Inventing Womanhood
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CHAPTER 4

VERNACULARITY, FEMININITY, AND AUTHORITY

Reinventing Motherhood in The Shewings of Julian of Norwich and The Book of Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe’s and Julian of Norwich’s lives suggest some of the ways in which women’s experiences in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries exceeded the extant gender stereotypes and vocabulary—in other words, the very issue that womanhood and related coinages began to address. But these women writers are not merely examples of a problem that concerned male poets; Julian and Margery are also grappling, perhaps even more urgently, with gender representations and terminology in their texts. These women are critical to a study of gender and language in the later Middle English textual tradition, then, not because they are female writers within that tradition (they are far from the only women in this category; as recent work by Mary C. Erler, Rebecca Krug, Catherine Sanok, and Claire Waters has underscored, women were involved in the production, circulation, and reception of religious and literary texts in multiple and complex ways) or because they significantly deal with gender in their texts. Julian and Margery are critical to this study because they consciously manipulate gendered vocabulary in order to address the shortcomings inherent in existing ways of imagining and labeling women and explore fraught questions about female power and authority. In other words, they participate in the processes that comprise the central focus of this book: developing terms for and representations of new concepts of femininity.

Margery and Julian not only share the general cultural and aesthetic context of the male writers in the previous chapters but also work with many of the same materials, including portrayals of the Virgin Mary and notions of feminine virtue. However, they employ a different strategy as they edge up to the same linguistic gap: rather than using the new word womanhood, they refashion motherhood.
It is impossible to know whether Julian and Margery never encountered the former term or knew and avoided it. However, the fact that Julian employs related words—manhood, childhood, fatherhood, and motherhood—while she does not use womanhood or a word often substituted for it, femininity, lends some credence to the latter scenario. If that hypothesis is correct, then there are many possible reasons for it. Perhaps these women writers did not wish to adopt a term that was being developed and employed primarily by men; perhaps it was already becoming—or had the potential to become—more limited in its denotation; or perhaps, conversely, they did not want to distract from the other purposes of their texts by putting forward their own construction of a word that was still unsettled enough to require a fresh definition with each usage.

We might also interpret Margery and Julian's avoidance of womanhood as characteristic of medieval women writers who, Nicholas Watson posits, tended to reshape established categories of femininity rather than proposing alternatives. They respond to gender stereotypes “neither by accepting nor by rejecting them, but rather by thinking through them in as active and positive a way as possible, identifying with them and even intensifying them to the point where their ‘authorized’ meaning (as understood, for example, by institutionally powerful men) undergoes basic shifts.” Watson continues, “For these women, it was less the stereotypes themselves that were seen as being the problem than a given interpretation of the stereotypes, which constantly threatened to devalue what women were concerned to think of as their ‘proper,’ positive meaning.”Perhaps this explains why Julian and Margery refashion the existing stereotype of motherhood rather than participating in the evolution of a wholly new term.

In this particular case, I would argue that there is a further positive justification for the choice: motherhood offers a clearer (and possibly less threatening) model for women's access to power. That model derives from various secular and spiritual sources, including depictions of the Virgin Mary as an authoritative figure, the traditional role of wives and mothers as mediators, and the acceptance of maternal nurturing as a power dynamic not only within earthly families but also between spiritual “parents” and “children.” Rather than trying to define a new model of feminine power, in other words, Julian and Margery can tweak established female roles to provide one that is consonant with their projects. Theresa Coletti’s and Nancy Bradley Warren's recent studies demonstrate that female spirituality offered a complicated but rich ground for creating an associated authority and these women writers took advantage of that as part of their literary strategies.

Even as they reform rather than refuse the stereotype, Julian and Margery create new possibilities for representing femininity in the vernacular. In other words, they contribute to the same project that the male poets undertook through coinages like womanhood and femininity, but from a different perspective. Paradoxically, on this issue Julian and Margery are not writing from outside the literary tradition—a
position that Jennifer Summit has shown as conventionally constructed for women writers even in the Middle Ages—but instead from more fully within it than the male poets examined in the previous chapters. The women adapt motherhood, a much older concept than womanhood that is also denoted by a more established term, and make use of the long literary history of Mary as mother. In this instance, the male poets whom we retrospectively perceive as foundational to the canon are, in fact, writing from a less central position. However, this does not make Julian and Margery’s approach any less novel or significant, nor does it sever their use of gendered vocabulary from male writers’; because motherhood is a component of womanhood, a reimagining of the former concept necessarily affects the latter, as well. Medieval authors had previously used motherhood to define a religious relationship and applied it almost exclusively to Mary herself, but Julian reshapes it as a category that applies to human women, as well, and both she and Margery use that altered concept to authorize themselves and their texts.

In making this move, both women redefine the idea of motherhood from human as well as spiritual perspectives. Caroline Walker Bynum identifies three primary maternal characteristics in spiritual writers: “the female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid).” Julian moves beyond a vision of motherhood as dependent upon specific events (“birth pangs” and “feeding”) to encompass the emotional experiences of mothering for biological and spiritual mothers. Margery acknowledges the negative and painful aspects of human motherhood, but uses that suffering to compare herself to Mary and then claim a parallel intercessory power and intimacy with Christ that eventually exceeds Mary’s.

These redefinitions of motherhood participate in the larger project of inventing womanhood. By increasing the value of motherhood, these writers are also revaluing womanhood; the former is an essential subcategory of the latter. By becoming authors and spiritual figures themselves, these women are also expanding potential female roles in society. As we have seen in previous chapters, male authors sometimes portrayed womanhood as a limiting rather than contributing factor in feminine power. Motherhood was an alternative available for reinvention in terms favorable to these women’s spiritual and authorial enterprises and accordingly becomes an important source of authority for them.

I. Redefining Motherhood:
Maternal Images and Words in the Shewings

*The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* is a novel undertaking; the first known book
by an English woman and the first known attempt to describe the experience of a female visionary from a first person perspective in vernacular English. In this project, Julian's contemporaries are not only other English mystics such as Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton but also Chaucer and Gower. Later Middle English poets share with devotional authors—particularly Julian—concerns about language and representing women. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins's excellent recent edition of the *Shewings* identifies language as Julian's primary focus, arguing that her text "is less concerned with ideas than it is intent to give birth to words that will be 'gretly stirrande to alle thaye that desires to be Cristes loverse.'" One mark of the critical divide between poetry and devotional texts, however, is that scholars tend to perceive Middle English as an up-and-coming literary language in poetry while seeing it as a common language—more accessible but also less authoritative than Latin—in religious texts of the same period. In Julian's case, new attention to the poetic qualities of her text is beginning to reverse this perception, but I want to stress here that all literary and devotional writers are making Middle English: they are developing more precise vocabulary to suit religious as well as aesthetic needs. Like the poets from the Chaucerian tradition, Julian is engaged in the process of creating language to meet her rhetorical requirements: she experiments in order to adapt or coin the words that will express her original ideas. Describing a vision from God demands, for her, a new vocabulary. And, also like the poets, Julian brings her interest in language to bear on the issue of how to think and write about women, which was at least as pressing in religious texts as courtly ones. The crucial term *motherhood* illustrates Julian's linguistic project and signifies her corresponding redefinition of women's spiritual and worldly roles.

Critical attention has generally focused on Julian's theology or on the differences between her short and long text in structure and content, but there is now also a renewed attention to her language and aesthetics. Denise Baker declared some time ago that Julian's *Shewings* "deserves to be acknowledged as the prose masterpiece of Ricardian literature," and this chapter contributes to the critical work that has taken up this perspective. While scholars have examined Julian's rhetoric, however, none has yet explored in detail her inventiveness with language—a sign that she participates in the evolution of Middle English as much as the courtly poets did—and how carefully she manipulates it as an aesthetic tool. This section considers her uses of language and feminine imagery to describe the motherhood of Jesus and examines how these narrative strategies address her two great challenges: writing about holy things and writing as a woman. I argue that Julian manipulates language to mark her descriptions and concepts as novel and sacred. Her representation of Christ as mother is the most significant example of that tactic; most critical attention has focused on how that representation affects medieval understandings of Christ, but I suggest that it also affects understandings of motherhood. Julian redefines *motherhood* to include not only spiritual nurturing
but also the continuing emotional and physical experience of human mothering. This redesigned motherhood creates space for Julian’s identity as a female spiritual authority and author and allows a different interpretation of the famous excision of the “I am woman” passage from the long text.

Julian’s redefinition of feminine roles overlaps with another of her primary aims: developing the language to express her holy visions and the theology they inspire. She resorts to the inexpressibility topos at several points, saying “I can not ne may not shew it as openly ne as fully as I would” (157), alluding to things that are “so mervelous that I can it not discrive” (287), and explaining that “for the gostely sighte, I have saide somedele, but I may never fulle telle it” (351). Julian never explicitly mentions English as a constraint, suggesting instead that the problem is rendering the holy in human language. Liz Herbert McAvoy identifies the phallogocentric nature of language as an additional barrier for Julian, one that she overcomes by paradoxically emphasizing the body and “collapsing . . . gender binaries.” It is not that the English vernacular fails where literary French or religious Latin might succeed; language itself falls short in multiple ways. Nonetheless, God supplies Julian with words as well as images and she must undertake the intellectual task of explicating both.

Julian deploys the inexpressibility topos in a literal fashion by combining it with word coinage. In part because she is engaged in a highly individual undertaking, it is impossible to ascertain what, if any, influences she had—textual or oral, literary or religious, direct or indirect. As a result, we cannot determine which words she might have encountered (including womanhood) and which she was creating for her own purposes. There are several words that she seems to be using in a special sense, including onnyng, homlyhede, fulhede, blindhede, and rightfullehede. Fulhede, for example, does appear in other texts but Julian uses it to convey something specific to her theology. The term often appears in the phrase “fulhede of joy,” designating the divine sense of completion and rightness that Christians should experience at the knowledge that Christ wishes to be “homely” with them and that, as Julian famously explains, “all shall be well.” For the words she creates and for the more generally known terms she modifies, Julian is precise in her usage. Describing the “rightfullehede of Gods working” at the first occurrence of the word, she explains that it “hath two fair properties: it is right and it is fulle. And so be all the workes of our lorde” (165). Because rightfullehede also appeared in works contemporaneous with Julian’s text, we cannot say with certainty that she originated the term. It is clear, however, that she is very conscious of the words she employs; here she breaks the word into its component parts to emphasize the exact meaning that she wishes it to convey to her audience.

As the examples above suggest, Julian makes particular and copious use of words with the -hed(e) suffix throughout the Shewings. The preference for -hed(e) over -ness marks her dialect, but some of the words appear to be her inventions.
while others were commonly used. Some also appear in the works of other English mystics, including *blindhede* and *fulhede*. The Sloane manuscript, which critics generally accept as the closest to Julian’s own language, contains more than fifty 
- hed(e) terms, most of them with multiple occurrences. This feature of Julian’s vocabulary takes on a significant pattern as the text uses the - hed(e) suffix with selective consistency. The same root may appear with that suffix in some instances and with a -ness suffix (or in another form with essentially the same meaning) elsewhere.

The - hed(e) words frequently appear in clusters and in passages with extraordinary visions or original theological concepts; they often mark a particular struggle to capture those ideas and images in language. I am not arguing that every time Julian uses a - hed(e) term she is actively struggling to find a language for her visions, nor that the use of - hed(e) words is the sole marker of those struggles in which she does engage. Relatively unusual words with the - hed(e) ending, however, do appear most often at these moments in the text and, in my view, she employs them to mark the distinctively divine nature of what she has seen. She defamiliarizes the vernacular to fit it to spiritual discussion and the - hed(e) suffix aids in this project by drawing attention to otherwise everyday diction.

Julian tends to use these - hed(e) words for two purposes: to distinguish descriptions as spiritual and to explicate the concepts that develop from her visions. In descriptive passages, - hed(e) terms mark the qualities being described as godly rather than ordinary. In the seventh chapter of the long text, Julian explains that all of her visions took place within the showing of Christ’s bleeding head:

The gret droppes of blode felle downe fro under the garlonde like pelottes, seing as it had comen oute of the veines. And in the coming oute they were browne rede, for the blode was full thicke. And in the spreding abrode they were bright rede. And whan it came at the browes, ther they vanished. And notwithstanding the bleding continued tille many thinges were sene and understonded, nevertheless the fairehede and the livelyhede continued in the same bewty and livelines.

The plentuoushede is like to the droppes of water that falle of the evesing of an house after a grete shower of raine, that falle so thicke that no man may nomber them with no bodely wit. And for the roundhede, they were like to the scale of hering, in the spreding of the forhede. The thre thinges cam to my minde in the time: pelettes, for the roundhede in the coming oute of the blode; the scale of herring, for the roundhede in the spreding; the droppes of the evesing of a house, for the plentuoushede unnumerable. This shewing was quick and lively, and hidous and dredfulle, and swete and lovely. (147; my emphasis)

Concluding the chapter, Julian refers to the “homelyhede” of this vision four times and describes the “fulhede of joy” it promises Christians (147–48). While “homely-
hede” and “fulhede” denote concepts specific to her developing theology, the other -bed(e) terms do not. They are part of Julian’s struggle to articulate a spiritual sight in words that will illustrate for her reader how the showing appeared and how it signified to her. She needs words that are vivid and suggestive, that can be commonly understood but are not merely ordinary descriptors. The “roundhede” of the drops of Christ’s blood, for instance, seems qualitatively different from the roundness of a wheel. When the process of description or explication becomes particularly complex or troubling, she often makes use of these -bed(e) words. That is not her only technique; in this passage, she also relies on figurative language, such as the images of eves and scales, and the paradoxical adjectives at the close to communicate the nature of the vision to the reader. Again, she is using the quotidian to express the divine and render it comprehensible, but even while using these everyday images and adjectives, Julian is working to signal the unique spiritual nature of her visions.

In the above example, the problem is one of description. In the forty-ninth chapter, a similar cluster of -bed(e) words appears around a problem of explication. Julian seeks to explain her ideas about the nature of God, including her view that God cannot be angry with us: “For thowe we fele in us wrath, debate, and strife, yet we be all mercifully beclosed in the mildehed of God and in his mekehed, in his benignnité, and in his buxomhede” (269; my emphasis). Another cluster occurs as Julian attempts to disentangle the multivalent symbolism of the servant’s clothing in the lord and servant parable: “The whit kirtel is his fleshe. The singlehede is that ther was right noght betwen the godhede and the manhede. The straighthede is poverte. The elde is of Adams wering. The defauting is the swete of Adams traveyle. The shorthede sheweth the servant laborar” (285; my emphasis). As in the descriptive passage, here the -bed(e) ending indicates the qualitatively different nature of spiritual qualities even when the word she uses to describe them might, in its root, be used to describe anything. Both of these examples involve the explication of ideas that are new: mildehed, mekehed, and buxomhede express the nature of God as incapable of real anger toward humanity while singlehede, straighthede, and shorthede illustrate human nature as not inherently evil or irredeemably sinful. Julian seeks a new vocabulary to accommodate such new theological concepts. The -bed(e) suffix may allude to established spiritual concepts that employ it, such as godhead and spiritual fatherhood, or it may invoke the idea that “Crist is oure hede” (219; see also 285 and 295). In addition, the suffix connotes a more substantial or enduring state of being than alternatives such as -ness and Julian may want to couch her theology in these more concrete terms. While both -bed(e) and -ness indicate a condition or quality, -ness was generally attached to adjectives and -bed(e), although originally used with adjectives, was also extended to nouns. Fulhede, as a result, seems more robust than fullness: it suggests a condition of being rather than a quality subject to change.

The central -bed(e) term in the Shewings is, of course, motherhood. While Julian does not coin this word, she does craft a new and individual definition of it as a
theological concept original to her visions: a condition of being that is spiritual as well as womanly. Critics have concentrated on her treatment of Christ’s motherhood, but Julian uses the idea much more broadly; she bases it on the Virgin Mary and includes the human experiences of child rearing as well as childbearing. She increases the value of motherhood by presenting it from a child’s point of view, as the child/Christian seeing mother/Jesus; recuperating its physical aspects; and imagining it as the common ground between the human and the divine—replacing manhood, which had previously been seen as the element that Christ shared with humanity—and ultimately revising ideas about womanhood.

Julian is not the first to apply maternal imagery to Christ. As Bynum discusses in *Jesus as Mother*, twelfth-century Cistercian monks famously used mothering as well as fathering imagery to describe their relationship to those in their care. Julian was also not the first to use the term *motherhood*; however, it was traditionally associated with the virgin Mary and Julian was among the first writers to apply *motherhood* to human women. Like the new word *womanhood*, then, Julian’s new definition of *motherhood* was significantly vernacular and secular. The word *motherhood* represents Julian’s linguistic techniques in response to the first major problem she faces—expressing the divine—but her elaboration of the concept of motherhood also helps her to address the second problem, writing as a woman. Julian uses her idea of motherhood to reassess the physical and womanly and then to authorize herself and her text.

Julian explains *motherhood* as follows:

> This fair, lovely worde, “moder,” it is so swete and so kinde in itselfe that it may not verely be saide of none, ne to none, but of him and to him that is very mother of life and of alle. To the properte of moderhede longeth kind love, wis-dom, and knowing; and it is God. For though it be so that oure bodely forth-bringing be but litle, lowe, and simple in regard of oure gostely forthbringing, yet it is he that doth it in the creatures by whom that is done. (313–15)

As she defines “moderhede,” Julian reminds us of the connection between human and spiritual mothering: if “bodely” motherhood is “little, lowe, and simple” (adjectives similar to those that Julian will later apply to Mary herself), it is still the foundation for the figure of “gostely” motherhood. The very word “moder” is an honorific, applicable to Christ and, in the Sloane manuscript, Mary, but commonly used to describe many women (or, in Julian’s language here, “creatures”), whose roles as mothers were important aspects of their social and marital value. Julian presents *motherhood* as estimable, a condition that encompasses important virtues and bridges the fleshly and the heavenly.

Julian’s emphasis on the word *motherhood* indicates a shift from the Cistercians’ focus; she imagines it as an emotional as well as physical experience and connects the concept to women rather than, as the Cistercians do, to men and their relation-
ships. I would argue that motherhood is significantly different from mother: while the verb to mother, particularly as the Cistercians use it, encompasses the physical acts of conceiving, giving birth, and breastfeeding, motherhood, particularly as Julian uses it, goes beyond such acts to the continuing experience of mothering. One is a biological condition (albeit applied metaphorically); the other is a largely emotional state of being and interacting. The Cistercians employ mother imagery in order to mediate relationships between men—a possibly problematic venture that this imagery facilitates by minimizing homoerotic overtones. Bynum suggests, “The Cistercian conception of Jesus as mother and abbot as mother reveals not an attitude towards women but a sense (not without ambivalence) of a need and obligation to nurture other men, a need and obligation to achieve intimate dependence on God.”

For the Cistercians, maternal imagery is about men; Julian’s motherhood imagery and theology applies more universally to humankind, but has a firm basis in womanhood.

Grace Jantzen has shown how Julian’s idea of motherhood is indebted to the notion of Holy Church as mother, but it also grows out of the popular conception of Mary’s motherhood. As a result, the basis of Julian’s concept of motherhood is both spiritual and womanly. Before moving into a detailed explication of the theology of Christ’s motherhood, Julian is careful to distinguish Mary’s motherhood from Christ’s: “Thus oure lady is oure moder, in whome we be all beclosed and of her borne in Crist. For she that is moder of oure savioure is mother of all that ben saved in our saviour. And oure savioure is oure very moder, in whome we be endlesly borne and never shall come out of him” (305). Mary’s motherhood—both literal and metaphorical—is the antecedent of and precedent for Christ’s motherhood. By grounding her concept in the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, Julian firmly claims the human as well as spiritual origins of the term. She draws an analogy between Christ’s enclosure in Mary and our enclosure in Christ, making Mary—the paragon of motherhood and womanhood—the basis for the concept of Christ’s spiritual motherhood. Julian often associates motherhood with Christ, or the “second person” of the Trinity, but also with God and the Trinity as a whole. These links strengthen the spiritual connotations of motherhood. She defines it as having sensual and substantial natures as well as mercy, pity, grace, and deep wisdom (307–11). Some of these—most notably mercy and pity—are conventional qualities of womanhood, as we have seen in the previous chapters. These associations recall that motherhood is a condition specific to women. In the Shewings, Julian founds motherhood on the exemplar of womanhood and female spirituality and, from this basis, extends it to Christ.

Most medieval theologians perceived and depicted Mary’s motherhood in terms of its main events: the Immaculate Conception and the birth and nursing of the holy infant. The scriptures describe few “mothering” experiences and indeed it is hard to imagine that God-made-flesh would require much human mothering.
Those moments that are described, such as Jesus’s visit with the scholars in the temple, indicate his independence and Mary’s limited role as a human mother. Although Julian finds her consideration of motherhood in Mary’s maternity, she expands it to include the larger experience of human motherhood, a lifetime of caring and service. As a byproduct of changing ideas about women, Julian alters conceptions of Mary. By pointing to Mary as a foundation, Julian’s theological concept of motherhood includes human women; by invoking the larger motherhood of Christ, Julian revalues women’s experiences more generally.

Julian maintains this focus on motherhood as an ongoing experience when she describes the motherhood of Christ, in spite of his presumed nature as a male figure. She explains that he “is oure very moder: we have oure being of him, where the ground of moderhed beginneth, with alle the swete keping of love that endlesly foloweth” (309). Motherhood, in other words, involves not only its beginnings—those images commonly utilized by the Cistercians and, more conventionally, by writers describing the maternity of Mary—but all “that endlesly foloweth.” Once the experience of motherhood begins, it never ends, whether for a human mother, Mary, or Christ. “Moder” is a persistent and enduring identity. In this concept, Julian relies not only on Mary’s holy motherhood but also on the human experience of motherhood, a vital aspect of womanhood; the love that “foloweth” the beginning of motherhood exists for human mothers, as well.

This wider vision of Christ’s motherhood requires a child’s perspective, drawing on scriptural injunctions to come to him as a child. All of Julian’s “evencristen” (235) are children in this metaphor and, speaking to and on behalf of them, she repeatedly identifies Christ as “our” mother: “oure very moder” (309, 311, 313), “oure precious moder Jhesu,” and “oure tender mother Jhesu” (313). Correspondingly, we should “use the condition of a childe,” “done as the meke childe,” and “use the properte of a childe” (317). Jennifer Bryan demonstrates that Julian portrays this mother-child connection as more positive and more enduring than was common in devotional texts. Furthermore, she builds on this metaphorical relationship with specific references to acts of mothering and what they signify in spiritual terms: “The moder may geve her childe sucke her milke. but oure precious moder Jhesu, he may fede us with himselfe, and doth full curtesly and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament that is precious fode of very life” (313). And in a longer passage:

The kinde, loving moder that woot and knoweth the neede of her childe, she kepeth it full tenderly, as the kinde and condition of moderhed will. And ever as it waxeth in age and in stature, she changeth her werking, but not her love. . . .

Thus he is our moder in kinde by the werking of grace in the lower perty, for love of the hyer. And he wille that we knowe it, for he wille have alle oure love fastened to him. (315)
Here Julian shows the “condition of moderhed” for human women in very positive terms, as analogous to Christ’s caring for us. Both passages above depict motherhood as experienced by the child; we are on the receiving end of these motherly emotions and actions rather than exhibiting them ourselves. Julian’s approach establishes the value of motherhood in its own right as a virtuous and holy condition that is feminine in its origins. Placing adult Christians in the position of children encourages an appreciation for what is being signified—Christ’s humanity and love—but it also implies an appreciation for the signifier—motherhood and mothers.

Julian’s broader treatment of motherhood also stresses its human physicality. She describes Christ’s motherhood as a condition of his Incarnation: “he arayed him and dight him all redy in oure poure flesh, himselfe to do the service and the office of moderhode in alle thing. The moders service is nerest, rediest, and sekerest: nerest, for it is most of kind; rediest, for it is most of love; and sekerest, for it is most of trewth” (313). Here again, all aspects of a “moders service” are highly valued. Motherhood is not any one event but an “office” and a “service”; indeed, the closest and best “service.” While traditional interpretations of Christ’s humanity described him as taking on manhood, opposing that term to godhead, Julian makes motherhood the mediating category—a category that opens the connection to women rather than focusing on men’s relation to Christ. Such motherhood is necessarily physical; in order to perform this “office,” Christ had to take on human flesh.

The Incarnation connects Christ to mankind (and, in the Shewings, womankind), but the dynamic also works in the opposite direction by connecting us to him. Julian emphasizes the value of our physical natures throughout the Shewings; in the sixth chapter, for example, she uses flesh as a metaphor for the relationship between humans and God: “For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the bones in the fleshe, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, clade and encosedde in the goodnes of God” (145). Flesh is not merely the metaphor here, however; it is also part of what gets recuperated—the “body” as well as the “soule” is “encosedde” in God. This greater value for human physicality becomes the foundation of Julian’s theology of motherhood: “God knit him [Christ] to oure body in the maidens wombe” and Mary’s motherhood prefigures Christ’s role as “oure very moder” (305), which leads to the reassessment of human motherhood. Christ’s connection to humanity through his physical nature is a necessary predicate for his motherhood, as Mary’s status as mother of Christ was a necessary predicate for her status as a spiritual mother to humanity. Rather than being diminished by its associations with the flesh, motherhood is elevated by those associations even as Julian expands its definition beyond them.

By founding her conception of motherhood on Mary, extending it to include the more complete experience of mothering, and asserting the worth of its physical
as well as spiritual aspects, Julian honors motherhood and, by extension, women and womanhood. In her *Shewings*, motherhood is an experience and an identity that is and should be valued. The fleshly aspect of motherhood does not detract from it but rather strengthens the connection between biological and spiritual motherhood: mothers are Christ-like. Julian does not praise women above men because of this—she consistently mentions *motherhood* with its counterparts in the Trinity, *fatherhood* and *lordhood*—but she creates for women a privileged position that potentially places them on equal standing with men. And by redefining motherhood, she revalues womanhood.

One of the other benefits Julian derives from her redefinition of motherhood is an implicit licensing of her own position as a woman writer. Significantly, the visions do not present this concept of motherhood directly; Julian develops it as she creates imagery to expound their teachings. If many medieval religious texts imagined fatherhood as a property of God and a quality of male religious authority, then motherhood might provide a model for a parallel form of female authority. Critics have suggested that, when she moves from the short text to the long, Julian excises references to herself as a woman in order to move toward a more universal view. However, I interpret this omission as a result of her theology of motherhood, which Julian develops only in the long text. This theology obviates any defense of her identity as a woman because her ideas about motherhood authorize her as a female writer; by creating a position analogous to Mary’s as mother, Julian shapes her text as a maternal gesture. She both gives birth to the text and, through it, serves as a spiritual mother and instructor to others.¹⁰

Julian’s identity as a woman licenses her text in one way, then, but it also creates some obstacles. The problem of language is exacerbated for a female mystic, as Sarah Beckwith notes: “the mystic must be a transmitter, and not a representor of that word [of God]. Her voice must not mix with, fuse with, talk with his.” ¹¹ Julian wrestles with this problem in a well-known passage from the short text of the *Shewings*:

> Botte God forbede that ye shulde saye or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille and freylye. . . . Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen? And that shalle ye welle see in the same matere that folowes after, if itte be welle and trewlye taken.

> Thane shalle ye sone forgette me that am a wreche, and dose so that I lette yowe nought, and behalde Jhesu that is techare of alle. (75)

This is the only moment in the short or long texts (aside from titles or chapter headings, which are likely scribal) that identifies Julian as a woman. Scholars have
traditionally read this passage as a defense against charges of Lollardy, addressing Paul’s injunction against women teaching or preaching. Julian does directly reject the identity of “techere” and position herself as merely the conduit for the message of “Jhesu that is techare of alle.” In other words, she crafts herself as vessel rather than voice. She omits this move in the later long text, however.

Even without the “I am a woman” passage, the long text preserves a clear sense of its author as female. Scribal headings identify the speaker as a “woman” and her status as an anchorite, the only religious way of life more popular with women than men, appears to have been relatively well known to her audience. Julian’s visions are necessarily filtered through her prior experiences as a woman in medieval society and possibly as a female religious figure in the Church; some scholars have argued that Julian was not only a laywoman before becoming an anchoress but also possibly a widow and even a mother. As Felicity Riddy observes, “Clearly A Book of Showings to a Young Widow would have a very different set of resonances.” Although Riddy is pointing up the differences between this title and A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich, it is also crucial to note the similarity between these two possible titles: in both cases (as, I would argue, in the various versions of the text itself), the showings are marked as those of a woman. This feature is integral to Julian’s authorial identity within the text.

Whether or not Julian was herself a biological mother, she conceives motherhood broadly enough to authorize her writing, as a condition with implications for women as a whole. By insisting on the relevance of human motherhood to the spiritual motherhood of Mary and Christ and by expanding motherhood to include emotional as well as physical experiences, Julian finds ways for human women to claim spiritual motherhood more fully. This metaphor, which was an important figure for spiritual authority among the Cistercians, now works powerfully for women, as well. In accessing the metaphor of spiritual motherhood herself, Julian concentrates on her likeness to Mary, its feminine exemplar. Julian’s revelation is highly personal; in spite of its minimal biographical details, the text is narrated from the first person and concerns her private visions and interpretations. She constructs the speaker within the text, however, as a self who speaks for and to humanity—hence, “I” often becomes “we” and, as Julian states, “by me alone is understonde alle” (235). Because she is writing as a woman, it seems a bold move to present herself as characteristic of mankind. Julian’s position is special (as the recipient of the visions) but representative (because her role is to share the visions widely). This makes her position as visionary author analogous to Mary’s position as holy mother: Mary is also special (as the mother of Christ) but representative (because she is a human woman). When Julian has a vision of Mary, she is conscious of “the littlehead of herselfe” but she is also “more then all that God made beneth her in worthines and in fullhead” (137–39). Similarly, Julian figures herself as a “simple creature” (125) but her complex and vivid visions mark her as divinely
favored. In both cases, the women themselves are modest while others are left to read the evidence of their special spiritual status.

Julian traces her connection to Mary even more directly through the eleventh revelation. In this showing, Julian first describes God’s love for Mary as symbolic of his love for “all mankind that shall be saved”: it is “as if he said: ‘Wilt thou se in her how thou art loved?’” (203–5). But Julian receives a more personal lesson: “hereof am I not lerned to long to see her bodely presens while I am here, but the vertuse of her blissed soule—her truth, her wisdom, her cherite—wherby I may leern to know myself” (205). This connection between Julian and Mary is not based on Mary’s role as a human woman but on her role as a spiritual and virtuous model. By considering Mary in this light, Julian learns “to know myself.” If Mary can be both “litille and simple” and “high and noble and glorious” (205) through her status as “blessed mother” (203), then Julian can aspire to a similar if not equal spiritual status because of their acknowledged likenesses and parallel spiritual motherhoods.

Mary gains reverence and authority due to her roles not only as the mother of Christ but also as the spiritual mother to humanity. The qualities of such motherhood include “mercy” and “tender love” (267), the very qualities that Julian thematizes in her text as she assures readers that “all shall be well.” In the context she has created, her identity as a woman makes her claim to spiritual motherhood stronger and more natural. In other words, because Julian has connected spiritual motherhood to human women, the authority inherent in that concept is more available to her because she is a woman. The Shewings, then, might be read as an act of spiritual motherhood—a tender attempt to teach Christ’s message of mercy and love to all Christians. The text seems designed to instruct its readers and inspire them to act accordingly, as a mother might instruct a child. Thus, “This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight” (379): acting as a spiritual mother, Julian has presented her text but its effect on the children of humanity remains to be seen.

It is possible that Julian, in her guise as spiritual mother, influenced Margery on these same ideas during their meeting, which Margery’s Book describes. Motherhood is absolutely central to both texts and their claims to authority; still, there are many and various differences between the two texts and their conceptions of motherhood and womanhood. This relationship is similar to that between Chaucer and Gower, where the former was the originator of the term womanhood but the latter was in some ways more radical in expanding and using the concept; Julian creates a new set of meanings for motherhood but Margery utilizes these meanings in dramatic new ways. While motherhood is at least as important in Margery’s text as in Julian’s, however, scholars have rarely remarked on Margery’s use of it. In the next section, I will argue that she is fully conversant with existing Maryology and other devotional models of motherhood but that she employs these models mainly
to revise them in a more assertive, protofeminist direction. It may have been Julian’s ideas about motherhood that inspired Margery’s use of the concept to appropriate authority for herself as a spiritual speaker and writer. While Julian connects spiritual motherhood to physical motherhood and implicitly licenses herself as a woman and a spiritual mother, however, Margery explicitly exploits her physical motherhood to gain the authority of spiritual motherhood and combines maternal with sexual imagery to express her extreme intimacy with Christ.

II. Reimagining Motherhood: Maternity, Sexuality, and Spiritual Authority in the *Book*

Sex is never far from Margery Kempe’s mind. In 1436 she creates *The Book of Margery Kempe*, one of the first English texts by a woman and perhaps the first autobiography in English, in order to chronicle her transformation from middle-class married businesswoman to traveling spiritual figure. However, sex remains a persistent feature of her thoughts and experiences throughout this transition, which paradoxically seeks both to leave behind and to build on her identity as wife and mother. One of the first things Margery tells us in her *Book* is that she wants to stop having sex with her husband. In fact, she says, “the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyne the wose, the mukke in the chanel.” Her revulsion is the result of a spiritual awakening, but Margery soon reveals that she has not lost her sexual passion: sex becomes more significant in her spiritual life than it was in her earthly one. In most medieval devotional texts, sexual imagery expresses spiritual longing, and scholars have generally agreed that Margery’s use of sex is inappropriately literal (or insufficiently figurative). However, they have dismissed this as a minor element in the *Book* and a somewhat clumsy maneuver by a woman whose desire for sainthood outstrips her qualifications. This section will argue that Margery’s sexual imagery is not a misstep but instead a conscious authorial strategy, the capstone of her effort to fashion a distinctive form of spiritual authority that is modeled on the Virgin Mary but incorporates the material of Margery’s worldly life in order to surpass even Mary’s level of intimacy with Christ. Margery does not misuse or misunderstand devotional traditions; she modifies them to suit her purposes.

There is a long-standing debate over the degree to which Margery controls the text and whether she can be considered the author of her *Book*. Early critics saw her as simply dictating her memories to scribes (in between bouts of her famous weeping) and credited those men for any narrative structure or devices. Lynn Staley challenged this assumption in *Margery Kemp’s Dissenting Fictions*, distinguishing the narrative persona Margery from the authorial presence Kempe
and viewing the text as a largely fictional construct. A. C. Spearing also sees the text as a construct but stresses the scribe’s role in shaping the representation of Margery, calling the book, “The Diary of a Nobody.” As a recent pair of essays by Nicholas Watson and Felicity Riddy illustrates, the fundamental issue of authorial responsibility remains unresolved. Watson carefully separates out which features of the text are attributable to Margery and which to the second scribe, finally concluding that Margery is primarily responsible for the shape of the narrative. Riddy, on the other hand, argues that the text must be read as the result of a collaborative effort and that it is neither possible nor desirable to assign responsibility for its effects.

While Riddy’s reading is persuasive, and we must not discount the mediating function of the scribe, I see the connection between the sexual and the devotional as a principal element of Margery’s innovative vision for her spiritual life, and a testimony to her control as author. Her literal deployment of sex in a spiritual context is not wholly unprecedented, as scholars have demonstrated; Virginia Burrus has shown in her study of ancient hagiography, The Sex Lives of Saints, that an “exuberant eroticism” was an important part of saintly discourse, often imagined in definite and material ways. It is unclear whether Margery would have known those ancient texts, but Burrus demonstrates that embodied eroticism is an inherent quality of hagiography. And, although most medieval devotional texts use sexual imagery metaphorically, some female mystics do engage in more literal descriptions of an erotic connection with Christ. While the image of Christ as lover is conventional in mystical texts, then, Margery’s use of maternal imagery in combination with concrete sexual imagery complicates what might otherwise be traditional metaphors. She uses her mixed imagery to a specific end: to enhance her authority as a religious figure in the image of the Virgin Mary.

Margery’s spiritual life begins too late for her to be a holy virgin and too early for her to be a chaste widow, but she builds on her earthly roles as a wife and mother to create unusually firm connections to her model, the mother of Christ. Although a few female saints had also been wives and mothers (most notably St. Bridget, an early fourteenth-century saint who was a favorite of Margery’s), they defined their devotional lives as a departure from those roles rather than—as Margery does—an extension of them. While scholars have frequently connected Margery’s text to imitatio Christi, I want to suggest that the more significant devotional model in the Book is the lesser-known imitatio Mariae. This imitatio might focus on various iconic traditions—the immaculate virgin, the nursing madonna, the suffering mother, or the sympathetic intercessor—but Margery chooses to concentrate on the primary ground of her identification with Mary: motherhood. Margery’s transition from physical to spiritual motherhood mirrors Mary’s transition from biological mother of Christ to spiritual mother of humanity. Margery carefully shapes her imitatio to take advantage of Mary’s authority to instruct and intercede
for others while negotiating the divergent challenges posed by her own lack of both
virginity and humility.

So where does sex fit into *imitatio Mariae*? For Margery Kempe, everywhere. She continually insists on the connection between motherhood—whether physical or spiritual—and sexuality. While the experience of childbirth recalled Eve’s original sin and resulted in the sexual impurity of the mother, and Mary’s motherhood remained pure because of her virginity, *sponsa Christi* tradition did attach sexual imagery to her.\(^49\) Like Mary Magdalene and other female saints, the Virgin Mary was sometimes imagined as the bride of Christ; Song-of-Songs-type language might be used to portray this relationship, but it was preserved as only a figure for spiritual desire and intimacy. Other religious women made use of similarly figurative language, but sometimes fell into a more literal eroticism as well. Margery, however, concretizes the image of the divine bride of Christ, and then appends that earthly eroticism to her *imitatio*, creating an intimate role for herself that combines the sexual and the maternal and draws on her secular roles. She also has parallel familial-yet-erotic relationships with the rest of the holy family. This conflation increases both the authority of her religious teachings and their potential for heterodoxy. In her intimacy and authority, Margery eventually seeks to exceed the Virgin Mary.

This section traces how Margery deploys that strategy, linking the sexual, maternal, and devotional to create authority for herself and her text. It begins by discussing the significance of motherhood in the Book and how Margery ties it to sex and uses her physical motherhood to justify a form of spiritual motherhood that permits her far-reaching authority. I then examine how Margery aligns herself with the Virgin Mary, focusing on their parallel transitions from physical to spiritual motherhood and emphasizing two related aspects of *imitatio Mariae*: Mary as *Mater Dolorosa* and intercessor. Finally, I explore how Margery combines maternal imagery with other kinds of familial and—more interestingly—sexual imagery to create a multiple and intense intimacy with Christ, again mingling the physical and the spiritual to achieve religious authority.

**From Physical to Spiritual Motherhood**

Carolyn Dinshaw observes that Margery Kempe is “a creature that itself is not clearly categorizable in her community’s bourgeois heteronormative terms . . . a creature whose body does not fit her desires.”\(^50\) Yet as Dinshaw’s shift in pronouns from “itself” to “her” might signal, Margery manipulates those terms—and that body—to fulfill her singular desires. In the Middle Ages, mothers were expected to be loving and nurturing figures who provided early religious and moral instruction
for their children within the home. Margery reshapes this concept of motherhood by drawing on a wide variety of maternal experiences and images while exploiting the relationship between physical and spiritual motherhood. Scholars have overlooked the abundance and importance of maternal imagery in this text, focusing instead on issues of authorial versus scribal control, and on the questionable orthodoxy of Margery’s devotional practices. Clarissa Atkinson, whose 1983 *Mystic and Pilgrim* marked the beginning of a resurgence of interest in Margery, downplays the significance of motherhood in the *Book*: “Kempe used few maternal images and metaphors, and she rarely mentioned her children or her experience of motherhood.” Anthony Goodman’s recent observation is a typical extension of this view: “*The Book* does not dwell on her role as mother, or on her children, because these subjects were largely irrelevant to its purposes.” On the contrary, motherhood and maternal imagery are prevalent and pervasive in Margery’s text.

The *Book* begins by drawing attention to her status as a physical mother. Margery’s claim to this form of motherhood is indisputable: she has fourteen children. Although we hear little about those children, she frames the *Book* with depictions of herself as a mother; the story of her life begins with the birth of her first child—the impetus for all that follows—and ends with her interactions with her adult son. Opening not with Margery’s birth but with a sentence briefly describing her marriage and first pregnancy, the *Book* then describes how, “aftyr that sche had conceyved, sche was labowrd wyth grett accessys tyl the chyld was born, and than, what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng befor n, sche dyspered of hyr lyfe, wenyng sche mygth not levyn” (21). The experience of labor leads to sickness and later madness—a progression that highlights the connections between motherhood, fleshliness, and sinfulness by focusing attention on the weaknesses of Margery’s body—and brings on the divine intervention that changes the course of her life. Margery becomes a mother and spiritual figure almost simultaneously. The language of the description closely associates the two events of becoming a mother and of going mad (as the result of an unconfessed but probably sexual sin). She returns to the term “labowryd” to describe the struggle she has with the spirits (22). Margery’s experience as a mother is the foundation for all of the experiences with which the rest of the text is concerned; her first difficult childbirth leads to her first vision of Christ and ultimately to her life as a spiritual figure and author.

The associations between maternity and spiritual uncleanness could be remedied through the ritual known as churching, which followed the precedent Mary set after Christ’s birth. The *Book* later describes another mother’s churching, but Margery’s extreme case, with the additional peril of madness, demands a more individual solution. In the midst of her postpartum struggles, Christ appears, sitting on her bed. Her insanity is so enduring and disturbing that she requires this divine intervention to recover—and she is apparently so special that she deserves it. This episode signifies a privileged relationship with Christ and emphasizes the connec-
tion between Margery’s sexual body and her spiritual experience, even suggesting that the first is somehow integral to or carried over into the second. Christ appears to her as an attractive young man, saying: “Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?” (23). He invokes his role as her father and crucified savior, but appears in the guise of a lover.

The erotic presence of Christ in the bedroom was not anomalous. In his Letter to Eustochium, St. Jerome exhorted the virgin to “Let the seclusion of your own chamber ever guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within.” Here, as elsewhere in the Book, however, it is the context of Margery’s earthly life and her conflations of the maternal and the sexual that make the difference. She is not in virtuous “seclusion” but has recently become a mother and still bears the sexual stigma, even though she is now figured as Christ’s “Dowtyr” in this bedroom tryst. Her sinful physicality is prominent in this moment and the appearance of Christ like a lover in her bedroom underscores this in the act of resolving it. Despite her condition, Margery is in a position of power: Christ seeks her out, states his devotion to her, and addresses her in the same words he spoke to God the Father from the cross. By invoking the Passion, Christ suggests that her suffering, like his own, may have spiritual significance. This suggestion conforms to a common trope in hagiography. Other female spiritual figures, including Julian of Norwich, also suffer in the modes of Christ or Mary; however, while Julian’s pain, for instance, is deeply physical, it leads to disembodied spiritual experiences and lacks the worldly sexual and maternal undertones that make Margery’s postpartum suffering distinctive.

Proving more effective than churching, Christ’s words immediately return Margery to her sanity. She resumes her normal life and daily activities, asking her husband “that sche mygth have the keys of the botery to takyn hir mete and drynke as sche had don befor” (23). Her keys are a symbol of her return to the very domestic world that caused her trouble, but they are also, as Staley points out, signs of female power. However, the keys signify that Margery’s power is still limited to and by her earthly roles as wife and mother; she will later adopt symbols of spiritual power, including her white clothing and engraved ring. Margery remains a mother and wife, but she will redirect her domesticity and sexuality into an intimate relationship with Christ. The text sets him up as a figure for whom both sexual and familial imagery is appropriate but, at this point, Margery is beginning that spiritual relationship while maintaining its earthly equivalents with her human family. The visions of the two religious figures closest to her, Bridget of Sweden and Julian, began in childhood and near-fatal illness respectively, but Margery’s spiritual career originates from this first encounter with Christ and childbirth.

In the only other example in the Book of a woman’s experience immediately after childbirth, the text makes it clear that the suffering of childbirth and motherhood is not an avenue that all mothers can follow to a religious life. Here madness again follows childbirth; the woman’s husband explains that “sche knowyth not me ne non of hir neyborwys. Sche roryth and cryith so that sche makith folk evyl
afeerd. Sche wyl bothe Smyyn and bityn, and therfor is sche manykyld on hir wirstys" (170). In this case, Margery, rather than Christ, heals the mother, emphasizing Margery’s spiritual power—she can perform the same act for another that Christ performed for her—and her unique status—she merited direct divine intervention. After Margery intervenes, the new mother stops raving and is “browt to chirche and purifiid as other women be” (171). If Margery’s ability to circumvent churching reveals her special status, then this episode shows that her spiritual power works within the established religious structure: her intervention facilitates the mother’s churching rather than replacing it. In other words, although Margery’s spiritual experiences may have been outside of the Church, she used her authority for orthodox objectives.

Before Margery could claim such authority, she had to perform a careful balancing act, overcoming the obstacles of physical motherhood in order to transform it into spiritual motherhood while still preserving the physical as a precondition for the spiritual. Her experiences of motherhood are not confined to her children, however; they begin again when she becomes a mother to her husband, John, after he suffers a head injury. She notes the commingling of her familial roles during this period, explaining that she “had ful mech labowr wyth hym, for in hys last days he turnyd childish agen.” The word “labowr” connects this episode with her experiences of motherhood and madness at the beginning of the text. Her husband’s childishness is not solely a mental condition but also a physical one: he “cowd not don hys owyn esement to gon to a sege . . . but as a childe voydyd his natural digestyon in hys lynyn clothys.” Margery’s experience with his newly childlike body reminds her of the sexual pleasure they shared before Christ first appeared to her, when she had “ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, an d inordinat lovys to hys [John’s] persone” (173). Here again motherhood mingles with sexuality, which is in turn complicated by the familial relationships involved. Margery’s husband is a passionate lover and a helpless son to her, while she is his wife and mother. It is her responsibility as his wife to become his mother in this situation; the people of Lynn believe that “yyf he deyd, hys wyfe was worthy to ben hangyn for hys deth, forasmeche as sche myth a kept hym and dede not” (172). Christ reinforces Margery’s wifely responsibility, instructing her to “take hym hom and kepe hym for my lofe” (173). Both her community and Christ pressure her to care for her husband in this peculiarly dual role. Christ argues his point by asking Margery to do so for the “lofe” of her spiritual lover, a further mingling of spiritual, familial, and erotic elements.

By the time of his sickness, however, Margery’s sexual relationship with her husband is in the past. Immediately after setting forth her credentials as a mother (and proving that motherhood can coexist with a sexualized spirituality), she distances herself from physical motherhood by portraying her withdrawal from earthly sex. Physical motherhood remains important; Margery sets it up as a prerequisite for spiritual motherhood, establishing it as the indispensable ground for the spiritual
metaphor. In doing so, she—like Julian—follows the model of the Virgin Mary, whose status as the human mother of Christ led to her role as spiritual mother for humanity. However, physical motherhood is also a potential impediment to its spiritual counterpart. From a philosophical standpoint, physical motherhood is an incontrovertible sign that a woman is not a virgin (with Mary as the sole exception); from a practical standpoint, the responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood deplete the time, energy, and resources that a woman might otherwise devote to pursuing a spiritual life. Because Margery is crafting an authority based on her human roles as wife and mother, she cannot simply leave the physical behind; the physical—and the sexual—remain as the foundation of her relationship with Christ.

Once again, Christ directly intervenes. He helps Margery overcome the philosophical and practical obstacles and, once again, she mixes maternal and sexual imagery to create spiritual intimacy and authority. She cannot recapture her virginity, but she distances herself from the fleshly and sinful connotations of motherhood by establishing a chaste marriage. Her husband is initially reluctant to agree to an arrangement that would turn sex into a deadly sin. With Christ’s mediation, the spouses strike a deal: Margery will pay her husband’s debts and eat with him on Fridays and he will assent to a chaste marriage. She figures her request for chastity not as an end to sexual intimacy, however, but as a redirection of it, saying that her husband, by agreeing to the new terms, would “makyth my body fr e to God.” He consents and says, “As fre mot yowr body ben to God as it hath ben to me,” a reference to their previously active sex life (38). This language suggests that Margery’s body is being exchanged between her husband and God; she renounces “fleschly comownyng” (26) in favor of a more spiritual but scarcely less sexual communion. Having achieved her “desyr” (38), she goes on to visit “many other of owyr Lordys loverys” (39), confirming that she has moved from being John’s lover to being the “Lordys.” The confluence of Margery’s spiritual and sexual experiences is unusual; the closest case is that of Bridget of Sweden, whose marital sexuality was much more controlled (she and her husband observed periods of chastity in their marriage) and was safely in the past by the time her spiritual life began in earnest during her widowhood. In her Revelations, Christ stresses this divide to Bridget: “And when at your husband’s death your soul was gravely shaken with disturbance, then the spark of my love—which lay, as it were, hidden and enclosed—began to go forth . . . [and] you abandoned your whole will to me and desired me above all things.”

For Margery, a chaste marriage is not only about keeping her body pure but also about ceasing to bear children. The text explains that this resolution conforms to a direct command from Christ. Although Christ consistently downplays to Margery the value of virginity, assuring her that he does not love her any less because she has an earthly husband, Christ makes a specific declaration against her continuing role
as mother: “whyth thy creatur was beryng chylder and sche was newly delyveryd of a chyld, owyr Lord Cryst Jhesu seyd to hir sche schuld no mor chyldren beryn, and therfor he bad hyr gon to Norwych” (50). This is not only an exhortation to chastity but also a specific imperative against further reproduction. It comes after she already has many children; Christ does not want her to be childless but to prevent her from having “mor chyldren.” The command is notable because it responds to Margery’s experience as a mother, an experience that most female religious figures lacked. It also distinguishes her from male religious authorities; priestly celibacy required a renunciation of biological in favor of spiritual fatherhood, but Margery is able to experience and utilize both forms of motherhood while exploiting the figurative relationship between them. As she embraces chastity, Margery replaces—or, more accurately, supplements—her marriage to John with a relationship with Christ that proves to be more intimate, more exclusive, and more productive.

Christ follows his instruction to stop having children with a significant rationale: since Margery had complained that she could not travel because giving birth had left her too weak, she must renounce motherhood in order to continue her teaching. Christ presents her trip to Norwich as an alternative to or replacement for motherhood, but this new task also conflates the spiritual and the sexual. Christ tells Margery to meet with a vicar and “schew hym thy prevytés and myn cownselys swech as I schewe the” (50). “Prevytés” is a suggestive term that could denote “genitals” as well as “divine secrets” while the latter meaning is clearly primary here, the former still hovers behind it. Margery’s “prevytés” and Christ’s “cownselys” are structurally equivalent in this passage, binding the two together and raising the value of the first. Christ has replaced the traditional vocation of women, motherhood, with teaching, a spiritual vocation. The circumstances surrounding this shift also endow Margery with spiritual authority; her activities may appear to violate scriptural and societal strictures against women as preachers, but a higher power has licensed her.

Christ makes teaching more suitable for her than bearing children, but Margery makes motherhood the basis for her authority, using her identity as a mother to warrant her actions and speech as a teacher. She advances this claim when a clerk questions her about God’s imperative to be fruitful and multiply, a command that seems to conflict with Christ’s injunction to her to stop having children. Margery glosses the phrase in a way that eliminates the apparent contradiction: “thes wordys ben not undirstondyn only of begetyng of chyldren bodily, but also be purchasyng of vertu, whexh is frute gostly, as be heryng of the wordys of Gode, [and] be good exampyl gevyng” (121–22). Figurative interpretation of this passage is hardly an original move, but Margery’s adaptation is. She emphasizes the connection between physical and spiritual motherhood; the scriptural words are not simply figurative, as in most other interpretations, but refer to both forms of fruitfulness (one should “not . . . only” have biological children “but also” become a virtuous example for
others, thereby producing spiritual children). The command is twofold: a directive toward both physical and spiritual productivity. Having satisfied the “bodily” component of the command, Margery has moved on to producing “frute gostly.” Whereas Julian connected spiritual motherhood to its human equivalent, Margery reverses the trajectory by leveraging her indisputable claim to the latter (the ground for the metaphor) into a claim for the former.

Margery again draws on her status as a mother when she is examined by the Archbishop of York and has to defend her right to speak publicly. He finds her orthodox, but asks her not to “techyn ne chalengyn” his people. She refuses his request and quotes the words spoken to Christ by a woman who heard him preach: “Blyssed be the wombe that the bar and the tetys that gaf the sowkyn” (Luke 11:27). This scriptural passage is the basis of Margery’s defense; it leads her to conclude that “me thynkyth that the gospel gevyth me leve to spekyn of God” (126). The passage offers dual grounds for Margery’s right to speak. First, Christ affirms the unnamed woman’s speech. Second, more subtly but more interestingly, the passage connects female speech with Mary’s role as physical mother. As Mary, the “wombe” that bore Christ, is blessed, so is Margery, whose womb has borne many children. Her role as mother, not only possessing but also using her “wombe” and “tetys” to birth and nurture children, makes her “blyssed.” And because she is blessed, she has the right to speak. Motherhood provides a foundation for some authority as a religious teacher; relying on examples of spiritual mothers who were “voices of holy wisdom,” David Herlihy suggests that medieval mothers assumed a critical if not very visible role in their children’s religious education. Margery’s conclusion certainly (and perhaps purposefully) misreads the passage, which concerns Christ’s speech and makes no mention of Mary’s right to speak or of the unnamed woman’s right to speak more than the single sentence in praise of Mary. Furthermore, it offers only slim grounds for the deduction that other mothers are “blyssed” because Mary herself is. Whether Margery misrepresented the passage, however, is less important than the fact that she chose to stake her claim on this basis, the authority of motherhood. In doing so, she collapses the categories of physical and spiritual. She emphasizes that she is physically a mother, referring to specific body parts and to the acts of birthing and nursing, but she uses these references to justify herself as a spiritual mother in the mode of Mary who is permitted to teach her “children”—a category that seems to include everyone Margery encounters.

Throughout the Book, Margery talks about her physical motherhood strategically, using it primarily at the beginning to establish her claim to motherhood and to set up the connection between her sexuality and spirituality. She is trying to do a tricky thing: to insist that her physical motherhood is valuable and, in fact, the basis of her unusual claim to spiritual authority, but then to leave it behind quickly so that she can assume the spiritual motherhood that is thus enabled. She wants to make clear that her claim to physical motherhood is indisputable and represents an
important connection to Mary, but its true value comes only when she makes the transition to spiritual motherhood. Once she has made that transition, she wants to inhabit the spiritual aspect fully. While Margery’s representation is always mediated at some level by her scribe, the use of her own motherhood is so unorthodox and so dependent on her individual identity that it seems more likely to have its origin in Margery’s view of her life than in the scribe’s. Taking on the role of spiritual mother helps Margery to appear experienced and authoritative because it necessarily positions other people as children. But she is focused on the Virgin Mary and, for Margery, Mary’s key characteristic is her maternity; even her virginity is a facet of her identity as Christ’s mother. Margery makes use of her own unusual purchase on that imagery; throughout the Book, she stresses her superlative spiritual status—as the closest intimate of Christ, the most persecuted and therefore most worthy figure, the loudest weeper—and her motherhood is another distinguishing feature of which she can take advantage. As a result, Margery’s motherhood, which might have been a major obstacle to her spiritual life, becomes the improbable foundation for it.

Imitating the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary was the most powerful and honored female figure of the Middle Ages, so it is hardly surprising that Margery, who is always concerned with spiritual status, would seek to imitate her.\(^6\) Mary was the paragon of motherhood in all its forms. What may be more surprising, however, is that Margery’s focus on Mary is unusual among women; Caroline Walker Bynum notes that “the humanity of Christ was a more prominent emphasis in women’s piety than was devotion to the Virgin.”\(^6\) This may explain why so few critics have noticed the elements of *imitatio Mariae* in Margery’s text, and why none has recognized the ways in which she strategically modifies that tradition in order to support her claim to spiritual authority through motherhood.\(^7\)

Near the beginning of the Book, Margery has a trio of visions that emphasize how closely she identifies with Mary, and how tightly that identification is tied to maternal images. These visions are an early and important sign that Margery’s ultimate model is Mary rather than the various other female saints who have similar characteristics. The visions begin with Christ’s instruction to Margery to “thynke on my modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that thow hast” (32). Margery then sees herself as a kind of midwife at the births of Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus (32–33); in all three births, Margery is most closely associated with Mary, regardless of Mary’s changing role throughout. Margery is an active participant in these scenes, contrasting with the rather passive actual mothers, and she demonstrates a
fair amount of maternal authority, taking charge of the young Mary and announcing that she will be the mother of Christ. Here, Margery becomes a spiritual mother to the ultimate spiritual mother.

Through most of the Book, Margery focuses on Mary as the divine example of physical motherhood transformed into spiritual motherhood, seizing on the two devotional models clustered around that transformation: Mary as Mater Dolorosa, or grieving mother, and as Mediatrix or intercessor. These models are connected because Mary’s suffering at Christ’s crucifixion established her as the emotional link between the human and the divine, and therefore as a mother to and intercessor for humanity. These roles for Mary are developments particular to the later Middle Ages and were popular in various medieval texts, including lyrics, Dante’s Paradiso, and Chaucer’s “An ABC” and Canterbury Tales. Most medieval literary representations of Mary, however, mention these roles in the context of other characteristics, and emphasize the paradox of her power and humility. Dante typifies this view when he addresses Mary as “Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son, humble and exalted more than any creature.” Similarly, the prologues of both the Prioress and the Second Nun in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales at once appeal to Mary as a powerful intercessor and stress her humility. The Prioress prays for “help” in telling her tale, addressing the Virgin as “O blisful Queene” and mentioning her “magnificence” alongside her “humblesse” and “grete humylitee” (473, 481, 474, 470, and 475). The Second Nun portrays Mary as one who helps not only those who request it but also “er that men thyn help biseche, / Thou goost biforn and art hir lyves leche” (55–56); she is “Mayde and Mooder,” which makes her “humble, and heigh over every creature” (36 and 39).

By downplaying certain aspects of Mary’s physical maternity—as well as her own—and highlighting instead the suffering that marked the end of Mary’s physical motherhood and the beginning of her spiritual motherhood and intercessory power, Margery takes advantage of the power while virtually ignoring its counterpart: humility. This is a distinct departure from other mystical texts (including the Shewings), which habitually embraced humility and revered Mary for her exemplary demonstration of that quality. There are some elements of humility and subordination in Margery’s text: she portrays herself as obedient to Christ and to the Church (all the while remarking on her many encounters with clerical figures who are less obedient than she). But her imitatio Mariae is a strategy for spiritual authority, and so she focuses on those elements of the Marian model that provided a link between Mary’s earthly maternal experience and her authority as supreme spiritual mother. Margery wants to duplicate that link. Her characteristic weeping thus emulates Mary’s suffering and facilitates her access to the associated intercessory power.

Some of Mary’s experiences with earthly maternity are more useful for Margery’s project than others. She ignores perhaps the most popular element of Mariolatrystating:
Mary as the nursing mother of the holy infant. Unlike many female saints—and some monks—Margery does not have visions of herself nursing the Christ child. Mary most fully participated in physical motherhood through nursing; her conception was immaculate and it was believed that she did not experience labor pains. As a result, images of Mary as a nursing mother, *Maria Lactans*, became particularly important and symbolically charged. In the fourteenth century, such images had become symbols for female humility, a virtue that is not dear to Margery’s heart. In her popular study of the Virgin Mary, Marina Warner describes the contemporary attitude: “if woman was considered inferior because of her greater subjection to biology, then the Virgin, by accepting that female destiny, by bearing and suckling a child, revealed her model humility.” The image was more complex than Warner allows; Bynum contends that Mary’s breast was an empowering symbol and provided the basis for perceiving the female body “as powerful in its holy or miraculous exuding, whether of breast milk or of blood or of oil,” but such “extraordinary flowing” in female saints, Bynum acknowledges, “was predicated on extraordinary closure.” Margery’s lay existence deprives her of the ability to claim any “miraculous exuding,” and the image remains problematically physical, even—or perhaps especially—for the Virgin Mary.

Margery does embrace the physicality of Mary’s experience as Christ’s mother, but primarily through her suffering. The most physical and perhaps best-known element of Margery’s *imitatio Mariae* is her copious weeping, although the connection to Mary has gone largely unrecognized—perhaps because the weeping is so extreme that any precedent seems inadequate. Sarah Beckwith notes that “tears of compassion had long been considered a special sign of grace,” but they were a sign specifically associated with Mary. Tears were a prominent feature in the cult of *Mater Dolorosa*, which reached its height in the fourteenth century, and Eamon Duffy identifies the devotion to the sorrows of Mary as “the most distinctive manifestation of Marian piety in late medieval England.” Many Marian lyrics described her sorrows; one late fourteenth-century poem speaks in Mary’s voice, bewailing “Wel may I mone and murning maken, / and wepen til myn eyne aken. / For wane of wele my wo is waken, / Was nevere wif so wo.” We might guess that Margery’s eyes ached from her repeated bouts of weeping, as well; in their very excessiveness, her tears are a testament to her Marian spirituality.

The embodiedness of Margery’s suffering, which scholars commonly claim as a facet of her *imitatio Christi*, strengthens her *imitatio Mariae*. Beckwith points out that Margery concentrates “on those parts of [Christ’s] life which emphasize embodiedness most completely,” his birth and death. Margery focuses most frequently and most intensely on Mary’s experience at these moments; her identification with Mary gives her access to these scenes. Karma Lochrie, in her influential reading of Margery’s associations with the flesh, points to the originary moment of Margery’s weeping as evidence that it is part of *imitatio Christi*: while visiting
Mount Calvary, she weeps uncontrollably as her body seems to mimic Christ’s crucified body. But Margery clearly associates these experiences with Mary rather than Christ. In spite of the physical mimesis, Margery never fully identifies with Christ on Mount Calvary but instead likens her suffering to that of people who “for inordinat lofe and fleschly affeccyon yfyf her frendys er partyn fro hem, thei wyl cryen and roryn and wryngyn her handys as yyyf thei had no wytte ne non mende” (77). This view aligns her with the audience at the crucifixion rather than with Christ himself. Soon after, Margery names the actual figure with whom she identifies in these moments of suffering, explaining that “sche thowt sche saw owyr Lady in hir sowle, how sche mornyd and how sche wept hir sonys deth, and than was owyr Ladiis sorwe hir sorwe” (78). Thus Margery’s suffering is initiated by Christ’s Passion, but it is the suffering of “owyr Lady,” for which Margery has special empathy and that she takes as the object of her imitatio Mariae.

Mary was recognized as having had various sorrows, but the greatest was her pain at the Passion. This emphasis was the creation of later religious authors; it does not feature prominently in the biblical accounts. Margery’s Christ intends her tears as a manifestation of Mary’s grief, a visible human representation to inspire others. Late in the Book, he reveals this to Margery: “I geve the gret cryis and roryngys for to makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace that I putte in the into a tokyn that I wil that my modrys sorwe be knowyn by the that men and women myth have the mor compassyon of hir sorwe that sche suffyrd for me” (175). Those who observed Margery’s crying did not always comprehend this aim. Some who did recognize the connection rejected it, suggesting that Margery’s suffering was excessive and admonishing her that “owr Lady, Cristys owyn modyr, cryed not as sche dede.” In other words, Margery’s Marian suffering surpasses even Mary’s. Margery herself begins to feel that her suffering is too great and cries out, “Lord, I am not thi modir. Take awey this peyn fro me, for I may not beryn it” (159). Although Margery momentarily rejects the role of Christ’s mother, her rejection makes it clear that her suffering—and her imitatio—is of Mary.

Mary’s suffering for her crucified son links her physical motherhood with the much broader spiritual motherhood she achieves; with the death and resurrection of Christ, Mary assumes the position of mother to humanity. She becomes the “Almighty and al merciable queene, / To whom that al this world fleeth for socour,” as Chaucer addresses her in the opening lines of “An ABC” (1–2). Mary’s status as intercessor was tied to the actual roles of mothers as intercessors in medieval households. Because wives were often significantly younger than their husbands, women could bridge the generations within their families and mediate between fathers and children. Herlihy explains that, “used to seeking the help and intercession of their natural mothers, medieval people seem to have sought comparable services from their spiritual mother in heaven.” The crucial depiction of Margery’s role as a “natural mother” is brief, but she often acts as an intercessor for her spiritual chil-
children, pleading with Christ for their salvation or healing. She has one such encounter with a priest: “be inqwyryng he cam into the place wher that sche was, and ful humbely and mekely he clepyd hir modyr, preying hir for charité to receyven hym as hir sone. Sche seyd that he was wolcom to God and to hir as to hys owyn modyr” (100). As his spiritual mother, Margery is able to assure the priest that he is “wolcom to God.” Like Mary, she can act as an intercessor to God and guarantee a man’s salvation.

In the only extended episode concerning one of Margery’s biological children, she acts as a spiritual mother toward her son. She intercedes with him on God’s behalf so that her son “schulde be the mor diligent and the mor esy to folwyn owr lordys drawyng” (209). He becomes seriously ill, but her concern is for his salvation, even at the expense of his health. Others accuse her of actually causing her son’s bodily sickness to prompt him to repent, saying that “thorw hir prayer God had takyn venjawns on hir owyn childe” (208). She shows no greater or lesser concern for her biological son than for her many spiritual children, for whom she also weeps and intercedes. This episode, near the end of the book, demonstrates that Margery has moved beyond physical motherhood and sees herself primarily as a spiritual mother.

But Margery does not only intercede between men and God; she also intercedes within the holy family—this is where she begins to exceed Mary as a spiritual mother and intercessor, and where her idiosyncratic path to spiritual authority takes an unusual turn. Christ recognizes the expansive nature of Margery’s spiritual motherhood and suggests that it benefits him, saying, “thu art to me a very modir and to al the world for that gret charité that is in the” (95). Christ also credits Margery with interceding for him with his mother, a peculiar permutation of the usual practice of intercession. He explains: “And also, dowtyr, thu clepist my modyr for to comyn into thi sowle and takyn me in hir armys and leyn me to hir brestys and gevyn me sokyn” (198). Here we do see Mary nursing her son, but this nurturing takes place at Margery’s instigation and within her very “sowle.” Here Mary remains a physical mother while Margery’s mothering is spiritual. This substantiates Margery’s spiritual authority: if she can intercede between Christ and Mary, then her messages from Christ to other people are surely credible.

A Maternal and Sexual Creature

While Margery’s intercessions are unusual, her combination of sexual and maternal imagery becomes patently unorthodox. She finally shifts from a selective imitatio Mariae to exceeding any available precedent. It is not enough, in other words, for Margery to do imitatio differently than other female mystics; she must take it up
another level to confirm her specialness. She goes beyond identification with Mary, and uses her *imitatio* as a springboard to her own inimitable intimacy with Christ. Margery returns to the physical and sexual aspects of her earthly life in order to transform her Marian spiritual motherhood into this insuperable spousal intimacy. Mary can be somewhat sexualized in this role through Song-of-Songs-type imagery, but her dominant sexual characteristic is her virginity, her experience of becoming a mother without engaging in sexual intercourse. In this final phase, Margery does not abandon her Marian model but instead radically alters it by suturing a new kind of intimacy onto it. She combines maternal and erotic elements, constructing a relationship with Christ that exceeds what anyone else—even Mary herself—could claim.

The family roles played out in the spiritual relationships Margery has with God, Christ, and Mary are far from traditional. This, says Dinshaw, is “one big queer family”; it “shows up the earthly family for its limitations, especially for its lack of intimacy.” Yet Margery does experience a fairly deep intimacy with her husband and, at times, with her son, and that human intimacy becomes a critical factor in her unorthodoxy. Motherhood and sexual passion, which were (and still are) popular religious metaphors, have a physical basis in Margery’s earthly life: just as she founded her spiritual motherhood on her physical motherhood, she founds her spiritual sexuality on its earthly equivalent. Most female mystics renounced the earthly roles of wife and mother; rather than simply ignoring or denouncing those parts of her identity, however, Margery uses them to make her relationship with Christ distinctly intimate. She experiences spiritual sexuality through physical interactions and combines it with maternal imagery, producing unique and unsettling configurations of imagery and characters.

Critics have consistently seen Margery’s sexual imagery as an unsuccessful attempt at affective piety, which frequently utilized metaphors of marriage, love, or desire. In some texts—including the *Book*—this metaphorical language becomes surprisingly literal. Margery’s use of the imagery of desire reworks those traditions in several important ways: by reforming its nature, by depicting its real-life context, and by combining it with other elements. This pattern is so pervasive in the text that it cannot be accidental or imposed. I see it as evidence of Margery’s role in shaping her own story; even if the scribe is selecting, rephrasing, or restructuring her dictation, this combination of the maternal and sexual must come from the material of her life as she presented it to him. Certainly the representation of Margery is constructed, but this aspect of the constructed representation, I would argue, bears the stamp of Margery herself.

Numerous female religious figures, including Angela of Foligno, Adelheid Langmann, and Catherine of Siena, envisioned themselves marrying Christ or God. Others used images of nursing the Christ child, or of Christ as lover. Such imagery was most often demonstrably metaphorical, as examples from Angela of
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Foligno and Hadewijch will demonstrate. Margery may not have known these thirteenth-century female mystics, but they are typical examples of affective piety and contribute to the context in which scholars have read Margery's *Book.* Hadewijch, for instance, says that Christ “came in the form and clothing of a Man, . . . took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him” but also interpolates the point that “he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form,” thus reminding us that this is a vision expressed in figurative terms. Angela of Foligno also combines the imagery of Christ as lover with an explicitly metaphorical context: she “kissed Christ's breast . . . [and] then she kissed his mouth. . . . Afterward, she placed her cheek on Christ's own and he, in turn, placed his hand on her other cheek, pressing her closely to him.” This intimate interaction, however, occurs while Angela is having a vision of herself with Christ in a sepulcher, and throughout he “lay[s] dead, with his eyes closed.”

The language describing such encounters sometimes borders on the orgasmic. Angela depicted another encounter in which she was “filled with love and inexpressible contentment which, satisfactory as it was, nonetheless generated in her a hunger so unspeakably great that all her members dislocated” (183). However, the metaphorical status of the description is again carefully preserved. Angela prefaces her description by specifying twice that she saw “with the eyes of her soul,” and explains that these feelings were inspired by a vision of love as a sickle; she reiterates that “this should not be understood to mean that it could be compared to anything spatial or measurable” and the sickle “was not something that could be compared to anything spatial or material because it was a reality perceptible only to her mind through the ineffable workings of divine grace” (182–83). While Margery does sometimes make use of metaphors, as when she sees Mary nursing Christ in her “sowle,” the metaphorical context for the sexual imagery often falls away and the context of her earthly life as a wife and mother replaces it. Margery's sexual imagery is not simply an attempt at affective piety that veers into the literal; she is deploying sexual imagery in a different context and to a different end. For Angela, Hadewijch, and other female mystics, desire is figurative and Christ is a divine lover; for Margery Kempe, desire is homely and familiar, and Christ is a daily partner with whom she shares an exclusive intimacy.

It is also worth noting that those female religious figures who were closest to Margery's experience and of whom she certainly knew—Bridget of Sweden and Julian—were muted in their descriptions of spiritual intimacy. Most studies that compare Margery and Bridget focus on their similarities as female spiritual figures who had experienced wifehood and motherhood rather than on the very different ways in which they use and depict those experiences. Although Bridget is consistently described as the “bride” of Christ in her *Revelations,* this functions as an honorific more than as a metaphor. Rather than engaging in intimate conversations with Christ, Bridget records Christ's and Mary's virtual monologues or responses to
organized “interrogations” from her visions. While Margery gains special authority from her homely intimacy with Christ, Bridget relies on the more established—and more masculine—model of prophetic authority. As we have seen, Julian avoids sexualized imagery, focusing on herself as one of many “evenchristen,” all of whom can be as close to Christ as a child to a parent, and authorizing herself primarily as a representative who received visions intended for that wider audience.

Within this context, Margery’s sexual imagery is unusually concrete and familiar: less divine ravishing than daily affection. Other female mystics tended to use orgasmic language and rapturous imagery; Margery was not attempting to render the nature of an ineffable and transcendent experience but rather to certify her intimacy with Christ. He invites her to “kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt” (95); in addition, he must “nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the” (94). This is not sexualized holy rapture; it is a domestic and “homly” sexual and spousal relationship. For Margery, erotic descriptions are not as much about her soul being ravished or lifted up as about her closeness to Christ, and the ways in which that intimacy is beyond what others can approach; she is as close to him as if she were his real and only wife or lover—even closer because she is also his daughter and mother. Margery equates her experiences with those described in other devotional texts: “sche herd nevyr boke, neythyr hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne Stimulus Amorys, ne Incendium Amoris, ne non other that evyr sche herd redyn that spak so hyly of lofe of God but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle” (51). But she also goes further. Christ assures Margery that she is “a synguler lover, and therfor thu schalt have a synguler love in hevyn” (62).

Margery also depicts herself in bed with Christ and his mother. This is not a configuration that is conventional or, indeed, anything less than startling. Christ reflects, “And also, dowtyr, I thank the for alle the tymys that thu hast herberwyd me and my blissyd modyr in thi bed.” For this act “and for alle other good thowtys and good dedys that thu hast thowt in my name and wrowt for my lofe thu schalt have wyth me and wyth my modyr . . . al maner joye and blysse lestyng wythowtyn ende” (201). Not only has this strange bedroom scene occurred, it has occurred many times and forms part of the basis for Margery’s heavenly reward. This sexually suggestive scene cements her salvation, but noticeably lacks the explicit metaphoricity insisted on by other female visionaries. The bed, as far as we can tell, is indeed a bed. Even if we accept the premise that this spiritual family is not constrained by the incest taboos that regulate behavior in human families, this new trinity of bedroom partners is unusual. It creates an intimacy with Christ and the holy family that is hard to top, and an authority for Margery as a spiritual speaker that is hard to ignore.

Margery’s religious sexual imagery is also bound up with her active earthly sex life (or, later, her recollections of it—even after her marriage becomes chaste, her sexual past provides the context for her relationship with Christ). While other
female mystics may concretize their experiences with Christ, those can never be as literal as Margery’s because she has the physical experience that they mostly lack. She is not imagining a physical and erotic relationship with Christ based on what she has heard or read; she is imagining it on the basis of the actual relationship she had with her husband. So when she kisses Christ’s feet, head, or mouth, it is not as part of an idealized if literal spousal relationship that she has never had—it is a kind of replication, albeit a heightened and improved one, of a relationship she has already experienced. Most other female mystics envision Christ as their lover or husband; Margery envisions him as her alternative or replacement lover or husband. Parallel to the ways in which her physical motherhood made her claim to spiritual motherhood more credible (because she indisputably had the ground of the metaphor), her experience with earthly sexuality makes her claim to spiritual eroticism stronger and more meaningful. And it adds to the authority that Margery can claim.

Whereas Julian’s parent/child imagery downplays her individual presence and significance within the text, Margery’s maternal imagery allows her some measure of power over the most impressive male figures of all time: God and Christ. As David Aers points out, only as a mother could a woman exercise power over a man at any age. Throughout the *Book*, however, Margery has reminded us that sexuality and motherhood are linked. Not only does she, as the visionary, use sexual metaphors to talk about God but—in a departure from devotional tradition—the holy family also uses sexual metaphors to talk about her. Margery’s treatment of the holy family has attracted attention, but has not been connected to her use of sexual imagery. Ralph Hanna sees Margery as seeking “a denatured family, one thoroughly spiritualized, in keeping with her efforts to enact a holy life” and as participating in a “textually based surrogate household, the Holy Family,” derived from the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. Beckwith contends that, rather than simply replacing the biological family, spiritual relationships that were figured as familial transformed and transcended their earthly models. Aers argues specifically that Margery is struggling against traditional family roles. But, as we have seen, something larger is at work in her mingling of the sexual with the familial and spiritual: a strategy for authority.

Margery derives authority from her over-the-top intimacy with the holy family. In her relationship with God, she occupies many roles simultaneously. This becomes apparent in a surprising context: when she is marrying him. Although she is reluctant to accept this sign of divine favor, Christ convinces her to go through with it, and excuses her cold feet to God. God speaks his vows, including the familiar “for richar, for powerar,” but goes on to promise, “For, dowtyr, ther was nevyr childe so buxom to the modyr as I schal be to the bothe in wel and i n wo, to help the and comfort the.” The vows describe God as her “childe” immediately after he takes her as “my weddyd wyfe” (92). The marriage ceremony traditionally reinforces
a wife’s duty to obey and submit to her husband, but this one attributes some power to Margery as a mother to God.102

Margery is also figured as Christ’s mother, a label that follows logically from her extended *imitatio Mariae* but that quickly leads into other roles. Christ identifies himself as “thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde” (94–95). Elsewhere he elaborates: “thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse.” The combination of these roles would be shocking and impossible in a biological family but, according to Christ, it simply agrees with scripture: “wyntessyng the gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dyscyples, ‘He that doth the wyl of my Fadyr in hevyn he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me’” (44). Although one hesitates to accuse Christ of misinterpreting scripture, and although incestuous representations of the Holy Family were not uncommon, the offered precedent is an inadequate basis for his words to Margery. The key role of “wyfe” and “spowse” is absent from the gospel version. As a result, it lacks the sexuality that makes the other so unusual; the scriptural version combines different family roles, but does not combine the familial with the erotic. Moreover, the role of brother, which draws on fluid ideas about gender roles that were more common, is eliminated in Christ’s words to Margery.103 Her human roles as mother and wife—the same roles the Virgin Mary had—distinguish Margery from most female religious figures and provide a natural foundation for her claims to the identities of spiritual mother and lover, also like Mary. While other women seeking spiritual lives renounced such earthly roles, Margery leverages them to construct a closer parallel between herself and Mary, and then stretches—even violates—that parallel to create a still closer intimacy with Christ as her son and lover.

The argument I have outlined might appear to be undermined by one word that Margery habitually uses: *creatur*. The use of this term, which emphasizes that human beings were created by God, might be interpreted as a strategy of modesty that also de-emphasizes gender. Such a reading would place Margery in a less feminine and thus less sexually charged position. But her use of *creatur* actually has the opposite effect, since every direct address to Margery identifies her as a woman. Christ, for instance, starts most of his speeches with “Dowtyr,” reminding the reader repeatedly of her womanhood (especially in Christ’s eyes). Margery is frequently asked about her marital status, her absent husband, and the identity of her father. The mayor of Leicester asks her “of what cuntre sche was and whos dowtyr sche was,” but overwritten her answer by identifying her as a “fals strumpet” (113–14). Margery’s femaleness, obscured under *creatur*, reemerges continually in the identities others inscribe upon her. The oscillation between the two (creature vs. woman/daughter/mother/wife, even strumpet) underscores rather than underplays Margery’s gender.

Furthermore, Margery does not consistently refer to herself as *creatur* through-
out the Book. At two significant junctures already discussed, creatur is replaced by words that define Margery in relation to her husband and son. Chapter 76 relates how her husband was seriously injured and so “the sayd creatur, hys wife, was sent for,” and for the rest of the chapter, the word creatur is not used (172). Similarly, in the first and second chapter of the second book—when Margery is interacting with her grown son—the creatur becomes “the modyr” or “hys modyr” (207–10). She is a creatur again only after her son and husband have died (211). In part, these deviations are attributable to the fact that readers are seeing Margery through the eyes of others (beyond the scribe): the people of Lynn in the first case, and her son and daughter-in-law in the second. Nonetheless, these two moments illustrate the ways in which Margery is at odds with the roles of wife and mother as they are traditionally imagined: her community criticizes her for failing to care for her husband and for causing her son’s illness. These moments also illuminate Margery’s desire to transform those roles (and, possibly, her reluctance to label herself with them). In this context, we can see creatur as an empowering identity; it is constantly reinscribed as female, but the new ways in which Margery imagines what it means to be a woman, wife, and mother contribute to her power and authority rather than compromising them. She is able to shed the expectations of these roles and return to being a female creatur.

Despite its careful tailoring to Margery’s particular experience, the Book does have implications for our understanding of gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages. Margery suggests that physical motherhood is valuable not only socially but also spiritually, and that spiritual value is not solely dependent upon chastity or virginity but is accessible through other means. To that extent, she—like Julian—is recuperating the fleshly aspects of femininity. In medieval texts, sex is often portrayed as earthly and negative whereas spiritual devotion is metaphorical and positive, but Margery refuses to abide by that distinction. Can we really tell the difference between her intimacy with her husband and her intimacy with Christ, except that she prefers the latter? Margery’s discussions of earthly sex—and how she would rather eat muck or let her husband be beheaded than engage in it—certainly put it in a negative light, but these descriptions might be read as an attempt to enforce a difference between earthly and spiritual intimacy that otherwise barely seems to exist in the Book.

Margery Kempe has many eccentricities: she wears a hair shirt during the conception of at least some of her fourteen children without her husband noticing, she is tortured by visions of men’s “members” and bargains with her husband for her chastity, she wears white clothes and cries loudly and (it sometimes seems) incessantly, and she has visions in which Christ invites her to kiss his toes and talks her into marrying God, among other things. But these are not random oddities; they are part of a pattern that Margery, as the author of her Book, creates by manipulating maternal, sexual, and—above all—Marian imagery in order to license her
speech, text, and life as a religious figure. *The Book of Margery Kempe* highlights Mary as a human mother and wife who provides a specifically female form of spiritual authority that Margery closely, if selectively, shadows. In the end, her imitation of Mary surpasses its model; Margery the creature creates herself as a more powerful spiritual mother, a more influential intercessor, and a more intimate lover of Christ.

Both Julian and Margery are manipulating ideas about womanhood. Although neither woman uses that term, their reinvention of motherhood closely parallels the invention of womanhood; each draws on vernacular language, each connects the holy to the human (taking the Virgin Mary as the touchstone), each mediates between conflicting categories, and each investigates the same central questions about the nature of femininity and its relationship to authority. These women writers may not be part of the poetic tradition that created and used *womanhood*, but they are certainly part of the social and literary culture from which it emerged and which it influenced. As this chapter has shown, the enterprise of experimenting with language to express new ideas about gender was not restricted to male authors or to Middle English poetry. Nor was the enterprise solely dependent on neologisms: Julian’s innovative redefinitions of extant terms and Margery’s highly individual collage of established precedents both work to similar ends (and with many of the same materials) as the coinages identified in earlier chapters.

Although I have paid close attention to the changes that gendered terms underwent from the fourteenth through the fifteenth centuries, the different methods and concerns in these female-authored devotional texts paradoxically highlight the aspects that persisted through that evolution. Beyond the fundamental effort to manipulate the language to accommodate changing conceptions of gender, those similarities include a concern with issues of power and authority, an interest in what might be called the limit cases (female figures who experienced extreme or unusual circumstances), and the search for a representative or paragon of the developing category of womanhood. In comparison with male poets, Julian and Margery explored a closely related branch of—or, we might say, an alternative path through—the possibilities for gendered language that were arising and undergoing such significant shifts in the late Middle Ages. As this historical moment passed, however, those words began to become more capacious, losing or combining many of their specific definitions. Moving toward the early modern period, *womanhood*—like *motherhood*—moves very close to its general modern meaning.