PROSE
Introduction

Chapter seventy-four of the *Book of Margery Kempe* contains a scene in which God re-frames her vision of disability and the Imago Dei. Beginning in prayer, Margery begs God to allow her, a creature of diverse eccentric traits and madness, into the center of His presence. God answers her prayer in an unexpected way. The *Book* says that Christ “drew His creature unto His love, and to mind of His Passion, so that she could not endure to behold a leper or other sick man, especially if he had any wounds appearing on him. So she cried, and so she wept, as if she had seen Our Lord Jesus Christ with His wounds bleeding.” This is not the Imago Dei Margery would have anticipated. But when she asks to see the Image of God, she is shown the infirmed and disabled. It is the “love” of Christ that brings Margery into His “mind” and inspires a new understanding and ministry for the disabled, especially those lepers who not only will suffer in body but also emotionally from social exclusion. As a result, the Lazar House transforms in Margery’s world from a place of brokenness into the place of the very presence of God.

After the transmission of Aristotle’s texts during the twelfth century, there was renewed interest in Europe for classical philosophy. Evident in the work of scholastic theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, Faith had to make room, as Reason became the measure of all things; including what it meant to be made in the image of God. These philosophical changes occur at the same time that Middle English is developing as a language, affecting how certain words would be weighted and understood. By the writing of the *Book* in the fifteenth century, the word “mad” had evolved to contain two distinct meanings. “Mad” could mean “made,” a created thing, and a condition highlighted throughout the *Book* by referring to Margery almost exclusively as “the creature.” “Mad” could also mean “mad” or “insane,” a person with a non-normative form of cognition, “uncontrolled by reason” or “filled with enthusiasm or desire.” Suggesting multiple meanings, whether as a pun or poetic device, the use of the word “mad” would unlock the potential for statements to read with multiple different significances. For instance, madness could signify that a creature is both made an Imago Dei in God’s Creation and also a mad person who is isolated from human society, set apart.

The doubled vision of Margery and the doubled significance of the word “mad” used throughout the *Book* in both senses creates a tension between the way that God might see disability and the way that society might see disability. In the medieval Church, where bodily signs of difference and disease could be read as moral differences and diseases, disability and especially leprosy were time and again condemned as a sign of punishment in the world that prefigures the punishments in Hell. Thus, the self-conscious work of madness in the *Book* not only challenges the rationality of the world but the cosmological order. The implication that the “mad” were Imago Dei, made in the image of God, and that to go to a Lazar House was to enter into the presence of Christ turns the value system of rational society inside out. Subsequently, Margery breaks open madness as being “mad,” i.e., both “made” and “unreasonable,”
in the Imago Dei through the making of a spiritual treatise and comforting the poor and marginalized by entering into community, constituting an early form of liberation theology.

If the Imago Dei makes and makes without reason, it is most reflected by co-creative “madness” and not self-governing reason. The Book acts as such a self-conscious Imago Dei, opening and closing with descriptions of its making, proudly proclaiming, “this book was mad.” This recursion deepens in the only two instants in the Book where “madness” explicitly means unreason. The Book quotes the Pryke of Life’s author confessing to being “overcome by desire, begin to madden, for love governeth me, and not reason…they say—Lo! yon madman crieth in the streets,’ but how much is the desire of my heart they perceive not.” This language is echoed in the Book’s other use of the word “mad” to describe Margery. In this second case, the Book frames her “crying and roaring” for God as a sign that she is a “mad woman.” The meaning of “madness” here is evidently suggestive of insanity, “uncontrolled by reason” or “filled with enthusiasm or desire.” Yet in the Book’s use of the word, this madness is made by God, inspired by the Imago Dei and the love Christ places in the heart of the mad creature.

Turning again to Margery’s prayer for God’s presence, readers stand witness to how the Imago Dei in the “mad” bodies of the Lazar House inspires acts of liberation. Receiving her revelation, Margery “went to a place where sick women dwelt who were right full of the sickness, and fell down to her knees before them.” Margery challenges the exclusionary logic of the Lazar House by crossing its threshold with a gesture of community. Seeing madness from the inside, Margery offers no rational answer to the woman’s ills, but remains with her, “to comfort her.”

The encounter with the madness of the Imago Dei breaks a barrier for Margery that prevented her, like the walls of the Lazar House, from finding comfort. “In those years of worldly prosperity,” Margery regarded “nothing more loathsome or more abominable…than to see or behold a leper.” The Book uses “abominable,” like the Book of Leviticus, to mark things excluded from the community. It aligns the logic of exclusion with “worldly prosperity,” suggesting that the Imago Dei could not be present until she accepts her own madness. Only then could she find and give comfort.

Margery finds herself most drawn to a woman “laboured with many foul and horrible thoughts.” Subject to visions of her own, the woman Margery ministers to mirrors herself, “a mad woman, crying and roaring.” Entering the Lazar House, Margery not only finds comfort for the leper, but for herself. The drive to comfort does not excuse the violence and isolation governing madness but seeks co-creation and co-liberation by a communal sharing of strength (physical, social, spiritual). As things are formed as disabled, they get pushed to the margins, but the Imago Dei of the Book of Margery Kempe gives a call to seek each other and make a co-creative community. Instead of being mad in isolation, we become mad for each other.

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The Proem

Here beginneth a short treatise and a comfortable for sinful wretches, wherein they may have a great solace and comfort to themselves and understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our Sovereign Saviour Christ Jesus, Whose Name be worshipped and magnified without end. Who now in our days to us unworthy, deigneth to exercise His nobility and goodness. All the works of Our Saviour be for our example and instruction, and what grace that He worketh in any creature is our profit, if lack of charity be not our hindrance.

And therefore, by the leave of our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, to the magnifying of His holy Name, Jesus Christ, this little treatise shall treat somewhat in part of His wonderful works, how mercifully, how benignly and how charitably He moved and stirred a sinful caitiff unto His love, which sinful caitiff many years was in will and purpose, through stirring of the Holy Ghost, to follow the Saviour, making great promises of fasting with many other deeds of penance. And ever she was turned aback in time of temptation, like unto the reed-spear which boweth with every wind, and never is stable unless no wind bloweth, unto the time that our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, having pity and compassion on His handiwork and His creature, turned health into sickness, prosperity into adversity, worship into reproof, and love into hatred.

Thus everything turning upside down, this creature who for many years had gone astray and ever been unstable, was perfectly drawn and stirred to enter the way of high perfection, which perfect way Christ Our Saviour, in His proper Person, exampled. Earnestly He trod it and duly He went it aforetime.

Then this creature, of whom this treatise through the mercy of Jesus shall shew in part the life, was touched by the hand of Our Lord with great bodily sickness, wherethrough she lost reason and her wits a long time, till Our Lord by grace restored her again, as it shall more openly be shewn afterwards. Her worldly goods which were plenteous and abundant at that date, a little while afterwards were full barren and bare. Then was pomp and pride cast down and laid aside. They that before had worshipped her, afterwards full sharply reproved her, her kindred and they that had been friends were now most her enemies. Then she, considering this wonderful changing, seeking succour under the wings of her Ghostly Mother Holy Church, went and offered obedience to her ghostly father, accusing herself of her misdeeds, and afterwards did great bodily penance, and in a short time Our Merciful Lord visited this creature with plenteous tears of contrition day by day, insomuch that some said she might weep when she would, and slandered the work of God.

She was so used to being slandered and reproved, to being chidden and rebuked by the world for grace and virtue with which she was endued through the strength of the Holy Ghost, that it was to her, in a manner, solace and comfort when she suffered any disease for the love of God and for the grace that God wrought in her. For ever the more slander and reproof that she suffered, the more she increased in grace, and in devotion of holy meditation, of high contemplation, and of wonderful speeches and dalliance which Our Lord spake and conveyed to her soul, teaching her how she should be despised for His love, how she should have patience, setting all her trust, all her love and all her affection in Him only.

She knew and understood many secret and privy things which should befall afterwards, by inspiration of the Holy Ghost. And oftentimes while she kept by such holy speeches and dalliance, she would so weep and sob that many men were greatly awonder, for they little knew how homely Our Lord was in her soul. She herself could never tell the grace that she felt. It was so heavenly, so high above her reason and her bodily wits, and her body so feeble in time of the presence of grace that she might never express it with her word as she felt it in her soul.
Then had this creature much dread, because of illusions and deceits of her ghostly enemies. Then went she, by the bidding of the Holy Ghost, to many worshipful clerks, both archbishops and bishops, doctors of divinity and bachelors also. She spoke also with many anchorites and showed them her manner of living and such grace as the Holy Ghost, of His goodness, wrought in her mind and in her soul, as her wit would serve her to express it. And all those that she shewed her secrets unto, said she was much bound to love Our Lord for the grace that He shewed unto her, and counselled her to follow her movings and her stirrings and trustingly believe they were of the Holy Ghost, and of no evil spirit.

Some of these worthy and worshipful clerks averred, at the peril of their souls and as they would answer to God, that this creature was inspired with the Holy Ghost, and bade her that she should have them written down and make a book of her feelings and revelations. Some proffered to write her feelings with their own hands, and she would not consent in any way, for she was commanded in her soul that she should not write so soon. And so it was twenty years and more from the time this creature had her first feelings and revelations, ere she did any writing. Afterwards, when it pleased Our Lord, He commanded her and charged her that she should get written her feelings and revelations and the form of her living, that His goodness might be known to all the world.

Chapter I
Her marriage and illness after child-birth. She recovers.

When this creature was twenty years of age, or some deal more, she was married to a worshipful burgess° (of Lynne) and was with child within a short time, as nature would. And after she had conceived, she was belaboured with great accesses till the child was born and then, what with the labour she had in childing, and the sickness going before, she despaired of her life, weening she might not live. And then she sent for her ghostly father, for she had a thing on her conscience which she had never shewn before that time in all her life. For she was ever hindered by her enemy, the devil, evermore saying to her that whilst she was in good health she needed no confession, but to do penance by herself alone and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enough. And therefore this creature oftentimes did great penance in fasting on bread and water, and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, save she would not shew that in confession.

And when she was at any time sick or diseased, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned because she was not shriven of that default. Wherefore after her child was born, she, not trusting to live, sent for her ghostly father, as is said before, in full will to be shriven of all her lifetime, as near as she could. And when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her, before she had fully said her intent, and so she would no more say for aught he might do. Anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side, and his sharp reproving of her on the other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wondrously vexed and laboured with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days.

And in this time, she saw, as she thought, devils opening their mouths all inflamed with burning waves of fire, as if they would have swallowed her in, sometimes ramping at her, sometimes threatening her, pulling her and hauling her, night and day during the aforesaid time. Also the devils cried upon her with great threatenings, and bade her that

°burgess citizen
she should forsake Christendom, her faith, and deny her God, His Mother and all the Saints in Heaven, her good works, and all good virtues, her father, her mother and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self. She said many a wicked word, and many a cruel word, she knew no virtue nor goodness, she desired all wickedness, like as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have destroyed herself many a time at their stirrings and have been damned with them in Hell, and in witness thereof, she bit her own hand so violently, that the mark was seen all her life after.

And also she rived the skin on her body against her heart with her nails spitefully, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have done, but that she was bound and kept with strength day and night so that she might not have her will. And when she had long been laboured in these and many other temptations, so that men weened she should never have escaped or lived, then on a time as she lay alone and her keepers were from her, Our Merciful Lord Jesus Christ, ever to be trusted, worshipped be His Name, never for-saking His servant in time of need, appeared to His creature who had forsaken Him, in the likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a face that she was strengthened in all her spirit, and said to her these words—

'Daughter, why hast thou forsaken Me, and I forsook never thee?'

And anon, as He said these words, she saw verily how the air opened as bright as any lightning. And He rose up into the air, not right hastily and quickly, but fair and easily, so that she might well behold Him in the air till it was closed again.

And anon this creature became calmed in her wits and reason, as well as ever she was before, and prayed her husband as soon as he came to her, that she might have the keys of the buttery to take her meat and drink as she had done before Her maidens and her keep- ers counsellcd him that he should deliver her no keys, as they said she would but give away such goods as there were, for she knew not what she said, as they weened.

Nevertheless, her husband ever having tenderness and compassion for her, com-manded that they should deliver to her the keys, and she took her meat and drink as her bodily strength would serve her, and knew her friends and her household and all others that came to see how Our Lord Jesus Christ had wrought His grace in her, so blessed may He be, Who ever is near in tribulation. When men think He is far from them, He is full near by His grace. Afterwards, this creature did all other occupations as fell to her to do, wisely and soberly enough, save she knew not verily the call of Our Lord.

Chapter 30
She visits the Jordan, Mount Quarentyne, Bethania and Rafnis. Starts for Rome, and at Venice meets Richard, the broken-backed man, and goes on in his company.

Another time, this creature’s fellowship would go to the Flood of Jordan and would not let her go with them. Then this creature prayed Our Lord that she might go with them, and He bade that she should go with them whether they would or not. Then she went forth by the grace of God and asked no leave of them.

When she came to the Flood of Jordan, the weather was so hot that she thought her feet would have burnt for the heat that she felt.

Afterwards she went with her fellow-ship to Mount Quarentyne. There Our Lord fasted forty days, and there she prayed her fellowship to help her up on to the Mount. And they said, ‘Nay,’ for they could not well help themselves. Then had she great sorrow, because she might not come on to the hill. And anon, happed a Saracen, a well-favoured man, to come by her, and she put a groat into his hand, making him a sign to bring her on
to the Mount. And quickly the Saracen took her under his arm and led her up on to the high Mount, where Our Lord fasted forty days.

Then was she sore athirst, and had no comfort in her fellowship. Then God of His great goodness, moved the Grey Friars with compassion, and they comforted her, when her countrymen would not know her.

And so she was ever more strengthened in the love of Our Lord and the more bold to suffer shame and reproach for His sake in every place where she came, for the grace that God wrought in her of weeping, sobbing, and crying, which grace she might not withstand when God would send it. And ever she proved her feelings true, and those promises that God had made her while she was in England and other places also. They befell her in effect just as she had felt before, and therefore she durst the better receive such speeches and dalliance, and the more boldly work thereafter.

Afterwards, when this creature came down from the Mount, as God willed, she went forth to the place where Saint John the Baptist was born. And later she went to Bethania, where Mary and Martha dwelt, and to the grave where Lazarus was buried and raised from death into life. And she prayed in the chapel where Our Blessed Lord appeared to His blissful Mother on Easter Day at morn, first of all others. And she stood in the same place where Mary Magdalene stood when Christ said to her—

‘Mary, why weepest thou?’

And so she was in many more places than be written, for she was three weeks in Jerusalem and the country thereabout, and she had ever great devotion as long as she was in that country.

The friars of the Temple made her great cheer and gave her many great relics, desiring that she should have dwelt still amongst them if she would, for the faith they had in her. Also the Saracens made much of her, and conveyed her, and led her about the country wherever she would go, and she found all people good to her and gentle, save only her own countrymen.

And as she came from Jerusalem unto Rafnys, then would she have turned again to Jerusalem for the great grace and ghostly comfort that she felt when she was there, and to purchase herself more pardon.

Then Our Lord commanded her to go to Rome and, so, forth home into England, and said to her—

‘Daughter, as oftentimes as thou sayest or thinkest “Worshipped be those Holy Places in Jerusalem that Christ suffered bitter pain and Passion in,” thou shalt have the same pardon as if thou wert there with thy bodily presence, both to thyself and to all that thou wilt give it to.’

And as she went forth to Venice, many of her fellowship were right sick, and Our Lord said to her—

‘Dread thee not, daughter, no man shall die in the ship that thou art in.’

And she found her feelings right true. When Our Lord had brought them again to Venice in safety, her countrymen forsook her and went away from her, leaving her alone. And some of them said that they would not go with her for a hundred pound.

When they had gone away from her, then Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who ever helpeth at need, and never forsaketh His servants who truly trust in His mercy, said to this creature—

‘Dread thee not, daughter, for I will provide for thee right well, and bring thee in safety to Rome and home again into England without any villainy to thy body, if thou wilt be clad in white clothes, and wear them as I said to thee whilst thou wert in England.’

Then this creature, being in great grief and distress, answered Him in her mind—

‘If Thou be the spirit of God that speakest in my soul, and I may prove Thee for a true spirit with the counsel of the Church, I shall obey Thy will, and if Thou bringest me to Rome in safety, I shall wear white clothes, though all the world should wonder at me, for Thy love.’
'Go forth, daughter, in the Name of Jesus, for I am the spirit of God, which shall help thee in all thy need, go with thee, and support thee in every place, and therefore mistrust Me not. Thou foundest Me never deceivable, and I bid thee nothing do, but that which is worship to God, and profit to thy soul. If thou wilt do thereafter, then I shall flow on thee great plenty of grace.'

Then anon, as she looked on one side, she saw a poor man sitting, who had a great hump on his back. His clothes were all clouted and he seemed a man of fifty winters' age. Then she went to him and said—

'Good man, what aileth your back?'

He said—'Damsel, it was broken in a sickness.'

She asked, what was his name, and what countryman he was. He said his name was Richard, and he was of Ireland. Then thought she of her confessor's words, who was a holy anchorite, as is written before, who spoke to her whilst she was in England in this manner—

'Daughter, when your fellowship hath forsaken you, God will provide a broken-backed man to lead you forth, wherever you will go.'

Then she, with a glad spirit, said to him—

'Good Richard, lead me to Rome, and you shall be rewarded for your labour.'

'Nay, damsel,' said he, 'I wot well thy countrymen have forsaken thee, and therefore it was hard on me to lead thee. Thy countrymen have both bows and arrows with which they might defend both thee and themselves, and I have no weapon save a cloak full of clouts, and yet I dread me that mine enemies will rob me, and peradventure take thee away from me and defile thy body, and therefore I dare not lead thee, for I would not, for a hundred pounds, that thou hadst a villainy in my company.'

And she said again—

'Richard, dread you not, God shall keep us both right well and I shall give you two nobles for your labour.'

Then he consented and went forth with her. So, soon after, there came two Grey Friars and a woman that came with them from Jerusalem, and she had with her an ass, which bore a chest and an image therein, made after Our Lord.

Then said Richard to the aforesaid creature—

'Thou shalt go forth with these two men and the woman and I will meet thee morning and evening, for I must get on with my job and beg my living.'

So she did after his counsel and went forth with the two friars and the woman. And none of them could understand her language, and yet they provided for her every day, meat, drink, and harbourage as well as they did for themselves and rather better, so that she was ever bounden to pray for them.

Every evening and morning, Richard with the broken back came and comforted her as he had promised.

The woman who had the image in the chest, when they came into good cities, took the image out of her chest, and set it in worshipful wives' laps, and they would put shirts thereon, and kiss it as if it had been God Himself.

When the creature saw the worship and reverence that they gave to the image, she was taken with sweet devotion and sweet meditations, so that she wept with great sobbing and loud crying, and she was moved so much the more, because while she was in England, she had high meditations on the birth and the childhood of Christ, and she thanked God forasmuch, as she saw these creatures having as great faith in what she saw with her bodily eye, as she had had before with her ghostly eye.

When these good women saw this creature weeping, sobbing and crying so wonderfully and mightily that she was nearly overcome therewith, then they arranged a good soft bed and laid her thereon, and comforted her as much as they could for Our Lord's sake, blessed may He be.
Chapter 62

The preaching friar preaches against her, without naming her. She loses many friends in consequence, but others come to her help.

Afterwards, on Saint James’ Day, the good friar preached in Saint James’ Chapel-yard at Lynne—he was at that time neither bachelor nor doctor of divinity—where were many people and a great audience, for he had a holy name and great favour with the people, insomuch that some men, if they thought he would preach in the country, they would go with him or else follow him from town to town, such great delight had they to hear him, and so, blessed may God be, he preached fully holily and full devoutly.

Nevertheless, on this day he preached much against the said creature, not expressing her name but so exploiting his conceits that men understood well that he meant her.

Then there was much discussion amongst the people, for many men and many women trusted her, and loved her right well, and were right grieved and sorrowful because he spoke as much against her as he did, desiring that they had not heard him that day.

When he heard the murmuring and grutching of the people, supposing to be gainsaid another day by them that were her friends, he, smiting his hand on the pulpit, said—‘If I hear these matters repeated any more, I shall so smite the nail on the head,’ he said, ‘that it shall shame all her maintainers.’

And then many of them that pretended friendship to her, turned aback, for a little vain dread that they had of his words, and durst not well speak with her. Of whom the same priest was one, that afterwards wrote this book, and who was in purpose never to have believed in her feelings afterwards.

And yet Our Lord drew him back in a short time, blessed may He be, so that he loved her more and trusted more to her weeping and her crying than ever he did before. For afterwards he read of a woman called Maria de Oegines, and of her manner of living, of the wonderful compassion that she had in thinking of His Passion, and of the plenteous tears that she wept, which made her so feeble and so weak that she could not endure to behold the Cross, or hear Our Lord’s Passion rehearsed, without being dissolved in tears of pity and compassion.

Of the plenteous grace of her tears, he treateth specially in the book before written, the 18th Chapter that begins, ‘BONUS EST DOMINE, SPERANTIBUS IN TE.’ and also in the 19th Chapter where he telleth how she, at the request of a priest that he should not be troubled or distraught in his Mass with her weeping and her sobbing, went out of the church door, with a loud voice crying that she could not restrain herself therefrom.

And Our Lord also visited the priest, when at Mass, with such grace and such devotion when he would read the Holy Gospel, that he wept wonderfully, so that he wetted his vestment and the ornaments of the altar, and might not measure his weeping and his sobbing, it was so abundant, nor might he restrain it, or well stand therewith at the Altar.

Then he believed well that the good woman, whom he before had little affection for, could not restrain her weeping, her sobbing or her crying, and who felt more plenty of grace than ever did he, without any comparison. Then he knew well that God gave His grace to whom He would.

Then the priest who wrote this treatise, through stirring of a worshipful clerk, a bachelor of divinity, had seen and read the matter before written much more seriously and expressly than it is written in this treatise, for here is but a little of the effect thereof, for he had not right clear mind of the said matter when he wrote this treatise, and therefore he wrote the less thereof.

Bonus est...te “Good is the one, Lord, whose hope is in you” [Latin]
Then he drew toward and inclined more seriously to the said creature, whom he had fled and eschewed through the friar’s preaching, as is before written.

Also the same priest read afterwards in a treatise that is called the ‘Prick of Love,’ the 2nd Chapter, that Bonaventure wrote of himself, these words following—

‘Ah, Lord, why shall I more call and cry! Thou delayest, and Thou comest not, and I, weary and overcome by desire, begin to madden, for love governeth me, and not reason. I run with hasty course wherever Thou wilt. I submit, Lord. They that see me, trouble and rue not, knowing me drunken with Thy love Lord, they say—“Lo! yon madman crieth in the streets,” but how much is the desire of my heart they perceive not.’

He read also of Richard Hampol, hermit, in Incendio Amoris, like matter that moved him to give credence to the said creature.

Also Elizabeth of Hungary cried with a loud voice, as is written in her treatise.

And many others, who had forsaken her through the friar’s preaching, repented and turned again to her in process of time, notwithstanding that the friar kept his opinion, and would always in his sermon, have a part against her, whether she were there or not, and caused many people to deem full evil of her, many a day and long.

For some said that she had a devil within her, and some said to her own mouth that the friar should have driven those devils out of her. Thus was she slandered, eaten and gnawed by the people, for the grace that God wrought in her, of contrition, devotion, and compassion, through the gift of which graces she wept, sobbed and cried full sore against her will. She might not choose, for she would rather have wept softly and privily, than openly, if it had been in her power.

Chapter 74
Her desire for death. Her desire to kiss the lepers. Visits to sick women, and consolation of one in temptation.

The said creature one day, hearing her Mass and revolving in her mind the time of her death, sore sighing and sorrowing because it was so long delayed, said in this manner—

‘Alas ’ Lord, how long shall I thus weep and mourn for Thy love, and for desire of Thy presence?’

Our Lord answered in her soul and said—

‘All these fifteen years.’

Then said she—

‘Ah! Lord, I shall think it many thousand years.’

Our Lord answered to her—

‘Daughter, thou must bethink thyself of My blessed Mother, who lived after Me on earth fifteen years, also Saint John the Evangelist, and Mary Magdalene, who loved Me right highly.’

‘Ah Blissful Lord,’ said she, ‘I would I were as worthy to be secure of Thy love, as Mary Magdalene was.’

Then said Our Lord—‘Truly, daughter, I love thee as well, and the same peace that I gave to her, the same peace I give to thee. For, daughter, there is no saint in Heaven displeased, though I love a creature on earth as much as I do them. Therefore they will not otherwise than I will.’

Thus Our Merciful Lord Christ Jesus drew His creature unto His love, and to mind of His Passion, so that she could not endure to behold a leper or other sick man, especially if he had any wounds appearing on him.

So she cried, and so she wept, as if she had seen Our Lord Jesus Christ with His wounds bleeding. And so she did, in the sight of her soul, for, through the beholding of the sick man, her mind was all taken over to Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then had she great mourning and sorrowing because she might not kiss the lepers when she saw them, or met with them, in the streets, for the love of Jesus.
Now began she to love what she had most hated beforetime, for there was nothing more loathsome or more abominable to her, while she was in those years of worldly prosperity, than to see or behold a leper, whom now, through Our Lord’s mercy, she desired to embrace and kiss for the love of Jesus, when she had time and place convenient.

Then she told her confessor what great desire she had to kiss lepers, and he warned her that she should kiss no men, but if she would anyhow kiss, she should kiss women. Then was she glad, because she had leave to kiss the sick women, and went to a place where sick women dwelt who were right full of the sickness, and fell down to her knees before them, praying them that she might kiss their mouths for the love of Jesus. So she kissed there two sick women with many a holy thought and many a devout tear, and when she had kissed them, she told them full many good words and stirred them to meekness and patience, so that they would not grutch at their sickness, but highly thank God therefor, and they should have great bliss in Heaven through the mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then one woman had so many temptations that she knew not how she might best be governed. She was so laboured with her ghostly enemy that she durst not bless herself, or do any worship to God, for dread that the devil should slay her, and she was laboured with many foul and horrible thoughts, many more than she could tell. And, as she said, she was a maid.

Therefore the said creature went to her many times to comfort her, and prayed for her also full specially, that God should strengthen her against her enemy. And it is to be believed that He did so, blessed may He be.

Chapter 75

The man whose wife experiences mental illness after child-birth. Margery visits her and she recovers with her but still experiences mental illness with others. She recovers.

As the said creature was in a church of Saint Margaret to say her devotions, there came a man kneeling at her back, wringing his hands and shewing tokens of great grief. She, perceiving his grief, asked him what ailed him. He said it stood right hard with him, for his wife was newly delivered of a child, and she was out of her mind.

‘And, dame,’ he said, ‘she knoweth not me or any of her neighbours. She roareth and crieth so that she maketh folk evil afraid. She will both smite and bite, and therefore is she manacled on her wrists.’

Then asked she the man if he would that she went with him and saw her, and he said—

‘Yea, dame, for God’s love.’

So she went forth with him to see the woman, and when she came into the house, as soon as the sick woman, who was alienated from her wits, saw her, she spake to her soberly and kindly and said she was right glad of her coming, and greatly comforted by her presence, ‘For ye are,’ she said, ‘a right good woman, and I behold many fair angels about you, and therefore, I pray you, go not from me, for I am greatly comforted by you.’

And when other folk came to her, she cried and gaped as if she would have eaten them, and said that she saw many devils about them. She would not suffer them to touch her, by her own good will. She roared and cried so, both night and day, for the most part, that men would not suffer her to dwell amongst them, she was so tedious to them.

Then was she taken to the furthest end of the town, into a chamber, so that the people should not hear her crying, and there was she bound, hand and foot, with chains of iron, so that she should smite nobody. And the said creature went to her each day, once or twice at least, and whilst she was with her, she was meek enough, and heard her speak and chat.
with good will, without any roaring or cry-
ing.

And the said creature prayed for this woman every day, that God should, if it were His will, restore her to her wits again, and Our Lord answered in her soul and said she should fare right well.

Then she was more bold to pray for her curing than she was before, and each day, weeping and sorrowing, prayed for her recovery, till God gave her her wits and her mind again. And then was she brought to church and purified as other women are, blessed may God be.

It was, as they thought that knew it, a right great miracle, for he that wrote this book had never, before that time, seen man or woman, as he thought, so far out of herself as this woman was, nor so evil to rule or to manage.

And later, he saw her sad and sober enough, worship and praise be to Our Lord without end, for His high mercy and His goodness, Who ever helpeth at need.

Chapter 76
Her husband's death.

It happened, on a time, that the husband of the said creature, a man in great age, passing three score years, as he would have come down from his chamber bare-foot and bare-legged, he slithered, or else failed of his footing, and fell down to the ground from the stairs, his head under him grievously broken and bruised, insomuch that he had in his head five linen plugs for many days, whilst his head was healing.

And, as God willed, it was known to some of his neighbours how he had fallen down from the stairs, peradventure through the din and the rush of his fall. So they came to him and found him lying with his head under him, half alive, all streaked with blood, and never likely to have spoken with priest or clerk, but through high grace and a miracle.

Then the said creature, his wife, was sent for and so she came to him. Then was he taken up and his head sewn, and he was sick a long time after, so that men thought he should have been dead.

Then the people said, if he died, his wife was worthy to be hanged for his death, forasmuch as she might have kept him and did not. They dwelt not together nor lay together, for, as is written before, they both with one assent and with the free will of each, had vowed to live chaste. Therefore, to avoid all perils, they dwelt and sojourned in diverse places where no suspicion could be had of their incontinence. For, at first, they dwelt together after they had made their vow, and then people slandered them, and said they used their lust and their pleasure, as they did before making their vow. And when they went out on pilgrimage, or to see and speak with other ghostly creatures, many evil folk, whose tongues were then own, failing the dread and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, deemed and said they went rather to woods, groves, and valleys, to use the lust of their bodies, so that people would not espy it or know it.

Having knowledge how prone people were to deem ill of them, and desiring to avoid all occasion for it as much as they rightly might, they, of their own free will and common consent, parted asunder, as touching their board and their chambers, and went to board in divers places. And this was the cause that she was not with him, and also that she should not be hindered from her contemplation.

And therefore when he had fallen, and grievously was hurt, as is said before, the people said, if he died, it was worthy that she should answer for his death. Then she prayed to Our Lord that her husband might live a year, and she be delivered out of slander, if it were His pleasure.

Our Lord said to her mind—
‘Daughter, thou shalt have thy boon, for he shall live, and I have wrought a great miracle for thee in that he was not dead, and I bid thee take him home and keep him for My love.’

She said—
‘Nay, good Lord, for I shall then not attend to Thee as I do now.’
‘Yes, daughter,’ said Our Lord, ‘thou shalt have as much reward for keeping him and helping him in his need at home, as if thou wert in church, making thy prayers. Thou hast said many times thou wouldst fain keep Me. I pray thee now keep him for the love of Me, for he hath some time fulfilled thy will and My will, both. And he hath made thy body free to Me, so that thou shouldst serve Me, and live chaste and clean, and I will that thou be free to help him at his need in My name.’

‘Ah! Lord,’ said she, ‘for Thy mercy grant me grace to obey and fulfil Thy will, and let never my ghostly enemies have any power to hinder me from fulfilling Thy will.’

Then she took home her husband with her and kept him years after, as long as he lived, and had full much labour with him, for in his last days he turned childish again, and lacked reason, so that he could not do his own easement by going to a seat, or else he would not, but, as a child, voided his natural digestion in his linen clothes, where he sat by the fire or at the table, whichever it were, he would spare no place.

And therefore was her labour much the more in washing and wringing, and her costage in firing, and it hindered her full much from her contemplation, so that many times she would have loathed her labour, save she bethought herself how she, in her young age, had full many delectable thoughts, fleshly lusts, and inordinate loves to his person.

And therefore she was glad to be punished with the same person, and took it much the more easily, and served him, and helped him, as she thought, as she would have done Christ Himself.
Endnotes

1 The text below is taken from The Book of Margery Kempe: A Modern Version by W. Butler Bowdon (Oxford University Press, 1936). The text is in the public domain. The introduction has been provided by Gabrielle M.C. Bychowski. The bibliography, glosses, and notes have been provided by Cameron Hunt McNabb.

2 OED Online, s.v. “mad,” adj.

3 In the original Middle English, made is spelled mad.

4 Chapter 80, not included in this volume.

5 The Proem has been excerpted to focus on issues of disability. The remainder of the proem pertains to how The Book was written.

6 Bowden’s translation uses the words “is insane” here and “insane” in the second sentence as well. They have been replaced with the preferred term “mental illness.”

7 Bowden’s translation uses the words “becomes normal” here. They have been replaced with “recovers.”