Medieval Women’s Spirituality

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[0:00] Thank you for coming, and especially those brave men that are here, because in the bulletin, the title that was given was Women's Spirituality, which I thought, oh dear, is that going to scare away all the men? So thank you for coming here. We're actually talking about medieval women's spirituality, and we'll be spending most of our time in the 14th century today.

Now, the thought world of the medieval period, and the medieval period lasted from about the 5th century to the 15th century. So that's a long span of time all in itself. The thought world of this period was characterized by a strong belief in the imminence or present everywhere-ness of God, and this was communicated through both writing and the visual arts. Women's writings were visionary.

Women were visionaries. So consider the image behind me here, which shows the 12th century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen receiving a vision. So the red waves that are coming down from heaven, sort of to her mind's eye, is indicative of the vision that she is receiving. And she's dictating it to the monks sitting across from her, who's leaning in attentively so as not to miss a word.

His name was Volkmar, and he recorded her images throughout her life. In their writings, women often depicted very vivid visual scenes, and visual artists in the medieval period and since have rendered such scenes in various media, some of which I'm going to draw on today.

So these artists also have depicted women visionaries themselves as here, where we see a detail of a statue of the 14th century anchorite Julian of Norwich, which is located at Norwich Cathedral in England.

[1:58] In her eyes, the artist has beautifully depicted Julian as visionary. Perhaps caught at the moment, she received one of her 16 revelations or showings of divine love. What I'd like to do today is explore how Jesus is Lord in a very immediate way by looking at the writings of a number of late medieval women in both England and on the European continent. Julian is one of those women, and we'll return to her a little later.

But in exploring medieval women's spirituality, I'm going to use Marjorie Kemp, a contemporary of Julian, as the main figure for our inquiry and analysis today. But first, I want to say a few words about women and writing.

From the beginnings of Christianity, there has been, sometimes more, sometimes less, misgivings, shall we say, of women who engage in religious teaching. Paul's prohibitions have frequently been repeated. From 1 Corinthians 14, verse 34, women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Or again, from 1 Timothy 2, verse 12, I do not permit a woman to teach. Women have grappled with these hard sayings throughout the centuries since Paul. While it's not my intention today to marshal a defense for women and teaching or speaking in churches, but perhaps I'll do that a different day. I do want to draw our attention to the creativity of historical women in finding ways to circumvent these kinds of prohibitions, particularly in their writings.

So in 18th century England, and this is 18th century, this is, this is kind of my other century. I live in the 21st century and the 18th century. So in 18th century England, Ann Dutton published some 50 books in which she vigorously entered contemporary theological debates. Most of these books were published anonymously or under her initials A.D., a fact that has obscured her role at the center of these debates until very recently. In this book by her, A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God, she includes an appendix on the lawfulness of printing anything written by a woman. So with an appendix and a letter regarding the lawfulness of a woman's appearing in print. That's an appendix there.

In it, Dutton skillfully complicated contemporary categories of public and private. Men belonged sort of in the public realm, women in the private realm. She used these categories to sort of to find a way into, well, to argue for the lawfulness of women appearing in print.

[5:01] She argued that when someone brought one of her books into their home, it was as if an author and reader were having a conversation in their home, a sort of tete-a-tete over a cup of tea. And surely there could be nothing objectionable in a private chat. This is basically her argument. So she wrote, quote, and you can public or follow it along here. If you can read 18th century print there. For though what is printed is published to the world and the instruction thereby given is in this regard public, and that it is presented to everyone's view, yet it is private with respect to the church.

Books are not read and the instruction by them given in the public assembly of the saints, but visit every one and converse with them in their own private houses. And therefore the teaching or instruction thereby given is private and of no other consideration than that of writing a private letter to a friend or having private conference, that is conversation with him.

So in the medieval world, many women claimed the right to speak because they were visionaries, granted certain visions by God. In their own way, these elevated religious insights overrode strictures of women's participation in speaking and teaching with religious authority. In her Revelations of Divine Love, which I've already mentioned, Julian of Norwich wrote, quote, but for I am a woman, should I therefore live that I should not tell you the goodness of God?

Which I think is quite a lovely quote, but for I am a woman, should I not tell you, therefore live that I should tell you the goodness of God? Even so, gendered and cultural norms pressed many women to present themselves in terms of modesty and humility. Thus we are told that the Belgian Beguin Mary of Oymes was always modest and as simple as a dove in every way.

And even Hildegard of Bingen, who we saw an image of at the beginning, who was an aristocratic woman who did not hesitate to denounce leaders of the church. She was a powerful woman and very interesting in her own right.

[7:27] Even she felt obliged to describe herself as a poor little creature. In the case of Marjorie Kemp, who we'll be talking about more, hostility was aroused in many she met, not just by her eccentricity, of which I'll say more in a moment, but by the simple fact that she was a woman who dared to make public pronouncements about religious matters. In her autobiography, she referred deferentially to herself as the creature, always in the third person, the creature, even though this is an autobiography.

Similarly, three centuries later, you can see that Anne Denton styled herself here as a poor, sinful, unworthy creature. And she's published here, you can see under AD. She has not given her name here.

And she's published here. Paradoxically, this self-diminuation was powerful to raise women's voices rather than maintain their silence. Literacy, so beyond these biblical sort of strictures and cultural requirements for women or expectations for women's behavior, literacy was another obstacle for women writers. In fact, for most of history, far more men than women were literate.

The small minority of medieval women who could read and write could usually do so only in the vernacular language. Okay, so the language of the common people. Whereas very few learned Latin, which was, which meant that they were cut off from the world of learning. Latin was the language of learning.

And especially of theology. So theology was written in Latin. Women did not learn Latin. This put women at a great disadvantage. But in another way, this could also be an advantage to them.

[9:23] Women could be more individual. They were more original, sometimes very peculiar, as we'll see. And they could think in ways that were not bound by the rigid logic of scholasticism, which was being taught in the universities at the time, with its emphasis on reasoning, always reasoning.

And they were more often left alone to do so. They could kind of make up their own rules as they went along. Now, before the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, the survival and diffusion of texts were dependent on few people, on a few people and local circumstances. Which women became well known and widely read, depended not just on the value and interest of what they thought and experienced, but on which male clerics admired them, and whether the women's teachings and ways of life were what the contemporary church wanted to encourage.

However, though the church could be very effective at promoting the works of women it approved, it could not always control the writing of such people as Marguerite Poirot, who is seen here.

Poirot was a French-speaking author of The Mirror of Simple Souls, a book about God's love. After refusing to recount her views or remove her book from circulation, she was burned at the stake for heresy.

One of her crimes was writing the book in Old French rather than Latin. Our access to women in the medieval period is almost always through men.

[11:03] Even texts that are certainly written by the woman herself, or their continued existence to a male scribe. And some exist because of a succession of men.

Okay. So here, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, who is here on the left, had first to be recognized as peculiarly holy by senior churchmen in her area.

At the bishop's request, a local abbot, who was also her cousin, became her protector. This man did not just provide for her care. Elizabeth was an actor rather than a writer, which is very interesting in the period.

And she regularly enacted a religious drama that her reverend cousin presented to admiring visitors. He was selecting and interpreting her behavior as he did so.

This reverend abbot was with us during everything which I have described, and was her informant and reliable expounder of the Virgin's words. So said Philip, the monk from Clairvaux, who wrote a Latin account of her life, in which he also referred to intervals, at intervals to worthy men, who had added to his own first-hand knowledge of being there.

[12:25] Before a medieval English woman could read this account of Elizabeth's life, an unknown English cleric had to translate Philip's Latin, sometimes having trouble understanding it, and cutting selectively as he went along.

So there is a succession of men who have been interpreting, cutting, selecting, and coming up with eventually the text that comes to us today. But I said I would spend the bulk of my time providing a deeper exploration of the life and writings of Marjorie Kemp.

This is a stained glass depiction of Marjorie. It's imaginative, not actually an image from the period.

But this is what Marjorie might have looked like here. The book of Marjorie Kemp is the earliest surviving autobiographical writing in English, and in this sense is unique as a medieval devotional text, for it's more immediate in its emphases, and we hear more of Marjorie's voice, and of the social context in which it was written.

Okay, so she actually wrote this. No, she didn't. Sorry, I'll get to that. But it is the earliest surviving autobiographical writing in England, which is quite something.

[13:56] And the title is Book. Which is not terribly imaginative. We just call it the book of Marjorie Kemp. The book itself was lost for centuries until in 1934, the 15th century manuscript came to light when an old Catholic family, the Butler Bowdens, went searching for a spare ping pong ball in a closet, and the book came tumbling out.

So it was hidden for centuries. Which is, I'd love to have that moment as a historian. That is really exciting.

I wouldn't have been looking for a ping pong ball, though. In the late medieval period, however, it had been in the possession, so very nearly after it was written, it was in the possession of Cartesian monks at Mount Grace Priory in Yorkshire, northern England, where it had been annotated by readers interested in her spiritual experience.

So it did survive into the next sort of generations of people. People were using it and annotating it.

Yet though her book had disappeared, the name of Marjorie Kemp had survived because of the printing in 1501, so not long after her death, by Winkind de Word, which I think is an excellent name, of a seven-page quarto pamphlet of extracts from the more devotional parts of the book.

[15:34] What does that mean? Pardon? When you said the word, the name of... When you said the name of that... Name, I think. Name. Oh, name. Name, yeah, sorry.

When I say name, okay. Yeah. So here we have Winkind de Word's short treatise, and this is English. Here begineth a short treatise of contemplation taught by our Lord Jesus Christ or taken out of the book of Marjorie Kemp of Lynn.

Okay. Yeah. When Henry Pepwell came to reprint these extracts in a selection of spiritual pieces in 1521, so 20 years later, he described Marjorie Kemp as a devout anchoress or recluse.

When the book was rediscovered in the last century then, not even 100 years ago, it might have been expected to contain the writings of a religious recluse, perhaps another Julian of Norwich, who lived for about 60 years in intense prayer-oriented seclusion in a permanently enclosed cell or anchor hold that probably looked something like this.

So this is a traditional medieval anchor hold. It is attached to the church, a butchitzapart. She would have been enclosed in it.

[17:05] And you can see that there are windows to the outside where people would have come to her for advice, her wisdom, seeking her wisdom.

There also would have been a window into the church so she could participate in the services that were taking place in the church. So since Henry Pepwell, when he published a selection of spiritual pieces in 1521, he called her a devout anchoress, which suggested for hundreds of years that Marjorie Kemp might have lived this sort of life.

In fact, the book, Marjorie's book, is as different from Julian's revelations as Marjorie Kemp is from Julian herself.

Of Marjorie's devotion, no reader can be in doubt, but the turbulent life that she looked back on in dictating her book is far removed from the peace and the withdrawal from the world, which are the experience of the recluse.

So Marjorie herself. Marjorie was born in 1373 to a very distinguished family in the prosperous medieval port of Kings Lynn in Norfolk.

[18:25] Her father was John Brunham, a burguess who held a number of honorable positions in Lynn. Extent archives record Brunham as being a major trader in the period.

So this was a port, a medieval port where they lived. Five times he was mayor of Lynn, one of the town's members of parliament. He was an alderman of the influential Trinity Guild in the town.

And he was coroner, justice of the peace, and chamberlain at various times. So he was really a major player in the town of Lynn. At about the age of 20, Marjorie was married to John Kemp.

And soon after their marriage, she became pregnant. And it was in this first pregnancy that she suffered a lot, enduring physical, spiritual, and mental anguish. She was in such distress that she threatened to kill herself.

She bit her hand and scratched her nails, her fingernails over her heart so severely that the marks remained visible throughout her life. It was in the course of this experience that she had the first of her visions of Jesus.

[19:36] And this was very helpful for her in these circumstances. In her book, she describes the vision here. Then one day, as she lay by herself and her keepers were not with her, Our merciful Lord Jesus, or Christ Jesus, ever to be trusted, worshipped be his name, never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature who had forsaken him in the likeness of a man, the 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 countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits.

And he said to her these words, Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you? So this is a very physical Christ, comforted and encouraged her.

He was sitting on the edge of her bed as she suffered. She was rescued by this vision of Christ. It restored her senses, bringing her back to herself. It was a climactic conversion experience for her.

From this time, some of what are to prove Marjorie's most persistent traits begin to appear. Her frequent sobbing and weeping. And we're talking very loud sobbing and weeping.

People knew when she was weeping. And her continual thinking and talking about heaven. Those who knew her before this intensification of her spiritual desires, they were confused, confused.

[21:10] And they quite logically asked her, Why do you talk so of the joy that is in heaven? You don't know it. And you haven't been there any more than we have, which seems quite logical.

At this stage, too, Marjorie recorded how Jesus entered into a conversation with her during her meditations. Conversations that continue throughout the book.

So you can actually read the back and forth of these conversations in her book. After these early episodes of her post-conversion experience, the book records Marjorie's desire to live a life of chastity.

Her husband objected. But in time, an agreement to live chastely, though married, was formalized in a vow. This was in her 40th year.

So she was 40 years old. And after 20 years of marriage, Marjorie had given birth to 14 children. And she may very well have endured other pregnancies besides this.

[22:12] The reason married women in this period sometimes sought lives of celibacy, she was not the only one who did this, is often interpreted in terms of asceticism and sexual renunciation.

And how through history, some people have viewed, some people have viewed a life of celibacy as a holier kind of life in which one could direct greater attention and devotion to God.

So this is a common kind of interpretation of the celibate life throughout history. However, I would suggest that in a world before birth control, in a world where every pregnancy presented the very real possibility of death, there may have been reasons other than the spiritual that suggested to Marjorie and other women that a celibate life was indeed a better life.

So, you know, it's probably a combination of reasons. But the physical is certainly, I would think, one thing that she would have considered. So Marjorie now entered on a life of pilgrimage and she traveled to meet and converse with the spiritually minded wherever she went.

On these travels, she met with frequent criticism, detraction, and even threats. At Canterbury, she was chased by a crowd threatening to burn her as a lawlord.

[23:37] And I'll tell you in a moment what this means. This is the first occurrence of an accusation that would recur and bring many trials throughout her life, despite Marjorie's evident orthodoxy in her devotion to the sacrament, frequent confession, fasting, pilgrimages, and holy images, all of which were questioned by the Lawlards.

So orthodoxy in this case is to the Catholic Church. This is before the Reformation. Okay. The Lawlards, on the other hand, have sometimes been described as a proto-Protestant movement, initially led by John Wycliffe, who was a Catholic theologian and declared a heretic and dismissed from the University of Oxford for criticizing the Catholic Church.

Lawlards, which is a pejorative term in the period, or Wycliffeites, more kindly, promoted the use of vernacular scripture, scripture written in the language of ordinary people.

He condemned the worshiping of the sacraments and relics as idolatry. He argued that only God has the right to forgive sins and opposed many of the more indulgent practices of the Catholic Church.

The highest religious authorities, along with more secular and ecclesiastical offices, were on high alert for heresy during this period.

[25:02] In 1401, in direct response to the problem of Lawlardy, one of the strictest religious censorship statutes ever enacted in England was passed by Parliament, de heretico comberendo, which allowed for the punishing of heretics by burning them at the stake.

So this was passed in direct response to this threat to the Catholic Church, initiated by Wycliffe and known as Wallerty. Marjorie was accused of heresy on numerous occasions, sometimes, as I've said, having to flee a scene for her very life.

Her convictions were very costly. Marjorie's foreign pilgrimages took her far beyond the horizons of Lynn to the Holy Land, to Assisi and Rome and to Santiago de Compostela in the 14th century.

And a lot of this would have been on foot. If few travelers can have had less to say about the experience of traveling than Marjorie, we hear only of the visions and meditations experienced during her visits to these holy places.

Women were particularly active in the late medieval explosion of interest in traveling to the holy sites of Christendom. So there were a lot of pilgrims on the road during the late medieval period.

[26:30] to read in some of the surviving memoirs of these late medieval travelers to the holy land of all the fuss, the commotion, the claustrophobic crowding and lack of privacy or security on the pilgrim galleys sailing from Venice to Jaffa.

And then to remember that Marjorie Camp described almost nothing of what struck contemporary travelers as so memorably difficult and so nervously absorbing. This to register how utterly Marjorie's memory excluded almost everything from what she saw as a spiritually significant side of life.

The conspicuous behavior of this woman who was dressed all in white, a married woman with 14 children adopting a persona of virginity by wearing white, her weeping and crying out, her telling people about her visions and pointing out their sins, you know, in front of crowds.

Quite publicly, she had no problem doing this. Predictably enough, this attracted criticism. And Marjorie saw it as persecution endured for Christ's sake and such treatment became, by its very repetitiousness, not so much a threat as a cumulative confirmation of the rightness of her own path.

This is how she interpreted it. So I like this image of Marjorie weeping on pilgrimage where you can read the reactions of her fellow travelers in their faces.

[28:01] This very smartly dressed woman is backing up. Like, this is not at all how we do things. And this person in the background is like, you know, face palm. Marjorie, this is Marjorie right here.

All the air. Yeah. She's crying. She's wearing white. It's very crowded, you can see. And there are actually stories in her book of she would join a group on pilgrimage and they would abandon her.

Sometimes they would just like sneak off ahead. her husband joined around pilgrimage on various occasions and he also would just kind of disappear when things got a little tricky for Marjorie.

And then he just, you know, rejoined the crowd a bit later. So, um, she, she was certainly making, uh, she wasn't quietly going along with the crowd by any means.

On returning home, her travels through England were complicated by a series of arrests and examinations as a heretic. At Leicester, the mayor showed great animus against her as a suspected Lollard.

[29:10] While in custody, she thought the steward of Leicester was going to rape her. Her examination before the abbot of Leicester, however, only revealed the orthodoxy of belief that she shows throughout her book and she was eventually able to leave.

She proceeded to York where she again was summoned to explain herself, this time before the archbishop who likewise found her orthodox but ordered her out of his diocese.

When about to cross the Humber on her way south, she was again arrested as a Lollard and once again brought before the archbishop who soon let her go on the condition that she proceeded to London to gain an authorizing letter from the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

The scene of Marjorie's life and book from this point now settled in Lynn and its environs and was much occupied with the mixture of hostility and support that she received on account of her weeping and crying.

As ever, Marjorie recalled the cares of this world alongside her visions and her conversations with Jesus, which came more and more to dominate the latter chapters of the book.

[30:21] In a series of passion meditations, Marjorie imagined herself present at the events of the first Easter from the betrayal of Christ through to the resurrection and not only present but actively involved as the busy and solicitous handmaid of Mary.

No rounded conclusion to the book is offered. If we want some kind of final vignette on which our own imaginations can linger as we take leave of Marjorie, we have to construct such a scene rather against the grain of Marjorie's method, imagining her in old age, as she briefly said, reconciled in her hometown to her circle of sympathizers.

In fact, Marjorie's dictation of her recollections ends here characteristically and authentically without any formally contrived or artistic sense of climax.

She simply ceased to speak. Marjorie found visits to converse with sympathetic people especially important.

And for many of these people, she received the wisdom they themselves had gathered from reading contemporary spiritual writers. Because Marjorie herself could not read, we should not understand, or sorry, underestimate her access to the content of spiritual books.

[31:45] She credited her access to books to visions of Christ. In the 17th chapter of her book, we read, again, there's a quote from book.

One day long before this time, while this creature was bearing children and was newly delivered of a child, our Lord Christ Jesus said to her that she should bear no more children, and therefore he commanded her to go to Norwich.

I bid you go to the vicar of St. Stephen's and tell him the secrets of your soul and my counsels that I reveal to you. Then she made her way to Norwich, and she greeted the vicar, asking him if she could speak with him for an hour or two of the love of God.

He, lifting up his hands and blessing himself, said, bless us, how could a woman occupy one or two hours with the love of our Lord? I shan't eat a thing until I find out what you can say of our Lord God in the space of an hour.

This was Richard of Caster, who became Marjorie's confessor, and over the years he frequently read to her. At her first meeting with Caster, he read aloud from the Bible, and it moved Marjorie deeply.

[32:58] At later times, she asked him to look up things for her in the Bible because she could not read. And in the Church Fathers as well, he became sort of her access point to these books.

Throughout her book, Marjorie shows her retentive memory working to recall or allude to various passages of Scripture. And her repeated reference to four books in particular conveys something of her connection with contemporary devotion through the text she read.

So, the first of these four books that she refers to quite often through book was Walter Hilton's The Scale of Perfection.

So, this is a work of spiritual counsel distinguished not only by the great dignity and grace of Hilton's English style, but also by his deep humanity and understanding of the difficulties of contemplative life.

this image is from a 1460 edition of the book. And while perhaps disturbing, and my apologies for that, I think it's also fascinating showing a soul, and this is characteristic also of the period, showing a soul as this person dies is depicted as a child.

[34:15] So, this person has been burned and is being tormented by demons depicted here and here.

But the soul is a child rising from the dying body. I'm also doing a research project on historical children, so I'm interested in that.

A second book frequently referred to by Marjorie is Richard Rohl's Incendium Amoris, or The Fire of Love.

In it, Rohl provides an account of his mystical experiences, which he describes as being of three kinds. A physical warmth in his body, a sense of wonderful sweetness, and a heavenly music that accompanied him as he chanted the Psalms.

These sorts of manifestations are also found throughout writings in the period. Hearing a heavenly music is something that does recur. This is a practical guide to the spiritual life, shot through with Rohl's autobiographical vividness, and written very much from within the continuing experience of a fervent mystic.

[35:29] In hearing something of these very different masterpieces by two of the great 14th century mystics, Marjorie gained access to the mainstream of current mystical writing in England. So she was very aware of what was going on in devotional writing in the period.

This, by the way, is an image of Rohl that is drawn in by the person who copied this manuscript in the early 15th century.

So it's an illuminated manuscript with many sketches and things like that, and they've sketched in Rohl as author. So thirdly, on several occasions, Marjorie mentions being read to by the stimulus amoris, shown here, which is related to the tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life, which so markedly colors Marjorie's visions, as we've seen.

The second chapter, to which Marjorie particularly refers, deals with compassion for Christ's passion. Sorry, compassion for Christ's passion. It is available in an English version, The Prick of Love, attributed to Walter Hilton.

The fourth book Marjorie mentions in her book as St. Bride's book is actually The Revelations of Bridget of Sweden, shown here.

[37:00] And her use of this book suggests how potent a model Marjorie found for herself in the life and revelations of the visionary Swedish saint. During a mass, Marjorie had a vision of Jesus who said to her, My daughter Bridget never saw me in this way, just as I spoke to St. Bridget, just so I speak to you, daughter.

And I tell you truly that every word that is written in Bridget's book is true, and through you shall be recognized as truth. Now, Bridget of Sweden was of noble birth and connected with the royal house in Sweden.

She was married at 13 and eventually bore eight children and was drawn increasingly to a strict religious life as she aged. On her husband's death, she devoted herself to the life of a visionary and pilgrim, and she founded a new order of nuns.

She dictated her revelations to her spiritual director. In 1349, she made a pilgrimage to Rome, where she stayed for the rest of her life, making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1371 at Christ's command.

The cult of St. Bridget in England in Marjorie's day was extensive. The influence of her life and her revisions and devotions was great. For Marjorie, the model provided by Bridget must have been particularly powerful.

[38:27] The pattern of her life as a married mystic, the transition from wife to bride of Christ, the sustained visionary experience of her life, all such things will have appealed to Marjorie in vindicating the potential of the female visionary.

But Bridget, while an important example and influence, was by no means the only female visionary brought to Marjorie's attention by those who read to her, advised her, or discussed their own reading with her.

In chapter 62, the priest who is writing down Marjorie's book tells how his confidence in her was badly shaken by the general impatience shown at her weeping and crying until he was led to read the life of the Belgian Beguins, Mary of Oinis, who I've mentioned earlier.

Her saintly life was similarly characterized by the gift of an uncontrollable tears, the gift of tears. was a thing in the period and is often referred to or sometimes referred to now as well.

Mary of Oinis was born of wealthy parents and married at the age of 14, despite her wish for a religious life. She led, that is, life as a nun.

[39:45] She led a life of great austerity and holiness and her fame drew so many visitors that she eventually retreated to live as a hermit in a cell next to the monastery at Oinis where she died.

She had visions and ecstasies, was especially devoted to the passion of Christ and the sacrament and had the gift of prophecy. Many features of Mary's experience are echoed in the life of Marjorie Kemp.

She wept copiously at the thought of the passion. If she tried to restrain her tears, they only increased. She was asked by a priest to stop her weeping and sobbing in church.

She did not eat meat. She wore a coat and mantle of white. Like Marjorie, she had a miraculous vision of the sacrament as it was held between the priest's hands at Mass.

and like Marjorie, she had at Candlemas a vision of the presentation in the temple. Like Marjorie, she was so drunk with charity that she was sometimes unaware of the passage of time.

[40:53] It was also intriguing to recall the association between Marjorie's experience and the experience of other female visionaries such as Angela of Foligno and Dorothea of Montau.

not only because evidence survives that their lives were known in England, but because Marjorie on her pilgrimages actually visited the areas where these women had lived.

Thus, at Assisi, she visited the site of some of Angela of Foligno's experiences and could well have heard of the example of this remarkable local figure.

Angela of Foligno lived a worldly life as a well-to-do wife and mother up to the age of 40. but suddenly underwent a conversion. She wept ceaselessly, cried aloud when she heard the name of God, and fell into a fever upon seeing a picture of Christ's passion.

It was difficult for her not to talk of God. She was subject to fits of screaming that astonished everyone, and people said she was troubled by devils.

[41:59] She was so ashamed that she wondered whether this was true. She had ecstasies and visions and was ardently devoted to the crucified Christ.

Marjorie's visit to Danzig late in life makes especially interesting the parallels between her experience and that of the Prussian visionary and ecstatic Dorothea of Montau, who spent her married life in Danzig, and whose cult would have been strong there at the time of Marjorie's visit.

Interestingly, a decisive influence on Dorothea's life was the example of Bridget of Sweden, whose relics were carried through Danzig on their return from Rome to Sweden in 1374.

And like Marjorie, this middle-class married woman who struggled to lead a religious life described her experience of a kind of spiritual drunkenness and was also noted for her frequent and sustained holy tears.

Marjorie's own life was made so persistently difficult by her gift of loud and frequent tears, a gift she received while at Calvary. It is essential to receive, sorry, she had this gift of tears, and it's essential to retrieve some sense of the spiritual value and desirability that was accorded to the gift of such tears in those days.

[43:23] Their spiritual value was confirmed for Marjorie in a discussion of unaccountably recurrent concern with discerning authentic tokens of the Holy Spirit by no less an authority on the contemplative life than Julian of Norwich who told Marjorie during a long visit with her, when God visits a creature with tears of contrition, devotion, or compassion, he may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in his soul.

So this is Julian speaking to Marjorie when Marjorie, doubting whether or not her tears were a sign of, of, were authentic and she worried about the spectacle that she often portrayed.

She went to Julian, she traveled to Julian and stayed for days outside her anchor hold and discussed things with her. So it's in this sense the value of Holy Tears that lies behind Marjorie's exchange with the Archbishop of York to whose rough question, why do you weep so, woman?

She replied firmly, sir, you shall wish someday that you had wept as sorely as I. But what do we make of Marjorie's visions? She believed that her visions came from God, but sometimes she very properly doubted this because even the most learned theologian could have difficulty discerning the origins of the vision, whether they came from God or from the devil, let alone a woman.

And this is what makes margin, or sorry, women's visions problematic because of all the stereotypical ideas about their intellectual capabilities and moral failings, women had the sense that they really wouldn't be capable of discerning the origins of a vision.

[45:14] This is one of the main themes of the book. Over and over, Marjorie questions this. And indeed, this was the main reason for her visiting Julian of Norwich, to ask her if she could trust her visions.

Julian assured her they were from God. Now, I actually like this page from Marjorie's book where someone marked their visit in the margins.

I mentioned earlier that the monks up in Yorkshire who had a copy of Marjorie's book in the 15th century interacted with the text with red pen in the margins and through the text.

So this is Dame Julian, it says right here, which shows that just marks the place where their visit is described. How seriously do we take the word vision?

From this distance with our own cultural lenses, it's difficult to know what was going on. All we have to do to go on is what Marjorie tells us.

[46:22] She believed that Christ was really there. She said in other visions that she touched him. She felt him. Medieval women's writings reflect a variety of developments in medieval piety.

One of the most important of these, as far as women are concerned, has been summed up by Carolyn Walker-Bynum in her remark that bodiliness provides access to the sacred.

In the course of the medieval period, there was a general shift in emphasis toward God's humanity, God inhabiting a suffering human body, culminating in the mutilation of that body in the passion and crucifixion.

Christ's pain and the blood and water that flowed from his wounds were the means by which it was possible for human beings to be saved. Given that medieval thought associated masculinity with mind and spirit and femininity with body, women, for all their inferiority and subordination, could be felt to have a special connection with Jesus in his passion, and through their bodies they could hope to have special access to the sacredness associated with his body.

This is the train of thought that underlies the intense focus on the bodies of holy women in the text of the Deuce manuscript, where the lives of three holy women are composed by distinguished ecclesiastics.

[47:42] The lives of Christina the Astonishing, which is an excellent name, Christina the Astonishing, Mary of Oignies, and Elizabeth of Spalby, who we've already met.

The settler focus on the body in Julian of Norwich's revelations and Marjorie Kemp's persistent weeping and her way of moving through the world noisily and sometimes uncontrollably.

The general link between female spirituality and the body of Christ is brought into especially sharp focus at a moment in Julian's revelations when, seeing Christ on the cross and imagining his pain, she seems to hear a voice saying, look up to this father in heaven, to his father in heaven, but answers, no I cannot, for you are my heaven, and proceeds to see the whole trinity within the humanity of Christ.

If there are any theologians here, you might like take issue with like her depiction of the trinity, but we're just going to move past that. The celibate way of life adopted by medieval holy women in its various forms as anchorites, nuns, and beguins, and in less formal ways, was regarded as a way of escaping from the demands of the body, yet their writings are dominated by bodily practices and meditations.

The lives of medieval holy women often reveal complex negotiations between human and divine relationships. We've seen this in the life of Marjorie Kemp, Kemp, who maintained a celibate but loving marriage with her husband, John, for many years.

[49:17] In her book, there is a particularly moving passage that describes how she cared for John during his final years. After he had left, sorry, in his final years after he had lost most of his cognitive and physical functions.

It's both painful and beautiful to read. It is much as they cared for family and friends, for women such as these and a great many other people, earthly relationships did give way to the all-important heavenly one.

God became father, mother, and even spouse. In the medieval period, if a woman was enclosed in a nunnery or anchor hold, it was not unusual for her to identify as a bride of Christ.

It was more unusual for a woman to transition from earthly bride to bride of Christ. Yet in chapter 35 of Marjorie's book, we read, read, As this creature was in the church of the Holy Apostles at Rome on St. Lateran's Day, the Father of Heaven said to her, Daughter, I am well pleased with you, inasmuch as you believe in all the sacraments of Holy Church and all faith involved in that, and especially because you believe in the manhood of my son and because of the great compassion that you have for his bitter passion.

The Father also said to this creature, Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end. In this passage, Marjorie enters into a mystical marriage with Jesus.

[50:49] This was not unique to her. A more famous instance of mystical marriage was that of Catherine of Siena, which is depicted here in a large painting at the cathedral in Siena, magnificent cathedral.

And you'll need to, oh, the light's not great anyway, but you'll need to forgive the blurriness of this photo, which was taken by me when I was in Italy a couple years ago, where you're not actually supposed to take photos in the cathedral.

But I was there with a fellow historian and he's recovered for me while I grabbed this photo. Historians will do that for each other.

Uh, yeah, so you can see here, um, you can see Jesus putting a ring on Catherine's finger.

So this depicts a mystical marriage. Again, I could point you to other examples of such mystical espousal or marriage. There are many examples through the history of Christianity.

[51:59] Right into the 18th century, my other, my other century. Such a relationship speaks eloquently of medieval women's experience of Jesus as imminent.

There is much to wonder about in the life and book of Marjorie Kemp, as in the writings of other late medieval women. There is much that reads uncomfortably to our 21st century ears.

And I think there is something beautiful and important in her experience of Jesus as imminent, very real and present to us in our own sufferings, rather than remote, wholly transcendent, detached from human concerns.

When Marjorie was imprisoned in Beverly in 1417, as she lay in bed at night in a state of trepidation, she heard with her bodily ears a loud voice calling Marjorie.

She awoke in fear. Such a manifestation was not part of her usual contemplative experience, but Christ, in her words, everywhere present, soon spoke to her in her soul in a familiar and comforting way.

[53:05] Thank you.