leading back to divine revelation. Barrie Ruth Straus defines authority much more simply as “the basis of [one’s] knowledge, or [one’s] claim to know.”³ Albrecht Claussen says that it “concerns all human interaction, and, moreover, touches on man’s general need for and quest for a divine force, the ultimate limit, and source, of all human existence.”⁴ Putting these ideas together, we can define authority as power through knowledge and claims to knowledge, which in the Middle Ages was understood primarily as knowledge based on the written word.

As Terrence N. Bowers notes in his article “Margery Kempe as Traveler,” travel was considered dangerous in the late Middle Ages not only due to practical concerns, but to sociopolitical ones as well:

In early modern England, travel was a controversial issue because freedom of movement conflicted with traditional concepts of the society (modeled on such paradigms as the Great Chain of Being), which viewed the social order, like the physical universe, as consisting of various degrees and estates, strictly ordered from high to low. Given this model of a fixed, hierarchical structure in which everything had to be in its place, travel posed a danger, for when individuals moved out of their physical places, they might also move out of their social places and possibly destabilize the structure as a whole.⁵

Both secular and sacred journeys offended the idealized power structures that were such a fundamental part of medieval England’s social system.

Yet, some of the most often read texts (in their own day and in the present) from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were those by and about travelers—*The Travels of Marco Polo* (c. 1300), *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1360), *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1430).

In order to discuss Kempe's role as a pilgrim in her legacy more fully, Bowers seeks to put forth a theory as to why travel was so disruptive to medieval society. His view is very individualistic, arguing that travel can be powerfully subversive both as "a medium of expression" and "a mode of social construction," because it is a "self-initiated act," outside of the "controlling frameworks of ordinary life"—both sacred and secular.⁶ It becomes "a way of conferring distinction and full personhood upon selected members of society"—which, in fourteenth-century England, essentially meant noble (or at least, well-off) men.⁷ From this perspective, travel is significant because of its role as a masculine "*rite de passage*" where a man can achieve "movement, liminality, and radical transformation" through the self-definition that travel allows. In the late Middle Ages, travel was considered dangerous especially for women: as partial persons confined to the home, a traveling woman would not only be putting the social order in jeopardy, but would be going against her very "nature" by participating in a male rite of passage.⁸

Bowers' goal is to apply this theory of travel-as-masculine-rite to Kempe in order to understand her travels as a "medium of expression" and self-creation.⁹ He sees Kempe's pilgrimages as performances that allow her to critique her society and define her own personhood. Bowers denies that Kempe's self-expression follows the pattern of female rites, which are "characterized by emergence, continuity, and magnification."¹⁰ Instead, he argues that Kempe, by traveling, is participating in the masculine strip-and-remake model of self-creation, in which someone's selfhood is broken down and lost and then rebuilt into something new.

Part of what makes Bowers' understanding of travel so interesting is its applicability to many texts—except perhaps that of Margery Kempe. The travels of Marco Polo, John Mandeville, and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* can all be understood very well through this interpretive lens, but the main weakness of Bowers' argument seems to be its application to the subject of his study, namely Margery Kempe. Partially, this is because Bowers must deemphasize Kempe's role as a mystic and the nature of her self-definition in order to argue that she is embracing a masculine style of transformation. Ultimately, though, I believe that Bowers' difficulty arises from the fact that—unlike the other works mentioned—Kempe's *Book* is an autobiography written (after a fashion) by a woman.¹¹ Travel may very well have been understood as a male *rite de passage* by men, but that does not necessitate that a woman would have seen her journeys in the same light, or would, by participating in travel, necessarily be also participating in a masculine rite. There is another thread, though, that connects the travel-as-rite-of-passage theory and Kempe's own use of pilgrimage: that of authority. At the heart of Polo, Mandeville, and Alisoun's masculine style of self-definition is a greater concern with legitimizing their experiential authority—just as it is for Kempe.

As Bowers observes, issues of authority and hierarchy were central to the discourse of late medieval England. *Auctoritas* was fundamental to the Church's religious and social hegemony; text and authorship—whether

biblical, theological, scientific, or philosophical—were of principal importance.¹² Travelers challenged this monopoly with their claims to knowledge through experience; as eyewitnesses of things beyond their own cultures, travelers could return with claims to “scientific, geographic, and personal authority” outside of the scope of the written authorities—both sacred and secular, Biblical and Classical—on which medieval Christendom was based.¹³ Those who documented and disseminated stories of their travels, then, engaged in a complicated dance as experiential authority interacted with and became written authority.

Marco Polo acts as a sort of control, since he was one of the first to write about traveling in the East. Bowers’ rite theory holds well for Polo, since he is only seventeen when he leaves with his father and uncle to journey to the court of Kubilai Khan.¹⁴ Far beyond European culture and power structures, Polo is able to recreate himself from being a mere merchant’s son to (as he would have the reader believe) an important attendant in the court of the Great Khan, with “a place of honor above the other barons.”¹⁵ Cut off from his own strictly hierarchical culture, Polo is judged on his merit, and, he claims, he becomes one of Kubilai’s important emissaries due to his wisdom, foresight, and skills as a linguist and storyteller. Before the Khan and far away from Italy, Polo’s status and identity are stripped down, and he is able to attain a position that would have been far beyond him otherwise: “from this time onwards the young fellow was called Messer Marco Polo.”¹⁶ As Bowers argues, one of the purposes of travel is “to transfer individuals from one place in the social hierarchy to another (usually a higher place) and to remake them so that they will fit their new station in life.”¹⁷ For Polo, his own *rite de passage* happens as he is on the threshold of manhood, making him the perfect example for Bowers’ argument.¹⁸

The legitimacy of Polo’s transformation from merchant to favored courtier is dependent on his claim to unique experiences. The text insists that “Messer Marco observed more of the peculiarities of this part of the world than any other man, because he travelled more widely in these outlandish regions than any man who was ever born, and also because he gave his mind more intently to observing them.”¹⁹ Evidently, for Polo to retain his identity, his adventures must be validated—his authority must be recognized. To discover that Polo is highly concerned with readers accepting his claim to experiential authority, one must look no further than the prologue:

Our book will relate [all the great wonders and curiosities of the East] to you plainly in due order, as they were related by Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, who has seen them with his own eyes. There is also much here that he has not seen but has heard from men of credit and veracity. We will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication. And all who read the book or hear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth.²⁰

Clearly, Polo and his scribe, Rustichello da Pisa, are very anxious that he be believed. Albrecht Classen notes that the authors seem afraid that their travel-

ogue will be too fantastic to be taken seriously, and seem almost overly willing to assure their readers of Polo's veracity. Classen also points out each of the repeated assurances that Polo gives of his truthfulness throughout his text, especially at points when he fears being disbelieved.²¹ Classen concludes that Polo constructed his account in as "realistic and careful" a manner as possible, "in an effort to establish his authority."²² To put it plainly, Classen suggests that Polo's *Travels* is intentionally boring in order to convince readers that its descriptions of the exotic East are truer than the more fantastical information provided in the commonly accepted authoritative texts. Polo's transformed identity must be ratified by his assertion that his own experiences trump all that has been written before him about the East—just as his claim to said identity is presented to strengthen his claim to authority. In an unexpected turn of events, experience supersedes—even debunks—*auctoritas*.

The Book of John Mandeville, which Classen partners with Polo's *Travels* in his discussion of travelers' authority, makes similar claims to those of its predecessor. While Polo seems primarily interested in detailing mercantile matters as he travels, "John Mandeville, knight," the purported author of the book named for him, declares that he is writing about his travels to the East because "many people delight in hearing the said Holy Land spoken about and take pleasure in it."²³ His *Book* is luxurious in its descriptions and elaborate in its devotions, going to great lengths in its exhaustive discussion of all possible travel routes and the spiritual significance of each location visited. Mandeville's travelogue is more of a catalogue of wonders, which makes the shape of the Earth itself into a sort of sacrament, in which geography is a participation in the physical realities of spiritual truths.

Stephen Greenblatt, in his chapter on Mandeville in his book *Marvelous Possessions*, is pleasantly surprised by Mandeville's demeanor. Greenblatt finds that Mandeville, unlike Polo, Columbus, and other travelers, is strangely unpossessive of status, riches, his religion, or even knowledge—the very stock in which he trades. Greenblatt argues that these "moment[s] of renunciation" arise from Mandeville's devotional wandering, but are not natural to him. Mandeville's travels convert him away from his originally possessive desire to regain Jerusalem for Christianity (as discussed in the prologue of his *Book*) toward a recognition that his own culture is in dire need of reformation before it is deserving of the Holy Land.²⁴ This seems to be Mandeville's *rite de passage*. Like Polo, Mandeville is offered changes in status during his journey—first by the Sultan of Babylon and then by Thiaut Chan—but, unlike Polo, Mandeville does not stay long in the service of these great kings and refuses all honors and riches.²⁵ Instead of changing his rank or social position, Mandeville's travels transform his desires.

Mandeville's more spiritual *passage* is complicated by the fact that, despite representing his *Book* as a description of real journeys and experiences, there is no evidence that John Mandeville, the English knight of St. Albans, journeyed to the East or even existed at all.²⁶ Despite many assurances that his descriptions can be trusted because of his status as an eye-witness, Mandeville remains, as Classen calls him, an "armchair traveler" who was synthesizing descriptions of the Holy Land and Far East from written authorities. Classen points out that Mandeville evidently had access to a staggering amount of information, though, which he shows off at every opportunity.

The *Book* is not a travelogue, but “a mouthpiece of many previous sources, summarizing their facts, or factoids.”²⁷

If he was such an expert on authoritative texts, however, the question remains as to why the Mandeville-author would choose to claim experiential authority. Classen believes that the author forged his travels in order to “support the claims [he makes] about the monstrous East” or to increase his *Book*’s popularity.²⁸ While much of the *Book* is occupied with descriptions of wonders and monsters, these things do not require an imaginary *rite de passage*. Greenblatt notices that the author uses the very moments in which Mandeville’s spiritual transformation is clearest to criticize the spiritual and secular elites of Christendom.²⁹ Mandeville, just as Bowers argues, is undermining the power of the authorities of his culture through imaginary travel. Of course, the author relies on *auctoritas* to do this, but, by claiming experience rather than written authority, he refuses to submit to it. Instead, the author is using imagination to craft a unique and self-transformative experience from *auctoritas* in order to critique the hypocrisy of his society. Ironically, by using imaginative travel and a forged *rite de passage*, he reveals (as Polo did) that experience has the power to supersede written authority.

The dichotomy of experiential and written authority is most famously represented in Chaucer’s character Alisoun, the Wife of Bath. Her declaration that she speaks from “*experience, though noon auctoritee*” (experience, but not written authority) seems to gender these two ideas, aligning women with the former, and men with the latter.³⁰ Since women were excluded from the chain of truth of *auctoritas*, it would seem that experiential knowledge would be the only way they could claim authority. The irony that experiential knowledge was paired with both women and the male rite of travel is that, in theory, the two should have been kept separate. There was much suspicion of female travelers and fear that they were overstepping their natural domestic sphere or engaging in promiscuity.³¹ Alisoun fully lives up to both of these prejudices. However, even as she participates in the masculine rite of travel, Chaucer binds the Wife of Bath’s identity as a pilgrim with her identity as a wife.

In the general prologue, we read that Alisoun “*koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye*” (knew much of wandering by the way), a reference to her experience as a traveler that conflates to her vast carnal knowledge.³² She has been on at least seven pilgrimages, and she has had almost as many husbands. Like Polo, the Wife of Bath uses her experiential knowledge to argue with commonly accepted written authorities, and like Mandeville, she uses her claim to authority to critique her society. Elizabeth M. Biebel argues that Alisoun “both challenges the scholarly world of men and manipulates their textual authority for her own purposes.”³³ Her prologue and tale are a candid conversation about sexuality and gender relations, and through them her primary interest is revealed: gaining mastery within marriage. Alisoun’s identity as a traveler acts as both a metaphor for and demonstration of her dominance within her relationships with her husbands, for within both she takes on typically masculine modes of self-creation and authentication.

Alisoun’s frank sexuality and independence give her an identity that is typically associated with men. When he initially describes her, Chaucer emphasizes her economic autonomy as a “*good wyf*”: “*Of clooth-makyng*

she hadde swich an haunt, / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (of cloth-making she had such a habit, / she surpassed that of Ypres and of Gaunt—two cities famous for cloth-making). He also discusses her many husbands and pilgrimages, lively sensuality ("*Gat-tothed [gap-toothed] was she*"), and masculine way of riding ("*Upon an amblere esily she sat, / ...And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe*" [upon a lively horse easily she sat, / ...and on her feet a pair of spurs sharp]).³⁴ She has her own business, chooses and gleefully enjoys her husbands, moves freely, and even rides astride. Biebel states that "in [her] quest for self-governance [Alisoun] comes to value the effectiveness of what many might call the means of men: wealth, power, and aggression."³⁵ Throughout her prologue, the Wife of Bath describes how she retained her autonomy in her marriages by using sex, manipulation, and bullying until she "*hadde hem hoolly in myn hond*" (had him wholly in my hand).³⁶ Kathryn A. Hall suggests that the Wife's "defense of the right to use sex for manipulative purposes" is "a manifestation of her aggressive nature and symptomatic of her desire for mastery over others."³⁷ This is certainly revealed in her much-analyzed disagreement with Jankyn—husband number five—for whom she gave up much of her financial independence, physical autonomy, and dominance.³⁸ Their violent struggle for mastery escalates due to Jankyn's insistence on punishing his wife by reading constantly from a book of "*wikked wyves*" (wicked wives).³⁹ After she tries to destroy the book and her husband beats her for the attempt, they are able to reconcile—but on Alisoun's terms. She says, "*he yaf me al the bridel in myn hond, / To han the governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his hond also*" (he gave all the bridle into my hand, / to have the governance of house and land, / And of his tongue, and of his hand also).⁴⁰ It is only at this point, when Jankyn gives up his misogynistic textual authority and submits to his wife's "*maistrie*" (mastery) and "*soveraynetee*" (sovereignty) that they are happy together.

Chaucer goes beyond merely using travel as a metaphor for Alisoun's desire for authority, though; it is also her means to maintaining and defining her independence. Chaucer makes it clear that Alisoun uses travel as a way of escaping husband number four, the philanderer. She made at least one of her journeys to Jerusalem during their marriage, and "*made [her] visitaciouns / To vigilies and to processions, / To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages, / To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages*" (made [her] visitations / To villages and to processions, / To preaching also, and to these pilgrimages, / To miracle plays, and to marriages).⁴¹ Following Bowers' model, the Wife of Bath uses travel as "an attempt to assume the status of a free, autonomous person."⁴² She insists on being a part of the masculine, public world of business and free movement, which requires her to participate in masculine *rites de passage*. By using travel, trade, and sexuality, Alisoun fashions herself into an authoritative figure, but to do so, she must also take on the more masculine qualities discussed above.

Just as we saw with Mandeville, much of the problem with Alisoun's claims to experiential knowledge and authority arise from her fictionality. All that is said about the Wife of Bath's autonomous creation of herself through travel must be checked by the reminder that she is invented by Chaucer, a man. It is hard to know how Chaucer himself viewed his creation.

Straus wonders whether the Wife “is a figure to laugh *with*” or “to laugh *at*”; is she an intentionally comedic invention, or one “whose morals and rhetoric are to be assiduously deplored” (emphasis Straus’s).⁴³ If she is to be laughed at and deplored, then her claims to experiential authority and its validity and her self-initiated identity are all meant to be laughed at too. From this perspective, Alisoun’s attempts to participate in masculine self-creation are failures. On the other hand, if Chaucer means his audience to laugh with the Wife, then her claims to authority are still tenuous, since her experiences are fictional. Alisoun argues with various *auctores* on the strength of her vast experience, yet we cannot take her claims to authority entirely seriously, because there never was a Wife of Bath who traveled so widely and ruled her five husbands so well.

It is possible that Alisoun fits Bowers’ model so well not because travel *must* be interpreted as a masculine *rite de passage*, but because that is how men understood travel. Perhaps the fact that a man wrote Alisoun into existence is the reason she grasps for authority in such a masculine way. Travel is certainly a way for individuals to claim experiential authority, but, as we have seen with the Wife of Bath, this is a complicated thing. Although experience was more accessible to women, they nonetheless were, in theory, excluded from attaining any authority—experiential and written alike.

So, then, is the pursuit of authority—even experiential authority—always necessarily masculinizing, or can it be done in a feminine way? If it can, then perhaps it would not be easily recognizable as feminine, or would still superficially have to shape itself into a masculine model in order to be recognized as such. Ellen M. Ross approaches the contradictory nature of women’s autobiography—which is one of the most direct ways for a woman to claim experience and engage with *auctoritas*—by arguing that women must “either adopt a model of male selfhood or adapt themselves to a model of the male-approved ‘ideal woman,’” yet they tend to present their life stories in a very un-masculine way: “not so much by chronology as by episodic or distinct units.”⁴⁴ When we approach the complicated case of Margery Kempe, who was both a pilgrim and an autobiographer, we must, therefore, take into account that her self-presentation may be feminizing masculine models, rather than submitting to them.

Bowers argues for the latter, and has excellent reasons for doing so. However, in order to maintain his case, he must minimize the spiritual experiences and radically feminine identity that Kempe is attempting to convey. Bowers identifies several goals in Kempe’s use of travel: to legitimize her behavior by “attach[ing] herself to a wider community of respected figures” (i.e., the tradition of other female mystics and pilgrims); to “construct” and secure “a radically new category of female personhood”; and to generate “a powerful critique of English society.”⁴⁵ While each of these is true, Bowers does not connect them tightly enough to Kempe’s claims as a mystic or the nature of her new female personhood.

Kempe does indeed often act as a critic of her society. When she is questioned by clerics throughout her travels, Kempe responds with confidence and astute theological orthodoxy and even upbraids those who oppose her. Bowers has brilliantly analyzed how Kempe uses her pilgrimages to reveal the injustice of English society’s persecution and suspicion of her: “while the

pilgrims become linked to the forces opposed to Christ, [Kempe] is linked to Christ, with the result that her behaviors and the rights she struggles to obtain...not only appear less deviant, but emerge as appropriate expressions of Christian devotion.³⁶ Through these episodes, Kempe is able to legitimize her claims to mystical experiences and expose the un-Christianity of the strict hierarchical structure of English culture. It seems unlikely, though, that social change is the greatest objective of Kempe's pilgrimages, displays of weeping, and affective visions, as Bowers seems to assume.⁴⁷ Rather, Kempe's use of travel to critique her own culture is a component of her claim to prophetic authority.

Ross argues that, although she never explicitly calls herself a prophet, Kempe nonetheless "perceives herself as God's spokesperson, personally charged to preach the dangers of spiritual lassitude and to deliver God's offer of mercy and compassion, exhorting believers to reform their lives and renew their spiritual vigor."⁴⁸ Because of this self-perception, Kempe speaks with authority, boldly defending her right to go on pilgrimage without her husband's written permission, to dress as a virgin, and to publicly preach her message to those who would castigate her. When chastised, Kempe even turns the allegations against her onto her accusers—even when they are powerful clerics or even the Archbishop.⁴⁹ Even though Kempe is illiterate, she can defend her theology when held in suspicion. Even her enemies must admit that "she knows her religion well enough"—although she is excluded, as a woman, from fully engaging in literary culture, she often makes use of her significant knowledge of the Bible and, as she puts it, "the Articles of our Faith."⁵⁰ As Bowers argues, when Kempe, a laywoman, and others like her "gain access to key texts, they present the possibility that they too may become authorities and contest the authority of those in power."⁵¹ Her prophetic authority, which is based on the experience of her visions and pilgrimages and her knowledge of the scriptures, supersedes the authority of the clerics.

Kempe's claim to authority also relies on her uniquely feminine identity, which is established by her visions and ministry. As Ellen M. Ross contends, within her ministry to others, Kempe identifies as a spiritual mother, sister, daughter, and spouse.⁵² Her visions and devotional experiences likewise add to this the contradictory labels of virgin and reformed whore.⁵³ All of these identities are necessary to Kempe as she associates herself with the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. In her first vision, Kempe spiritually participates in the births of Mary and Christ. She acts as Mary's handmaiden and serves her throughout her life until the Nativity.⁵⁴ Kempe continues to perform this duty, carried out literally in the vision, more metaphorically throughout the rest of her life. As a mother and "virgin in [her] soul," she identifies heavily with the mother of God, to the point that she weeps uncontrollably whenever she sees a baby boy, because it reminds her of the infant Christ.⁵⁵ In her vision of the Passion, Kempe's emotions mirror those of Mary Magdalene, who weeps bitterly over Christ's death and desires, as Kempe does, to remain alone with the body of Jesus and grieve. When the risen Christ tells Mary Magdalene that she must not touch him, Kempe takes this injunction personally to heart, as if Jesus had been speaking to her.⁵⁶ Kempe's view of herself as a "reformed sexual temptress" who now weeps for her sins makes Mary Magdalene another fitting avatar of Christ-like femininity.⁵⁷

So, Kempe brings together practically every feminine role possible simultaneously, allowing herself to identify with as many women as possible while creating a unique selfhood that encompasses all of womanhood. This fits Bowers' description of women's rites of passage, in which "women are adorned with layers of clothing" instead of stripped and reclothed, as men are.⁵⁸ Kempe's selfhood cannot be stripped and remade through various rites because if it were, she would lose her ability to identify with all aspects of femininity.

Kempe's frequent identifications as mother, sister, daughter, and spouse have a unique affect on the meaning of her travels. She does not concede any of her roles in order to join the public world of men, instead, "Kempe's family relations provided categories for naming and experiencing her relationship to the world. Rather than substituting for domestic relations, her self-definition...signifies an extension of familial categories that enables and empowers Kempe to create a world of public activity."⁵⁹ Although Kempe's critics and enemies see her free movement as a transgression against her role in the home, Kempe is extending the home—and her female role in it—to include the entire world in her pilgrimages, and in doing so makes the pilgrimages into Bowers' feminine rite of "emergence, continuity, and magnification."⁶⁰

Although Bowers never explores the implications of the male scribes of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, their presence might be taken to support Bowers' argument that Kempe's travels must be understood through the lens of male experience and self-expression. If they were heavily editing Kempe's experiences, they could potentially—like Chaucer—be interpreting her through masculine definitions of self and rites of passage. However, the inability of such definitions to truly contain Kempe and her claims to authority show that Kempe should be considered an autobiographer with an authentic voice.

Kempe, then, participates in travel as a tool both to gain and prove her prophetic and experiential authority. In doing so, she does not submit to the masculine model—as the Wife of Bath does—but instead appropriates and adapts it. In other words, Kempe does not become a person through her travels and thereby cease to be a woman, as Bowers argues; instead she uses her travels to ratify her spiritual authority, which springs from her radical encompassing of all feminine roles, revelatory experiences, and her verbal engagement with authoritative texts. As with Polo, we must contend with Kempe as a real person making real claims to her experience, and so must make room for her and her *Book* as she becomes a part of the literary *auctoritas* that she contended with in her own day. Polo, the Mandeville-author, Chaucer, and Kempe all used travel as a way to construct identities, whether for themselves or characters they invented, but not as ends unto themselves. Each was using their created-selves to make claims of experiential authority in order to grapple with their societies' assumptions—whether those were about the nature of the East or the nature of femininity. Bowers' theory is extremely useful for understanding the role that travel plays in the contest of knowledge and power, and the complicated relationships of these late-medieval authors reveals how identity can be the first step in establishing authority.



Notes

- 1 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 114-115.
- 2 Sini Kangas, Mia Korpiola, and Tuija Ainonen, "Foreword," in *Authorities in the Middle Ages: Influence, Legitimacy, and Power in Medieval Society*, ed. Mia Korpiola, et al., vii-xiii, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, vol. 12, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), vii.
- 3 Barrie Ruth Straus, "The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath: Phallogocentric Discourse and Imprisonment of Criticism," *ELH* 55, no. 3 (1988): 529.
- 4 Albrecht Classen, "Introduction: The Authority of the Written Word, the Sacred Object, and the Spoken Word: A Highly Contested Discourse in the Middle Ages With a Focus on the Poet Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Mystic Hildegard von Bingen," in *Authorities in the Middle Ages: Influence, Legitimacy, and Power in Medieval Society*, ed. Mia Korpiola, et al., 1-26, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, vol. 12, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 6.
- 5 Terrence N. Bowers, "Margery Kempe as Traveler," *Studies in Philology* 97, no. 1 (2000): 5.
- 6 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 3, 5-6.
- 7 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 7.
- 8 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 10.
- 9 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 27.
- 10 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 10.
- 11 Ellen M. Ross, "Spiritual Experience and Women's Autobiography: The Rhetoric of Selfhood in "The Book of Margery Kempe,'" *The American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1991): 527-546. I recognize the problematic nature of this claim, since Kempe's *Book* was transcribed and edited by men, but I choose to side with Ellen M. Ross in embracing the *Book* as Kempe's authentic voice.
- 12 Classen, "Introduction," 4.
- 13 Albrecht Classen, "Marco Polo and John Mandeville: The Traveler as Authority Figure, the Real and the Imaginary," in *Authorities in the Middle Ages: Influence, Legitimacy, and Power in Medieval Society*, ed. Mia Korpiola, et al., 229-249, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, vol. 12, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 229.
- 14 *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Roland Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 37-38.
- 15 *Marco Polo*, 40.
- 16 *Marco Polo*, 41.
- 17 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 8.
- 18 *Marco Polo*, 41. The Khan's courtiers speak of what Polo will be like when he "lives to manhood," and repeatedly refer to him as a "youth."
- 19 *Marco Polo*, 41-42.
- 20 *Marco Polo*, 33.
- 21 Classen, "Polo and Mandeville," 231.
- 22 Classen, "Polo and Mandeville," 236-237.
- 23 *The Book of John Mandeville*, trans. Iain MacLeod Higgins (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), 5.
- 24 Stephen Greenblatt, "From the Dome of the Rock to the Rim of the World," in

Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World, 26-51 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 27-28.

25 *John Mandeville*, 23, 133.

26 Iain MacLeod Higgins, "Introduction," in *The Book of John Mandeville*, ix-xxvi (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), ix.

27 Classen, "Polo and Mandeville," 239-241. Classen refers to Mandeville as basing his text on "a whole library of relevant studies."

28 Classen, "Polo and Mandeville," 244, 246.

29 Greenblatt, "Dome of the Rock," 28-29.

30 Geoffrey Chaucer and Larry Dean Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1987), 105, ln. 1. All translations of Middle English are mine.

31 Leigh Ann Craig, "'She Koude Muchel of Wandrynge by the Weye.'" Pilgrimage and the Fear of Wandering Women," in *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 29.

32 *Riverside Chaucer*, 30, ln. 467.

33 Elizabeth M. Biebel, "A Wife, a Batterer, a Rapist: Representations of 'Masculinity' in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*," In *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Creseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler, 63-76, *Chaucer Studies XXV* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 64.

34 *Riverside Chaucer*, 30-31, 818. Larry Dean Benson, the editor of *Riverside Chaucer*, notes that in medieval physiognomy, a gap between one's front teeth was believed to reveal a particularly sensual and lusty character.

35 Biebel, "Wife, Batterer, Rapist," 65.

36 *Riverside Chaucer*, 108, ln. 211.

37 Kathryn A. Hall, "Teaching Margery Kempe in Tandem with The Wife of Bath: Lollardy, Mysticism, and 'Wandrynge by The Weye.'" *South Atlantic Modern Language Association* 72, no. 4 (2007): 61.

38 *Riverside Chaucer*, 113-115.

39 *Riverside Chaucer*, 114.

40 *Riverside Chaucer*, 116, ln. 818.

41 *Riverside Chaucer* 112, ln. 555-558.

42 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 8.

43 Straus, "Subversive Discourse," 527.

44 Ross, "Selfhood," 528.

45 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 15-16, 20.

46 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler, 19-21.

47 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 24-25. Bowers considers Kempe's "victory" in self-creation limited because its "potential for radical social change" is "not fully realized." In exploring this theme, he suggests that Kempe's affective piety has the goal of reproducing itself and altering the misogynistic hierarchical social order of fifteenth-century England.

48 Ross, "Selfhood," 540.

49 *Margery Kempe*, 114-115.

50 *Margery Kempe*, 111-114.

51 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 14.

52 Ross, "Selfhood."

53 Hall, "Kempe and the Wife of Bath," 65-66.

54 *Margery Kempe*, 20-22.

- 55 Margery Kempe, 50, 80.
 56 Margery Kempe, 173-177.
 57 Hall, "Kempe and the Wife of Bath, 65-66.
 58 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 10.
 59 Ross, "Selfhood," 533.
 60 Bowers, "Kempe as Traveler," 10.

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