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Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Motherhood in Medieval Europe

In the eyes of the medieval Christian Church it was a woman's duty to share her husband's bed and to bear his children. Yet, those very duties put her soul in peril. Motherhood was a noble vocation, but becoming a mother, that is, engaging in sexual intercourse, and bearing and birthing children, was fraught with spiritual dangers. "Between a Rock and Hard Place" examines this contradiction at the heart of medieval European motherhood, and explores some of the ways women negotiated their way through those conflicting values and expectations.

In her spiritual autobiography, Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century English woman, and mother of fourteen children, records conversations between herself and Jesus. In one conversation, Jesus informs her that she is pregnant once again. Margery is appalled, and responds to the news by bewailing her married sexuality. "Lord," she wails, "I am not worthy to hear you speak, and still to make love with my husband, even though it is great pain and great distress to me" (1985: 84, ch. I.21). Margery, along with her contemporaries, was caught between a rock and a hard place. In the eyes of the medieval Christian Church it was a woman's duty to share her husband's bed and bear his children. Yet, those very duties put her soul in peril. Motherhood was a noble vocation, but becoming a mother, that is, engaging in sexual intercourse, and bearing and birthing children, were fraught with spiritual dangers (see Atkinson, 1991). In the following pages, I examine this contradiction at the heart of medieval European motherhood, and explore some of the ways women negotiated their way through those conflicting values and expectations.

Margery's dilemma has its roots in the earliest days of Christianity. The early church valued virginity both as a sign of contradiction amidst, what it characterised as, the lax morals of the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity,

and as a sign of faith in Christ's anticipated return (see Zizioulas, 1985: 23-43). The letters of Paul are particularly instructive in this regard. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages both men and women to live as if they are unmarried because the world as they know it is passing away. In that letter, he describes the unmarried woman as being "anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit" (1 Cor. 7:34 *New Revised Standard Version*). The married woman, on the other hand, is preoccupied with less noble concerns; she is "anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband."

When Christ did not return as quickly as was anticipated, the Church Fathers turned their attention to the question of how to live the Christian life in this world. They wrote at length about sexuality and family life. Here, they embraced the influence of the Greco-Roman world, framing their discussions of sexuality and family life within Platonic and Neo-Platonic dualism, separating the spiritual from the material, identifying women's procreative bodies as imperfect, corrupt and corrupting (see Atkinson, 1983b). Holiness continued to be equated with virginity. Margery Kempe attests to the fact that this equation persisted into the late middle ages when she bemoans the loss of her virginity in another conversation with Jesus:

Because I am no virgin, lack of virginity is now great sorrow to me. I think I wish I had been killed as soon as I was taken from the [baptismal] font, so that I should never have displeased you, and then, blessed Lord, you would have had my virginity without end. (Kempe, 1985: 86, ch. I.22)

Christianity did provide opportunities for women to live celibate lives—as nuns, recluses, and anchoresses. But the majority of women did not have the necessary financial resources and family permission to pursue them. Most women were obliged to marry. And good Christian wives could not deny their husbands their conjugal rights. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorts husbands and wives to give to each other their conjugal rights. "Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor. 7: 5 NRSV). This obligation to pay the marriage debt, as it was called, became enshrined in canon law. Both husband and wife were bound by it. If one partner desired to forego her or his sexual relationship in order to pursue the better way, a life of celibate holiness, she or he had to obtain the agreement of her or his partner.

Margery finally obtained this permission after twenty years of marriage and fourteen children.

It happened on Friday, Midsummer Eve, in very hot weather—as this creature was coming from York carrying a bottle of beer in her hand,

and her husband a cake tucked inside his clothes against his chest...
(Kempe, 1985: 58, ch. I.11)

As they walked along her husband John asked Margery what she would do if a highway robber came and threatened to strike off his head unless he made love to her. They continued walking toward their destination as they debated the merits of the vow of chastity she so desired. After some very harsh words and hard bargaining he finally consented. In return, Margery agreed to pay his debts, continue to sleep in his bed, and to share his table on Fridays instead of fasting as she was accustomed to doing. Not all husbands were so accommodating.

Neither was celibacy every woman's cup of tea. Even Margery Kempe, despite her protestations to the contrary, appears to have enjoyed sex. She tells us that early in her pursuit of holiness, she was tempted to commit adultery with a man who propositioned her outside a church (see Kempe, 1985: 49-50, ch. I.4). Later, after her vow of chastity, she describes being distracted by obscene thoughts and visions for twelve days. She confesses that she found these sights and thoughts "delicious to her against her will" (Kempe, 1985: 184, ch. I.59). And most tellingly, Margery admits to having had "very many delectable thoughts, physical lust, and inordinate love" (Kempe, 1985: 221, ch. I.76) for her husband's body.

Margery Kempe was a controversial figure in her day, and she continues to be in ours. Scholars debate her motives and her place in the Christian mystical tradition (e.g. see Glascoe, 1993: 268-319; Neaman, 1988), and they question the authorship of her spiritual autobiography (e.g. see Hirsh, 1975). They do agree however that *The Book of Margery Kempe* reflects her times. Although Margery's behaviour and her piety were somewhat extreme, the sentiments she expresses conformed to the understanding of her age, and would have been shared by her friends and neighbours.

While Margery's response to the dilemma of medieval motherhood was a bit unusual, her claim to mysticism was not. Women have always found mysticism a space within which to resist and negotiate the constraints placed upon them (see Atkinson, 1983a: 157-194). Mystical experience is direct unmediated experience of God, circumventing accepted religious, social and gender hierarchies. What was unusual about Margery was that she set about pursuing a career as a mystic and a pilgrim with her husband and children in tow, figuratively if not always literally (see Atkinson, 1983a: 39-66). While still living with her husband, Margery travelled around England, Italy and the Holy Land (present-day Israel) in virginal white to consult holy monks, priests and anchoresses about her visions and conversations with Jesus. One scholar complains that Margery's claim to a mystical vocation was really a ploy on her part so that she could travel, limit the number of children she bore and hobnob with the rich and famous (Neaman, 1988: 25-7). Others suggest that her claims to mystical experience enabled her to reconcile holiness and motherhood. And

indeed, throughout her spiritual autobiography, we hear God encourage Margery to integrate her married life with the pursuit of holiness. At one point in her spiritual journey, Margery tells us that Jesus assured her of a place in heaven and then he asked her whom she would have as her companion there. She requested that her spiritual director accompany her. At this, Jesus asked, "Why do you ask for him more than your own father or your husband?" (Kempe, 1985: 55, ch. I.8). Margery also recounts that when she and her husband were living apart after their vow of chastity, her husband had a serious accident. She was reluctant to take him home and look after him because it would interfere with her devotions and ministrations to the Lord (see Kempe, 1985: 220, ch. I.76). But Jesus insisted that she care for her husband, reassuring her that in doing so she also served him. We see this repeatedly throughout her book. Margery, reflecting the dominant values of her day, rejects her wifely duties and maternal affections in order to pursue holiness. Jesus responds by insisting that those same duties and affections are the means to holiness. By the end of her account, we can only conclude that despite her ambivalence, Margery was convinced that "God loves wives also" (Kempe, 1985: 84, ch. I.21), that *performing wifely duties, including engaging in sexual intercourse, and bearing and birthing children* was no obstacle to holiness.

Margery Kempe authored her spiritual autobiography for the edification and instruction of others. But most medieval wives and mothers found more mundane ways to manoeuvre within the conflicting values and expectations confronting them. One of the places or spaces in which they did so was a popular childbirth ritual known in that day as the purification of women after childbirth, more commonly spoken of today as churching. From the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries in England and Europe it was customary for a new mother to go to her parish church with a group of her women relatives, friends and neighbours some four to six weeks after having given birth to receive a blessing. Before mass, the new mother would kneel at the door of the church with a candle in her hand. There the priest would greet her, sprinkle her with holy water while reciting a psalm and a prayer, and then take her by the hand to lead her into the church.

This rite concluded a woman's puerperal confinement. In medieval England and Europe, a woman customarily retreated from normal society in the latter stages of her pregnancy to be tended by the local midwife and a company of her women relatives, friends and neighbours until her purification (see Wilson, 1990: 70-78; Cressy, 1997: 201-05). During that time, which lasted approximately six weeks, the pregnant and newly-delivered woman was exempt, or prohibited, from her normal duties and obligations, including household tasks like cooking and marketing, and sexual relations with her husband. Instead, she and her companions gathered in the birthing chamber where they gossiped and ate special food and drink. Folk wisdom held that during pregnancy and while she was experiencing post-partum bleeding, a woman was more susceptible to the influence of the devil, in danger herself and

a threat to those around her (see Karant-Nunn, 1997: 83). The Church considered her defiled by the sexual act made obvious by her pregnancy.

Participation in this ritual purification after childbirth reinforced those negative stereotypes. The postures and movements prescribed for the newly-delivered mother in the purification rite configure the maternal body as unclean, impure and dangerous (for the rubrics of the rite see Henderson, 1875: xix, 23, 213-14). The new mother kneels outside the door of the church, with a candle in her hand, in an attitude of supplication. Before admitting her to the church, the priest stands over her, recites a psalm and several prayers, and then sprinkles her with holy water. Only after this symbolic rebaptism does he extend his right hand to her, raise her to her feet, and lead her across the threshold into the church. She then proceeds to a special pew reserved for her and her female cohort, called the childwife pew, separating them from the rest of the congregation until the final blessing of the mass which completes the purification.

But even as the purification rite reinforced the notion of the maternal body as unclean, impure and dangerous, it also provided a forum in which that gender stereotype could be resisted and reinterpreted. Although the childwife pew served as a fence, segregating the new mother from the rest of the congregation, it was also a place of honour. After having been welcomed at the door of the church and led over the threshold, the new mother and her company of women processed to the childwife pew at the front of the church, traditionally a place of honour and prestige. Although the ritual actions of this rite reinforced the impurity of the maternal body, the psalms and prayers recited by the whole congregation on her behalf are ones of thanksgiving for her fertility and safe delivery, and petitions for her continued safety in this life and the next. The only other time a woman was recognised and celebrated publicly like this was her first marriage (Karant-Nunn, 1997: 85).

The new mother's companions were also prominent in the public eye during the purification rite. A pregnant and newly-delivered woman was surrounded by a company of women, who by virtue of their own status as wives and mothers were immune to the spiritual dangers posed by her maternal body. Within that company, normative gender relations were turned upside down (see Wilson, 1990: 85-93). The midwife ruled the birthing chamber. The pregnant woman's husband was subject to her authority in his own home. The midwife along with the other female companions also ensured that he took care of the household while his wife rested and recuperated. They also safeguarded the new mother's right to refuse intercourse until the time of her purification. The midwife also had sacred power, for she was empowered to baptise dying infants (see Gibson, 1996: 150). This not only confounded the boundaries between male and female gender roles, but also the distinction between clergy and laity.

When the new mother and her cohort of women processed to the door of the church and sat in the childwife pew on her purification day, their subversion

of the prevailing gender roles and stereotypes was brought out of the privacy of the birthing chamber into the public forum. The rite of the purification of a woman after childbirth provided a forum in which the society of women occasioned by pregnancy and delivery was recognised. Its exemption from everyday routines, and the roles of authority and leadership women played within that society were validated (see Wilson, 1990: 92; Gibson, 1996: 149).

In assuming their place in the childwife pew, medieval women allowed themselves to be fenced off, reinforcing the notion of the maternal body as impure and dangerous. At the same time however, being set apart allowed the puerperal woman and her female companions a privileged place and a space within which to express and explore alternative understandings of the maternal body, the puerperal woman, and women's individual and collective place. The ambivalence of medieval Christianity toward the maternal body placed medieval mothers between a rock and a hard place. However that ambivalence also allowed them opportunities to resist, subvert and manoeuvre within the conflicting expectations and values of their day.

A version of this paper was presented at the 7th Annual Conference of the Association for Research on Mothering at York University, October 24-26, 2003.

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Becky Lee

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