In 14th century England, Christian women had many reasons to declare vows of chastity. For instance, many single women became chaste for the purposes of remaining a virgin for their future husbands; of course, certain women also sought chastity as a tool for the moral progression of their Christian communities. In Margery Kempe’s spiritual autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a married Kempe stated that God spoke to her; and she declared that sexual abstinence from her husband would purify her relationship with God. Although Kempe’s vow of chastity could be deemed as a declaration of her spiritual devotion, it appears as if this spiritually authoritative action was most empowered by an unwavering will to possess a purity that exceeded contemporary practices of chastity, and to align her sexuality with this vision of piety.

Margery Kempe, a mayor’s daughter from Norfolk, was a middle-aged wife who gave birth to 14 children, yet she desired chastity for God. In the beginning of Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she confesses that God told her “Daughter, I will have thee wedded to my Godhead, for I shall show thee my privities and my counsels, for thou shall wonen with me without end.” (Norton, 286) Within this quote, it appears that Kempe is convinced that the voice
she heard was God, and she believed God wanted her to become his anointed bride even though Margery already had a “husband.” In addition, it seems as if Kempe’s longing to become God’s bride while being chaste with her husband could have been deemed as a way for her to enter a passage from “wifehood to widowhood.” (Williams, 14)

In 14th century England, the rights of women were very limited; however, it was known by many that widows possessed more independence, were deemed pious, and sought chastity. Similarly, Dr. Tara Williams of Oregon State University has researched Margery’s journey to widowhood and has stated:

“Early in her spiritual life, Margery encounters a widow who asks for ‘the same grace that [God] gaf this creatur.’ (55) When the widow does not believe Margery’s insistence that she was not entitled to this ‘same grace,’ Margery commissions a letter written stipulating that ‘the wedow schuld nevyr han the grace that this creatur had.’ (56) Widowhood is not a reliable route to holiness in and of itself; Margery’s ability to draw on widowhood while maintaining her chaste wifehood elevates her above both states. Perhaps this explains why the text never identifies her as a widow.” (Williams, 358)

It appears that Kempe’s longing for marital chastity could have been motivated by a desire to become elevated to even beyond the status of widowhood in order to prepare herself for a purification which would eventually be worthy for God.

In comparison, in the academic journal, *Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is also expressed that Kempe’s desire to be God’s bride comes from her spiritual beginning. The journal revealed, “Margery’s spiritual life begins too late for her to be a holy virgin and ends too early for her to be a chaste widow.” (Williams, 530) Hence, by Kempe declaring herself the bride of God, she strategically aligns herself with others who have been given that title.
By claiming to be God’s wedded wife, Kempe attempted to view her spiritual role to be as high as the witnesses’ of their “wedding”. For instance, Kempe had a vision of the wedding between her and God with pious figures in attendance such as St. Katherine, St. Margret, Mary with Jesus, and the twelve apostles. Mary expresses that God announces to her soul, “I take thee, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, so that thou be buxom and bonyr to do what I bid thee do. For daughter, there was never child so buxom to the mother as I shall be to thee both in well and in woe, to help thee and comfort thee…” (Norton, 287) Kempe continues, “And then the Mother of God and all the saints that were present in her soul prayed that they might have much joy together.” These lines seem to reveal Kempe’s desire to be piously connected with these saintly figures as equals, and by doing so, it appeared as if she relished the idea that God perceives her just as worthy as his saintly servants.

Moreover, in the journal *Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety*, Dr. Raymond Powell describes Kempe’s piety as completely normal for her time. He states:

“The Book of Margery Kempe seems unusual only when divorced from its context; against the backdrop of popular piety in late medieval England, Kempe fits perfectly. In fact, so many of the religious trends in the England of her day find an expression in her religiosity that she may well be considered an exemplar of late medieval English piety.” (Powell, 3)

Therefore, one can assume that Kempe’s pious chastity and her “marriage” to God could be deemed as her way of fulfilling not only her “saintly” desires but also for the conformity “to the religious norms and expectations of her society.” (Powell, 4)
Margery Kempe’s devotion to God has also been attributed to her connection to a spiritual text wielded by many in her society. The religious text is called the *Meditaciones vite Christi*. It revolves around the ideology of meditative reflections on one’s life and the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Powell stated “through detailed and serious reflection on the events of Jesus’ life, the soul of the devout person is made aware of a great love displayed by God in redemption, and is drawn to respond to that love. The significant aspect of this form of spirituality was the encouragement to draw on the resources of the imagination to facilitate devotional practice.” (Powell, 4) By wielding the text of *Meditaciones vite Christi*, it would seem possible that Kempe became conscious of a spiritual grace within her control, allowing her the liberation of creating reflections of the suffering of Jesus in order to seek enlightenment. Most relevantly, it seems clear that these reflections of Jesus’ could have allowed Kempe to reflect on her own suffering. For example, Kempe reveals that she was drawn to the ‘manhood’ of Christ and admitted that ‘menchildren’ and handsome men reminded her of God’s image. (Norton, 287) Kempe then admits “And, therefore she cried many times and often when she met a seemly man and wept and sobbed full sore in the manhood of Christ as she went in the streets of Rome, that they that saw her wondered full much on her, for they knew not the cause.” (Norton, 287)

Moreover, it appears as if Kempe’s crying is in reaction to her sexual attraction for the Christ-like figures passing by her on the street; as a woman who sought chastity, it would seem appropriate to abstain from the encouragement from human male attractions other than her husband. However, as with the teachings in the *Meditaciones vite Christi*, Kempe seems to allow herself an imaginative sphere in which her attractions arise only at the presence of images that look like the son of God whom she was “saving herself” for.
Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe* provides a peek into the soul of a devout woman who strived towards purity in order to demonstrate a matched piety among holy figures, in order to connect with the spiritual independence of “widowhood” and also to align herself with the religious teachings and expectations in her society of late medieval England. Also, one discovers that Kempe’s spiritually motivated actions liberated her in a world that denounced powers given to women. Hence, Margery Kemp’s declaration of chastity is an example of an expression of women’s empowerment and spiritual independence. Kempe’s “marriage” to God served as a pious practice that allowed her to center on an intimate relationship between herself and God to ultimately gain spiritual and authoritative control over her own sexuality.
Works Cited


