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Acts of Devotion: Loving God with Body and Soul in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and

The Book of Margery Kempe

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The thesis examines the relationship between the active and contemplative life in the medieval English texts *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The similarities and differences between the views of the *Cloud's* author and Margery Kempe on the interplay between the active and contemplative life is discussed. I use their positions to support my theory that the mixed life, which involves aspects of both the contemplative and active life, permits an individual to serve God with both body and spirit. The diverse actions a person performs physically and spiritually will validate the multitude of paths that may be pursued in forming a relationship with God. The texts will be used to demonstrate that man must integrate both the physical and spiritual to unite with God in spiritual marriage. I will establish that Margery Kempe's call to serve all of humanity in the active life is the fruit of her commitment to contemplative prayer. The proof of a holy active life being rooted in prayer will be further established by the *Cloud* author's praise for the physicality involved in contemplation.

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In the medieval Christian work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author discusses the relationship that must exist between the contemplative's body and soul if he is to achieve perfection in his calling to love God alone. The active and contemplative lives, which represent the workings of the body and soul respectively, must be lived simultaneously for the contemplative to advance toward spiritual marriage and full unity with God. However, the aspiring contemplative cannot live the active life that the *Cloud* author characterizes by good bodily works of charity to others if he is to renounce completely all materiality for the sake of God's love. For the contemplative, the physical labor typically performed by the body of the active must occur within his spirit, transforming the soul's mere desire for God into an active will to love God and others. The active individual's bodily toil and the suffering of Christ during the crucifixion are experienced by the contemplative through the emotions of contrition, compassion and devotion in his soul when meditating on images of human sin, Christ's Passion and the joys of heaven. Spiritual suffering authorizes the contemplative to work for the salvation of souls in the same manner that the active's work cares for the body while still in the temporal world.

The soul's ability to join the body in its works of charity and suffering demonstrates the body and soul's mutual reliance. The spirit that mimics the labor present in the active life in turn aids the active life by commanding the body to accomplish the soul's desires. Although the body must remain subject to the spirit's requests, the body also shares in the soul's rewards during both earthly and eternal life. Since all physical actions must originate in the spirit and be performed for spiritual purposes, the gifts given to the body for its labor also have a spiritual purpose. The suffering the contemplative previously endured for charity's sake is transformed into a gift God gives to advance a meditative person's spiritual journey. Additionally, God

gladdens the contemplative in both body and spirit by granting him the knowledge that true bliss comes from being in God's friendship and enjoying their mutual love. God's love, like the contemplative's love, is an action and not mere emotion. The abundance of love the contemplative feels in his spirit is imparted to his physical being as a bodily comfort.

Graced with the experience of God's love, the contemplative is empowered to advance beyond using corporal images and relying on physical and spiritual comforts to advance his relationship with God. The contemplative spiritually exits the material world, abandoning all its works to enter into a physical "nowhere," which the *Cloud* author locates between the cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing within the contemplative's soul. The cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing become symbolic of the contemplative spiritual work of "forgetting" and "loving." The image of the clouds and the labor performed by the contemplative within that space once again recalls the physical activity of active life. Yet the activity is occurring exclusively within the soul and does not involve meditating on these images, but using them as a means to reveal spiritual progress. "Above" the cloud of forgetting, the contemplative ceaselessly toils to prevent the physical world from intruding on his intimate connection with God that takes place between the clouds. "Within" the privacy of the "nowhere," God invites the contemplative to eternally unite with Him in spiritual marriage, partially in this life and eternally in the next. However, the proposal calls the contemplative to a new spiritual work. The loving desire of the contemplative becomes the act of seeking out God who eludes intellectual understanding by remaining hidden within the cloud of unknowing. God equips His beloved for the new task by continuing to stir the contemplative's love longing and granting him peace and rest once he is bound to Him in spiritual marriage.

The medieval mystic Margery Kempe does not separate the actions of the body from the workings of the spirit when seeking martial union with God. Although Margery conforms to the *Cloud* author's notion that physical actions must reflect the desires of the spirit, the holy woman frequently relies on the material world to encounter God and perform her spiritual works of charity. Without the burden of forgetting all things that are not God Himself, the mystic is free to see God in all people and all human activity. The compassion she feels in her soul for the suffering body of Christ and for her sinful fellow man inspires her to use her body as a means to save souls by forcing them to recall God's love, much like Christ used his body to save souls during the crucifixion. Margery solidifies her body's relationship with her soul through her weeping, her bodily performance of the crucifixion, her resolve to wear white clothes and her loving care of her ailing husband, John Kempe. However, unlike her body, which cares for the spiritual needs of others, her spirit cares for the bodily needs of Christ and the holy family. Within her soul, Margery dresses, feeds, bathes and houses the suffering and forgotten bodies of Mary and Christ, extending her charity beyond her fellow man. Although the work occurs within the holy woman's soul, it mirrors the labor of the active life which aims to care for people while they are still on earth.

Margery's spiritual marriage to God authorizes her uninhibited movement between the active and contemplative life. For the mystic, spiritual marriage is not the end product of the work done to abandon the active life in diligent pursuit of loving the naked being of God in the realm of high contemplation. The joy God loving bestows on His spouse, both physically and spiritually in their marriage without care for her previous sins is precisely what allows Margery to perform her charitable works in both body and soul. The mystic does not make any distinction between her marital state with God on earth and the marriage she will share with God in heaven,

permitting the holy woman to experience complete unity with God while still in the world. The love God shows for Margery by wedding her before the entire host of heaven and the invitation He gives her to lie with Him in rest and peace as an earthly wife would do with her husband allows the mystic to reciprocate her love for God in the same worldly manner. Margery uses sexual language to describe the relationship she shares with God. The acts of “kissing” and “embracing” that take place between God and Margery free the mystic from the perpetual longing and continual binding the *Cloud* author envisioned the contemplative enduring. The intimacy Margery shares with God show that actions have the same power to unite the mystic to God as strict contemplation. Margery’s commitment to love God with both body and spirit through a combination of the active and contemplative life, validates the *Cloud* author’s assertion that spiritual marriage can only be achieved through the desire to love God above all else, while simultaneously championing active works of charity as the means through which the mystic shares God’s love with the world.

The position the body occupies within the body/soul dichotomy is outlined within the *Cloud* author’s explanation of the integration of the active and contemplative life. The *Cloud* author states, “Ther ben two maner of lives in Holy Chirche. Actyve is the lower, and contemplative is the hier” (545-46). The contemplative writer claims, the first degree of active life “stondeth in good and onest bodily werks of mercy and of charite” (*Cloud* 969). Active life is synonymous with the good works the earthly body performs. Bodily works of charity will be both “bygone and eended in this liff” because in heaven no one shall “hunger ne thirst, ne dighe for colde, ne be seeke” (*Cloud* 554, 988-89). Although good bodily works must be done out of love for God, an active individual must also be considering the needs of others without burying them under the cloud of forgetting; whereas the vocation of the contemplative is to love “the

naked being of God Himself only” (*Cloud* 566). Such love is the working of the soul that inhabits the higher position in the body/soul binary. However, the soul’s work of loving God is only greater because it “bigonne in this liff, and schal last withouten eende” and is not concerned with temporal creations (*Cloud* 555-56). Just as the body remains conjoined, yet subjugated to the spirit, the active life possesses the same unique ability to assist one in the contemplative life without satisfying one’s longing to be with God as the contemplative life promises. Thus, the active life fails to provide the person who lives it with a glimpse of the eternal union that exists between the soul of man and God in heaven, as the mortal body must be shed before one reaches such bliss in the afterlife.

Relegating the good works of the body to the active life and the desire of the soul to unite with God to the contemplative life does not form a permanent division between the body and the soul or between the active life and the contemplative life. Humanity’s very nature, being composed of both matter and spirit, does not allow for such a rigid bifurcation. The *Cloud* author asserts that neither the active nor contemplative life “may be had fully withouten som party of the other...these two lives ben couplid togeders” (549-50). “The two manners of living flow into and inform one another, each balancing and grounding the other,” demonstrating the body and soul’s shared reliance (Cowan 45). The lower part of contemplative life, which can only exist in connection with the higher part of the active life, consists of “goostly meditations of a mans owne wretchidnes, the Passion of Christe, and of the joyes of heven” (*Cloud* 971-72). While these meditations are the work of the spirit, they involve the use of images and emotions. The images are not transcendent images of heaven, but of the world. The sinfulness of man on earth, the physical body of Christ suffering the crucifixion and the foreshadowing of heavenly joys by the much smaller joys of “the wonderful giftes, kyndnes, and werks of God in alle His creatures”

on earth fill the act of contemplation with an intense physicality (*Cloud* 562-63). The images evoke the emotions of contrition, compassion and devotion which can be felt within the body of the contemplative.

Margery's compassion is not evoked by meditating on images within the soul. Actual physical objects replace mere images and move the holy woman beyond the "feelings" of compassion as she weeps for the suffering body of Christ. Each time the spiritual woman saw a "crucifyx" or a man who "had a wownde" or if "a man bett a childe befor hire er smet an hors" she "thowt sche saw owyr Lord be betyn er wowndyd" (Kempe 1586-88). Margery's bodily tears reflect her soul's sorrow for the suffering body of Christ physically present in the body of the wounded man, the beaten child and the whipped horse. The holy woman has confirmed the contemplative writer's previous assertion that neither the active life nor the contemplative life can be lived fully without some part of the other. However, Margery does not have to engage in contemplation first, as the *Cloud* author suggested, to see God in all suffering people, since the objects themselves inspire her contemplation. Only after the contemplative act occurs can she perform her weeping which is intended to be an active act of charity. The spiritual woman's tears are only "active" in that they are performed by her body and not by her soul. For as the *Cloud* author testifies, all bodily actions must have a spiritual meaning for the body to remain aligned with the spirit. Margery's tears "are a further way of mimesis and identification with Christ that allows her a parallel redemptive function-the savior of souls" (Beckwith 89). The mystic does not reserve bodily acts of charity as beneficial only to the body or earthly existence of the recipient as the contemplative writer does. The holy woman who was moved to contemplation by the bodies of the man, the child and the horse in turn uses the tears cried by her body to inspire

the same contemplation in the observer. The body thus has the power to save the soul, elevating the body beyond a mere performer of the soul's desires.

Margery's emotion of devotion and the tears it induces are a continuation of her resolve to embrace the joy and the holiness present in the physical world. Unlike the *Cloud* author, who frequently found angst in the busyness of active life and distraction in all creatures that were not God Himself, Margery is so overwhelmed by the happiness of seeing God in all people that her tears of sorrow are transformed into tears of joy. Therefore, works of charity both bodily and spiritually do not always have to result in suffering as is often described by the *Cloud* author and occasionally experienced by Margery. She asks the mothers "yf ther wer any man childe amongys hem" before becoming so "raveschyd into the childhood of Crist" that she "fel downe and wept and cryid" for devotion (Kempe 4759-62). Margery rejects the "model of substitution" championed by the *Cloud* author in which the contemplative must reject the world for heavenly transcendence (Beckwith 84). For the mystic, "heaven will not be preferred to earth but rather included in it" (Beckwith 84). The joy of union with God in heaven can begin to be experienced in the temporal world because God has already presented himself to Margery disguised as her fellow man. The spiritual woman's tears do not recall the Passion of Christ as they usually do, but instead remind the people in her company of the joy of Christ's birth. Margery demonstrates the spiritual meaning behind every bodily action as she cries for joy when meditating on how "owr Lady was joynyd to Joseph and of the gostly joynyng of mannys sowle to Jhesu Crist" whenever she viewed "men and women ben joined togedyr" in holy matrimony (Kempe 4720-22). During the crying she would pray "to owr Lord that hir lofe and hir affeccyon myth ben joynyd to hym only wythowtyn ende" (Kempe 4722-23). The spiritual meaning behind the physical union of the spouses is that it reflects the spiritual union of God and man.

The emotions of contrition, compassion and devotion are not unique to the lower realm of contemplative life. The contemplative writer declares, “For whi noghwhere bodily is everywhere goostly” and that “man’s affeccion varied in goostly felyng of this nought” (*Cloud* 2295-96, 2318). The “naught” the writer references is only a physical “nowhere.” By having the contemplative “neither locate nor confine his...efforts to the material world,” he is freed to travel spiritually through the metaphysical realms of hell, purgatory and heaven, but only within his soul (Cowan 263). The “naught” is a spiritual location within the soul of the contemplative in which he dwells and communicates with God. The spiritual insights which inspire the emotions the contemplative discovers within the naught mirror those found within the lower part of the contemplative life with the use of images. The *Cloud* author claims that once within the naught, the contemplative will “loke therapon as on helle” for the sorrow and horror felt for sin (2325). At other times one “clepith it nought helle bot purgatory” because of the hope one feels in knowing God’s grace has wiped out previous sins (*Cloud* 2335). Occasionally, the contemplative will call this spiritual nowhere “paradis or heven...for pees and rest he findeth therin” (*Cloud* 2338, 2340). The feelings of contrition, compassion and devotion that were described in earthly terminology in the lower part of contemplative life are now described in spiritual terms once one enters the realm of high contemplation. The sorrow the contemplative felt for his sins in the lower part of the contemplative life is so intensified in the higher part that it is only comparable to the pains of hell. The compassion and abundance of grace the lower contemplative felt meditating on Christ’s earthly Passion is similarly felt by the high contemplative who joyfully suffers the pains of a spiritual purgatory knowing one’s sins are forgiven. The joy of heaven that is foreshadowed by the goodness of God’s works and creatures for the lower contemplative is experienced by the higher contemplative in the form of spiritual comfort.

Emotions allow a person living a combination of the active and contemplative life to share in the strict contemplative's longing to be united to God. However, the language the *Cloud* author uses to describe the fruit of contemplation permits the contemplative to share in the active individual's ability to perform charitably works. The spiritual writer maintains, "If we be in charite" whoever "streyne up his spirit in this werk goostly for the salvacion of alle" shall do as "oure Lorde did His body on the Cros" (*Cloud* 1107-09). The author's use of the word "work" implies toil, a notion enforced by the labor of salvation that Christ's body performs on the cross. By utilizing the image of physical labor, the spiritual writer endows both the body of Christ and the spirit of the contemplative that participates in the Passion's saving mission with a "strength that has been forged out of weakness" (Nieva 114). The seeming weakness and passivity of Christ's pained body and the contemplative's suffering spirit is actually the strength of mercy and its determination to understand and alleviate the "suffering of others" (Nieva 114). Unlike an active individual's charity, which can only assist the few and not extend its benefits beyond earthly life, a contemplative's spiritual work aids all of humanity and has the power to save souls. The work of salvation Christ performs through His body, the contemplative performs in his spirit. The contemplative is thus granted mystical participation in Christ's Passion. Yet, the mystic's spiritual involvement cannot be accomplished without being part of a suffering body. The *Cloud* author affirms, "For right as if a lyme of oure body felith sore, alle the tother lymes ben pined and disesid...so it is goostly of all the limes of Holy Chirche" (1104-06). For the spiritual writer, suffering is the work that produces salvation. The salvation of souls cannot be accomplished simply through the mystic's charitable good will. The contemplative must endure the pain of others' sins in his spirit as vividly and as patiently as the body must physically endure the soreness and affliction of a limb.

Margery's commitment to the contemplative life is precisely what grants her active participation in Christ's Passion. The compassion the mystic feels in her spirit for Christ's Passion and sinful humanity inspires her bodily performance of the crucifixion. Unlike the strict contemplative, who the *Cloud* author claimed can only suffer in spirit for the sins of others, Margery endures agony in both body and soul simultaneously. While meditating on the crucifixion the holy woman "sobbyd, roryd, and cryed, and, spredyng hir armys abrood, seyde with lowed voys, I dey, I dey" (Kempe 3312-13). The spiritual woman's outstretched arms mirror Christ's arms spread on the cross and her repetition of the phrase "I die" shows she suffers an emotional death only comparable to Christ's physical death. Only after the spirit has been flooded with compassion can the body obey with the spirit's desire to impart the emotion to others. Margery complies with the *Cloud* author's assertion that a mutual reliance defines the body/soul relationship, even if the body remains slightly subjugated to the spirit's desires. By reenacting the crucifixion, Margery hopes to make Christ's suffering a lived reality for the viewers who can otherwise only contemplate the Passion. Margery thus "represents Christ's power and presence to the people who see her spectacle" (Christie). The holy woman promises God "as wel as I myth gevyne a peny owte of my purse, sone schulde I fulfille mennys hertys wyth contricyon that thei myth sesyn of her synne" (Kempe 3345-47). The mystic makes a direct comparison between caring for others' material needs and ensuring their spiritual welfare, both of which can be accomplished through the active life. Margery is both a member of Christ's suffering body and a member of the suffering body of the church. The holy woman's bodily performance is therefore another work of charity among the people whom she prays will be encouraged to renounce their own sins once they witness God's love for them through the vehicle of her body. As the English woman cried she "wrestyd hir body turning fro the o syde

into the other and wex al blew and al blo as it had ben colour of leed” (Kempe 2475-76).

Margery does not only demonstrate Christ’s suffering, but also His death with her own body.

The “blue” and “pale” coloring of the mystic’s flesh, as well as the twitching of her body to reflect death throws, unmask the slow agony of the crucifixion, further highlighting the Passion as an act of love by God for humanity.

The good and holy work of helping others achieve salvation through spiritual suffering is not how an individual reaches perfection in the contemplative life. The mystical writer argues that the only thing necessary is that “God be loved and preysid by Himself, aboven alle other besines, bodily or goostly” (*Cloud* 946-47). Yet the labor and the suffering that accompanied the charitable aspect of the contemplative’s life are also present in his work of loving God. The *Cloud* author speculates, “Me thinketh that thei schuld be so occupied in spirite that thie schuld take litel kepe, or none, what men did or seyde aboute hem” (925-27). The term “occupied” like the word “work” used previously, summons the image of physical labor. However, the toil of the spirit is so consuming that the contemplative should have neither the time nor the care to answer the actives who complain against their spiritual work. By not answering, the contemplative shows he has gained the “degree of detachment” necessary in loving God alone by quickly dismissing the comment (Cowan 85). Since the actives’ ignorant condemnation of the contemplative’s work should be met with silence, the contemplative’s suffering retains the passivity it had in its work of charity as a limb on a suffering body. Yet this very passivity permits the contemplative to show Christ-like mercy and forgiveness toward the unknowing actives.

The *Cloud* author’s interpretation of the Martha and Mary episode from the Gospel demonstrates through the use of images the spiritual work and the persecution contemplatives

endure for their love of God. Mary is described as being “so highe ravischid in contemplation and love of the Godheed” that she does not answer her sister who bids her “rise and help hir, and lat hir not so worche and travayle by himself” (*Cloud* 857, 862-63). Mary is depicted as sitting idly while her sister labors in the kitchen to provide for Christ and the guests. The contrasting images make tangible what Martha falsely perceives as Mary’s resolve to do “nothing.” Yet the “nothing” Martha witnesses is precisely the failing of the bodily senses and intellect that is necessary to “travayle fast in this nought and this noughwhere” (*Cloud* 2344). Mary’s inability to answer for her behavior shows that human speech cannot articulate the knowledge of God she has, for she is being ravished by Jesus’ Godhood, not His manhood. Words will not allow Martha to understand through intellect what Mary has understood through love of Christ’s divinity. The spiritual writer concludes, “Oure Lorde might not suffre...hir owne sister, speke a worde agens hir, bot yif He answered for hir Hymself...oure Lord will do now for us as He did than for Marie” (*Cloud* 928-29, 1020-21). The actual words Christ once spoke to Martha are now envisioned as having been spiritually spoken to all actives. Christ justifies all contemplatives from heaven as He did on earth with Mary picturing the spirit as performing the same works as the body. The contemplative is thus empowered to join Christ in his charity toward actives by his very willingness to suffer passively the persecution of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, the *Cloud* author “characterizes this passivity as a form of activity” in which by “suffering God’s work within the soul” the contemplative opens himself as a channel for God to mercifully deliver actives from their ignorance (Will 65). Christ answers Martha to “deliver hir of doute that sche might not bothe serve God in bodily besines and goostly togedir parfityly” (*Cloud* 950-51). Martha is not only taught humility, but that only “o thing is nessessary” in both this life and in heaven (*Cloud* 945). Had Mary not endured Martha’s rebuke, her sister would never have gained

the knowledge that her earthly works do not make her superior to others or a perfect servant of God, much less teach her that love of God is the only important thing regardless of the work in which one partakes. Therefore, Mary's suffering has aided Christ in redeeming Martha from her pride and ignorance just as Christ suffers bodily to bring all to salvation.

The mutual work and suffering the body and soul undergo jointly in both the active and contemplative life forge a permanent unity between the body and soul. However, the body must be subjugated to the spirit for both to work in harmony and for the individual to advance in holiness. The *Cloud* author affirms, "For alle bodily thing is ferther fro God bi the cours of kynde than any goostly thing," for the body is constantly weighed down by the "ese of the flesche" (1657-58, 2137). The body which is corrupted from sin is by its very nature furthest from a perfect and sinless God. However, the person of Jesus who is both God and man restores body/soul concord in the incarnation. The mystical writer states, "The body and the soul, the whiche is the Manheed, is onid with the Godheed withoutyn departing" (*Cloud* 2044-45). The body must rely on its oneness with the spirit to be like God in kind, just as the humanity of Jesus is made holy by its unity with His divinity. The body's obedience to the spirit is displayed through bodily actions as it was during the ascension of Christ. The *Cloud* author claims the ascension of Christ "was done bodily and for a bodily bemenyng as wel as for a goostly...for that His body is anhighed with the soul" (2043-44, 2069-70). The bodily meaning of the subsuming of the glorified body of Christ into heaven is that on Judgment day all will be given an immortal body. The spiritual meaning is that "we schul be than as swiftly where us liste bodely, as we been now in oure thoughte goostly" for during the present life one "mayst not come to heven not bodely, bot goostly" (*Cloud* 2073-74, 2076-77). Only after an individual's body has been freed from sin can it fully consent to the spirit's desire to be permanently united

with God in heaven. The elevation of Christ's body (and the soul that resides within) to heaven thus demonstrates the necessity of the body to perform physically the soul's desire for salvation in heaven and holiness on earth.

Margery's resolution to wear white clothes despite the persecution she steadfastly endures demonstrates that the actions of the body reveal the workings of love in the spirit. One of Margery's enemies questions, "Why gost thou in white? Art thou a mayden" (Kempe 2923). "In addition to the obvious suggestion of virginity the notions of martyrdom, of remission of sins, and of the clothing of heaven are present" in the garment (Erler). The mystic's clothes do not symbolize the bodily purity of maidenhood, but the spiritual purity of her love for Christ and obedience to His will. The whiteness of the garments has a dual purpose. Although the white clothes function as a wedding dress that publicly declares the holy woman's marriage with God, they are more significantly an effort to perform a work of charity amongst humanity. Upon God's request that she should make His love for her publicly known by arraying herself in white, the fearful woman admits, "I drede that the pepyl wyl slawndyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me" (Kempe 734-35). God is already aware of the mutual love that exists between Him and Margery and that others will react negatively to her garments. "Margery's dress therefore expresses her divine spouse's wish to distinguish her" as a sinner who has been saved, by dressing her in the clothing of heaven while she is still on earth (Erler). The mystic's white clothes therefore permit God to display His love for all people by having what is falsely believed to be a sinful woman wear white as a sign of His love for her. The very people Margery seeks to reveal God's love to speak evil of her "for sche weryd white clothyng mor than other dedyn which wer holyar and bettyr" than her (Kempe 1963). God is not concerned with the past sins of His spiritual spouse, as his love is given freely to all and not only

to the most righteous. The spiritual woman's body and the white garments that adorn it express Margery's soul's desire to fulfill God's longing of having His love known to others, including the mystic's sinful enemies.

Margery's soul which passively endures the persecution of isolation and slander is accompanied in its work of suffering by the body's willingness to bear humiliation and distress. The holy woman's traveling companions "cuttyd hir gown so schort....and dedyn hir don on a whyte canwas...for sche schuld ben holdyn a fool" (Kempe 1430-32). The incident evokes "the soldiers' theft of Christ's garment at the crucifixion," granting the mystic a spiritual martyrdom akin to Christ's physical martyrdom (Christie). The white clothing which has previously marked Margery as a hypocrite in the view of her company now proves her holiness. Draped in a short humble garment, Margery's love for God and humanity becomes an action and an attitude. Unlike the white clothes that were simply a declaration of God's endless love for all, the mystic's cut canvas dress authorizes her to perform physically God's will to love, just as the Passion permitted Christ to display God's love beyond mere words. God tells Margery, "For I far liche a man that lovyth wel hys wife, the mor envye that men han to hir the bettyr he wyl arayn hir in despite of hir enemys" (Kempe 1895-96). The persecuted woman's unsightly attire is pleasing to God and as beneficial as the white dress because it grants her the power to reveal Christ's desire to suffer and endure mockery through her own body. Margery's bodily actions thus have both a bodily meaning and a spiritual meaning as the *Cloud* author demanded. The spiritual meaning of the clothes is that God desires to be betrothed to every human soul. The bodily meaning is that the adorned body is united to the spirit's will to be in charity with others.

The body's very subjugation to the spirit endows it with a unique dignity. Subjugation is not portrayed by the *Cloud* author as inferiority or unwilling slavish submission. Subjugation

makes the body an obedient servant to the soul in its holy works and a coheir to the soul's rewards in heaven. The mystical writer maintains, "For God will be served with body and soul, bothe togeders...and rewarde man his mede in blis bothe in body and in soule" (*Cloud* 1688-90). Just as the body of Christ rose to heaven because of the suffering it endured to comply with His spirit's resolve to die for humanity's sins, the bodies of all people who humbly serve their spirit in word and deed will merit the same reward. The emotions of devotion and compassion that the active person felt in the lower realm of contemplation are made manifest by bodily actions. The contemplative writer agrees that "for habundaunce of devocion in thi spirit" some individuals will "speke unto God as unto man" saying "Good Jhesu! Faire Jhesu! Swete Jhesu" (*Cloud* 1684-86). Only after the soul is overcome with love for God can the mouth speak words of praise. Similarly, the active can only perform good bodily works of charity once overcome by compassion for the suffering Christ. The *Cloud* author cites the Gospel to prove that "whoso clotheth a pore man and doth any other good deed for Goddes love...schal be rewarded as substancyaly therefore as thei had done it to Cristes owne body" (2012-15). Although the body reacts to the soul's compassion by clothing the naked person, the soul's compassion stems from the mutual embodiment and suffering that exists between Christ, the compassionate individual and the needy person. Therefore, the soul must humble itself to serve the body's needs as much as the body must submit to the desires of the spirit. The poor person's body, which suffers for want of clothes, recalls the greater suffering of Christ's Passion in the soul of the compassionate charitable person who sorrows for Christ's crucifixion out of love. Caring for the bodily needs of others reveals that the soul loves God alone and does not hold one person in "any special regard," since God is preference above all others (Johnston 160).

The division the *Cloud* author makes between the desires of the spirit and the action of the body do not exist for Margery. For the pious woman, the soul and the body do not act independently for a common purpose, but are equal partners in charity, performing their work in unison. Overcome with devotion to the holy family, Margery sees Saint Anne in a contemplative vision “gret with child” and asks the expecting mother “to be hir mayden and hir servawnt” while she is pregnant and the caregiver of her child whom she raises “with good mete and drynke” (Kempe 406-07, 409). Later in the meditation, the mystic repeats the act by attending the birth of Christ as the mid-wife and then diligently begs, “Owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swathyn in hir sone whan he wer born” (Kempe 429-30). Although the acts of birthing, feeding and clothing occur strictly within Margery’s soul, they aim to care for the physical needs of the pregnant women and their children. Unlike the *Cloud* author who relegates bodily acts of charity to the active life and the spiritual work of emotional suffering to the contemplative life, Margery attends to the bodily needs of Christ and His female kinsman during contemplation. The mystic “fel down on hir kneys with gret reverens and gret wepyng” once she discovered she would be the servant of God’s mother (Kempe 415-16). The English woman’s charity does not involve suffering, but rejoicing at her opportunity to express her love for God in actions as well as emotions, as is evident by her tears of jubilation. The emotion of devotion does not inspire action. Margery’s service to the holy family is her devotion, not a byproduct of a preexisting emotional state. The spiritual woman resides within the second manner of living in which the active life is combined with the contemplative life, as previously described by the contemplative writer. However, Margery does not travel continuously between active and contemplative life using the benefits of meditation to advance her active life of charity. The

active life and contemplative life are to be lived simultaneously without either life limiting the work of the other.

The diverse actions Margery performs in her soul caring for the holy family are transformed once she witnesses the crucifixion. The transformation is only a change in emotion and action, not in love. During a vision of the Passion Margery stands with Christ's mother as she "wept, sobbyd, and cryd as thow sche schulde a deyid for pite and compassyon" (Kempe 4542-43). Previously, crying was a physical act of charity that originated with the feelings of devotion and compassion in the mystic's soul, permitting her to see God in all people and reenact the crucifixion with her own body. While viewing the Passion with Mary, crying is an action occurring in the spirit. The holy woman therefore participates in the emotional work of suffering the *Cloud* author allocates to the contemplative life. However, Margery's suffering is not silent and passive as the contemplative writer described. The tears the spiritual woman cries in her soul make compassion an action and not simply an emotion that can be felt without bodily involvement. By meditating with the use of images, Margery unites the physical suffering of the body with the emotional suffering of the soul. The mystic "gretly desyryng to an had the precyows body be hirsself alone that sche myth a wept anow in presens of that precyows body" (Kempe 4605-06). Margery's longing to be with Christ's body affirms the *Cloud* author's assertion that contemplatives can only participate mystically in Christ's Passion by remaining part of a suffering body. However, unlike the spiritual writer who envisions the contemplative as part of the suffering sinful body of the church, Margery partakes in the suffering of Christ's body directly. The spiritual woman is mystically present during "the moments of Christ's birth and death...those parts of his life which emphasize...embodiedness most completely" (Beckwith 81). The housing and clothing Margery provided for the infant Christ turn into tears as she gazes at

the dead body she once cared for and comforted. The act of caring for physical needs has thus changed into the act of sorrowing for the body's suffering state that is beyond any loving act of relief that Margery has the power to perform. However, the clothing and feeding Margery did for Christ's mother remain constant throughout the mystic's lifelong service to the Virgin. After Jesus' death, Margery "mad for our Lady a good cawdel and browt it hir to comfortyn hir" (Kempe 4631-32). The mystic's act is one of loving comfort performed in the soul aimed at soothing Mary's body.

The body and soul that toil and suffer together on earth will not only be rewarded in heaven, but will experience the joy of God's love while still in the world. However, the delight one experiences on earth will not only occur during times of tranquility, but will frequently arise in the midst of suffering. Therefore, true bliss is known by its very absence much like God can only be sought through the failure of all outward bodily senses. The *Cloud* author declares, "There may no swetnes ne no counforte falle to any man...that he ne is as fayne and as gladd to lacke it at Goddes wille" for the "meek steryng of love" for God "in oure wille" should be the contemplative's sole aim (1738-39, 1743). Stripped of all other comforts bodily and spiritually, one enters a "high state of abandonment to the love of God in which nothing else, good or evil, has importance" (Nieva 220). The contemplative's love for God must extend beyond "feelings" and expectations of physical and spiritual gifts. The anguish one feels from lack of comfort is only perceived as an absence by the outer physical man, for as the mystical author suggests, "Oure inner man clepith it Al; for of it he is wel lernid to kon skyle of alle thinges" (*Cloud* 2314-15). The inner spiritual man gains worldly and heavenly wisdom by delighting and taking part in the divine wisdom of God. The wisdom of the contemplative does not reside within the physical mind, but within the soul. The soul is consoled with the knowledge that all gifts are given or

taken away “after the disposicion and the ordynaunce of God, al after the profite and the needfulnes of diverse creatures” (*Cloud* 1755-56). God’s wisdom becomes His love. Any suffering an individual may endure should be cause for rejoicing, knowing that God withdraws His presence strictly for a soul’s benefit. The *Cloud* author maintains, “Yif thou grocche overmoche” when physical and spiritual consolations vanish you become graced with the knowledge that “thi love is not yit neither chaste ne parfite” (1748-50). However, those who do bear the disappearance of God’s gifts without complaining learn that they are “so stronge in spirit, that thei kun pike hem counforte inowgh withinne in theirre soules” that they do not need constant gifts (*Cloud* 1763-64). For the imperfect lovers and the strong souls alike, God aims to draw contemplatives closer to Him in love without them having any concern for the extra gifts He will freely provide for them out of necessity or generosity.

Margery’s resolve to care for her husband, John Kempe, during his illness despite the labor and suffering he imposes on her proves that Margery has a “naked intent” onto God that is not concerned for the absence of bodily or spiritual comforts. However, Margery’s love for God is expressed through caring for the bodily needs of another person. The holy woman admits she “had ful mech labowr wyth hym” since she toiled “waschyng and wryngyng and hir costage in fyryng and lettyd hir ful meche fro hir contemplacyon” (Kempe 4281, 4285-87). The mystic suffers bodily from the physical labor of washing and dressing her husband and spiritually from the lack of time she can spend in contemplation with God. However, Margery “distinguishes this activity from ordinary, unsanctified domestic work” and “makes the experience meaningful by spiritualizing it” (Salih 173). The dressing she previously performed for Christ and Mary in her soul, she now performs physically for her husband, once again uniting the actions of the body with those of the spirit. God tells the prayerful woman, “Thu schalt have as mech mede for to

kepyn hym...as yif thu wer in chirche to makyn thi preyers” (Kempe 4273-74). For Margery, the rewards of contemplative prayer are not achieved after she advances past the first two manners of living in which she lives strictly the active life or a combination of the active life with meditations. Serving John permits her to find happiness in God’s love without focusing solely on contemplative prayer. Margery’s service is her prayer. The mystic rejoices knowing that God has temporarily called her away from the consolations of prayer without hindering her spiritual progress. God reminds Margery, “Thu hast seyde many tymys that thu woldist fawyn kepyn me. I prey the now kepe hym for the lofe of me” (Kempe 4274-75). The *Cloud* author’s promise that those who joyfully suffer in body and spirit without complaint will gain wisdom is a lived reality for the English woman. Margery gains the knowledge that suffering can be a form of cheer and even its own reward. By requesting that Margery care for her husband, God grants the mystic her desire to care physically for Christ’s body as she has already promised she gladly would. Just as the *Cloud* author cited scripture to remind contemplatives that whoever lives in charity with the least among them does so as if to Christ’s own body, so too does Margery when she cares for the suffering John Kempe.

Finding joy in God’s love does not always have to be encountered through suffering or permit the contemplative to be privy to God’s wisdom. True bliss does not come solely from loving God, despite anguish or even being comforted with the knowledge that God will perfect the contemplative’s love for Him, and thus be a powerful assistant in one’s spiritual progress. Bliss also comes from the knowledge that one is loved by God and that His love may be experienced bodily and spiritually simultaneously. God’s gifts do not depend on the effort or the moral merit of the contemplative, but are “wholly dependent on the good will of God,” much like the invitation to engage in contemplative prayer (Will 64). The body which has been promised a

share in the spirit's rewards in heaven also shares in the soul's rewards while still on earth. The mystical writer states that God will sometime "enflame the body of a devoute servaunt of His here in this liif...risyng and spryngyng of habundaunce of goostly gladness, and of trewe devocion in the spirit" (*Cloud* 1691-92, 1695-96). The spirit which has been previously assisted by bodily and earthly images to evoke devotion in the lower tier of contemplative life now imparts a share of God's love to the body. Although the love the body receives from God originates within the soul, it is not experienced as an emotion. God's love is perceived by the body as an action as is evident by the *Cloud* author's use of the words "rising" and "springing." Both words imply that the body is not inflamed abruptly, but is kindled and nurtured by the purity of the love God has stirred in the soul and that the gift may be given "not onys or twies, bot paraventure right ofte, and as Him likith" (*Cloud* 1692-93). God's perpetual action of love is only comparable to what a "fadir doth with the childe, kyssyng and clippyng" while he "gamesumli pley with hym" (*Cloud* 1637-38). The inner joy the father and son experience playing together is expressed physically through kissing and embracing. Similarly, the abundance of gladness felt by God and the contemplative's soul from mutual love is expressed physically by God's willingness to inflame His beloved's body. The warmth present in the father's embrace is echoed in the warmth of the contemplative's inflamed body. "The flame that tortured with intolerable torment" when the contemplative felt the pains of hell while meditating on sin, now "ravishes with ecstatic joy" when given by God as a free gift that does not dwell on past sin (Johnston 169). However, the warmth which is received by the contemplative only appears to be mere sensation, but is truly an expression of loving kindness that only God can bestow.

The action of love is not unique to God, but may be performed by aspiring contemplatives through the work of “forgetting” all things that are not God Himself. The act of forgetting becomes a “determined act of will,” as only the free will to love God can remain once a contemplative liberates himself from thought and feeling (Rissanen 141). Although forgetting is a work of the soul involving the total renunciation of all bodily action and materiality, the *Cloud* author can only adequately explain such supernatural work through the use of worldly images. Also, forgetting can only occur once the physical mind has gained proper knowledge of the worldly objects it is called to deny. Therefore, the contemplative can only progress in his desire to love God alone, after engaging in an aspect of the active life. The contemplative writer states, “Travaile is al in tredyng doun of the mynde of alle the creatures that ever God maad, and in holding of hem under the cloude of forgetyng” (*Cloud* 1124-26). “Laboring,” “treading down” and “holding” recall physical action, but are actions occurring in the soul of the contemplative. By envisioning the contemplative as trampling all thoughts under the cloud of forgetting, one is left with the image of the contemplative’s physical living space and the work the contemplative must do to maintain that space. The “nowhere” the *Cloud* author insisted the contemplative dwell in is not imagined as a complete darkness, but as a place between the cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing. This space can only be occupied once the hopeful inhabitant forgets “alle the creatures that ever ben maad...alle the werks and the conditions of the same creatures” as well as achieves the ‘condicion of a perfite lover” whose nature it is to love God “more then himself” and “hate himself or that thing that he lovith” (*Cloud* 427-29, 1524-26). Recognizing the goodness of God’s diverse creations and despising himself for his sins proves the contemplative has spent time in the lower half of the contemplative life and has attained the

knowledge to recognize the goodness of the material world that prefigures the joys of heaven as well as the severity of his wretchedness.

The work the contemplative engages in to reside above the cloud of forgetting is insufficient for achieving full unity with God. Once the contemplative performs his work of “forgetting,” he must work on the act of loving God in his soul. However, such mystical action cannot be achieved by the contemplative alone, but must be initiated by God in the contemplative’s spirit. The *Cloud* author declares, “The steryng of love-that is the werk of only God” (1128). God’s work of moving the spirit mirrors the contemplative’s work of moving all earthly objects and concerns under the cloud of forgetting. Yet the movement involves “spaces.” However, the spaces are only described in physical terminology since all movement is occurring in the spirit. The spirit must be moved “within” the contemplative’s material body, the worldly creatures and works must be moved “beneath” the cloud of forgetting within the soul of the contemplative. Positioned above the cloud of forgetting and graced with the stirring of love in his spirit, the contemplative is able to perform a new holy work. The mystical writer defines prayer as “not elles bot a devoute entent directe unto God, for getyng of goodes and remowyng of yvelles” (*Cloud* 1421-22). The holy work of “forgetting” and “removing” that began in the lower level of contemplation is brought to completion in the higher realm of contemplation now that the contemplative has added a desire for nothing else but God to his prayer life.

The work of prayer is not mere thinking or feeling, but involves the act of “searching” and “seeing.” The act of “finding” God that the active accomplished by performing bodily works to benefit the suffering Christ disguised as members of the church and by participating in Christ’s Passion through meditating on images is now achieved by the contemplative in his spirit. The contemplative is reminded that “yif ever schalt thou fele Him or see Him...it behoveth

alweis be in this cloud and in this derknes...that is bitwix thee and thi God" (*Cloud* 294, 419). Therefore, the cloud is both defined in terms of physical space, much like the stirring of the contemplative's spirit and the work of forgetting. The color and position of the cloud of unknowing demand that the contemplative engage in a perpetual search. The cloud simultaneously obscures the contemplative's view of God with its darkness, while keeping the searcher at a distance by remaining a fixed entity "between" him and God. The search can never be fully completed in this earthly life because the cloud of unknowing defines and limits the space the contemplative can occupy, forcing the contemplative to remain forever "between" itself and the cloud of forgetting.

The contemplative's very inability to "find" God is what grants him discovery. The contemplative knows God is "enclosid in a cloude of unknowyng" (*Cloud* 1220). God is positioned "within" the cloud of unknowing, much like the spirit is stirred "within" the contemplative. The *Cloud* author trusts that "withinne schort tyme thou schalt be esid of thi travayle" if the contemplative persists in his longing to love the "nakid beyng of Him" that is God (*Cloud* 447, 1221). Although the cloud of unknowing blocks the contemplative's gaze, God lovingly provides him with rest for his labor as both the contemplative and God enjoy their momentary union. God is perceived as a naked being enrobed in the cloud of unknowing. The "nakedness" of God recalls the contemplative's "naked intent" onto nothing else but God. The mutual nakedness of God and the contemplative provides an image of profound intimacy between lovers. Only after the contemplative is "stripped naked" can he be "clothed in God" and offer himself "to the Father in union with Christ" (Johnston 248). Yet the lovers are imagined as physically distant from one another even when they are spiritually united. Since the entire "search" for God is being conducted in prayer and not by the body, the imagined physical space

the cloud of unknowing occupies does not represent the actual space between God and the contemplative. The spiritual “vision” the cloud of unknowing grants the contemplative closes the distance between God and His longing lover. The contemplative can “see” God within the cloud by the very uselessness of his bodily sight and senses as he peers at the cloud’s darkness.

The contemplative is rendered powerless in pursuing his lover through the vast cloud of unknowing, which both distances and blinds while simultaneously allowing for nearness and intimate vision. The cloud can only be stripped of its binaries, namely its function of dividing the lovers, by God’s decision to stir the contemplative’s soul to love. God’s stirring of love in a contemplative’s soul arms the contemplative with “sharp darts” of love that he would be incapable of possessing without being loved by God first. The mystical writer encourages the contemplative to “smyte that thicke cloude of unknowyng with a scharp darte of longing love” (*Cloud* 463-64). Earthly images of love accompany the contemplative’s resolve to be permanently bound to God. The contemplative is imaged as a soldier prepared to battle against an enemy who has captured his lover. The cloud which was previously described as a robe is now characterized as a prison. The prison does not so much keep the all-powerful God from leaving, as it keeps the contemplative from entering. Since “sharp darts” of love are the only weapon the contemplative is equipped with, the *Cloud* author demonstrates that the cloud of unknowing can only be infiltrated through love and not through any bodily means or intellectual reasoning. Like all disciplined soldiers, the mystical writer insists the contemplative use his weapon to “distroie[n] the ground and the rote of synne” (*Cloud* 683-84). The soldier does not merely fight against his human limitations to pierce the cloud, but indeed invades and overturns the territories of sin in his life, destroying his own human evil. Penetrating the imprisoning cloud and uprooting sin implies willful, self-inflicted violence. However, the act of violence is not

punishing, but a means to make the contemplative like his God and thus a worthy partner in their mutual love. Love therefore becomes the knowledge that replaces purely intellectual understanding of God (Chartrand-Burke 118). The contemplative learns what God is by discovering the sins that distance him from God's goodness. The mystical writer defines virtue as "not elles bot an ordeinde and a mesurid affeccion, plainly directe unto God for himself" (*Cloud* 702-03). Sacrificial love is the contemplative's virtue. Unlike the active individual who is inspired by God to the self-sacrificing love of performing charitable works for others, the contemplative must actively forfeit the human inclination to sin so that he may love God himself.

God's willingness to give the contemplative the "sharp darts" needed to pierce the cloud of unknowing further shows spiritual marriage can only occur once God proposes. "The loving intent has now a more quiet, restful character" as "the dart of love longing is no longer fired," but surrendered in loving expectation that God will soon make his proposal (Rissanen 142).

However, the contemplative must actively accept God's offer by diligently binding himself to God in love. Images of worldly work enforce the *Cloud* author's description of the labor of love entailed in solidifying the spiritual marriage beyond mere feelings. Still, all workings of love occur in the soul of the contemplative. The mystical writer instructs the contemplative to "knyt thee therfore to Him bi love and by beleve; and thean by vertewe of that knot thou schalt be comoun parcener with Him and with alle that by love so be knittyd unto Him" (*Cloud* 371-73).

The violent images of war that characterized the contemplative's struggle to destroy sin and focus on love dissolve into the domestic images of tying, knotting and knitting once the self is overcome and the cloud is penetrated to the extent it can be in this earthly life. The contemplative's work has not become simple, but has merely been transformed. The work is not burdensome in either body or spirit, but is a reward for the contemplative's previous toil. Within

the tranquility of domestic life, God and the contemplative rejoice in one another, as the contemplative continues to strengthen his commitment to the spiritual marriage by growing “more meek and loving to thi goostly spouse” (*Cloud* 256). Just as knotting joins two separate objects into one entity and knitting permits multiple strings of fabric to form a single garment, so too does the contemplative’s task of knotting and knitting result in the merging of the two spouses into one. Thus the contemplative does not forget his being under the cloud of forgetting, but actually finds his “true substance in the undifferentiated being which proceeds from God and is one being with God” (Rissanen 144). The contemplative is told to “knit the goostly knot of brennyng love bitwix thee and thi God” (*Cloud* 1649-50). The warmth that signified the intimacy of a father and son kissing and embracing is magnified to describe the more intimate relationship between husband and wife.

Margery’s spiritual marriage to God confirms the *Cloud* author’s demand that there be a mutual loving desire between God and the soul of His beloved before a complete wedding can occur. However, the mystic’s marriage to God is not burdened by the obstructive cloud of unknowing that threatens to divide the lovers if the contemplative does not perform the necessary work of “forgetting” and “searching.” For Margery, God’s marriage proposal is a free gift that does not require her to prove her worthiness. God tells the holy woman, “Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn the my prevyteys...for thu schalt wonyn with me wythowtyn ende” (Kempe 2004-06). The mystic’s marriage is not a quick glimpse of the eternal union that exists between God and man in heaven while still on earth as depicted by the contemplative writer. Margery’s marriage permits full unity while still on earth as shown by the language God uses to describe his wedding with the mystic. Margery is not only to be joined to God, but is to be one with God. Additionally, Margery’s marriage is “without end,” illustrating

that God does not make any division between His relationship with souls on earth and in heaven. The marriage that takes place on earth simply continues in the next world. Because Margery stares speechless and confused at God proposal, Jesus tells His father, “Have hir excused, for sche is yet but yong and not fully lernyd how sche schulde answeyn” (Kempe 2026-27). The mystic does not need to emerge as a victorious soldier who has just conquered the cloud of unknowing and destroyed her sinful nature. Her uncertainty is reminiscent of the *Cloud* author’s assertion that intellectual understanding will never permit a soul to encounter God. However, the mystic’s seeming enclosure in the cloud of unknowing is what causes Christ to intercede on her behalf. By asking His father to excuse Margery’s weakness, Christ proves that God does not propose marriage with the hope that his desired spouse will expend the necessary effort to love in return. God weds willing souls knowing His love will sustain the relationship, even when His spouse fails to love Him perfectly in return.

Margery experiences God’s active will to love in both body and spirit during their spiritual marriage. The *Cloud* author concluded that the body and spirit will share in each other’s rewards if they aid one another in the active life and contemplative life respectively. However, Margery’s physical and spiritual rewards are once again free gifts from God that do not hinge on her merit. God tells His soon-to-be spouse, “Ther may no man let me to lofe whom I wele and as mech as I wyl, for lofe, dowtyr, qwenchith synne” (Kempe 1119-20). After their wedding, the holy woman feels “the fyer of love brennyng in her brest” and is told by God that it “schal bren away alle thi synnes, for the fyer of lofe qwenchith alle synnes” (Kempe 2064, 2066-67). The mystic uses that same symbol of fire that the *Cloud* author used to describe God’s generous gifts and the contemplative’s effort to tie himself to God with love’s burning knot. However, the fire is never used to describe the English woman’s love for God; it only refers to God’s love for

Margery. The holy woman does not have to labor to conquer her sins by trampling them under the cloud of forgetting, as the contemplative writer previously described. God does the work of abolishing sin through the act of “quenching” and “burning” them in love’s fire. The fire of love thus has a dual function. The flame simultaneously recalls the violent image of the “sharp dart” God gives to His lovers, while evoking the warmth present in God’s relationship with the contemplative as previously described through the father/child and husband/wife relationship. Before God’s marriage to Margery, he comforts her in spirit alone by proclaiming His love for her in her soul. The brutality of the flame does not only actively damage sin, but also reveals the lawless nature of God’s will to love. God will not conform to man-made rules that govern who are most lovable. After God marries the mystic, the fire loses its destructive power and is described by God’s spouse as “wondir hoot and delectably and ryth comfortabyl” (Kempe 2061). The flame is now experienced as a bodily comfort in the mystic’s breast, exhibiting the “continuity between love and sensuality” (Lipton 147). The comfort that is experienced bodily also has a spiritual significance as demanded by the *Cloud* author. The spiritual meaning is that her sins have been extinguished and forgiven without Margery enduring any punishment.

Margery resorts to the same earthy terminology and images to describe her marriage to God that the *Cloud* author used to explain the work a contemplative performs in his spirit before he can pierce the cloud of unknowing. However, the images that characterize Margery’s marital experience are strictly intimate and domestic. Freed from the struggle of searching and battling, God and Margery can enjoy their unity in body and spirit without any concern for the persecution they previously faced from others. On their wedding day, God took Margery “be the hand in hir sowle” before all the angels and saints in heaven and vowed “I take the, Margery for my weddyd wife, for fayar, for fowelar, for richer, for powerar” (Kempe 2027, 2030-31). God

holds Margery's "hands" before their wedding guests as he promises to accompany her through the joys and tribulations of life. The vision of spiritual union that occurs in the mystic's soul recalls the marriage of an earthly husband and wife. By including hardships in His wedding vow, God affirms that spiritual marriage can be as binding and as important in this life as it is in everlasting life. Since there are no struggles in heaven there is no need for such a promise to be made after a soul reaches everlasting life. By describing heavenly union in earthly terms, the holy woman unites the temporal with the eternal world. For Margery, contemplation does not mean leaving the distracting world as the *Cloud* author requested, but embracing its holiness. Just as the English woman has previously seen God in all people when she cries tears of devotion, she now sees God in the human act of marriage.

God's full union with Margery while she is still in the world is evident by the physical symbols she uses to declare her acceptance of God's proposal. The spiritual woman crafted a ring for herself and engraved it with the words "Jhesus est amor meus" before tying it on a string to "bar at hir brest" (Kempe 1810-11, 1819-20). Margery wears the same wedding ring to profess her love for God that an earthly husband and wife would wear. However, she wears it close to her heart and not on her finger. By situating the ring near her heart, the mystic connects her expression of love for God to the burning fire of love that expresses God's love for her. Margery once again adorns her body in a manner that professes outwardly what she is experiencing inwardly. The fire of love which is felt privately as a comfortable sensation transcends mere "feelings" by becoming a loving act extended to all humanity, much like her white clothes. The holy woman's loss and rediscovery of her wedding ring inspires her hostess (who is possible guilty of hiding the ring) to say "bone Cristian, prey pur me" after witnessing Margery's loving determination to be reunited with the symbol of her and God's mutual love (Kempe 1830). The

mystic is empowered to show God's forgiveness to another sinner through the medium of the ring, just as God graciously destroyed Margery's sins and comforted her with the burning fire of love. The spiritual woman's will is one with God's will and her body is in harmony with her spirit since both her physical and spiritual being are in charity with others.

Spiritual marriage is not only described in physical terms, but is experienced in the soul as earthly spouses would experience bodily union. Margery uses sexually explicit language to describe the love that exists in her marriage to God. The spiritual woman "unites love and sex making sex a spiritualized expression of love" (Lipton 130). By comparing the soul's love to sexual performance, love is once more depicted as an action and not merely an emotion. The "act" of love is once again free from the labor and suffering described by the *Cloud* author and occasionally experienced by the mystic. God tells his beloved spouse, "For thu wost wel that I far lyke an husband that schulde weddyn a wife" and that they must "gon to bedde togedyr... and slepy in rest and pees" (Kempe 5074, 5076-77). Margery depicts God as initiating their sexual relationship, conforming to the *Cloud* author's assertion that God controls the human desire to bind with Him. The domestic images of tying, knotting and knitting that characterized the contemplative's marriage to God are replaced with another "specifically earthly image of marital sexuality imagined in the domestic space of the bed" (Lipton 144). The mystic can simply sleep peacefully knowing her beloved cannot be taken from her side. Margery's soul thus becomes the bridal chamber in which the intimate act takes place. God tells the holy woman, "I thank the for as many tymys as thu hast bathyd me in thi sowle at hom in thi chamber as thow I had be ther present in my manhood" (Kempe 5086-87). Spiritual marriage to God does not mean an end to performing works of charity. The washing and wringing Margery performed in her active life for John Kempe, she now performs in her spirit by "bathing" Christ directly, once

again uniting the actions of the body and the will of the spirit. The “nakedness” of Christ in his manhood recalls the “nakedness” of God hidden in the cloud of unknowing and the “naked” intent of the contemplative. However, God and Margery’s relationship is consummated with Margery physically touching Christ to bathe him and not merely through desire as illustrated by the *Cloud* author. Also, God extends the benefits of His intimacy with Margery to include His mother. God states, “I thank the for alle the tymys that thu hast herberwyd me and my blissyd modyr in thi bed” (Kempe 5089-90). The mystic is imagined as “lodging” Mary in her spirit echoing the notion of the soul as a bed chamber. The shifting position of the contemplative in relation to the cloud of unknowing as explained by the *Cloud* author becomes fixated by the holy woman. Margery, God, Mary, as well as anyone to whom the mystic extends her charity reside “within” the bed chamber of her soul.

Margery’s sexual relationship with God permits her to continue comforting Christ’s body. Yet the comfort she provides differs from the charity she performs “bathing” and “lodging” Christ and His mother. God tells his beloved, “I nedys be homly with the and lyn in thi bed wyth the” before quickly following with the request that she do nothing more than give her “hert for to lovyn” Him as His heart is “evyr redy to” love her (Kempe 2102, 2110-11). God demands that His spouse be so familiar with His love that she may adequately reflect it in her love for Him. God tells Margery, “Thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt” (Kempe 2106-08). The mystic’s restful slumber with God beside her turn into another “act” of love that takes place exclusively in the soul. The warmth of the kissing and embracing the holy woman performs in her soul recalls the heat of the burning fire of love that God used to express his love for the English woman physically. Margery’s kissing is confined to God’s “mouth,” “head,” and “feet.”

By selecting the body parts His lover is allowed to kiss, God establishes the nature of His marriage to Margery. Allowing the mystic to kiss His “mouth” grants Margery the authority to reciprocate her love for God, at the precise moment that God shows His love by kissing her. Although Margery is physically expressing her love for Christ’s body, “the body is not always the final answer,” but is actually “a sign of something else” (Salih 168). The kisses permit a “movement toward less embodied forms of piety,” since the act of kissing merely reveals the purity of her love for God in her soul (Salih 168). The spiritual woman does not have to languish in desire as the *Cloud* author described, but can carry out her will to love through the kiss. However, kissing God’s “head” and “feet” leave the act of love to be carried out by Margery exclusively. The “head” and “feet” of Christ are closely associated with the suffering of the crucifixion. The body parts that suffer for Christ’s love for humanity are consoled and venerated through the mystic’s gentle kisses. Once again Margery performs her work of charity to Christ’s body directly.

The *Cloud* author views the interplay between the active and contemplative life as a testimony to the codependence of the body and soul in forming a relationship with God and one’s fellow man. To reach unity with God through spiritual marriage, the contemplative must engage in some aspect of the active life before renouncing the material world to devote himself to loving God alone. The active life is present in meditation through the use of images in the lower part of contemplative life and through the act of searching and binding in the higher part of contemplation. The worldly images of human sin, Christ’s Passion and the joys of heaven not only evoke the emotions of contrition, compassion and devotion within the soul, but also enable the contemplative to perform works of charity within his soul to advance the spiritual welfare of others. Suffering is the labor of the soul which endures the rebuke of unknowing actives who

condemn the contemplative life because they cannot perceive the relationship contemplatives have with God or the benefits of that unity for all humanity. The spiritual suffering of the contemplative recalls the physical suffering body of Christ, joining the work of the body with the toil of the spirit. The labor of the body, which is subjugated to the spirit's charitable desire, shares in the soul's rewards both during earthly life and in eternal life for its resolve to make the spirit's will known. The rewards the contemplatives receive are gifts God gives to His beloveds as a manifestation of His love for them that do not depend on their spiritual progress, only their desire to encounter God.

The position of the contemplative in relation to the cloud of forgetting and the cloud of unknowing reveals the nature of the contemplative's work of prayer and desire. "Above" the cloud of forgetting and "under" the cloud of unknowing is the space in which the contemplative expresses his love longing for God by diligently burying all temporal creations beneath the cloud of forgetting and focusing solely on penetrating the cloud of unknowing in which God dwells. The images used to describe the desire God stirs in the contemplative so that he may pursue Him through the cloud of unknowing unmask the intimacy that takes place among the two lovers within the space between the two clouds. The "naked" intent the contemplative gives to loving God is matched by the "naked" being of God Himself who resides "within" the cloud of unknowing waiting to be discovered by His beloved. The contemplative uses the "sharp darts" of love given to him by God to renounce any temptation to use intellectual reasoning or return to any previous sinful habits that may hinder the two lovers' impending spiritual marriage. Once the contemplative infiltrates the cloud of unknowing, he continues to perform the work of strengthening his relationship with God by "tying," "knotting" and "knitting" himself to God in

love. The act of binding is the fulfillment of the contemplative's desire to unite with God in marriage.

Margery Kempe's spiritual marriage to God is not the culmination of the effort she expends in bodily works of charity or on meditations of Christ's Passion. All of the mystic's bodily and spiritual works are the result of the marriage that already exists between God and Margery's soul. The complete husband/wife relationship that God and the holy woman enjoy while she is still living her earthly life permits Margery to see God in all people and in all human actions, allowing the active and contemplative life to coexist without valuing one way of life over the other. The English woman's sorrow for her spouse's Passion inspires her to weep openly at the sight of wounded or beaten men and children with the hope that her tears will fill the hearts of sinful humanity with contrition and compassion. The mystic's bodily performance of the crucifixion, her resolve to wear white clothes despite the slander of the very people she is attempting to lead to God and her service to John Kempe permit her to represent her body as the vehicle through which God cares for the physical and spiritual needs of all people. However, Margery's spiritual works care for the bodily needs of Christ and the holy family. Active works of charity are not confined to benefiting others' bodily needs during earthly life only, nor are spiritual works limited to aiding in the salvation of souls. Margery forges a permanent unity between the body and soul by showing the active and contemplative life can be lived simultaneously to benefit both the physical and material aspects of the human person.

The language and images Margery uses to describe her spiritual marriage to God implicates her body's involvement. The mystic depicts herself as an earthly wife enjoying her husband's love in body and spirit both in the temporal world and in eternal life. The burning fire of love that the holy woman feels as a bodily comfort also heals her soul by destroying her sins.

Any uncertainty Margery feels when initially receiving God's marriage proposal rapidly dissolves into joy as she is married before the entire host of heaven, just as an earthly wife would marry her husband before others. The mystic's wedding ring and the sexual language she uses to describe her relationship with God after the wedding shows her marriage is a continuation of the loving care she has previously shown for God and her fellow man, both in her bodily actions and in her soul. Unlike Margery's bodily actions which frequently resulted in persecution, her spiritual actions, done for the bodily comfort of her spouse, give her peace and security knowing she can never be separated from Him. Margery "bathing," "laying" and "kissing" her husband within the bed chamber of her soul proves that the holy woman is joined to God in marriage in both body and spirit and that such union is only made manifest through a commitment to love God alone by living the active and contemplative life simultaneously.

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