Nicholas Love and Margery Kempe invite their lay audiences to take pleasure in submission. Drawing on the Eucharist as their central devotional object, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* discourage theological thought and instead encourage readers to suffer with and for Christ. The *Mirror* and the *Book* set forth specifically lay models of affective eucharistic reading, and both frame these models within the context of the institutional church’s increasingly extreme restrictions on lay education in the first decades of the fifteenth century. Love’s text, a series of meditations officially endorsed by Archbishop Arundel, encourages the laity to engage in an unthinking emotional devotion to Christ’s crucified body, especially as that body was physically present in the consecrated host. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery herself engages in ecstatic eucharistic devotion—weeping loudly during the Mass—and Arundel personally approves her practice of frequent eucharistic reception.

Rather than offer affective piety to Christ’s suffering body as simple, both texts suggest that affective devotion involves both the involvement of the will and an intellectual engagement with ideas about what it means to read a devotional text affectively. Neither text dismisses lay readers as being incapable of higher contemplation or even argues wholeheartedly that lay people are more suited to affective piety because of their feminized status; instead they invite...
lay readers to choose affective piety out of obedience. They suggest that the lay community’s willful refusal of contemplation produces spiritual pleasure. For the Mirror and the Book, the Eucharist is a symbol of the Christian community’s pleasurable surrender of the will both to Christ and to the institutional church; both regard the Eucharist as essential to lay devotional reading precisely because of the affective union with Christ it does not fully provide. Neither text offers simple eucharistic promises of individual fulfillment in the Eucharist; rather, they encourage willed, disciplined acceptance of powerlessness and a lack of knowledge as necessary preconditions for spiritual and communal transformation.

My argument proceeds in four stages. First I demonstrate how the Mirror and the Book share an interest in affective eucharistic devotion that is particularly characteristic of fifteenth-century English piety. Next, I examine how Nicholas Love constructs a model of lay devotion centered on an eucharistic and pleasurable surrender of the will to ecclesiastical authority. I then show how the Book of Margery Kempe extends the Mirror’s model of eucharistic reading by revealing how this inward-looking lay piety shapes the corpus mysticum. Finally, I argue that, through the deliberately alienating figure of Margery, the Book invites readers to embrace eucharistic reading as an intellectual and emotional challenge.

DEVOTIONAL READING IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The eucharistic devotion that lies at the center of the Mirror and the Book is in many ways representative of a fifteenth-century inward affective trend in devotional writings that demanded both self-reflection and submission to the institutional church. In fifteenth-century England, vernacular religious writings shifted toward the affective and devotional both because of the increasing restrictions on vernacular writing and because of a growing lay interest in the “mixed life.” Through the increased production of books of hours, translations of Continental religious texts into English, and original Middle English writings that urged readers to look “inward,” it is evident that fifteenth-century Middle English writings demonstrate a proclivity to focus on affect and the reform of the self.¹

¹ Near the end of the fourteenth century, lay people, particularly the wealthy, began to develop an increased interest in more inward-looking devotional practices, practices that involved a focus on one’s own emotions and the state of one’s own soul rather than more specifically communal devotion. On this inward turn and the turn toward the mixed life, see Bryan, Looking Inward; Rice, Lay Piety.
Both texts contribute to the growing body of fifteenth-century religious works that encourage believers to turn inward, to be concerned with the state of one's own soul. Love names his text a "mirror" precisely in order to contribute to this body of literature. As he explains, the life of Christ cannot be fully described and so must be shown "in a maner of liknes as þe ymage of mans face is shewed in þe mirrroure" (11). Through his use of the mirror image, Love suggests that Christ always exceeds linguistic representation and places his text alongside other medieval works that call themselves a "mirror" or "speculum" in order to indicate that the text is meant to reveal readers to themselves. Love tells his readers that, during the reading process, they must imitate St. Cecilia, who bears the story of Christ’s life “in þe priuyte of her breste” (11). For Love, reading is an imaginative process and one that must remain fundamentally private. Margery Kempe later draws on Love’s meditations to take up this practice of devout imagination, particularly through her visions of Christ’s Passion, events that she willfully imagines and that become her own private encounters with Christ’s life. Fifteenth-century meditative texts are often simultaneously restrictive to and enabling of individual lay devotion through their focus on providing what Sarah McNamer has usefully called “intimate scripts”: “quite literally scripts for the performance of feeling—scripts that often explicitly aspire to performative efficacy.” For those committed to the institutional Church, affective devotion to the suffering body of Christ provided a powerful link to the divine, a link that the ecclesiastical hierarchy actively encouraged the laity to believe truly existed. Such intimate scripts are particularly important to worship of the Eucharist because many religious lyrics provided lay readers with scripts for how to feel and imagine Christ during the Mass.

Through their shared emphasis on and imitation of the monastic reading practice of *lectio divina*, the *Mirror* and *Book of Margery Kempe* draw on the growing lay interest in the mixed life and present themselves as texts aimed at generating intimate scripts. Love himself directly invokes the practice of *lectio divina*—with its emphasis on repetitive “rumination” over textual pas-

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sages read aloud—when he describes how St. Cecilia “with a likyng & swete
taste gostly chewyng in þat manere þe gospell of crist” (11). Love thus advises
readers to behave like monks in their religious devotion, not seeking new
material but always rereading and remeditating on familiar passages. Since
he believes lay people must not translate the Bible into the vernacular, Love
suggests that readers may use his text in the way that monks use scripture
itself. Although Love, following the Latin Meditations, divides his text into
meditations ascribed to the seven days of the week, he tells his readers near
the end of the text that “it semeþ to me beste þat euery deuout creature þat
loueþ to rede or to here þis boke take þe partes þerof as it semeþ moste con-
fortable & stiryng to his deuocion, sumtyme one & symtyme an oþere” (220).
By placing this instruction near the end of the Mirror, Love indicates that
he wants his readers to read the entire text at least once, but after that, they
ought to read the text selectively, depending on which passages produce the
most fervent affective response. Likewise, the Book of Margery Kempe begins
by presenting the text as “a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrec-
chys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem” (41). As Rebecca
Krug has suggested, there is much to be gained in our understanding of late
medieval reading practices if we take the Book at its word and regard it as a
text intended for spiritual education rather than an autobiography. Near the
conclusion of the proem, the Book tells us, “Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr,
every thing aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur
in mend whan it schuld be wretyn,” (49). While it is certainly possible that this
description simply indicates the way in which the Book was dictated, it also is
an indication to readers that the order of the Book is not of much importance.
The Book deliberately models itself on other devotional works—silently draw-
ing on Love’s text while explicitly naming Walter Hilton, Bridget of Sweden,
Richard Rolle, and the Stimulus Amoris—and suggesting that it was written in

6. On the lectio divina tradition, see Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for
God, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham UP, 1961); originally published in French
number from this edition.
8. Rebecca Krug, “Margery Kempe,” The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Lit-
9. I am grateful to Sarah Noonan for this suggestion. Though she does not focus on The
Book of Margery Kempe, Noonan provides an excellent analysis of selective reading practices
in her recent article: “‘Bycause the redying shold not turne hem to enoye’: Reading, Selectivity,
a meditative manner tells readers that it can also be read in such a way, reading whichever parts of the Book are most likely to stir the reader to devotion.10

For all these inward-looking texts, there is a disjunction between looking inward for religious meaning and accepting the decidedly external authority of ecclesiastical authorities. This disjunction is heightened when texts discuss the Eucharist because the political and theological stakes surrounding the sacrament were particularly high. Although they present their meditations in strikingly different ways, both texts offer a self-consciously orthodox model of lay eucharistic piety as central to the practice of devout reading and to religious devotion more generally. Since Love asserts that the Mirror is meant to serve as a “lollardorum confutacionem” (confutation of the Lollards; 7), the Eucharist is central to both his antiheresy agenda and his model of piety. Although Love elsewhere cuts and condenses large amounts of his source text’s material, he adds a substantial amount of material on the Eucharist, adding approximately 2,500 words to the treatment of the Last Supper and appending the text with the “Treatise on the Sacrament,” which deals directly and exclusively with the Eucharist. Love intertwines his instruction that lay people feel instead of think with eucharistic devotion. Likewise Margery’s piety centers on eucharistic devotion. She receives special permission to receive the sacrament weekly and experiences her most frequent and dramatic bouts of weeping and roaring during the Mass. For both texts, affective reading means eucharistic piety and this sort of eucharistic piety demonstrates obedience to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

**LOVE AND AFFECTION**

In the Mirror, Love presents a model of lay affective reading that is dependent upon eucharistic piety. The Eucharist lays the foundation for two essential elements of his model of lay reading: affective devotion to Christ’s body and submission to the ecclesiastical hierarchy through belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Love encourages his readers to use his written meditations as intimate scripts, which produce “affeccion” for Christ’s body in the Eucharist—a term that, for Love, demands the intervention of a disciplined will. Love recognizes that in order for lay people to read affectively, they must deliberately will themselves away from intellectual or contemplative encoun-

10. The Book twice names these four texts, in chapter 17 and 58. Scholars have long recognized the Book’s debt to Love or, at the very least, another translation of the Meditationes. For an influential example, see Gail McMurray Gibson, The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47–66.
ters with the divine. He argues that this paradoxical willful surrender of the intellect, far from being a detriment to the affective lay reading experience, is an essential and appealing element of it.

Scholarship on the Mirror has tended to focus on the degree to which the text is spiritually and politically oppressive. In contrast, I want to suggest that one of the reasons that Love's intended lay audience may have found the text attractive is precisely because of the intellectual limitations his model of affective piety demands. Love's vernacular translation of the pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditationes Vitae Christi actively encourages its lay readers to submit silently and obediently to ecclesiastical authority, but it was one of the most well-read vernacular books in fifteenth-century England. Though Love's model of devotional reading may not appeal to modern scholars, it certainly held the interest of many medieval readers.

In developing his model of lay affective reading, Love draws heavily on the Eucharist and eucharistic imagery throughout the text, not only turning repeatedly to the sacrament itself but also depicting lay learning as a process of ingestion. Along with adding material that directly discusses transubstantiation, as Sarah Stanbury notes, throughout his narrative of Christ's life, Love urges readers to “behold” Christ's body in a manner evocative of a cleric holding the consecrated host aloft during the Mass. In the proem, when Love first explains his belief that lay people should imagine and engage in simple affective devotion to Christ's body rather than theological inquiry, he compares religious learning to eating, contending that lay people are only able to ingest particular forms of divine knowledge. Love explains that his lay readers are

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11. Much of the scholarship on Love up until this point has detailed the ways in which Love's attempt to convince his lay readers to be satisfied with lower levels of contemplation and submit their own wills to the power of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is oppressive. David Aers, Sanctifying Signs, 1–28; Sarah Beckwith, Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1996); Michelle Karnes, "Nicholas Love and Medieval Meditations on Christ," Speculum 82 (2007): 380–408; Nicholas Watson, “Censorship.” As an exception, Ian Johnson argues that the Mirror is an empowering text. Ian Johnson, “The Non-Dissenting Vernacular and the Middle English Life of Christ: The Case of Love's Mirror,” The Medieval Translator: Lost in Translation?, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2009), 223–36.

12. I am building off the work of Sarah McNamer and Sarah Stanbury, both of whom examine the affective and aesthetic impact of Love's text despite and because of its oppressive aims. McNamer, Affective Meditation, 128–49; Stanbury, Visual Object, 172–90.

13. As Michael G. Sargent points out in the introduction to his critical edition, Love's Mirror survives in fifty-nine originally complete manuscripts (1).

“symple creatures þe whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyȝte doctrine & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemptacion” (10). Love thus compares lay believers to infants and the basic points of doctrine to breast milk. His comparison transforms the lay desire for religious education into an unthinking physical appetite and, by contrasting milk with meat, highlights the fluidity and insubstantial nature of the doctrine that Love believes they should be offered.\(^{15}\) Love uses eucharistic imagery such as breastfeeding throughout the Mirror in order to connect directly the affective devotion to the physical body of Christ and the official doctrines of the institutional church.

Love argues that the goal of his book is to help the individual reader shape the inward self in the image of Christ. As in Handlyng Synne, among others, this invisible inner transformation is evocative of transubstantiation. Love immediately follows his description of the Mirror as educational milk with his explanation of his choice of Mirror as a title, directly linking ingestion and self-reflection as essential to the knowledge of the divine. In doing so, Love, like such writers as Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton, draws on an Augustinian tradition that regards the soul as a reflection of God. For Love, becoming like Christ is a process of highly literal ingestion. Reading his text should not only lead believers to transform their inner lives in the image of Christ’s life; it should also lead to the literal ingestion of Christ’s physical body in the Eucharist.

Love tells his readers to base their devotion on direct physical affection for Christ and avoid figurative interpretation. According to Love, readers must approach both the Mirror and the Eucharist itself with an affection that does not seek to go beyond the literal. In his discussion of the Last Supper, Love presents the apostles as models of lay readers who must restrict their interpretation of signs as much as possible even as Love himself recognizes exegesis as an essential component of eucharistic doctrine. Love explains that he has lengthened the meditation on the Last Supper because it is the most fruitful of all the meditations, “principaly for þe passyng tokenes & shewyngis in dede of his loue to mankynde” (145). In this meditation, Love does not ask readers to identify with the suffering of Christ or the apostles. Rather, Love asks readers to understand what the events signify, in the sense of pointing to a meaning beyond themselves. He offers the apostles’ reactions to the Last Supper as models of both devout lay reading and of proper eucharistic recep-

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\(^{15}\) Love’s presentation of religious knowledge as breast milk is also eucharistic, reminiscent of the many images of Christ as a mother feeding his believers from the open wound in his side. Such imagery is discussed most fully in the work of Caroline Walker Bynum. See especially Bynum, *Holy Feast*; idem, *Jesus as Mother.*
tion. The apostles “laft all hir kyndely reson of manne, & onely rested in trew byleue to alle þat he seide & dide” (149). The apostles refuse natural reason in deference to the authority of Christ, an authority to which Love has just compared a medieval priest’s. He moves rapidly from historical Last Supper to the medieval Mass in order to show how the two events signify each other across history. Love explains that “þis is þat swete & precious memoriale þat souereynly makeþ mannus soule worþi & pleisyng to god, als oft as it is dewely receyued, ouþere by trewe & deuout meditacion of his passion or elles & þat more specialy in sacramentale etyng þerof” (149). Love indicates that the Last Supper was a historical event that is memorialized in the sacrament of the Eucharist. But it is an historical event that has the unique power to transform the individual human soul through reverence toward the power of the sacrament both in the present day and during the historical Last Supper. For Love, this event is the most important meditation partly because it is central to the goal of refuting the Lollards but also because it is the most full of signs; it is the meditation in most need of exegesis, which, despite the fact that Love has argued against exegesis, makes it significant. Because of the requirement that lay people be aware of the exegetical basis for the Eucharist and then refuse to reason with it, the Eucharist has the power to transform lay devotion and the way in which individual believers see themselves.

Interpretation of signs and texts remains essential to Love’s model of eucharistic piety, even as he circumscribes the limits of such interpretation. Love’s explicit turn to the Eucharist in the “Treatise on the Sacrament” foregrounds the disjunction between complex exegesis and a physical, intimate, and emotional piety directed at the literal body of Christ in the host. In contrast to the “mylke of lyȝte doctrine” he promised in the proem, Love turns his attention to “þat preciouse gostly mete of þe blessede body of oure lorde Jesu in þe sacrament of þe awtere” (223). By using the word “mete” repeatedly throughout the treatise instead of “flesh”—a word that would emphasize the flesh of the human body and that frequently appears in Middle English writings on the Eucharist—Love emphasizes the meaning of “mete” as solid food, in opposition to “drink.” The term “mete” itself becomes both literal and figurative. With his shift from the literal “mylkе” to the both literal and figurative “mete,” Love reveals the difficulty of fitting the Eucharist under the umbrella

16. As Kantik Ghosh points out, Love’s use of “reason” in relationship to the Eucharist often doubles back on itself because Love both argues that the doctrine of transubstantiation is reasonable and that in order to believe you must leave behind your reason. Kantik Ghosh, Wycliffite Heresy, 164.
of “lyȝte doctrine.” In order to justify the specific details of transubstantiation to lay readers, Love cannot depict the physicality of Christ as something simple and outside the realm of intellectual interpretation.\(^\text{18}\) Love resists figurative language by insisting that Christ’s “hoc est corpus meum” is and was literally true—the bread literally is Christ’s flesh—but he must explain the difference between substance and accidents, and precisely why the Lollards’ reliance on Aristotle is wrong but the church’s use of Aristotle is right.\(^\text{19}\) With his transition from “mylké” to “mete,” Love cannot maintain a strong connection between physicality and simplicity because, as Love points out, the Lollards are the ones who insist on simple physicality with regard to the Eucharist; it is the Lollards who see only bread during the Mass (151). Paradoxically, the Eucharist is the cornerstone of Love’s model of lay affective reading, but it is precisely on the topic of the Eucharist that he cannot maintain his insistence on “lyȝte doctrine.” As Love recognizes, it is impossible to describe the Eucharist as only literal since the sacrament itself troubles the boundary between the material world and signification.

Lay devotion to the Eucharist necessarily involves both affective worship of the material body of Christ and an intellectual understanding of how that body is present in the consecrated host. Love overcomes this difficulty by suggesting that, once readers have understood the Eucharist as “mete,” as substantial theological learning, they should no longer seek to understand it. Love argues that the Lollard belief that the Eucharist is still bread after the consecration “wiþout doute springen of gostly pride & presumpcion of kyndely witte, in defaut & lakke of lowely drede” (225). The obedient lay person’s belief in the Eucharist must be a combination of reason—in order to understand the precise definition of transubstantiation and to recognize that God’s omnipotence is capable of overcoming the laws of nature—and submission to the knowledge of ecclesiastical authorities through “drede.” As Love explains, “It is moste sikere namely to a symple soule, & sufficient to sauacion touchinge þe foreside merueiles & alle óþer of þis blessed sacrament, to þenke & fele in þis manere, þus hauen holy doctours tauth, & holi chirch determined, & þerfore þus I trowe & fully byleue þat it is in soþenes, þouh my kyndely reson âȝeyn sey it” (227). Love baldly asserts that Christians need to believe in transubstantiation simply because the ecclesiastical hierarchy tells them to. For lay readers as well as for Love himself, devotion to the Eucharist as “mete”

\(^{18}\) Love encounters a logical problem because, although he is committed to plain language, he needs to go into complex language in order to defend the Eucharist since the doctrine has little basis in the narrative of Christ’s life. Aers, Sanctifying Signs, 1–28.

\(^{19}\) According to Love, the Lollards do not recognize that Aristotle only teaches about natural law, but according to holy church, transubstantiation is “aboue kynde” (236).
demands thinking and feeling in a way that is firmly bound by willing submission to the superior knowledge of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Love wants readers to experience an intense emotional reaction to the Eucharist, a reaction that involves the will to restrict their own capacities for reason. This particular combination of controlled thinking and feeling is what Love calls “affeccion”: not strictly emotion but particularly willed and controlled emotional reactions. For Love, as for many Middle English writers from Walter Hilton to John Lydgate, “affeccion” refers not simply to emotion but to the faculty of the soul concerned with emotion and volition. In Thomas Aquinas’s “Treatise on the Passions,” for example, even though the passions are movements of the nonrational appetites, there is a moral value to them insofar as they are subject to the control of the reason and the will. For Love, affection for Christ is essential to eucharistic devotion and that emotional response to the sacrament must be willed. Love ends the “Treatise” with an elevation prayer that is to serve as an intimate script for lay people to perform inwardly when they see the host elevated during the Mass. The prayer requests that “Myn affeccion be enflaumede with fire of þi loue” through the encounter with the sacrament (238). Love urges his lay readers to pray both with affection and for affection to be generated through the Eucharist. Though Love invokes Richard Rolle’s model of affective and ecstatic divine contemplation through using the phrase “fire of love,” Love overtly restricts his readers from attempting to engage in a contemplative life.

Like Archbishop Arundel, Love recognizes that the independent thinking of lay people poses a potential threat to the institutional church, and he asks for lay participation in the avoidance of such thought. “Affeccion” toward the Eucharist becomes both an emotional desire for union with Christ and an obligation to believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Love urges readers that the Eucharist “be prentede euer in oure mynde, & to be bisily kept in þe inwarde affeccion of þe herte” (224). Much as the Pearl-poet regards ritual repetition as essential to spiritual reform, Love suggests that through the repetition of the liturgy, Christ’s sacrifice ought to become imprinted on the hearts of believers and then finally move to believers’ hearts. In doing so, Christ’s memory will be “prentede in þe herte” (224). Far from being the first

20. “Affeccion,” MED.
21. Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1a.2ae.24, 1.
22. The phrase “fire of þi loue” appears to be original to Love’s version of the prayer. His source, the Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastynge Wisdome, asks that “myne affeccyone be flawmed and kyndelyd.” Cited in Sargent’s introduction to the Mirror, 72.
step or the simplest in producing piety, the proper emotion has to be con-
sciously produced and produced in response to church rituals. For Love, the Eucharist is a tool for the control and containment of both lay affect and lay cognition, but significantly, he believes that lay people must choose this discipline; such containment cannot happen exclusively by restricting access to sacred or controversial texts. Love encourages repetition and emotion as ways for the laity to think about the divine, even as he rec-
ognizes that repetition and emotion are not entirely distinct from the rational and the new. Repetition always involves the potential for change, and as Love's use of "affeccion" shows, feeling is never fully distinct from thinking. Love tells readers that their "affeccion" for the host must remain private, not interfering with the social world or the hierarchy of the church. In order to convince readers of this idea, he provides two exempla—one of Edward the Confessor and one of Hugh of Lincoln—of holy men who had miraculous encounters with the consecrated host but decide to keep the experience "private" and away from "the comune knowing" (230, 229). In order to preserve the holiness of the experiences of the host, such experiences must be individual and internal. Even moments of ecstatic union with Christ must be disciplined and contained.

Love presents this lay "affeccion" for the Eucharist as a sort of masochistic pleasure, derived from the laity's consent to their own submission. Affective devotion to the host includes not only attempts to identify with the cruci-
fied body of Christ in the host but also a paradoxically willing surrender of will to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. For all of its condescension, Love's model of eucharistic piety is surprisingly dependent upon the will of lay readers. Throughout the Mirror, Love encourages readers to "behold" imagined events of Christ's life and consider them "inwardly," placing his reader as audience to the events he describes, watching and feeling but not interacting with events as they unfold. The language of beholding is much less frequent in the "Trea-

23. Although "affeccion" is a state of thinking and feeling rather than an utterance, Love's version of "affeccion" is much like William Reddy's "emotives": emotional expressions that are "an attempt to call up the emotion that is expressed in an attempt to feel what one says one feels." Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns." History and Theory 49 (2010): 237–65.

24. As Sarah McNamer notes, in opposition to scholarship that regards Love's writing as wholly oppressive, "Is feeling really so innocent, so unproductive, so distinct from the rational? Do 'rounds' always lead nowhere or always back to tradition? Not always." Affective Meditation, 148–49.

25. As Sarah Stanbury puts it, "Central to the pleasure of the text is a forfeiture of will." Stanbury, Visual Object, 187.

tise,” largely since the lay reader already knows to “behold” the Eucharist because it is exactly what the individual lay believer does during the Mass—stands back and beholds the host at the elevation. Unlike the events in the text that must be imagined, the Mass is an event that Love’s readers presumably see at least once a week. Thus, the “Treatise,” as the conclusion to the Mirror, reaffirms the indispensability of the clergy as the public displayers of Christ’s body and the role of the laity as audience.27 Just as the host contains Christ’s body, lay believers are meant to contain their own spiritual experiences, willing themselves to feel and feel silently. Love offers a model of lay reading centered on the deliberate choice to focus on the literal level of both text and sacrament; in doing so, Love provides readers with the opportunity to choose a surrender of the will to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

**CORPUS MYSTICUM AND MARGERY KEMPE**

*The Book of Margery Kempe* is both an enactment and an extension of Love’s eucharistic model of lay devotional reading. Not only is the Mirror a primary source for many of Margery’s meditations, but she also embodies many of Love’s ideals: throughout the Book, Margery expresses a strong preference for emotional and physical forms of devotion in opposition to more intellectual and contemplative forms, and she intently structures her spiritual practice around the Eucharist. Like the Mirror, the Book focuses on such devotional issues as the relationship between the Eucharist and lay intellect, the relationship between the Eucharist and the lay community as a whole, and the importance of bodily, affective devotion to the consecrated host.

However, the Book enlarges Love’s focus on the laity to consider more directly the communal nature of eucharistic piety. Though Margery views her own eucharistic devotion as a primarily individual encounter with the divine, the Book progressively depicts her piety as having communal significance. Margery’s dramatic eucharistic piety reveals to readers the separation between Christ’s physical body and the flawed, fragmented community of believers that is supposed to signify the body of Christ. The Book critiques the medieval English community’s failure to follow its own beliefs—by engaging in sloth or lechery, for example—and therefore its failure to fulfill its role as the corporate body of Christ. In a manner more akin to Langland than Love, the Book examines the social problems that create a gap between the corpus Christi (the

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27. According to Sarah Beckwith, the Mirror reaffirms the indispensability of the clergy—and the role of the laity as blind believers—by reaffirming the Mass as “the public, clerically controlled means of manipulating Christ’s body.” Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 64.
physical body of Christ present in the consecrated host) and the *corpus mysticum* (the Christian community which that body should allegorically signify), but the *Book*'s solution to this gap is essentially Love's: lay submission to both divine and clerical authority.

Despite widespread acknowledgement that Margery’s piety centers on the Eucharist, there is not to my knowledge any scholarly work focused on this important feature of the text.28 One of the lasting aftereffects of the feminist recovery of Margery Kempe beginning in the 1980s has been that scholars tend to predominately read the *Book* as autobiography or even a sort of auto-hagiography rather than the genre that the *Book* explicitly asserts that it is: a religious treatise.29 I do not wish to deny the importance or value of such scholarship, nor Margery Kempe’s real historical existence and authorship. However, by reading the *Book* in this way exclusively, we risk missing not only how the *Book* imagines itself as being read, as Krug has persuasively argued, but we also leave unexamined the central object of Margery’s piety: the Eucharist.30 Throughout this chapter, in order to eschew controversies about authorship as well as to avoid focusing on the *Book* as autobiography, I refer to the voice and inscribed intention of the text as simply “the *Book*” and refer to the *Book*’s protagonist as “Margery.”31

When we read the *Book* as a devotional treatise, we see that although Margery is certainly audacious in the manner in which she promotes her model of piety—reclaiming her virginity after fourteen children, publicly criticizing lay person and cleric alike—that model is itself profoundly and explicitly in line with the orthodox model outlined by Love. My interpretation of the *Book*

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28. I wish to take up Christopher Bradley’s challenge that scholars attempt to read religious texts for how they “made sense to those persons who created or read them; along with a conviction that the ways in which they made sense to those individuals, not just rationally but emotionally, culturally, and practically, are worth scholarly attention.” Christopher G. Bradley, “Censorship and Cultural Continuity: Love’s *Mirror, the Pore Caitif,* and Religious Experience before and after Arundel,” *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2011), 119.


31. The conventional distinction in scholarship on the *Book* has generally been Lynn Staley’s: to distinguish between “Kempe,” the author, and “Margery,” the character. Sarah Salih has productively argued for using the name “Margery” without drawing any sharp distinctions between these roles. Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 171.
as fundamentally conservative thus differs radically from the many scholarly interpretations of it as a work of religious and political dissent. Although heresy and orthodoxy are in the eye of the beholder, it is clear that the *Book* uses the Eucharist as a way of structuring, for both Margery and the reader, a piety that views itself as orthodox. Throughout the *Book*, Margery criticizes individual members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy for their sinful behavior, but she does not criticize either the structure of the medieval church or its theology in any fundamental way.

Margery models a self-consciously orthodox version of lay piety and lay reading centered on the Eucharist. Margery’s devotion to the Eucharist is central to the *Book*: Christ instructs her to receive special permission to receive the Eucharist weekly (I.5), she has a vision of the consecrated host fluttering like a dove (I.20), her violent sobbing episodes occur most frequently during the Mass, she puts out a fire in St. Margaret’s Church by requesting that the sacrament be brought before the fire (I.67), she frequently observes processions of the sacrament, and she engages in a pilgrimage to see hosts miraculously transformed into blood at Wilsnack (II.4–5). When Margery is accused of heresy and brought before the Archbishop of York, Margery utters a quintessentially orthodox statement of belief in transubstantiation when she explains how the consecrated host “is hys very flesch and hys blood and no material bred, ne nevyr may be unseyd, be it onys seyd” (I.48, 235). The *Book* does not go on to narrate all the questions—“as many as thei wolde askyn hir” (I.48, 235)—but instead lets her clear description of transubstantiation stand in as evidence of her orthodoxy. Her response not only affirms her personal eucharistic piety but also represents her complete adherence to the teaching of ecclesiastical authority.

33 As John Arnold notes, Margery’s answer “is exemplar in its orthodoxy—one might even say strenuously exemplary—and cer-


tainly informed by a knowledge of what one should not say and where no doubt should be left.”

Although she will go on later in the same chapter to criticize priests who do not properly respect their own priestly offices, she does not launch a critique of the priestly role. For Margery, any corruption within the church stems from individuals’ failures to fulfill their proper roles; there is not a systemic problem with the roles themselves.

The tension between Margery’s inward devotion to Christ’s physical body and the community’s failure to practice similar devotion is sharpest in Book II. As Margery undertakes various travels as an older woman, she is frequently rejected by different groups of pilgrims and communities that find her either embarrassing or annoying. When Margery is offered the opportunity to travel on the feast of Corpus Christi to visit the Holy Blood of Wilsnack—miraculously bleeding hosts that became a site of pilgrimage in the late fourteenth century—she accepts on the condition that she have “good felaschep” (II.4, 400), a condition that implies both a practical concern for her physical well-being and the importance of fellowship to the experience of the Eucharist. After most of her traveling companions abandon her because of her weeping, Margery’s guide forces her to walk too quickly, without regard for the fact that she is both aged and ill. Eventually, some generous women have to bring Margery in a wagon so that she can see the Holy Blood. Throughout this episode, the Book emphasizes the disjunction between the feast of Corpus Christi, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the startlingly cruel behavior of Margery’s fellow Christians.

Margery’s piety consistently points out to readers the separation between Christ’s physical body and the flawed, fragmented community of believers that is supposed to signify the body of Christ. According to the Book, Christ purposefully uses Margery’s exceptional and highly individual eucharistic piety to reveal the Christian community’s need to reform itself into the just and orderly body of Christ, allegorically signified by the Eucharist. In its opening chapters, the Book depicts Margery’s initial eucharistic devotion as individual, internal, and centered on identification with the crucified Christ. When, in the fifth chapter Christ tells Margery that he wants her to receive the Eucharist weekly, he presents eucharistic reception as an inward sacramental alternative to an outward and social meal. Christ demands that Margery give up eating meat and “instead of that flesch, thow shalt etyn my flesch and my blod, that is the very body of Crist in the sacrament of the awter” (I.5, 71–72). Not only

34. Arnold, “Margery’s Trials,” 84.

35. As Catherine Sanok argues, Margery’s social critique lies in challenging “important fictions of community: the possibility of reconciling spiritual and social priorities and the existence of a community defined by shared religious ideals.” Sanok, Her Life Historical, 116–44.
is Christ’s flesh a spiritually superior food, but her weekly reception also sets her apart from members of the wider community, who receive the Eucharist much less frequently. And indeed, directly after commanding her frequent eucharistic reception, Christ explains, “Thow schalt ben etyn and knawyn of the pepul of the world as any raton knawyth the stokfysch” (I.5, 72). Margery’s inward and private reception of the Eucharist will not bring her closer to the corpus mysticum, the corporate body of Christ; rather, it will bring her into closer identification with the suffering of Christ at the crucifixion, rejected and humiliated by his community. Christ wants Margery to eat his flesh so that she, too, can be devoured by her community. If the Book suggests any identification with the community at all here, it is that she eats Christ in the same way that her community eats her. The identification with the community is thus an identification based on shared sin, not on shared community.

Margery’s devotion to the Eucharist is often a marker of her own individual sanctity, setting her apart from the wider Christian community. When Margery has a vision of the sacrament fluttering like a dove at the consecration and desires to have more eucharistic visions, Christ tells her that, although she will not see any more than she has already seen, she should be satisfied because, “My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse” (I.20, 129). Christ explicitly tells Margery that her vision ought to satisfy her, not for any specific or rich spiritual meaning it contains, but because Margery’s vision is different and superior to even the visions of St. Bridget of Sweden. For Margery, the Eucharist’s importance stems partly from her exclusive access to it. Far from representing communal unity here, it represents exclusion. When Margery asks what the significance of this vision is, Christ goes on to explain to her that it foretells an earthquake that will occur out of his own vengeance for the people’s sins. The vision signifies the sins of the people and how Christ has deliberately set Margery apart from others. In fact, “The mor envye thei han to the for my grace, the bettyr schal I lofe the” (I.20, 130). Christ initially asks Margery to seek suffering in the form of the human community’s rejection in order to receive more of his love.

However, Margery’s piety is never private; Christ ensures that her performance of eucharistic devotion is a public sign of the community’s need to reform itself. Margery’s obtrusive and self-righteous eucharistic piety becomes a call for the community’s repentance and, ultimately, the instrument of Christ’s mercy. Immediately after hearing about the upcoming earthquake, Margery begs Christ for mercy and asks what she can do to protect the people. When Christ replies, the Book details that “owyr merciful Lord seyde: ‘I may no mor, dowtyr, of my rytfulnesse do for hem than I do’” (I.20, 130). The Book describes Christ as merciful at the very moment at which he
is apparently refusing to be merciful and then suggests that he has already offered his people all that he can for their conversion. It becomes clear that the instrument of God’s mercy is in fact Margery herself. Margery’s status as having a unique claim to holiness is itself a sign of the community’s sinfulness and therefore a sign that they need to turn to God for forgiveness. It is noteworthy that Margery never has a bloody vision of the Eucharist as we might expect, such as a child or a Man of Sorrows rising from the host; the visible sign of Christ’s body in this text becomes Margery’s body, weeping and wailing. When, later in the Book, priests try to give Margery the Eucharist privately so that she does not disturb the rest of the community with her sobbing, her weeping becomes even more dramatic so that she needs two men to hold her up while she receives the Eucharist. According to the Book, God does not send her these ecstatic outpourings simply for the sake of her own spiritual benefit and her feelings of “the habundawns of lofe” (I.56, 273). Rather God tells her, “Dowtyr, I wil not han my grace hyd that I yeve the, for the mor besy that the pepil is to hyndryn it and lette it, the mor schal I spredyn it abrood and makyn it knowyn to alle the worlde” (I.56, 273). Margery’s dramatic reaction to the Eucharist is a result of the public rejection of her. In this way, her piety is not just a sign of her own holiness but also of the community’s need for redemption.

The Book depicts Margery’s singular holiness as a spiritual benefit to the greater community. During a Corpus Christi procession in which the clergy process the consecrated host through the town, Margery follows the procession with what is initially a primarily inward devotion, “wyth holy thowtys and meditacyon” (I.45, 222). The nature of the eucharistic encounter changes, however, once a woman comes “be this creatur and seyd: ‘Damsel, God yef us grace to folwyn the steppys of owr Lord Jhesu Crist’” (I.45, 223). It is unclear what this woman’s intention is in approaching Margery, whether it is to give Margery a spiritual exhortation to follow Christ or whether she regards Margery as a holy woman who will help her in her own attempts to follow Christ. Both women at this moment are literally following Christ because they are following the consecrated host, so the woman’s plea is both for an imitatio Christi in the sense that they ought to try to be more Christ-like in their actions and a literal acknowledgement that they are graced to be following the host on Corpus Christi day. Regardless of the woman’s intention, her comment highlights the social and physical surroundings in which Margery is engaged, and it is this social circumstance that prompts Margery’s ecstatic response. The Book narrates how “that worde wrowt so sor in her herte and in her mende that sche myth not beryn it” (I.56, 223). Margery’s recognition of the immediacy of
Christ’s body renders her physically unable to contain her feelings. Although she is overcome with emotion to the extent that she needs to leave the procession and go inside, she does not leave the Christian community. Rather, eating in the houses of strangers becomes an opportunity for her emotional displays to inspire those who host her to transform their own lives with contrition. Likewise, when Margery asks for the Eucharist to be brought out to stop a fire at St. Margaret’s church, she does so because she believes that the presence of the Eucharist will save not just the building, but will be an act of mercy on the people (I.67). Here, Margery’s devotion to the Eucharist literally saves a church, a building that metonymically stands in for the parish community. Margery’s eucharistic piety is beneficial to the community, both because of and despite how her piety shows her superior holiness.

At the end of Book II, Margery’s piety begins to look increasingly individual and contemplative, but through her prayer, she provides a script for readers to perform in imagining a communal intimacy with Christ. The Book’s closing prayer offers a vision of a union of Eucharist, Christian community, and Margery, specifically describing how Margery says the prayer in church “knelyng befor the sacrament” (421). After saying the hymn, “Veni creator spiritus,” a Pentecost hymn that marks the historical birth of the Christian church and, as discussed in Piers Plowman, celebrates the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community, she begins her own prayer. She first thanks God for the miraculous events of her life and then prays that her weeping will transform the lives of both laity and clergy to make all the world “for to han the mor sorwe for her owyn synnys, for the sorwe that thu hast yovyn me for other mennys synnys” (423). Margery’s weeping becomes a good work for the spiritual community. She goes on to pray for mercy for a variety of groups of people and concludes by placing her prayer and life in the context of the lives of saints and biblical figures, such as Lazarus and Mary of Egypt. The Book closes by inviting readers to pray with Margery for the union of corpus mysticum and corpus Christi, a union made possible through eucharistic devotion and the very process of reading the Book itself.

READING MARGERY KEMPE AS READER

Margery’s plea for communal unity at the end of the Book may initially seem disjunctive, shifting from her self-glorification to a prayer for Christian unity. The Book invites readers to pray along with Margery for Christian unity; however, this prayer is a particularly challenging one: Margery is a woman who
is difficult to like. Indeed, one of the most distinctive elements of Margery’s piety for both modern readers and for those figures who encounter her in the Book itself is that she is often disruptive, self-righteous, annoying, unsettling, or embarrassing. By presenting Margery as an alienating figure and one with whom it is difficult to identify, the Book challenges readers to see Margery as part of the *corpus mysticum*. If readers can do that, they can begin to pray with her for the community and pray for a corporate body of Christ that more closely resembles the community of saints that her closing eucharistic prayer projects. In this section, I argue that Margery’s dramatic behavior allows the Book not only to show Margery as a model for pious reading but also to ask readers to focus on what it means to read devotionally. The Book imagines devotional reading as a process modeled on the Eucharist: it is a process of inward transformation that invites readers to hold in tension the categories of individual and communal, worldly and divine, even as readers work hard to imagine those categories as unified. Following Love’s model, the Book depicts eucharistic reading as a difficult willed process. For the Book, eucharistic reading is a process of willing to be unified with a body that will always to some extent be inaccessible. Such a reading practice requires readers to engage in the often alienating and painful struggle to become one with the body of Christ, both *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum*.

The figure of Margery encourages readers to reflect on the purpose and method of devotional reading. As many scholars have noted, the Book draws heavily on hagiography, particularly the life of St. Bridget of Sweden, in its depiction of Margery.\(^36\) Although such self-conscious saintly modeling certainly demonstrates a sense of Kempe’s own self-importance, I believe that it should also call our attention to how the Book was meant to be used, providing a model of a lay person modeling herself on the devotional literature to which she has access.\(^37\) Margery Kempe was almost certainly a real historical figure, but the depiction of her in the Book is clearly an amalgamation of a variety of devotional models and, as such, provides a valuable model for show-

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ing lay readers how they are to read.\textsuperscript{38} The \textit{Book of Margery Kempe} is both a response to books of religious devotion and itself one of those books.\textsuperscript{39}

By repeatedly depicting itself as a devotional book about devotional reading, the \textit{Book} encourages readers to think about how reading might be a transformative process modeled on the Eucharist. In particular, in Margery’s exemplum of the bear and the pear tree, the \textit{Book} explores the disjunction between \textit{corpus mysticum} and \textit{corpus Christi}, and suggests that personal transformation through devout reading is fundamental to bridging that gap. Devotional reading is essential in helping the individual believer and the wider Christian community understand and embody the \textit{corpus mysticum}. When Margery is arrested and brought before the Archbishop of York, she tells the story of a priest who sees a hideous bear eat the beautiful flowers off a pear tree, and then “whan he had etyn hem, turnyng hys tayl-ende in the prestys presens, vouydyd hem owt ageyn at the hymyr party” (I.52, 254). A hermit then interprets this apparently disturbing event for the priest, explaining how the pear tree represents the priest himself, and the flowers are the beauty of the sacraments and his priestly office. However, because of the priest’s lack of devotion, “be thy mysgovernawns, lych onto the lothly ber, thu devowryst and destroist the flowerys and blomys of vertuows levyng” (I.52, 255). The priest particularly represents the bear because he says his mass without devotion and then receives “the frute of evyrlestyng lyfe, the sacrament of the awter, in ful febyl disposicyon” (I.52, 255). The fruit of the pear tree represents the Eucharist, the fruit of everlasting life. This exemplum’s clever attack on clerical sin and excess is effective partly because of its central image, an image that has eucharistic implications. If the pear blossoms represent the sacraments, the Eucharist foremost among them, and if the bear’s visible defecation represents the priest’s performance of the sacraments, Margery seems to be comparing the Eucharist to excrement.\textsuperscript{40} This comparison is evocative of Lollards who questioned the sacred nature of the host by pointing out that


\textsuperscript{39} Clarissa Atkinson contends that “Margery’s book is especially valuable because it is a response” to other vernacular religious writings. Atkinson, \textit{Mystic and Pilgrim}, 218.

\textsuperscript{40} Lynn Staley also discusses the eucharistic nature of this exemplum. Staley, \textit{Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions}, 83–126.
the Eucharist ultimately ends up in “sepibus turpiter fetentibus” (foul stinking privies).41 However, the excrement is the one element of the exemplum that Margery does not interpret; she leaves the connection between feces and Eucharist unspoken. Rather than focus on what has happened to the flowers/sacraments, Margery forces listeners to focus not on the bear’s excrement but on the visible and disgusting act of defecation. In this way, the exemplum suggests that the priest is treating the sacrament as if it were feces. It is the priest’s performance of the sacrament that is scandalous and revolting, not the sacrament itself. In this way, Margery’s exemplum creates a sharp opposition between the sacramental body of Christ and the human body through which that body is produced.

In short, the tale centers on the apparent disjunction between the corpus Christi and corpus mysticum. In this way, the priest comes to stand for all priests, and indeed all Christians, questioning their worthiness to receive the Eucharist at all. The opposition between the beauty of the pear blossoms and the bear, between sacrament and priest, reveals one of Margery’s fundamental points throughout the Book: fifteenth-century Christians are not worthy of the body of Christ, and they do not embody Christ’s corporate body. Rather, they have transformed the corporate body of Christ into a loathly bear.

Even as the exemplum contrasts the corporate and sacramental bodies of Christ, it provides a eucharistic model of devotional reading, including a model for how the reader is meant to approach the Book itself. After Margery finishes the exemplum, a clerk who had previously questioned Margery exclaims that “this tale smyth me to the hert” (I.52, 256). Although Margery had deliberately not mentioned any particular priest in the tale, the clerk recognizes himself in the tale and later begs Margery for her forgiveness.42 Margery explains that such an interpretive practice is her intent when she details how a priest that she knows “seyth many tymes in the pulpit, ‘Yyf any man be evyl plesyd wyth my prechyng, note hym wel, for he is gyylty’” (I.52, 256).

41. For example, one Norfolk Lollard, Margery Baxter of Martham, ridiculed the way in which the doctrine of transubstantiation seems to posit that there are thousands of gods eaten by thousands of priests every day and then “comedunt et commestos emittunt per posteriora in sepibus turpiter fetentibus” (consumed and excreted through their rears into foul stinking privies). Norman P. Tanner, ed. Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1482–31 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 45. Translation from Windeatt’s edition of Book, 254 n. 4228.

According to Margery, the proper way to listen to preaching and spiritual teaching is to avoid looking for the personal flaws of a particular individual, and instead look to see yourself and your own sins reflected. Listeners and readers are supposed to be cut to the heart so that they can begin a process of transformation. When read in this way, the exemplum is not just an exemplum for the priest in the Book, it is an exemplum for every Christian who engages in church ritual and receives the Eucharist. The exemplum thus asks readers to transform their inward states and their outward actions toward the community in order to transform the loathly bear into the corporate body of Christ. Just as Margery challenges the clerk, the Book challenges readers to look beyond Margery’s personal characteristics and to see what her behavior and her words reveal about their own spiritual failings.

The Book frequently depicts both Margery and her ecstatic eucharistic piety as alienating to the community around her, and the Book thus challenges readers to accept the alienation and distance that is so often at the heart of even the most fervent eucharistic devotion in Middle English texts. Throughout the Book, the spiritual identification between individual and Christ, and the unity between individual members of the Christian community, seem to be goals at odds with one another. Numerous scholars have pointed out a tension in the Book between spiritual transcendence and Margery’s self-identification with the sinful physical world, between metaphor and literal reality.  

While some scholars have suggested that the text aims to redeem the world and the flesh, others have argued that the text is fundamentally contemplative and rejecting of the social world. I would argue that part of the challenge that scholars have had in determining whether the Book is encouraging readers toward a fully embodied piety or a contemplative piety that rejects the physical world is that Margery’s piety is fundamentally eucharistic. She loves Christ who is both her real and metaphorical lover and whose blood she really does physically drink on a weekly basis. The Eucharist does not ultimately demand that believers reject either category, nor does it suggest that they are blurred together. Rather, the Eucharist holds these ideas in tension and their

43. For example, Nicholas Watson argues that, “Kempe presents her life as following two, apparently contradictory, trajectories: towards ever greater perfection on the one hand, and towards ever closer identification with the sinful world around her on the other.” Watson, “Making of The Book of Margery Kempe,” 418.

irreconcilability is part of what provides the sacrament’s ultimate appeal. The Eucharist represents a unity between the world and the divine, but it is a unity that is uncomfortable and difficult for believers to imagine.

Like Nicholas Love’s Mirror, the Book depicts this contradictory and alienating eucharistic devotion as a willed process. As Jessica Barr has shown, Margery Kempe’s religious practices are predominately affective, but that affective piety is predicated upon a volitional union with the divine. Despite the often seemingly uncontrollable nature of Margery’s weeping, the Book depicts her form of bodily affective piety as a choice. For example, Margery is initially unwilling to marry God the Father because she so intently chooses to focus on the physicality of Christ’s body (I.35). Although Margery does gradually move toward a somewhat more contemplative model by the conclusion of the Book, her piety remains resolutely bodily and affective. In this way, her piety is what Nicholas Love imagined lay piety should be. In the sixty-fourth chapter, Christ tells Margery that he wants a volitional union with her: “Yf thou wilt be buxom to my wyl, I schal be buxom to thy wil. Wher is a bettyr token of love than to wepyn for thi Lordys love?” (I.64, 301). Christ defines his relationship with Margery as a chosen mutual loving submission, and he explains that her weeping is a sign of that perfect union of wills. Like Nicholas Love’s reader, Margery is a willing participant in her own affective suffering in service of God.

For Margery, this eucharistic reading practice centers on identification with the Virgin Mary. Mary is the perfect image of affective devotion through suffering in many medieval texts and images. She is also a model of willing submission to God in her response to Gabriel’s announcement that she is to give birth to Christ: fiat mihi (let it be done to me). Margery much more frequently identifies with Mary in her Passion meditations than she does with Christ himself. Part of this tendency to identify with the mother rather than the son comes directly from Love’s text’s influences on the Book. When Margery travels to Jerusalem and stands on Calvary, the place of the crucifixion, she

fel down that sche myght not stondyn ne knelyn, but walwyd and erstyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowed voys as

thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr, for in the cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. Beforn hir face sche herd and saw in hir gostly syght the mornyng of owyr Lady, of Sen John and Mary Mawdelyn, and of many other that lovyd owyr Lord. (I.28, 162–63)

Margery’s dramatic actions on Calvary are certainly in response to Christ’s pain, both remembered and in her vision. However, she does not identify with Christ at this moment. Rather, she imagines herself in Mary’s place, gazing on Christ from the foot of the cross. She sees Christ crucified; she does not imagine it being done to her. She is identifying with Mary identifying with Christ. It is the interplay of identifications between Margery, mother, and child that makes this episode so sensational. Christ experiences pain, Mary identifies with him, Margery identifies with her, and the emotion is so powerful that it overflows Margery’s body and marks the start of her dramatic public weeping. When Margery later has another vision of the Passion, she wonders how Mary was able to endure witnessing Christ’s suffering and exclaims, “Lord, I am not thi modir. Take awey this peyn fro me, for I may not beryn it. Thi Passyon will sle me” (I.67, 309). Although Margery eventually recognizes that her visions are a spiritual gift, she associates Mary with an enlarged capacity for emotional suffering. This sort of suffering, according to the Book, is a form of devotion that lay readers should desire and that both Love and the Book spend much of their time asking readers to imagine. It is spiritually productive to emotionally identify with the Virgin Mary at her moment of greatest emotional suffering: when she is witnessing Christ’s suffering.

This imitatio Mariae becomes a eucharistic reading practice, a process of willed suffering in order to become one with Christ. The Book positions Margery as a spiritual mother, drawing on and superseding Margery’s physical motherhood of fourteen children. In the eighty-sixth chapter of the first book, Christ directly thanks Margery for her devotion to him and particularly and repeatedly thanks her for her devotion to the Eucharist. At the same time, he thanks her that “thu clepist my modyr for to comyn into thi sowle, and takyn me in hir armys, and leyn me to hir brestys and yevyn me sokyn” (I.86, 372). As Liz Herbert McAvoy argues, Margery’s insistence on receiving the Eucharist weekly allows her to transform her earthly role as mother into a more spiritual category and to assert that the child who will fulfil her will not be that born of her own body, but is the divine child who will enter her body as sustenance in the form of the Host and keep her as its figurative mother in a perpetual state of grace. In effect, she will enter a state of perpetual pregnancy, but the progeny
will be a grace which she will hold within herself and which will direct her on her desired path towards perfection.  

Here, Christ explicitly links the Eucharist with breastfeeding, but it is Margery who is helping Christ to be fed. Christ feeds Margery through his own body in the Eucharist, and Margery nurses Christ in her soul. Both of these models of ingestion are metaphorical to a certain extent, but they represent the exchange of identities and bodies that the Book sets up as the eucharistic ideal. Immediately after Christ tells Margery early in the Book that she should begin receiving the Eucharist weekly, an anchorite confirms the legitimacy of Christ’s message by referring to Christ as lactating: “Dowtyr, ye sowkyn evyn on Crystys brest” (I.5, 74). When the anchorite describes how Margery nurses at Christ’s breast, he conveys that not only is her vision divine but that Christ wants to be intimately physically connected to Margery, and he makes that physical connection through the Eucharist. For the Book, the Eucharist provides a physical intimacy with Christ that is both metaphorical and real. The Eucharist troubles the boundary between reality and metaphor, between physical and spiritual maternity, between community and solitary devotion. Christ as mother and as Eucharist brings together the intimacy of affective devotion with submission to a parental figure.

This interplay between intimacy and disciplined submission in eucharistic devotional reading is most fully realized in the Book’s retelling of the noli me tangere episode from John’s gospel. The episode demonstrates that affective piety is a desire to long for a body that is primarily available through mediation, imagination, and figuration. In the Book’s retelling of the episode, when Margery witnesses Christ telling Mary Magdalene not to touch his resurrected body, Margery is amazed that Mary Magdalene rejoiced “for yfy owr Lord had seyd to hir as he dede to Mary, hir thowt sche cowed nevyr a ben mery. That was whan sche wolde a kissyd hys feet and he seyd, ‘Towche me not.’” (I.81, 356). When Margery refuses to relinquish a physical connection with Christ, she insists on a fully physical form of piety in what is fundamentally a rejection of Christ’s command. She recognizes that her desire for Christ’s body can never be fulfilled, but she nevertheless will go on desiring Christ’s body with an insatiable appetite. Of course, her refusal of distance is in some ways futile.

47. McAvoy, Authority and the Female Body, 49.
48. As Caroline Walker Bynum explains, the image of Jesus as a mother reflected a move in the late Middle Ages toward a more personal and emotional version of God: “It was peculiarly appropriate to a theological emphasis on an accessible and tender God, a God who bleeds and suffers less as a sacrifice or restoration of cosmic order than as a stimulus to human love.” Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 133.
because Margery is not physically present at the resurrection; she is having a vivid meditation on the scene as suggested by Nicholas Love. In the Mirror, Love emphasizes that lay readers should insist on physical devotion to Christ and concludes his version of the gospel narrative by suggesting that “afterward he suffrede hir to touch him, & to kysse boþe hands & feete, or þei depart¬eden” (198). And just as Love imagines that Christ ultimately did let Mary touch him, Margery imagines that, if she were present as Mary is present at the resurrection, she would have been miserable to have been refused by Christ. However, what is notable about this scene is that Mary Magdalene has a much more immediate physical connection with Christ than Margery does because Mary is literally in the same historical time and place as Christ. What Margery imagines is that she herself would feel miserable if she were so close to Jesus but unable to touch him. Watching Jesus does not have quite the same effect on her.49 Margery’s insistence on touch ultimately supports precisely Love’s version of lay piety: a recognition that there are other modes of piety beyond the physical and emotive, but an active refusal of those forms. By insisting on physical closeness, Margery recognizes that a degree of metaphor and distance will always be between herself and Christ’s body. In her influential analysis of this episode from the Book, Carolyn Dinshaw argues that “Margery’s whole story is a record of her inability to will that tactile contact or accept its inac¬cessibility—she is unable finally to write herself out of her earthly community and into a spiritual one.”50 On the contrary, I want to suggest that this scene demonstrates Margery’s choice to consistently long for a body she knows is to some extent always inaccessible, always treading a fine line between literal presence and metaphorical comparison. Margery is actively refusing a possibility for contemplation offered by scripture and instead choosing to long for a body that she must always regard as at some distance.

The Book of Margery Kempe and Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist to lay devotion and show how the Eucharist functions as a symbol of willing subjection before the divine. In his Mirror, Love presents his written text as a tool for lay people to engage in a pleasurable surrender of the will to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, a surrender dependent on the intangible nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The Book of Margery Kempe not only enacts Love’s model of devo-


50. Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, 164.
tion but asks readers to consider the eucharistic nature of their own reading practices by depicting devotional reading as a transformative but often difficult process that does not provide the easy avenue toward affective union that it seems to promise. Both texts ask readers to submit to the Eucharist, desire physical contact with Christ, and recognize that there is pleasure in this perpetual state of longing for knowledge of Christ that they cannot have. Both texts ask lay readers to recognize that this willful submission is not just the best path for their own salvation but also the duty of the lay community as a whole in maintaining the *corpus mysticum* and preserving the holiness of the Eucharist, an allegorical meaning that they should embody but never question. In celebrating the simultaneous alienation and intimacy of encountering Christ through the inscribed material object—both text and Eucharist—Nicholas Love and Margery Kempe draw on and shape the English eucharistic poetic tradition.