

SUNY College at Buffalo  
1300 Elmwood Avenue  
Buffalo NY 14222  
E-mail: HOVLANDL@buffalostate.edu

1 *L'Official; Messire Jean; Le Mariage Robin Mouton; Mahuet qui donne ses œufs au Prix du Marché; Mahuet Badin; La Bouteille; La mère et son fils qui veut être prêtre; Le Maître d'école; Pernet qui va à l'école; Un qui se fait examiner; Mimin étudiant; Mimin qui va à la guerre; Jenin, fils de rien; Le Nouveau marié; Le Cuvier; Celui qui se confesse à sa voisine* (the daughter plays a key role in the outcome of this play, although she is not a member of the cast of characters).

2 *Joliot; Le Nouveau Marié; Maître Mimin étudiant; Jenin, fils de rien; Mimin qui va à la guerre* (in this play Raoulet, the father of Mimin, is alluded to by Mimin but does not appear).

3 *Messire Jean; Le Mariage Robin Mouton; Mahuet qui donne ses œufs au Prix du Marché; Mahuet Badin; La Bouteille; La Mère et son fils qui veut être prêtre; Le Maître d'école; Un qui se fait examiner; Mimin étudiant; Mimin qui va à la guerre; Jenin, fils de rien.*

4 *L'Official; Le Nouveau Marié; Le Cuvier; Celui qui se confesse à sa voisine.*

5 Cf. Elizabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel* (XVIIe - XVIIIe siècle) (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

6 "The only true love is a mother's love" (*Maître Mimin qui va à la guerre*).

## MOTHERHOOD: THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

Much of what has been written about the theme of motherhood in *The Book of Margery Kempe* has concentrated on Margery's traumatic early experience of motherhood and her apparent abandonment of that role after the birth of thirteen more children, as well as her apparent failure to represent them in her text. This representational absence has proved troublesome to some readers and, to more acerbic critics, further evidence to reinforce the accusations of neurosis and hysteria levelled against Margery. It is still presumed that as a woman whose active experience of physical mothering covered nearly twenty years, more if we take into account Margery's repeated attempts to rescue an adult son from a life of secular hedonism which she recounts to us at the beginning of Book Two, Margery as a writer would have been expected to draw heavily on these experiences in recounting her life before her embarkation on the spiritual path to perfection. It is also presumed that the physical absence of Margery's children in her account, except for isolated allusions, represents an abandonment and rejection of her own maternalism in favour of pursuing the spiritual life.

Margery was living and writing at a time when perfect motherhood had become an impossible ideal. The cult of the Virgin, so powerful in East Anglia where she was living and writing, had helped to reshape contemporary attitudes towards motherhood, making it on the one hand the highest ideal for a woman, but on

the other forever condemning her because of the concupiscence it necessarily represented. The image of Eve forever lurked threateningly behind the image of the Virgin, leaving the mother in the unenviable position of embodying both Eve and Mary, each taking precedence over the other according to the patriarchal attitudes confronting her. Any attempt towards authority and autonomy on the part of a mother would first have to unravel the complex thread attaching her to both archetypes and either free herself from them, an impossible task in view of contemporary socio-religious attitudes, or reweave them according to the dictates of her own desire.

On closer examination of the text, Margery Kempe's awareness of herself as mother is everywhere apparent, as is her own unravelling of the archetypal bonds tying her to both Eve and to Mary, and her Book can in many ways be seen as a tapestry woven from these unravelled and reworked bonds. In doing so she is liberated to use and manipulate the preconceptions and established essentialist beliefs of her day and exploit them in order to create a personal space from which to speak and be heard. This exploitation arises from both an awareness of the ideals of motherhood as well as a confidence born from the physical and psychological components of the job of human mothering which must have been a central part of her life for so long.

On many occasions we see Margery using and exploiting the paradigms of accepted notions about gender generally, but about motherhood in particular, to subvert apparently restrictive socio-sexual and religious attitudes in order to both assert and protect herself. As a woman on the margins of an androcentric society, Margery's gendered experience as wife and mother is used by her as a means of empowerment affording her expression through the language of the physical as well as the emotional. The pains and dangers of childbirth, the constant self-effacement required of the mother of a large family of small children, the physical and psychological strength and courage required to bring these young children safely to adulthood are transformed by Margery into a figurative language which depends upon the bodily experience of the mother as its primary mode of expression and authority. For Margery, then, motherhood develops into a primary means of self-assertion and control and re-emerges in the language and imagery of the Book as a type of weapon used to disrupt the hegemony of male language and experience and assert the equal value of the specifically female experience.

The importance of motherhood in Margery's life is evidenced by the fact that her Book opens with her first experience of pregnancy and childbirth, rather than the childhood narratives traditionally associated with the *Vitae* of Holy Women which the Book takes as its models. A defining moment in her life, it is the concept and suffering of motherhood which takes precedence from the start, rather than the physical baby which results from the difficult pregnancy. This

physical baby disappears from the text immediately, leaving the vacuum which is filled by the more abstract concept of maternity. The intense suffering created by this child's birth is forever written on the body of Margery Kempe and leaves an indelible imprint in the text. Margery's developing *raison d'être* is rooted in this experience and will later develop into her absorption in the suffering of the Virgin and her active adoption of an intense *imitatio Mariae*, as well as the gift of tears which will forever exclude her from society and confirm her position in the eyes of her contemporaries as marginal woman.

The centrality of motherhood as a guide and strategy to Margery is particularly evident in her travels around England in search of vocational validation. Threatened by the intensified zeal of the Church's persecution of the Lollard heresy in England, Margery finds herself arraigned ostensibly as a heretic, but in reality as an uncategorizable woman, on several occasions. At these moments of heightened physical danger, confronted by the whole weight of patriarchal and ecclesiastical law, Margery's self-defence draws heavily on her own position in society as wife and mother. No matter that her children are now being cared for by others or each other and that she has renegotiated the terms of her marriage to encompass chastity and physical separation, the fact that she is and will always be a mother is irrefutable and at the moment of most intense danger in the Leicester court she conjures up the image of her fourteen absent children in her defense, representing herself before the eyes of the patriarchs and escaping through the fissure which this representation opens up for her. In effect, Margery uses the reality of her own motherhood to redefine herself in the face of accusations of sexual and religious impropriety, and is able to withdraw behind it, turning the focus of accusation at the same time from herself to the abuse of power which she has seen exercised by the dominant men in the court.

Margery's physical separation from her own children also serves other purposes on her journey to spiritual perfection. The *imitatio Mariae* which, as mentioned previously, is facilitated by Margery's own early maternal suffering, develops into a merging with the persona of the Virgin whilst on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, which in turn allows Margery unimpeded access to the body of Christ in all its humanity. From this point, Margery is liberated and empowered to become mother to the whole world rather than to a limited number of children in a limited sphere, which would forever have severed her from a personal experience of the body of Christ in all its physicality. This freedom, represented by a mystical marriage to the Godhead on St. Lateran's Day in Rome on her return from Jerusalem, allows Margery a new self-definition as spiritual mother able to minister to those needy people she meets on the road, ranging from a sick and elderly woman in Italy to a young woman experiencing the same post-partum suffering as Margery did in her youth. The most potent symbol of Margery's new role as spiritual mother is her nursing of the aging and ill John Kempe after his

descent into senility following a fall at his home. Apparently bowing to social pressures, but in reality to the coincidence of those social requirements with her own sense of her spiritual vocation, Margery returns to nurse the doubly incontinent John Kempe and cares for him until the end of his life. At the end, it is not a sense of wifely duty which has remained, but a realization that John Kempe, too, is a child of God and, in that sense, a worthy recipient of the maternal ministrations of His wife, the mother of the whole world.

Finally, it could be said that Margery's finest achievement is to transform the seemingly irrevocably restricting role of mother into something vocal, empowering and eventually utterly fulfilling. It is possibly Margery's instinctive awareness of the enormous dichotomy between the private female experience of motherhood and the public essentialist attitudes towards it, which creates an Irigarayan 'blind spot' in patriarchal discourse where Margery's seeming impotency as earthly mother can be acted out and transformed into something irresistibly and specifically her own.

*Liz Herbert McAvooy*  
*Postgraduate Student*  
*Dept. of English*  
*Aberystwyth University*  
*E-mail: Liz@ysbryd.demon.co.uk*

## **"ABOMINABLE MINGLING": FATHER-DAUGHTER INCEST AND THE LAW**

In a recent article, Kathryn Gravdal makes use of an interdisciplinary methodology to re-examine the meaning of nuclear family incest in medieval literature. She suggests that looking at legal discourse (specifically, penitentials and canon law texts) "enables us to reread literary texts in a less literal, less linear, more complex way."<sup>1</sup> Gravdal comes to the interesting and plausible conclusion that "both legal and literary textual traditions conceal and reveal an anxiety about and an effort to keep women—as objects of marital exchange among men—in proper and controlled circulation."<sup>2</sup> However, the central point she uses to support that conclusion is highly questionable. "The forgiveness of the father in literature," she argues, "contrasted to the emphasis on the mother's punishment in mother-son incest stories, and read alongside the absence of the father in the penitentials, seems to suggest that paternal incest is perhaps not so serious a sin."<sup>3</sup> Throughout her essay, Gravdal asserts that the father is "absent" from legal discourses about sexual abuse within the nuclear family, and thus it seems to her a "foregone conclusion that he is either incapable of or absolved from abusing his child."