

# A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Mystical Experience: Fantasy and Separation in *the Book of Margery Kempe*

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There have been four main perspectives of feminist studies on medieval female mysticism that focus on the relation between mystical experience and female subjectivity. The first group assesses mysticism positively and argues that through mysticism and mystical experience female subjects can attain subjectivity or authority within existing ideology. Works of Caroline Walker Bynum represent this first group. Bynum argues that in mysticism, a female subject gains divine authority through identification with the feminized divine because female mystic's "bodiliness provides access to the sacred." (Bynum 186) Since the divine and Christ signify the core foundation of Christianity and have the strongest authority, Bynum says, female mystics' identification with them enables a female subject to establish her spiritual authority. According to her investigation, through the bodily contemplation and mystical experiences, female mystics show their subjectivity by representing autonomy on their body.

The second group of feminist studies on medieval female mysticism, represented by David Aers, denies the possibility of gaining subjectivity via mysticism and argues its limitations. Aers refuted Bynum's theory that the male-dominant religious order allowed women to appropriate the motherhood of the divine and the feminized body of Christ so as to sustain the existing ideology. He also claims that mystical experience cannot have subversive power since only the one approved by the religious order could practice mystical experience in medieval Christian society. Accordingly, the clergy allowed the spiritual authority and autonomy that female mystics achieved through mysticism insofar as they did not threaten the male-dominant society.

The third group also rebuts the view of first group and suggests a third alternative. To understand this, it will help to discuss the theories of Luce Irigaray. She sees mysticism's subversiveness where "mysticism disrupts the borders between body and soul, immanence and transcendence, sensible and intelligible, and in doing so is always marked by sexual difference" (Hollywood, *Sensible* 187). Irigaray claims the whole new ground for female subjects to build their subjectivity. To construct the new imaginary and symbolic, Irigaray requires the creation of a feminine divine model, arguing in "Divine Women." (Hollywood, *Sensible* 209)

Finally, Jacques Lacan, though not a feminist, evaluated mysticism and found a more subversive power in it. Amy Hollywood explains that "He insists that the goal of psychoanalysis—like that of mysticism in its apophatic moments—is to refuse the claims to mastery and wholeness on which male-dominant culture, society, and their unconscious rest" (Hollywood, *Sensible*, 16 - 17). Lacan connects mysticism with his theory on jouissance and sexual difference. However there is another subversive notion in his theory: 'Separation.' According to Lacan, Separation is a process that subject overcomes the alienation of the absolute structure and the process has capability to reveal the incompleteness of the dominant

structure, (in Lacanian term, the Symbolic). Given that “mysticism is innately mysterious” and mystical texts “seek to understand or impressionistically describe moments of intense experience (or the transcendence of experience), and do so using an extraordinary array of rhetorical, poetic, and linguistic strategies and subversions,” mystical experiences and mystical texts can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the singular nature of each mystic and each text (Gillespie ix). This paper will interpret the subversiveness of the mystical experience of a medieval female mystic inspired by the Lacanian concept of Fantasy and Separation.

The aim of this paper is to explore the mystical experiences of Margery Kempe’s early mystical life, and the subversive nature of those experiences. Margery experienced a mystical encounter with Christ and conducted bodily contemplation in fifteenth-century England, and wrote her autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which was transcribed by two men. Since the book was discovered in the 1930s, it has given rise to controversies about her piety and mystical experiences, because scholars had anticipated “another Julian of Norwich.” As Powell explains that “the reluctance of many modern scholars to take Margery seriously has been reinforced by her description of the reception her piety received at the hands of her contemporaries,” the fact that Margery’s piety, mystical experiences, and mystical text were distinguishable from other mystics was the reason of negative interpretation (Powell 1). However, there are more recent scholars who interpret her mystical experience as a quest “for identity and independence” from the feminist perspective (Neuburger 56). One of the proponents, Lynne Staley, demonstrates her subversiveness, saying that Margery needed “strategies to conceal and disguise [her] original and, in some cases, destabilizing insights into the system of theological or communal ordering.” (qtd. in Powell 3) As an extension of those interpretations, this paper will focus on Margery’s mystical

experiences, especially her divine conversation with Christ during her mystical encounter, and the spiritual fantasy that marked the early phase of her mystical life. Based on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, it will be examined that how her mystical experiences can be read as Lacanian Fantasy and Separation and how it revealed the lack and the incompleteness of the orthodox religious order. In doing so, the subversive power of female mysticism will be elucidated in the view of psychoanalysis.

## 1. Lacanian Concept of Fantasy and Separation

When a being enters into a world that consists of laws of symbolic order where one must use language, the being must give up some part of their body that cannot be expressed in language or allowed to appropriate in the symbolic in order to exist as a subject in the symbolic order. Lacan says that, "subject as such is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language." (Lacan 188) Symbolic castration cuts off the part which was possessed in the body and the lost part become the object of desire, which is called *object a* in Lacan's concept.

At this level, we are not even forced to take into account any subjectification of the subject. The subject is an apparatus. This apparatus is something lacunary, and it is in the lacuna that the subject establishes the function of a certain object, qua lost object. It is the status of the object *a* in so far as it is present in the drive. (Lacan 279)

It follows that the root of desire is deprivation and loss. In the symbolic, the speaking subject cannot realize the reality of his or her loss consciously but rather has an unconscious awareness of one's void and, therefore, unceasingly desires to fill the lack. The entity that arouses a desire to fill

the subject's loss and lack is the lost *object a*. *Object a* is the cause of desire, and does not exist in reality and language cannot express it

In the symbolic order, as the Other regulates the subject, the desire of the divided subject is also subordinated to the desire of the Other by believing the Other is desiring "which is worthy of desire" and monopolizes the object of desire. (Fink 102). Thus, the subject identifies its desire with the desire of the Other and becomes the subject of desire in searching for what the Other desires. Since *object a* is the one which doesn't exist in the symbolic, the Other also doesn't have and also desires *object a* though the subordinated subject cannot realize the fact.

When the desiring subject makes a relationship with the object of desire, *object a*, the relationship seems to satisfy the desire. It is called *Fantasy* (or phantasy), and "The phantasy is the support of desire." (Lacan 185) As *object a* is absent in the Other, the relationship is constructed without the Other. The function of *Fantasy*, thus, has dual aspects: it may allow the subject to re-enter the symbolic order by answering the subject's desire, or it may allow the subject realize the lack of the Other through the relationship that excludes the Other. Through *Fantasy*, the subject may realize that *object a* does not belong to both the Other and the symbolic order; *object a* is separated to the Other, and the Other also desires it. "Through the function of the *object a*, the subject separates himself off, ceases to be linked to the vacillation of being, in the sense that it forms the essence of alienation." (Lacan 258) Realizing that the fact that the subject himself and *object a* are separated from the Other is the Lacanian concept of '*Separation*'. Through the *Separation*, the subject faces the lack of the Other and finally, the lack of oneself. This process may enable the subject to overcome the symbolic identity given by the Other, realizing "[T]he desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other." (Lacan 214)

For this reason, *Separation* is important in discussing the subversiveness

of the subject in the structure. Through the process of *Separation*, the divided subject, who had considered oneself a complete one and the Other a complete whole, might realize the instability and crack of the structure as well as the lack of oneself. Lacan stresses that “[B]y *Separation*, the subject finds, one might say, the weak point of the primal dyad of the signifying articulation, in so far as it is alienating in essence.” (Lacan 218)

## 2. Mystical Experience and Separation

### (1) Margery as a subordinated subject

*The Book of Margery Kempe* starts with the explanation of how her first mystical experience began, and throughout the whole book, Margery’s life, mystical experiences and subejcthood go through changes. Margery’s first mystical experience was an encounter with Christ in a figure of a handsome man telling her that he had not abandoned her. It is noteworthy that she did not become a mystic immediately after this experience. The book’s narrator says that after her first mystical experience she went back to her worldly life. The explanations on her secular life and thoughts provide important information about the background and the characteristics of Margery as a non-mystic. She was originally a bourgeois (merchant-class), lay woman who not only had financial capacity but also had relatively high social position. Accepting her position in society as her identity, Margery was a divided and subordinated subject in the Lacanian sense, subordinated to the symbolic order. In particular, she absorbed the value of her father who was a mayor of Lynn five times.

And when her husband used to try and speak to her, to urge her to leave her proud ways, she answered sharply and shortly, and said that she was come of worthy kindred—he should never have married her—

for her father was sometime mayor of the town of N., and afterwards he was alderman of the High Guild of the Trinity in N. And therefore she would keep the honour of her kindred, whatever anyone said. (44)<sup>1</sup>

This passage suggests that, before she became a mystic, Margery had identified with the social position of her family, and especially with the superior social status of her father, rather than with her mother or any other female figure. So proud of herself and her family's status, she even looked down on her husband.

Moreover, the gaze and reputation given by others sustained her symbolic identity as an upper-class woman. She said, "Her cloaks were also modishly slashed and underlaid with various colors between the slashes, so that she would be all the more stared at, and all the more esteemed" (43). She also confessed that "Her whole desire was to be respected by people" (44). In these passages, Margery shows her dependence on being "stared at" and "respected by people," which means she desired and required the approval of others. We can read her desires and behaviors as an example of "symbolic identification" of the divided subject. The subject entrapped in the symbolic order requires acknowledgement and approval from the Other to maintain his or her existence in the symbolic order and internalizes the symbolic identity—based on socially and culturally constructed roles endowed by the Other through this 'symbolic identification.' In identifying herself with her family's social position and sustaining herself by meeting approval in the Other's gaze, Margery occupies a fixed and stable position in the symbolic order of medieval English society. In that sense, pre-mystic Margery is a subject who is completely subordinated to the symbolic order.

It was an existential crisis related to the religious order that led Margery to her first mystical experience. She experienced rejection when

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<sup>1</sup> All the subsequent citations of *The Book of Margery Kempe* are taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004).

she asked for forgiveness to her confessor, and it was the most dreadful imprecation in the Christian society of the middle ages. For Margery, facing her lack as an unforgiven sinner from the dominant religious order of society must have proved traumatic enough to make her desire something that she couldn't access, that is, the voice of forgiveness of Christ.

## **(2) Failed confession and religious ideology**

The core issue of the religious ideology is salvation. In medieval times, religious circles strictly controlled salvation and the remission of sins. Only through mediation by a confessor could believers receive pardon for their sins by God. Because the salvation system and all the other religious rituals lay under the control of the religious establishment, the exclusive ideology of salvation was its strongest foundation and had established and reinforced the formidable authority of the Church and orthodoxy. When people sinned, they could escape from being excluded not only from heaven but also from Christian society by confessing; eventually, they could be approved to re-enter the religious order. Margery's mystical experience began when she experienced the existential crisis of exclusion from the Christian world, the greatest symbolic order of the medieval age.

At twenty, Margery got married, and the sickness that began when she became pregnant lasted even after childbirth. At that time, she had only one sin that she had never confessed, so she suffered from guilt and believed that she was being punished for the only sin she had not told to a confessor. On her deathbed, Margery tried to confess her sin (41). It can be read that her attempt is an endeavor to be forgiven by God as well as to be included in the symbolic order. However, she did not manage to confess because of the attitude of the confessor, and therefore her attempt failed.



And when she came to the point of saying 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 what she meant, and so she would say no more in spite of anything he might do. And soon after, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and his sharp reproving of her on the other, this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days. (42)

This passage shows that the failure of confession led Margery to the dread of damnation. For her, the confessor's reproving words meant rejection by the Other, that is, the religious order of society and the voice of God which is the final and eventual destination of Christianity. The rejection of forgiveness developed into the failure of salvation in Margery's psyche and it was the most dreadful existential crisis for a subject living in the Christian world. Because of this trauma, Margery developed a mental illness, symptoms of which connect trauma to Christianity. She suffered from dreadful fantasies that "The devils called out to her with great threats, and bade her that she should forsake her Christian faith and belief, and deny her God" (42). Moreover, She tried to kill herself and "pitilessly tore the skin on her body" with her nails (42). She lost her senses and people around her had to restrain her limbs lest she injure herself or attempt suicide.

### **(3) Mystical experience as Lacanian fantasy**

As a subject who was subordinated to the symbolic order, Margery had had no awareness of anything lacking in her being. However, her religious crisis first revealed her lack as an unforgiven sinner. At that point, Margery's first mystical experience occurred, and it can be interpreted as Lacanian Fantasy. Christ appeared to her when she was tied to her bed,

and gave her the remission of sin which was the object of her desire. He said, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?" (42). As soon as she saw Christ and heard his voice, Margery recovered her senses. However, unlike many other female mystics who usually began to live as a nun or a recluse after a mystical experience, for example, Julian of Norwich, Margery did not fall into the mystical life; rather, her book shows that she became more strongly committed to her secular life. She says, "But yet she did not entirely give up the world." Put another way, for Margery, her mystical experience was different from the divine experiences of other mystics' but rather Lacanian Fantasy that satisfied her desires and hid what she lacked so that she could continue to fulfill her existence in the symbolic order.

According to Slavoj Žižek, Lacanian Fantasy refers to a subject's relation with *object a*, the cause and the object of desire. The subject assumes that *object a* is a "secret supposed to be hidden in the Other" (Žižek 44) The subject regards oneself as a being "excluded from the secret of Other" (Žižek 66) In other words, *object a* becomes the object and cause of desire since it supposedly offers what the Other monopolizes, excluding the subject. In the case of Margery, the voice of forgiveness became the cause and object of a desire for something that belonged to the Other, the confessor and religious circles. The Other had sole access to the forgiveness and excluded Margery from it. In this regard, Margery's first encounter with Christ and hearing his voice approving her connection with God can be read as her fantasized relation with *object a*, the object of her desire.

Žižek points out another dimension of Fantasy. He quotes Lacan's comment on Fantasy as "the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'" (Žižek 44). He interprets Fantasy's function as that of a screen that hides the lack in reality or the crack of the symbolic. In terms of the fact that her mental illness resulted from the rejection by the Other, the religious order, we can suppose that what she desired was the voice of the

Other forgiving her sin and approving her being which had failed through her language of confession. By means of this relationship with Christ and his voice as *object a*, Margery could overcome her ontological crisis and receive existential meaning—that Christ had not abandoned her, the core of the religious belief—which enabled her to sustain her life in the symbolic order.

There is another piece of evidence that helps in the reading of Margery's mystical experiences, especially her earlier experiences, not as a divine encounter or a subversive attempt to surpass the oppressive symbolic order but as the Lacanian '*Fantasy*' mediating the subject and his/her desire for *object a*. With regard to Margery's mystical experience, her book explicitly shows that her dominant mystical experiences involved conversations with Christ and with famous male and female saints. According to the contents of the conversations illustrated in *The Book*, her mystical experience and the voices she hears blur the boundary of holy religious contemplation and the projection of Margery's own desire, and this was the reason why many early commentators didn't recognize Margery as a holy mystic. Unlike many other mystics whose contemplations were full of holiness, many voices in the Margery's early contemplations reflect or satisfy what she wanted and desired at that time. For example, Margery heard the voice of forgiveness at the first and second mystical encounter with Christ, and both experiences occurred when she suffered from guilt, which causes a desire for forgiveness. In her second encounter, the voice of Christ dictated:

but always mourned and sorrowed as though God had forsaken her. . .  
. . . our merciful Lord Christ Jesus ravished her spirit and said to her,  
'Daughter, why are you weeping to sorely? I have come to you, Jesus  
Christ, . . . I the same God, forgive you your sins to the uttermost point.  
And you shall never come into hell nor into purgatory, but when you  
pass out of this world, within the twinkling of an eye, you shall have

the bliss of heaven, for I am the same God who has brought your sins to your mind and caused you to be shrunken of them. And I grant you contrition until your life's end. (50-51, my emphasis)

In the earlier phase of her mystic life, Margery heard voices promising salvation and love, as the guarantee of the remission of sins and salvation was the object of her desire; thus, fulfilling this desire was an essential element in keeping her existence stable at that time. As her existential anxiety lifted, the voice of Christ began to reflect her other desires, for example, a desire to be a virgin, which was the greatest virtue for holy women but which Margery, as a wife, could never attain in reality. After she complained, Christ answered in her contemplation: "And because you are a maiden in your soul ... you shall dance in heaven with other holy maidens and virgins" (87 - 88). Her desire for *object a* formulates her mystical experience into the Fantasy. Although the reality could not provide what she needed to justify her existence in the symbolic order, the Fantasy let her approach the object of her desire and sustained her being.

#### **(4) Fantasy and the strategy of the ideology to conceal its lack**

According to the interpretation of Margery's mystical experience as Lacanian Fantasy, it might seem that the function of Fantasy is subordinated to the symbolic order, since it relieves the tension of the unfulfilled quest for the subject's desire and maintains the existence of the subject in the religious structure by letting them converge with the symbolic order. However Lacan pointed out that the Fantasy, the relation with *object a*, connotes a subversive possibility revealing the lack and the desire of the Other, which is mistaken for a complete order in the symbolic. In Fantasy the subject has a relationship with *object a*, which is supposed to belong to the Other. However, the crucial fact is that the Other also lacks in *object a*. The Other, therefore, also desires *object a* to fill the cracks and

lack in itself, which means that *Fantasy* contains the possibility of exposing the lack of the Other.

Žižek assesses this point as “the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory” (Žižek 122). Since Lacan’s theory “lies not in recognizing this fact but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself is also barred, crossed-out, by fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack” (Žižek 122). Through *Fantasy*, the divided subject can face the lack of the Other, and *Fantasy* enables the subject “to achieve a kind of ‘de-alienation’ called by Lacan’ Separation: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that the object is separated from the Other itself” (Žižek 122).

Margery eagerly heard the voice of Christ as an *object a*, the supposed possession of the Other. However, in actuality, the *object a* fundamentally does not exist in the Other. That is, *Fantasy* as a relationship with *object a* excludes the Other. As Margery continued her mystical experiences, the experiences revealed the lack of *object a* of the Other, that is, the lack of absolute divinity in religious spheres. After her anxiety about damnation was solved by the promise of salvation, the voice of Christ started to mention the intimate union between Christ and Margery, excluding official religious circles. In her contemplation, Margery directly engaged with Christ, without any mediation by a confessor or religious doctrines.

In chapter 5, Christ said to Margery that:

You shall be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world just as any rat gnaws the stockfish. Don’t be afraid, daughter, for you shall be victorious over all your enemies. I shall give you grace enough to answer every cleric in the love of God. I swear to you by my majesty that I shall never forsake you whether in happiness or in sorrow. I shall help you and protect you, so that no devil in hell shall ever part you from me, nor angel in heaven, nor man on earth—for devils in hell may

not, nor angels in heaven will not, nor man on earth shall not. (51)

In this passage, Christ promises to create a union between himself and Margery by telling her that he will never “forsake” her by his “majesty,” which is superior to that of any cleric in the world. He refers to the forces that persecute her, which indicates that she was already experiencing criticism and hostility from religious forces. Christ categorizes these forces as her (as well as his own) “enemies,” labeling them not only “devils in the hell” but also “man on earth,” implying that earthly religious authorities were not necessarily connected to God; on the contrary, they are excluded from the divine union between Christ and Margery.

When she suffered criticism from the public, the voice of Christ comforted Margery: “Though all the world be against you, don’t be afraid, for they cannot understand you” (65). In her mystical experience, Christ was “the hidden God” to the exclusion of the outside world (66). This aspect of her experience reveals a different dimension of her mysticism: her early experiences were devices that allowed her to gain inclusion in the outside world. The change in her mystical conversation suggested that Christ, the divine, did not belong to the clergy that, in reality, maintained the strong religious authority on earth. In this sense, Christ could choose his people beyond script or religious doctrines and grant spiritual authority to those sinners and those who lacked holiness according to the normative religious order.

Although Christianity’s foundations rest on the existence of God, the written law of Christianity could not control his presence or influence. In other words, Margery’s Fantasy eventually revealed the absence of *object a* in the Other. In this way we can see why mysticism has the capacity to expose the incompleteness of the Other as well as the cracks in the symbolic order. More importantly, because of mysticism’s subversive nature, the medieval church and orthodox circles assumed an ambiguous

stance toward female mysticism and applied strict standards in their treatment of such individuals.

They could not neglect the mystical experiences already described in the Bible in the extensive records of prophets and apostles. Therefore, the religious circles could not avoid admitting the spiritual authority of mystics, who directly experienced the divine. They also granted mystics exceptional independence from the control of the clergy. Instead, they devised subtle strategies that prohibited mystics from revealing the lack and used mystics as an otherness that helped construct the visible boundary between abnormal mysticism and normal orthodox.

Medieval religious circles embraced mysticism in a particular way that allowed for a low level of piety to prevent the devalued mystic from revealing the lack of religious circles. If the mystic and their experience did not strongly threaten the orthodoxy, the mystic could attain a certain spiritual position within the Christian community. When the mystical faith proved menacing to the orthodoxy, the religious order classified the mystic as a heretic and excluded the mystic from society. Therefore, the female mystic was forced to confess her experience to be approved by religious leaders. This requirement was a matter of survival for the female mystic as it determined her level of inclusion in medieval Christian society. At the same time, by adopting the term *mystical*, the religious ideology subtly distinguished mystical experience from the identity of normal, orthodox piety. Considered an enigmatic piety and an exception, mysticism formed the visible boundary of orthodox piety. Thus, it is possible to understand this strategy as an attempt to conceal the lack of orthodox religious spheres and the impossibility of the Other. Medieval religious ideology used mysticism both as a distinguishing point to characterize the existence of a normal orthodox religious order and as a screen to hide the inability to communicate with the divine.

In this regard, Margery's continuous quest for approval from the

Church resulted directly from this strategy.

Then they went on to Bridlington and also to many other places, and spoke with God's servants, both anchorites and recluses, and many other of our Lord's lovers, with many worthy clerics, doctors and bachelors of divinity as well, in many different places. And to various people amongst them this creature revealed her feelings and her contemplations, as she was commanded to do, to find out if there were any deception in her feelings. (60)

In her conversation with Christ, Margery had already been approved her own experiences and feelings as holy piety. Nevertheless, she longed for approval from religious authorities so she could live as a mystical contemplator in society rather than a heretic. The perception of mysticism as deceptive and dangerous deeply permeated medieval England. Margery, who directly experienced a mystical union with Christ through direct communication, doubted her experience, for she was subordinate to the Other and internalized its dominant attitude toward mysticism. Therefore, she actively and continuously made an effort to attain the approval of religious circles.

she told this worshipful lord about her manner of life, . . . in order to discover what he would say about it, and if he found any fault with either her contemplation or her weeping. And she also told him the cause of her weeping, and the manner in which our Lord conversed with her soul. And he did not find fault at all, but approved her manner of life. (72)

In simple terms, Margery obsessively depended on the clerical opinion of her experiences and was under the control of religious ideology. For this reason the official religious order did not deny her mystical experience during the early phase of her mystic life, even though those surrounding



her felt uncomfortable in the presence of her excessive weeping and utterances about God.

### **(5) Mystical experience and Separation**

As Margery's intimate conversation with Christ developed and as she met many incomplete clerics who were unable to understand God's will, she began to realize the lack of the Other. During her life, Margery kept meeting many confessors and religious figures in order to confess her sin and to be proved her spiritual authenticity. However, it seems that her focus shifted from being approved by the Other to negotiating with the Other for her independence. After some time, Margery began to assert her spiritual authority, and it is the evidences that show her changed perception of the religious circle. First, we can read many examples in her conversations with Christ that reveal a lack of consciousness of the clergy, which represents an absence of God in official religious authority. According to the voice of Christ, they are alienated from divinity because they cannot understand Margery's spirituality as well as God's will for her life. The passage that follows depicts one of Margery's mystical conversations with Christ when her activity as a mystic caused conflict with a powerful religious figure. Christ said to her:

Daughter, do not be afraid of whatever he says to you, for though he ran every year to Jerusalem, I have no liking him; for as long as he speaks against you he speaks against me, for I am in you and you are in me. (121-122)

This passage represents the way mystical experiences reveal the lack of the dominant religious circle. In earlier phases of her life, Margery accepted the authority of the religious leaders as a complete Other that possessed exclusive access to the divine and mediated her interaction with God.

However, throughout her mystical experience, Christ denies the spiritual authority of the religious leaders by emphasizing that he “have no liking him,” rather dwells in Margery (122). Through this process, the religious clerics lost their spiritual authority, and the impossibility of their connection with the divinity was unveiled. This means that the divine was separated from the religious circle, and it is the crucial lack of orthodox religious circle who is the Other in medieval times. The location of the divine moved from the core of the Other to the crack and the lack of Other. In other words, through mystical experiences, Margery understood the emptiness of false authority of religious circles.

Her encounters with religious leaders also expose the incompleteness of the Other. During one of these encounters, a cleric hostile to Margery asked her a question related to the matter of sin and salvation to test Margery’s spiritual authenticity.

‘I hear it said that God speaks to you. I pray you to tell me whether I shall be saved or not, and in what sins I have most displeased God, for I will not believe in you unless you can tell me what my sins are.’  
(61)

The priest’s demand implies that he does not know whether he “shall be saved or not,” just like the common laity (61). At this point, the religious leaders revealed their own lack and proved the falsehood of their spiritual authority. By acknowledging their ignorance regarding their own salvation, they conversely approved Margery’s spiritual authority and her entire mystical experience.

Their ignorance and the resulting desire to know of their own salvation also demystified the nature of the sacrament of confession. In her contemplation, Christ revealed to Margery the true answer to the question of the priest’s salvation. Moreover, she could hear the exact revelation

regarding the priest's salvation directly from Christ.

'Blessed Lord, what answer shall I give to this man?'

'My beloved daughter, say in the name of Jesus that he has sinned in lechery, in despair, and in the keeping of worldly goods.'

'Ah, gracious Lord, this is hard for me to say. He will cause me much shame if I tell him any lie.'

'Don't be afraid, but speak boldly in my name—in the name of Jesus—for they are not lies.'

And then she said again to our Lord Jesus Christ, 'Good Lord, shall he be saved?'

'Yes,' said our Lord Jesus, 'if he will give up his sin and follow your advice. Charge him to give up his sin—and be shriven of it—and also the office that he has outside.' (61)

According to Lacan, the concept of Separation, which enables the subject to escape from the subordination of the symbolic order, can only occur when the subject recognizes *object a* is separated from the Other. At first, the split subject in the symbolic order considers the Other a complete entity that possesses *object a*—the object of desire. Hence, the subject as well as the subject's desire is subordinate to the desire of the Other, although the Other does not possess *object a*. However, the subversive possibility of Fantasy enables the subject to face the fact that "the Other itself 'hasn't got it,' hasn't got the final answer - that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other" (Žižek 122).

In the medieval religious sphere, only the confessor could intervene as the ventriloquist of God. However, Margery's conversation with Christ indicates that confession is not a closed system that can only be accessed by the confessor. As a result, her experience and revelation not only threatened the inviolable right of the religious sphere to exclusively access God but also disclosed the incompleteness of traditional confession. In fact, the supposed agents of God, the confessors, were isolated from the divine.

As Žižek points out, “The big Other [that is, the symbolic order as a consistent, closed totality] does not exist” (72). Realizing that the Other is isolated from God, Margery separated herself and her desire from the subordination of the Other. It is the point that Margery gains subversiveness in the rigidly structured medieval society through her mystical experience.

## Conclusion

Medieval religious ideology was enacted orthodox law to conceal their lack, that is, the inability to possess and control the divine nature of God. While God is the core of Christianity, the language and script of Christianity failed to express and contain the divinity that existed beyond language and human reason. Therefore, medieval orthodoxy constructed strict doctrines and excluded any influence that threatened the religious order by authorizing the written script and visible clergy. They prohibited the laity’s approach to the script and restricted religious speaking in public to monopolize and reproduce their own religious discourse. Their exclusive salvation system that required the mediation of a confessor between God and the believer was the strongest screening device covering the lack of the clergy. Via the confessor, the Church effectively represented the voice of God who is, in actuality, absent in the sensible world. Furthermore, they could block the laity’s ability to approach God directly through the sacrament of confession.

In her relationship with Christ and through her encounter with religious leaders, Margery’s mystical experience revealed the lack of the medieval religious order. To Margery, Christ repeatedly emphasized the lack of divinity in religious circles. Furthermore, the ignorance and desire to know the result of their own salvation demystified the spiritual authority

of the religious leaders. This reveals the empty core of the Other, which is the religious ideology. Like the split subject, the Other is also split around its object of desire, which does not exist in the symbolic. In *the Book*, Margery's mystical experiences is the subversive core that shows the lack of the religious order and enable Margery to develop her independent spirituality with subversiveness.

As Provost commented that "because she is not like other mystics, she is not a true mystic; because she is not like other women, she fails as a model of womanhood; because controversy swirls around her, she is a troublemaker, an egotist, a madwoman. Indeed, "most controversial" is the only issue about which critics agree," her mystical experiences were different from those of the classical female mystics. (Provost x) She pursued not only spiritual holiness but also her desires, and it provided profound aspects which can be interpreted in subversive aspect of Lacan's psychological theory: Fantasy and Separation, illuminating the subversive possibility of female mysticism.

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**ABSTRACT****A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Mystical Experience:  
Fantasy and Separation in *the Book of Margery Kempe*****Ah Reum Yoon**

This paper examines the subversiveness of medieval female mystic's mystical experience inscribed in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, focused on Margery's earlier mystical experiences in the light of Lacan's psychoanalysis theory: *Separation*, and also observes the complex relationship between orthodox religious ideology and mysticism.

Based on Lacanian *Separation*, this study reads how Margery became a mystic and the early phase of her mystical life from the viewpoint of her desire, which was not satisfied in the sensible world. In her early mystical life, Margery subordinated to religious ideology and misunderstood that the mystical experience and the absolute divine belonged to the Church. Margery, who was a divided subject, faced her lack through the rejection of confession. The mystical experiences in her early mystic life can be read as her relationship with Christ as an object of desire, which Lacan terms '*Fantasy*.' During her earlier experiences as a mystic, Margery tried to be approved herself by the discourse of religious ideology. However, as she continued to experience Christ, excluding the established religious spheres, she separated her mystical experiences and her object of desire from the symbolic order, and recognized the lack of the Other (religious ideology). Thus she wished to satisfy her desire by the union with divinity outside the symbolic order. In other words, she realized that the divine is absent from religious circles and acknowledged her own the spiritual authority. This process is well explained through the process of Lacanian *Separation* in which the divided subject in the symbolic realizes the lack of the Other through the *Fantasy* relationship.

**Key Words** | Margery Kempe, Jacques Lacan, psychological analysis, medieval female mystic, feminine mystical experience, fantasy, separation, medieval religious ideology