Chaucer's Wife of Bath tells us, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynoough for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (Prologue WBT.1-3). Not a churchman, she had no authority to speak of marriage or of womanhood; not a flesh-and-blood woman, she could tap only fictional experience. Powerful and compelling though they may be, the Wife of Bath and her tale reflect the interest of a man, Chaucer the artist. Neither Wife nor tale is the creation of a woman, and the Wife herself wishes "By God, [that] wommen hadde writen stories" (693).

Nearly fifty years later (1432–1436), a woman wrote a story of marriage and womanhood and religion. Margery Brunham Kempe (1373–c.1439) of Lynn, a cosmopolitan English town, created her self, her life story, with her spiritual autobiography, The Book of Margery Kempe. Daughter of a prominent family, wife of a less prestigious burgess, and mother of fourteen children, Margery left her relatively comfortable life to answer God's call to weep (her "gift of tears") and to pray for the souls of her fellow Christians—and not to do so in a cell or convent, but throughout England, Europe, and the Holy Land. In old age, she dictated to scribes (to one about 1431 and to the other in 1436) an autobiography that recounted the trials and triumphs of her pilgrimage in the world and of the spirit. Her Book would lie neglected, but preserved, until 1934, when Hope Emily Allen identified and helped Sanford Brown Meech edit the unique manuscript, long the possession of the Butler-Bowdon estate. And since the 1940 publication of Margery's Book by the Early English Text Society (Meech and Allen's literal copy of the manuscript), this historical pilgrim has often been compared with Chaucer's Wife, her literary antecedent. True, both mobile, bourgeois women

Cheryl Glenn is Assistant Professor of English at Oregon State University. She has coauthored, with Robert J. Connors, The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing and has published articles on rhetoric, composition, literacy, and medieval literature. At present, she is writing Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance.
"hadde passed many a straunge strem" (GP.464): both travel without their spouses; both are outspoken, opinionated, and strong-willed; and both speak frankly about their lives.

But Margery Kempe speaks to us on her own, through a character created by herself. She is the first woman to compose her life story in English (although Julian of Norwich, 1343–1415, seems to have been the first woman to write about herself), and that story is the earliest extant autobiography in English. Her female literary contemporaries were mostly erudite women, writing in Latin or French, enclosed within religious orders. Her male literary contemporaries (Chaucer, the Gawain poet, the mystery playwrights, Malory) immediately gained the support of a public or courtly audience. Margery Kempe, however, gives voice to a largely silent and unsung force, the voice of the middle-class, uneducated woman determined to be understood on her own terms.

In Writing a Woman's Life, Carolyn Heilbrun tells us that “power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter” (18). And gaining power often requires translating one's own opinions into the dominant idiom by employing “dialogism” (a technique I explain below). In this essay, I will argue that despite her lack of formal training, Margery Kempe was a skillful and powerful rhetorician, for she located herself within the particular discourse of Franciscan affective piety, where she could self-consciously author and own the story of her life, create her self, record her spiritual development, and, most importantly, validate her life and her visions to her “authorial audience,” the hypothetical audience for whom each author designs her text. Although she makes certain that her “narrative audience,” the person each flesh-and-blood reader must pretend to be in order to believe the text is real and to respond accordingly to the narrator, understands and believes that her words and actions actually took place, she doesn't try to win its approval (Rabinowitz provides a careful distinction of audiences [126–127]). In fact, she regularly offends that audience as she composes her self. More important to her seems to be her authorial audience, which she privileges by gauging her ethos to its satisfaction and approbation. That projected ethos—that convergence of spirituality, selfhood, and authorship—which creates antithetical responses, constitutes Margery's unique contribution to rhetorical practice.

Margery did just what the great Cistercian and Franciscan writers had directed the devout to do: within the tradition of affective piety, she contemplated freely the Gospels, meshed her own individual history with the sacred history of the Scripture, and used her imagination in order to experience life with Jesus (Despres 3). And as a mystic within that tradition, Margery demonstrated her mind's kinship with spiritual realities. Her divine visions allowed her to communicate with God, love Jesus in his humanity, attend the Virgin, and participate with all her emotions in the joy and grief of the Christian story. Mystics func-
tioned effectively within the whole of medieval life (Petroff 34-45) and participated in the customary late medieval longing for the Passion. Women mystics rallied around an all-purpose figure of Jesus as lover, spouse, and teacher, but they were especially attached to Jesus-the-sufferer.

The lively and gregarious Margery opens her Book with the life-threatening experience of her first childbirth, referring to herself as “this creature,” a fairly common medieval usage. This scene of her first visions invites the appearance of Christ:

When this creature was twenty years of age, ... she was married to a worshipful burgess and was with child within a short time, as nature would. And after she had conceived, she was belabored with great accesses till the child was born and then, what with the labor she had in childing, and the sickness going before, she despaired of her life, imagining she might not live. ... And anon, for the dread she had of damnation ... , this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly vexed and labored with spirits for half a year, eight weeks, and several days. And during this time, she thought she saw devils opening their mouths all inflamed with billows of fire as though they should swallow her. ... And also the devils cried upon her with great threats and bid her to forsake Christendom, her faith, and deny her God, His Mother, and all the saints in Heaven. ... Whatever the spirits tempted her to say and do she said and did. ... And, when she had long been labored ..., Our Merciful Lord Christ Jesus, ever to be trusted, worshipped be His Name, never forsaking His servant in time of need, appeared to His creature which had forsaken Him, in the likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man’s eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, and He said to her these words, “Daughter, why hast thou forsaken Me, and I forsook never thee?” And anon, as He said these words, ... this creature became stable in her reason as well as ever she was before. ... (Meech and Allen 1.3b.5-32; 4a.19, 21-25, 28-31; 4b.36-37, 8-22, 26-27 [all quotations are my own modernizations from this edition])

The Book of Margery Kempe “may disappoint or even shock the reader,” writes R. W. Chambers, in his introduction to the 1944 edition, modernized by William Butler-Bowdon. And Chambers warns us that we “must come to her not expecting too much” (xviii). He was the first of many scholars to discount Margery Kempe’s spirituality and consider her Book an anecdotal curiosity. A deterrent to taking her narrative seriously seems to have been that she begins her holy revelations postpartum, inviting many scholars to assume she was in the midst of a full-out postpartum depression. Such “hysteria” serves to remind scholars of its origin as God’s curse against Eve (Knowles 146; Chambers xv–xxvi; Thurston; Meech liv, lxv; Stone 35). And scholars continue to view Margery’s spirituality as hysterical. For instance, in the 1982 “Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: Hysterica Compassio in the Late Middle Ages,” Hope Phyllis Weissman, who takes Margery seriously, nonetheless tells us that “to diagnose Margery’s case as ‘hysteric’ need not be to trivialize her significance or reduce her Book’s value as cultural testi-
mony” (202). Indeed, the Book provides valuable testimony to religious, cultural, business, and literary practices.

In what is often a moving narration, Margery reveals herself to be a woman who could neither read nor write, dependent upon amanuenses to record her story. R. M. Wilson assures us that “we are probably safe . . . in assuming that The Book of Margery Kempe represents the kind of prose that Margery herself would have written had she not been illiterate” (105). In fact, the manuscript begins with the priest’s incipit, recounting his tribulations in attempting to revise the previous priest’s transcription of Margery’s text:

> Then there was a priest for which this creature had great affection, and so she . . . brought him the [first transcription of the] book to read. The book was so “evil” written that he could discriminate little of it, for it was neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped nor formed as other letters were. Therefore, the priest truly believed that no man would ever read it, except by special blessing. . . . [But eventually] he read every word of it to this creature, she sometimes helping where there was any difficulty. (Proem.2b.12–18; 3a.11–12)

“Evil” written as it may have been, if Margery’s Book had originally found a broad contemporary audience, it would have contributed to the widespread resumption of English as a written medium in the fifteenth century, what Paul E. Szarmach refers to as “the triumph of the vernacular” (14). And it might also have played some small part in the drama of the English Reformation. But for us and for now, the book merits attention not only because it seems to be the earliest extant large-scale narrative written in English prose (verse was, of course, another matter), but also because it introduces unprecedented artistic and rhetorical techniques. Her self-disclosing, candid, direct view of contemporary life gives her text a verisimilitude rarely found in devotional or soul-saving literature. David Knowles writes that Margery “would seem to be an early, if not the first, example in English prose literature of the skilful use of dramatically appropriate dialogue based on the substantial memory of what had taken place” (144). No English writer had committed to writing such an intimate, revealing, and humane account of life and thoughts. Perhaps only a woman (untrained in and unconscious of standard rhetorical and literary practices) would assert her self this way.

Like any autobiographer, Margery was convinced that her life was special, her life story valuable to readers distant in time or space. In service of that significance, then, she had to shape the raw material of her inner and outer experience—spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social—into a memorable narrative. And memorable it is, though neither predictably coherent nor conventionally chronological. Like many of Margery’s contemporaries, then, her future scholarly audience has often judged her and her book to be incoherent, exaggerated piety, regardless of her circumstances, motivation, or intention. But Margery’s mysticism derives its impact from experience of feeling; she offers
testimony, not logical proof. Her visions accord with the tenor of her personal faith: Jesus had singled her out among women to suffer, to preach (saving souls and improving morals), to receive his steadfast love, and to be saved.

The absence of chronology in Margery's narrative seems to render it logically incoherent, a problem that not even her second scribe could rectify, as explained in this disclaimer:

This book is not written in order, everything after the other as it is usually done, but like the matter came to the creature in mind when it should be written, for it was so long before it was written that she had forgotten the time and the order that things happened. And therefore she wrote nothing except what she knew right well for the very truth. (Proem.3a.12–18)

Instead of being linear, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is cyclical and associational, but still a record of her spiritual development, the stages exemplified by sickness, conversion, travel, evangelism, persecution, and divine intervention. By associating her own development with incidents in Jesus's life, Margery blurs her theology with her autobiography. Although her narrative is loosely organized (akin to the edifying homily structurally but to the exhortative sermon thematically), she effectively marshals the information within each true-to-life, self-contained vignette, just like the best of fiction writers, commingling homely, even commonplace events with rather self-satisfied descriptions of her great devotion, her intimacy with Jesus, and the gradual routing of those who oppose or mock her (opposition, mocking, and routing are practices consistent not only with Jesus's life but with saints' lives as well). And her presentation of her created self, what Wayne Booth calls the "implied author" (71–75), achieves one of her most important rhetorical effects.

Although Margery unknowingly relaxes conventional distinctions of genre and structure, she deliberately exerts distinctions of audience for calculated rhetorical ends, especially between the authorial audience and the narrative audience. Both her story and her character appeal to the authorial audience, though they often perturb the narrative audience. And "this creature" frequently offends the "immediate audience," the other characters within her narrative. Like all authors, Margery would have no guaranteed control over the "actual audience," the flesh-and-blood people who read the text (Rabinowitz 126).

The conversion scene illustrates her rhetorical technique. After Jesus's initial appearance to her, which restored her health, Margery returns to her vain, proud, and superficially religious ways. Only after the failures of her brewery and her mill is she humbled enough to turn wholly to God. The circumstances of her conversion serve as a morality tale to her authorial audience, for her visions had led eventually to self-understanding and to a movement from fearful sinner to favorite child of God:
And, when this creature had thus graciously come again to her mind, she thought that she was bound to God and that she would be His servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her pompous array... All her desire was to be worshipped by the people. She would not take heed of any chastisement, nor be content with the goods that God had sent her, as her husband was, but ever desired more and more. . . . [After her business failures,] some said she was accursed; some said God took open vengeance on her. . . . And some wise men, whose minds were more grounded in the love of Our Lord, said that it was the high mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ that called her from the pride and vanity of the wretched world. And then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, thought they were the scourges of Our Lord that would chastise her for her sin. Then she asked God's mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and the desire that she had for the worship of the world, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life as shall be told hereafter. (2.5a.7-10; 2.5a–b.27-30; 2.6a.36-38, 1-10)

“This creature” projects a sense of radical dependency on God for her ongoing creation, a projection grounded in the humility *topos*. Although Margery’s consistent reference to herself as “this creature” is probably in deference to her Creator, this common usage also serves to remind us that this illiterate “creature” was in constant collaboration with her scribes: Margery told her story to men who then wrote it out. Yet this devout/arrogant, humble/forceful, feverish/submissive Christian actually creates herself, a complicated and sometimes contradictory—a “real”—self. And these “real” selves—mystic, woman, author—connect in a narrative sequence that sanctions her words and actions. In fact, this nexus of selves, this *ethos*, subsumes her vernacular evangelical prose to appeal in varying degrees to different audiences.

Margery’s implied author, her implied version of herself, shapes the narration and selects the events to present a carefully wrought *ethos*. From the outset, the *ethos* Margery introduces is her only means of self-preservation, both within the written text and within the text of her life. Margery-the-actual-(flesh-and-blood)-author creates Margery-the-implied-author (a persona that dictates to the scribe) who creates Margery-the-character (“this creature”). Hence, Margery Kempe is preserved.

The historical Margery, the actual composer of the text, employs what has come to be known in theoretical circles as “dialogism,” a conversation among conflicting intentions, values, claims, opinions—a conversation among her selves. Margery Kempe creates a heteroglossic self (Bakhtin 324), stratified by the voices of the implied author, the third-person narrator, and the character—three Margerys in all. Thus, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, presented as nonfiction, subtly implements highly sophisticated fictional techniques—an implied author, a narrator, and the author-as-character—and demonstrates the refinement of her rhetorical method.
What is most impressive—amazing, in fact—about this medieval fictionalized nonfiction is Margery’s use of what James Phelan calls “instabilities.” In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, Phelan explains the dynamics of narrative progression in terms of “instabilities” and “tensions,” terms with Burkean resonances. Kenneth Burke tells us that form in literature is “an arousing and fulfillment of desires” (124) and that form is “correct’ in so far as it gratifies the needs it creates” (138). But Phelan takes the notion further, explaining that narrative movement is shaped by “instabilities between characters [which are] created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions” and by “tensions” among values, beliefs, opinions, knowledge, and expectations within the discourse itself (15).

The Book of Margery Kempe manifests both “instabilities” and “tensions,” and they lead to two results. First of all, the implied author evokes a sympathetic response in the authorial audience for the historical Margery, who longs for confirmation of her mystic status. (Although the author wants all readers to join the authorial audience, not every reader will want or be able to join that hypothetical group.) Second, the narrator (who was created by the implied author) reveals neither sympathy nor admiration for Margery-the-character, “this creature.” Hence, the response to Margery of the narrative audience duplicates the response of the characters in the story: both her narrative audience and the characters within her story find Margery’s single-minded moralizing and constant interference annoying, if not harassing. Such a negative response seems perfectly reasonable given the narrative line. And the implied author, the Margery who dictates her memoirs, ultimately engineers both positive and negative responses to a version of her self.

The following scene between Margery and her husband exemplifies the implied author’s rhetorical technique; the scene strikes a sympathetic chord in the authorial audience and dissonance in the narrative and immediate audiences. This scene also typifies the narrator’s purposeful use of gossipy anecdotes and fresh dialogue, a striking effect strengthened by her natural and homely figurative language. Margery spends many years of her marriage trying to dissuade her husband from their sexual relationship, and the account of her ultimate success is engaging and homespun:

It befell on a Friday on Midsummer Eve in right hot weather, as this creature was coming from York-ward bearing a bottle with beer in her hand and her husband a cake in his bosom, that he asked his wife this question, “Margery, if there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless I should commune naturally with you as I have done before, tell me the truth of your conscience—for ye say ye will not lie—whether ye would suffer my head to be smitten off or else suffer me to meddle with you again, as I did at one time?” “Alas, sir,” said she, “why raise this matter when we have been chaste these eight weeks?” “For I will know the truth of your heart.” And then she said with great sorrow, “Forsooth, I would...
rather see you be slain than we should turn again to our uncleanness.” And he said again, “Ye are no good wife.” (11.12a.9–24)

The implied author commands Margery-the-character’s native tongue for use in her own self-definition and self-defense. Although the implied author is doing the commanding, ensuring that the narrator gives Margery-the-character a believable “voice,” the narrator is telling the story and the character is doing her own speaking. Yet all this commanding belongs to the flesh-and-blood author, the historical Margery, the artist. The rhetorical style (including tone and voice) of the artist is perfectly matched to the implied author’s aim: to impress upon her readers (the authorial and narrative audiences) her chastity, a form of spiritual expression that offers psychic freedom. After all, Margery-the-character’s witness to God’s love (her contrition and compassion) merited spiritual graces designed to earn and to validate publicly the recovery of her virginal purity, the most valuable of all God’s gifts. The implied author is taking full advantage of this opportunity to justify “this creature’s” behavior by re-making, re-membering, and re-creating her life to her readers (her authorial and narrative audiences).

Yet this created Margery seems to have no good sense of “immediate audience” (the other characters within her story), for her accounts are replete with her offensive behavior at home and abroad. Not dedicated to the vow of silence, Margery-the-character reproves even the highest Church officials for what she considers moral lapses: lacking moral courage and shirking responsibility. And although these same Church officials may have questioned her behavior, none of them refuted her doctrine or denied her persistent petitions (to live apart from her husband, wear white clothes, go on pilgrimage, and receive weekly communion). She was permitted to live the life God commanded and she wanted. She also preached to people wherever she found them. Her absolute certainty of her own moral and spiritual superiority, her dizzying intimacy with Jesus, her inconceivable apprenticeship as a saint—characteristics fused to a formidable and flamboyant self-glorification—annoy most of her narrative audience. And her fellow Christians within the immediate audience taunt, harass, molest, and abandon her; she is an especially easy target for their derision because she travels without the protection of her husband.

Her incessant religious harangues, her moralizing, and her sobbing fits (exacerbated by her perpetual neediness) infuriate nearly everyone she meets, especially those on pilgrimage:

They were most displeased because she wept so much and spoke always of the love and goodness of Our Lord, as much at the table as in other places. And therefore shamefully they reproved her and severely scolded her and said they would not suffer her as her husband did when she was at home and in England. . . . And then she said to one of them specially, “Ye cause me much shame and great grievance.” He answered again anon, “I pray God that the devil’s death may overcome thee soon and quickly”. . . . They cut her gown so short that it came but little beneath
her knee and made her put on a white canvas, in the manner of a sacken apron, so that she should be held a fool and the people should not make much of her or hold her in repute. . . . And, notwithstanding all their malice, she was held in more worship than they were, wherever they went. (26.30a.18–23, 31–34; 30b.14–18, 20–22)

In her witness to God's love, Margery-the-character's retrospective account answers her critics and explains apparent mistakes and inconsistencies, but in no way does her account, especially of her degrading attire, mitigate the response of the other characters within the immediate audience.

R. W. Chambers's observation seems to illustrate Margery's rhetorical purposefulness as she creates herself-as-character:

Things might have been easier for Margery, if she had been a recluse. At large in the world, people found her a nuisance. In a cell, where people could come and speak to her when they wished, and depart when they liked, Margery would have fitted better into medieval life. (xix)

For instance, when her visions transport her to the scene of the Christ's interment (according to Franciscan participatory meditation, the penitent should envision or re-create scriptural events), Margery treats the mournful Blessed Mother as though she were just another to-be-helped Christian, giving Mary unsolicited care and advice:

Then the creature thought, when Our Lady was come home and was laid down on a bed, that she made for Our Lady a good cauldre [a warm, medicinal beverage] and brought it her to comfort her, and then Our Lady said unto her, "Take it away, daughter. Give me no food, but mine own Child." The creature answered, "Ah! Blessed Lady, ye must needs comfort yourself and cease of your sorrowing." (81.95a.5–12)

But such behavior—appreciated or no—establishes the Margery-character's ethos; she wants to present herself and be recognized as a religious woman, one singled out above all other humans, to be saved at once (without the pains of Purgatory). J. H. Leuba explains Margery's determination not only to be "worthwhile" but also to be "recognized as such," to be a respected mystic. Despite their profession of humility, obedience, and long-suffering, the great mystics should not be categorized as meek and purposeless. On the contrary, Leuba tells us, "Their light shall not shine under a bushel. They show the firmest purpose and accept no influence that does not lead where they want to go" (121). Far from being an incoherent hysteric, Margery-the-implied-author is, instead, a careful artist, fashioning a character who behaves consistently within a well-established social and spiritual context.

In addition to her good works and witnessing, the Margery-character is also intensely interested in her weeping fits and her clothes (an interest that makes the sacken apron episode even more humiliating). All these concerns emerge as features of female authorial consciousness. The implied author determines that
these concerns best reflect the Margery-character’s ethos in terms of her successful evangelizing. (Always in the balance, however, is the relationship of the implied author’s ethos to the Margery-character’s ethos.) In the Holy Land, Margery receives her “gift of tears”—a gift of the spirit albeit not always a comfortable or convenient one. Margery copiously manifests her gift of tears every day for ten years and at less frequent intervals over an additional fifteen, whenever reminded of Jesus or the Passion. The implied author skillfully creates a devout weeping spell in such a way that the authorial audience sympathizes with Margery, delights in her eccentricity, all the while understanding why the Margery-character vexes the characters within the immediate audience:

On Purification Day, or otherwise Candlemas Day, when the said creature beheld the people with their candles in church, her mind was ravished into beholding Our Lady offering her Blissful Son Our Savior to the priest.... Then was she so comforted by the contemplation in her soul that she... could hardly bear up her own candle to the priest... but went wavering on each side like a drunken woman, weeping and sobbing so sore, that scarcely could she stand on her feet for the fervor of love and devotion that God put into her soul through high contemplation. And sometimes she could not stand but fell down among the people and cried so loud that many men wondered and marvelled what ailed her; for the fervor of the spirit was so great that the body failed, and might not endure it. (82.96a.1–23)

Margery’s gift of tears was a physical token of her special sanctity, akin to Saint Francis’s gift of the stigmata. Thus, Franciscan ethos and pathos color her dramatic piety, her unqualified, unconditional, and fearless love of God.

Although Margery-the-flesh-and-blood-author, Margery-the-implied-author, and Margery-the-character wanted to live chastely with her husband, Margery was, indeed, a married woman. Her decision to dress as the bride of Christ, completely in white wool, and to wear a gold ring engraved Iesu est amor meus was an effrontery to her townspeople, her immediate audience. White clothes could indicate either chaste living or salvation without time in Purgatory, and Margery wore them for both reasons. The townspeople, however, were offended by her attire, and instead of accepting her sainthood, they often accused her of being a hypocrite. In Lambeth, for instance, a townswoman came forward to curse Margery: “I would bring a faggot to burn thee with; it is a pity that thou live” (16.18a.15–16). Since Margery had a newborn son and a living husband, her behavior was considered anomalous, if not scandalous.

Several passages underscore Margery’s recurring concern for her attire as a reflection of her spiritual status. In the following passage, she has just been abandoned by her irritated fellow pilgrims, who refuse to travel with this overbearing evangelist; providentially, Jesus appears to the frightened Margery with advice:

“Dread thee not, daughter, for I shall provide for thee right well and bring thee in safety to Rome and home again into England without any villainy to thy body if thou wilt be clad in white clothes and wear them as I said to thee while thou were
in England.” Then this creature, being in great pain and despair, answered Him in her mind, “If Thou be the spirit of God that speak in my soul, and I may prove Thee for a true spirit with the counsel of the Church, I shall obey Thy will; and if Thou bring me to Rome in safety, I shall wear white clothes, though all the world should wonder at me, for Thy love.” (30.37b.5–16)

Although the authorial audience can be amused or even impressed by Margery’s willingness to bargain with Jesus with regard to her costume, rarely does her narrative support or her immediate audience appreciate her spiritual confidence, her self-proclaimed holiness, or her costumes. In the opening chapters, the young, proud, attention-seeking Margery dresses in the gayest new fashion for the sole purpose of outshining the other merchants’ wives. And she knows full well

that men said of her much villainy, for she wore gold pipes on her head, and her hoods, with the tippets, were slashed. Her cloaks were also slashed and laid with divers colours between the slashes, so that they should be the more staring to men’s sight, and herself the more worshipped. (2.5a.13–18)

Throughout her life, the Margery-character offends many people with her choice of dress, a physical expression of her *etbos*: before her conversion, she is garishly stylish; after her conversion, she wears the powerfully symbolic white; and when her white attire becomes too controversial, she resorts to the later, safer black. When a German priest commands her to wear black, she feels “that she pleased God with her obedience” (34.41b.1–2). The Margery-character’s costume changes reflect her spiritual condition.

The reactions of the other characters (the immediate audience) and the narrative audience to the Margery-character are most often perplexity and exasperation, depending on her behavior (leaving her husband and children for pilgrimage, insisting the pilgrimage conversation be limited to her pontification). Occasionally, they appreciate her “good works,” her nursing and serving the poor and the sick, or counseling the bereaved and insane. At the same time, the authorial audience, in response to the author’s artistic design and intentions, consistently delights in the antics of Margery (presented by the narrator as told by the implied author) and applauds her decisions. The authorial audience fully understands the negative reactions of the characters in the text, yet it remains sympathetic to Margery-the-implied-author. By fashioning a proleptic *etbos* for her authorial audience, Margery Kempe attends to the expectations of that audience, yet, simultaneously, she meets her own demands as a character before a narrative audience. The artistry of her self-presentation, her *etbos*, is a major rhetorical accomplishment.

Margery Kempe is one of the most important English women who participated in the medieval rhetorical tradition, although the males who controlled that tradition did not recognize her participation. A rhetorician who joins her narra-
tive audience but does not join her authorial audience has no means to recognize Margery Kempe's rhetorical sophistication; that reader cannot do otherwise than pronounce her work unimportant in terms of rhetoric. Margery Kempe is not so much practicing rhetoric in its traditional sense as inscribing it in a different way.

Although never before recognized by scholars for its contributions to rhetoric, her fifteenth-century Book has rightfully enjoyed special attention from scholars of other stripes attracted to her ability to elaborate with considerable sophistication her theological convictions and practices. Margery Kempe represents a unique strain in the most important literary activity by women in the Middle Ages: the flowering of religious writing into the writing and dictation of mystical treatises. Our medieval literary foremothers, such as Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, and Margery, participated in the continental mystic tradition, beginning with after-illness visions. This tradition of dramatic piety could provide women a socially acceptable and respected medium of religious expression and personal assertion, especially if they were attached to religious orders and, hence, educated in the intellectual tradition. Julian and Hildegard are considered valid mystics because they belong to this world of confined, virginal, and intellectual religious experience. A bourgeois laywoman like Margery simply could not meet the traditional requirements of mysticism, yet mysticism provided her with the means to compose her life.

Mystics in any period, however, are vulnerable to charges of heresy and disobedience because their direct communication with God bypasses the services and sacraments of the Church. Margery was especially vulnerable, not only because she was an outspoken woman and layperson without formal education, but because she lived at a time of serious disruption in the Church at home and on the Continent. As Denise Despres tells us:

Her spiritual independence in seeking the difficult balance between the active and contemplative lives . . . baffled her contemporaries and caused many to question her orthodoxy. . . . Both men and women remarked with hostility on the impropriety of Margery's wandering, as well as the presumptuousness of her teaching. A frustrated intolerance surfaced most frequently in the attitudes of her tormentors. Unable to “define” Margery's behavior by placing her in those roles appropriate for either religious women or laywomen, her contemporaries felt threatened by her. (87)

But we must understand that Margery's teaching, her blending of personal and scriptural history, was Franciscan in spirit and orthodox in its origins, and that her visions gave her a public language and a visible office in the world, despite her position as a woman.

The works of the female mystics spoke to religious communities and struck chords in the developing popular piety, a piety seeking emotional and rational stimulation. Moreover, these works were accessible to the populace: works such
as Margery’s were generally written in the vernacular, and these writings were akin to the sermon, the central dramatic participatory event in Christian corporate life. The themes, structure, and didactic purpose of sermons would have been readily familiar to Margery, for the Church was her primary source of lifelong teaching and comfort, a basic constituent of her worldly as well as “ghostly” life, and an essential framework for her calling. But most important, the Church provided Margery the language and the opportunity with which to use that calling.

The fragmented nature of her autobiography may, indeed, demonstrate her ambiguous role as an effective Christian and layperson—especially in a society where her gender deprived her of the authority to teach or preach. But this fragmented story corroborates the conclusion of recent scholars: women’s autobiographies tend to be less linear, unified, and chronological than men’s autobiographies. (Consider the autobiographical works of Adrienne Rich, Mary McCarthy, Maxine Hong Kingston, and even Carolyn Heilbrun.) Women’s autobiographies are often novelistic, women’s novels autobiographical. And because of the continual crossing of self and other, the continual conversation among the voices, women’s writings often blur the public and the private—just as Margery’s writing does. Margery’s autobiography, her rhetoric, inscribes the feminine conversation rather than the masculine dialectic.

Although presented as nonfiction, Margery’s account implements other highly sophisticated fictional techniques besides dialogism. Hers is the timeless, quintessential woman’s story of irreducible and irreconcilable gendered-language limitations. Yet, in other ways, her story is a morality tale about asserting those language differences and seeking appropriate—though nontraditional—forms of fulfillment. The conversational quality of Margery’s discourse depends on human connections: her discourse relies on others to come into its existence, whether others are scribes or those to whom she testifies.

Margery Kempe would be recognized—and heard. Although she lacked the necessary skills for transcribing her own story and had no guarantee that her story would ever reach an audience, this religious mystic was, nonetheless, determined to record her spiritual autobiography. She used her “inner voice” for knowing and then turned to “correct” or public voices for composing and speaking. And in Margery’s case, as in the case of so many other women, the same mind can live in several voices.

This first English autobiographer provides us a powerful example of successful double-voiced discourse, articulating her private, disenfranchised experience through the public discourse of religion. It is an inherently interesting text that is also a resounding response to religious instruction. Yet most remarkable of all is Margery Kempe’s ability to introduce and balance an ethos with dual effects: she faithfully presents the annoying and believable Margery-character, who costs her the respect of her narrative audience; but at the same time, she writes the life of
the implied author with a disarming and utterly convincing sincerity that gains her the admiration of her authorial audience. *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only redefines the rhetorical tradition, making it inclusive of such female works, it also contributes an innovative example of purposeful and persuasive feminine inscription.

**Works Cited**


