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"Delicious Matyr":
Feminine Courtesy in Middle English Devotional Literature for Women

Anne Clark Bartlett

Near the beginning of her *Book*, Margery Kempe describes the violent trauma that accompanies the birth of her first child. She reports becoming ill during her pregnancy, experiencing a difficult labor, and then suffering what many have suggested was a severe postpartum depression. She claws her body with her fingernails, reviles her husband and friends, and beholds terrifying visions of demons and hellfire. One day, however, while she is alone, an incident occurs which restores her to emotional and physical health: "[Christ] appeared to this creature which had forsaken him, in the likeness of a man, the most seemly, most beautiful, & most amiable that ever could be seen, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blissful an expression that her spirits rose, and he said to her: "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, when I remained faithful?"¹ After uttering these words, her visitor ascends slowly, gracefully, majestically, and disappears into the parted heavens. After this encounter, Kempe is able to speak, eat, and drink; and she is released from her restraints. Although she claims in hindsight that at this point "she did not understand the power of our Lord,"² which reveals the non-allegorical nature of her initial understanding of this incident, the sudden appearance of a handsome and courtly Christ does function redemptively for Kempe. As the representative of an omnipotent and invisible Father, the courteous son re-assimilates her into the cultural economy of language, desire, and subjectivity from which her traumatic childbirth and subsequent madness had exiled her.³ She returns once more to her daily activities: "she knew the friends and acquaintances who came to her, and afterwards ... did all of her daily occupations."⁴

Readers of courtly literature will readily recognize the appearance, manner, and dress of a courtly hero in this occurrence; they may also find familiar the structure and logic of the incident itself. Such episodes of visitation, disguise and recognition, and rescue appear frequently in Middle English romances.⁵ Yet many modern readers of Margery Kempe exhibit considerable skepticism about her evident appreciation for courtesy, preferring to isolate in her *Book* the discursive strains of religion and romance. Similarly, virtually all extant analyses of devotional literature for women focus only on the figural or doctrinal significance of their use of courtesy and romance conventions. Rosemary Woolf and Elizabeth Robertson have argued that the "Christ as courtly wooer" motif functions allegorically, teaching women readers to redirect their amorous desires,

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and to prefer spiritual marriage to Christ over physical union with a knight.⁶

The conflation of these discursive registers in Middle English devotional literature is the central problem that this essay examines. I will argue that the literary and social conventions of courtesy--which include stock episodes and characterizations from the romance genre, models of gender relations from the literature of courtly love, and conventional notions of feminine decorum deriving from conduct manuals--provide a compensatory and sometimes conflicting counter-discourse alongside the traditional ascetic didacticism circulating in devotional texts for women and within medieval culture in general.⁷ This convergence of devotional and courtly discourses is not simply a matter of theological truths offered up in a pleasing allegory. The pleasure of the literal sense of these courtly conventions offers to women a heuristic fantasy of erotic love and aristocratic power. In the context of a religious ideology that sought to subdue what it viewed as the sinful tendencies of Woman, the tropes of feminine courtesy validate (though ambivalently, to be sure) female beauty, power, and agency.⁸ This essay treats three major aspects of courtly discourse found in devotional literature: 1) courteous feminine ideals, 2) representations of Christ as a courtly lover, and 3) a paradoxical tendency to critique the very conventions of courtesy that these texts exploit.⁹

Middle English devotional treatises written for women represent several aspects of courteous femininity, including humility, chastity, beauty, patience, meekness, and domesticity.¹⁰ For example, Richard Rolle's *The Commandment* reminds its female audience that as the lovers of this Christ, they must "be courteous and meek to all men ... Decorate

your soul beautifully, and erect in it a tower of love dedicated to God's son For his joy is that you be attractive and lovely in his eyes" [11](#) This address to female readers clearly shares the conventions of femininity found in medieval courtesy books. Although Rolle glosses this advice by stating that it is the reader's spiritual rather than physical beauty that arouses Christ's desire for her, his use of the ornate language of courtesy presents a clear alternative to the didactic conventions of traditional ascetic piety.

Likewise, many devotional treatises conspicuously present the Virgin Mary or female saints as courteous personages. For instance, *Pore Caitif* calls "the mirror of maidens," and urges female readers to "look therein." [12](#) The text elaborates: "she was never gluttonous, nor a wine-drinker, a flirtatious woman, a game-player, a joker, nor a dancer and singer." [13](#) Similarly, Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jhesu Christ* holds up the Virgin Mary as a model of courteous conduct for female readers. [14](#) Like courtly romance heroines, Mary is physically attractive (Joseph "coveted her shape and her beauty"), [15](#) and she also possesses all of the feminine virtues found in courtesy manuals, including meekness, silence, and humility. Love urges his readers to "learn from her example." [16](#) Osborn Bokenham's fifteenth-century hagiographic narratives also use these courteous ideals of feminine conduct. For example, Saint Margaret comes from a noble (though pagan) family, and she is virtuous and chaste,

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refusing to marry out of devotion to God. Nevertheless, she is so attractive that even an evil prefect, who cannot possibly appreciate her saintlier virtues, falls in love with her at first sight (this is, of course, itself a courtly convention):

And when he saw her lily-white forehead,
Her arched black eyebrows, and her gray eyes,
Her cheery cheeks, her well-proportioned nose,
Her red lips, and her cleft chin that shone
Like well-polished marble,
This beauty took him by such surprise,
That he barely knew where he was. [17](#)

After Margaret refuses his affections, she is gruesomely tortured, but manages to remain courteously deferential throughout the entire ordeal, praying at her death for the forgiveness of her persecutors and for deliverance for all "oppressed by pain or grief," particularly women in childbirth. [18](#) To the end, her humility, charity, and even her physical appearance epitomize the medieval ideal of feminine courtesy.

Devotional texts also incorporate the convention of the dominant lady developed in courtly literature. For example, a Middle English translation of Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Institutione Inclusarum* describes Christ as a handsome paramour whom the reader has selected: "Behold now the spouse and friend you have chosen. Indeed, he is handsomer in appearance than anyone every born, fairer than the sun, surpassing without measure the beauty of the stars. His breath is sweeter than any honey, and his lineage surpasses honey and all sweetness." [19](#) Similarly, the *Ancrene Riwe* addresses its audience with remarkable directness, urging its female readers to, "stretch out your love to Jesus Christ. You have won him! Touch him with as much love as you sometimes feel for a man. He is yours to do with all that you will So exceedingly does Christ love you that he makes [you] His equal. I dare to say even more--He makes [you] His sovereign and does all [you] command, as if from necessity." [20](#) Rather than castigating Woman as the lascivious and depraved descendant of Eve, the courtly version of the gospel seeks to arouse desire, hailing the female reader as one whom Christ seeks out, actively and humbly, as a lover. This text positions female readers as active and desiring subjects, rather than passive objects of male desire. Christ becomes the acquiescent partner, the gentle yet sensual knight who can be won by an aggressively eligible courtly female reader.

Other devotional texts offer readers similarly active, even masculine, roles within the ideology of courtesy, which overturn the conventional medieval religious hierarchy of God, man, and woman. The *Pore Caitif*, for example, holds up Saint Katherine as an example of virtuous courtly conduct for its female readers; it reminds its audience that "she was not afraid, and took up the strife of knighthood, on behalf of the Lord." [21](#) Similarly, *The xii frutes of the holy goost* advises its female readers that the struggle against evil is like a tournament. This text likens its audience to "a famous and worthy knight who

would be glad to prove his knighthood against a worthy opponent.²² Later, the treatise reminds its audience that "a human life on earth is a knighthood. We must therefore fight valiantly, sister."²³

At the same time, even where the medieval discourse of feminine courtesy might prove most attractive to women, its conventions would ultimately reinforce the misogyny pervasive in much medieval religious discourse.²⁴ Like the romance plots that endow women largely with passive or peripheral roles, the tropes of feminine courtesy in devotional texts cultivate a highly gendered spirituality, in which women readers are instructed to submit silently to men as well as to God. As the representative of a divinely-authorized patriarchal social order, the courtly Christ validates female desire only in order to contain it, direct it toward sanctioned imaginative targets, and construct it as reactive, responsive not only to the call of the Father/Son, but also to the human (male) author. As R. Howard Bloch has recently argued, "Courtliness is a much more effective tool than even misogyny for the possession and repossession of women."²⁵

Illustrating this double submission is the quintessential courtesy trope in devotional literature: the parable of Christ as a distant king, seeking the female reader's love through his letters. *The Tretyse of Love*, for example, asserts, "Right dear beloved friend in God, now take heed carefully and with great devotion to the following story ... wherein you shall find '*delicious matyr*,' for Jesus the king of glory has done for your soul, which is his love, as a faraway king does, who loves a distant lady, and sends his messengers before him with letters of love²⁶ This courteous version, a romance gospel, is undoubtedly designed for what a male author believes are the tastes and capacities of a female audience. The woman reader is figured as a beautiful and reticent lady, the passive love object who is forced to rely on the messengers (and the author) as intermediaries and interpreters of the heavenly message. Even when the author discards this courteous conceit, he continues to position readers as submissive and dependent, consistently--even intrusively--guiding them through the minute details of the narrative, questioning them on their reactions, and supplying what he feels are appropriate responses to the events that he recounts. Richard Rolle's *Ego Dormio* supplies a rather unusual version of this general theme (although a scenario familiar to readers of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*). He informs his readership that "because I love you, I woo you, so that I might have you as I wish, not for myself, but for my lord. I will become his agent, to bring you to his bed²⁷ In assenting to and internalizing this metaphor, the female reader is invited to play a doubly inactive role, envisioning herself as the target of the authorial seducer's attentions as well as those of the Lover-Knight.²⁸

Taken to its logical extreme, this motif, what I call "salvation through seduction," reveals the misogynistic assumption that women are incapable of freely assenting to the invitation of grace that stands at the heart of Christian theology. That the metaphor of Christ the wooer of the soul can easily become Christ the abductor is illustrated by the *Ancrene Riwe*'s version of the amorous king parable. As in courtly seductions in general, the disdainful female partner is not expected to acquiesce readily to the lover's advances, necessitating a

flirtatious negotiation of demands, pursuits, promises, and the hope of eventual submission. In devotional texts, though, the lady's coldness functions as a negative example for the reader's response to the Lover Knight's devotion and deeds. The narrative seeks to move female audiences to pity and indignation; it offers no plausible explanation for the lady's reluctance (unlike pursued courtly heroines, she is not protecting her chastity against a pagan suitor). In effect, she becomes a straw target upon whom the female audience can project its doubt and reticence. Having externalized and vanquished their own sense of ambivalence and unworthiness, they can then return to contemplating the heavenly Lover, purified and absolved from the lack of desire that the treatise defines as sinful.

The assumptions of the author about women, spirituality, and sex are clarified at the close of the parable, in which the Lover Christ vehemently addresses the lady (whose point of view-significantly-has merged with that of the reader). The exclamation of the *Ancrene Riwe*'s courtly Christ is well worth quoting at length:

'Your love,' He says, 'can be given freely, or it can be sold, or it can be ravished from you and taken by force. If it is to be given, where can you better bestow it than on Me? Am I not fairer than any other? Am I not the richest of kings? Am I not of the noblest of kindred? Am I not the wisest of those who have riches? Am I not the most gracious among men? ... Set a price on your love. You will not name so much that I will not give more.

Would you have castles, kingdoms? Would you have the whole world in your power? I will provide more for you, make you the queen of the kingdom of heaven.... [But] If you are so very obstinate, and so out of your mind, that for fear of loss you refuse such gain, and with it every kind of happiness, then see! I hold a hostile sword here over your head to divide life and soul, to plunge both of them into the fire of hell, to be whores to the devil in shame and sorrow, world without end! Answer me now and protect yourself against Me if you can, or give Me your love that I long for so much...."[29](#)

This representation of the Lover Christ resembles the boasting heroes of the *chanson du geste* or epic more than it does the humble but courageous knights of courtly romance and the suffering savior of passion narrative. Yet it is consistent with conventional medieval assumptions about female sexuality, especially the notion that women always desire sex, and that male compulsion to surrender merely bends the female will that is always already compliant.[30](#) When Christ boasts extravagantly and then threatens the reticent lady with his sword, he illustrates this text's foundational logic that women must be seduced--whether to bed or to the gospel--by an appeal either to their physical appetites, fears, or to their materialistic desires. Then, if the woman in question still refuses, she must be brought into conformity with male objectives and patriarchal social structures through the use of physical or psychic force.

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Courtesy thus conscripts female readers into a divinely ordained cultural system of desire, submission, and containment.

Although the discourses of courtesy and asceticism appear together in medieval devotional texts, their cohabitation is frequently less than harmonious. As the *Ancrene Riwe* explains, "courtesy in an anchoress has sometimes become a thing harmful to herself."[31](#) Consequently, devotional treatises that incorporate the conventions of courtliness also regularly advise women to strip them away in order to expose what they label a very unromantic, even bestial female essence. Richard Rolle's *The Conwundment* urges its female readers to renounce their desires for courtly dress and social status:

If you truly seek him, you must proceed in the way of poverty, and not of riches... How can you who are just a servant, but who are shamefully dressed in many luxurious garments, follow your spouse and lord, who is clad only in a tunic? You trail more fabric behind yourself than he had covering his entire body![32](#)

The Ancrene Riwe's advice on confession delivers a similar critique of courtly female speech: "confession must be naked, and stripped of all courteous adornment. The words should match the deeds... For example, when a woman says 'sir, I have had a lover'... it is not naked confession. You should say plainly: "sir, god's mercy, I am a foul stud mare, a stinking whore"[33](#) Evidently, while courtesy can constitute an appropriate vehicle for God (as Lover Knight) to reveal himself to women and for men to convey moral instruction to female readers, it does not provide an appropriate medium for women to reveal themselves to God or to priests. Even the *Ancrene Riwe's* expected audience of anchoresses--portrayed elsewhere as virtuous and chaste--are urged to begin a confession with the grotesquely misogynistic (and curiously metaphorical) "unadorned" assertion: "I am a foul stud mare, a stinking whore." In this way, the discourse of feminine courtesy in devotional texts resembles medieval characterizations of women themselves, who are often figured in theological and popular treatises as deceptive, sensual, artificial, supplementary. Ultimately, the inherent distrust with which religious authors regarded courtly discourse makes its pervasiveness in devotional texts for women (whom they obviously viewed with similar suspicion) doubly intriguing.

Consequently, women's devotional literature must be seen as the site of multiple, and sometimes conflicting social and literary meanings and functions. While identification with certain courtly scenes and characterizations may have had an empowering effect on women readers, the internalization of other aspects of feminine courtesy may have disabled readers, rendering them passive and subservient toward men, as well as toward God. If courtly discourse validates an inversion of the conventional medieval gender hierarchy under some circumstances, it simultaneously reinforces the silence and powerlessness of women.

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The function of courtesy also varies in specific historical contexts. Bloch concludes that in late twelfth-century France, the courtly romance represents "above all, a usurping reappropriation of Woman at the moment she became

capable of appropriating what had traditionally constituted masculine modes of wealth.³⁴ Yet, as Kempe's *Book* illustrates, in late medieval England, the discourse of feminine courtesy in devotional texts could exert significant appeal and offer a model of conduct that could empower, as well as disenfranchise, women readers. During this period of economic and social change, these texts may well have encouraged a temporary, vicarious resolution of cultural anxieties about gender roles, inheritance practices, and women's work;³⁵ they also allowed an initiation into a feminine ideal revered by men and marked traditionally as the domain of the aristocracy.

In fact, the proliferation of these courtly devotional texts during the late Middle Ages indicates that male authors sought to accommodate--rather than to resist--the desires of female readers and patrons. The discursive hybrids that I have discussed here must have offered to women an opportunity to satisfy both their taste for the literature of courtesy and their need for religious instruction, all while evading the commonplace clerical critique of "frivolous" romance reading. Moreover, these treatises contrast starkly with the misogynistic tirades contained in earlier devotional writing (for example the twelfth-century Latin *De institutionibus inclusarum*), addressed to women, but very likely actually intended for men.³⁶ In the Middle English texts, representations of women begin to function as signs designed to be circulated among female readers, rather than solely as feminine figures intended to be exchanged between men in the absence of women.³⁷ In conjunction with the multiple gender roles available for female audiences in Middle English texts and society, then, the conventions of courtesy in devotional literature simultaneously reflect, perpetuate, and contain larger conflicts in late medieval English culture about women's power, position, and essence.

Notes

1. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, Early English Text Society o.s. 212 (London, 1940), 8. I have translated the passage very literally, seeking to preserve the courtliness of the Middle English. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent translations are also my own.
2. *Book*, 9.
3. Kempe's mysticism has also been seen as a mode of resistance to this cultural economy. See Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: the Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (New York, 1986), 34-57; and Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the* (Philadelphia, 1991).
4. *Book*, 8-9.
5. For a discussion of these conventions, see Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, 1978), 173-4; and Laura Hubbard, *Mediaeval Romance in England*, (New Yor, 1960). Some notable "miraculous visitations" occur in *Sir Degaré* lines 87 ff., *Generides*, lines 57 ff., and *Partonope of Blois*, lines 1181 ff.
6. Rosemary Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Middle English Literature," *Review of English Studies* n.s. 13 (1962), 1-16, and Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville, 1990), 121.
7. Devotional texts certainly constituted the largest category of books by owned women in the Middle Ages. See Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Woman Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," *Signs* 7 (1982), 742; Hilary Carey, "Devout Literate Lay People and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England," *Journal of Religious History* 14 (1987), 361-81; and Ann Hutchison, "Devotional Reading in the Monastery and the Late Medieval Household," in *De Cella in Saeculum: Religious and Secular Life in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael Sargent (Cambridge, 1989), 215-28.
8. Recent cultural studies show how popular romances also function compensatorily (though ambivalently) for modern women readers. See Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 212; and Leslie Rabine, *Reading the Romance Heroine* (Ann Arbor, 1985).
9. For a fuller treatment of these issues, see my "'Lettyrs of Love': Discourses of Gender and Genre in Middle English Devotional Literature for Women" (PhD Diss. University of Iowa, 1993).
10. For applications of these ideals to female conduct, see Thomas Wright, ed., *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, EETS o.s. 33 (London, 1868), especially, pp. 20, 25-6, 98, 136, and 147.

11. Hope Emily Allen, ed., *The English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole* (Oxford, 1963), 79.
12. Sister Mary Teresa Brady, ed. *The Pore Caitif - Edited from MS Harley 2336 with Introduction and Notes* (PhD Diss., Fordham University, 1954), 176.
13. Brady, *Pore Caitif*, 177.
14. On the exemplary function of courtesy in Middle English drama, see Kathleen Ashley, "Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on the Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York, 1987), 25-38.
15. Nicholas Love, *The Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, ed. James Hogg and Lawrence W. Powell. 2 vols. (Salzburg, 1989), I, 24.
16. Hogg and Powell, *Mirroure*, I, 27.
17. Mary Sargeantson, ed., *Legendys of Hooly Wummen by Osbern Bokenham*, EETS o.s. 206 (London, 1938), 12.
18. Sargeantson, *Legendys*, 23.
19. *Aelred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS 287 (London, 1984), 26.
20. M. B. Salu, trans. *Ancrene Riwe* (Notre Dame, 1955), 180.
21. Brady, *Pore Caitif*, 195.
22. J. J. Vaissier, ed., *The Tree and the xii frutes of the holy goost* (Groningen, 1960), 81.
23. Vaissier, *The xii frutes*, 99.
24. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991); and Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York, 1990).
25. Bloch, 196.
26. John H. Fisher, ed., *The Tretyse of Love*, EETS o.s. 223 (London, 1951), 9.
27. Allen, *The English Writings of Richard Rolle*, 61.
28. Nicholas Watson's recent study, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge, 1991), also relates this conceit to *Troilus and Criseyde*, but reads it as an index of Rolle's close spiritual friendships with women and his development of an authorial identity. See esp. 230-33.
29. Salu, *Ancrene Riwe*, 176-77.
30. This notion originates in both scientific and theological discourse, as well as in texts which offer to harmonize the doctrines of the body and the soul. Soranus' *Gynecology* explains the fact that during rape "the emotion of sexual appetite exist[s] in [women] too, but [is] obscured by mental resolve." I.III.37, trans., Owsei Temkin (Baltimore, 1956), 36. Similarly,

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Augustine argues that rape "does not destroy a purity which has been maintained by the utmost resolution, still it does engender a sense of shame, because it may be believed that an act, which perhaps could not have taken place without some physical pleasure, was accompanied by a consent of the mind." *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1972), 26. See also Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, "The Heroics of Virginité: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, 1986), 29-72.

31. Salu, *Ancrene Riwe*, 30.
32. Allen, *The English Writings*, 125 and 130.
33. Salu, *Ancrene Riwe*, 140-41.
34. Bloch, 196.
35. For a useful summary of economic and social changes in the late Middle Ages, see Christopher Dwyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989). On the relationships between these fluctuations and Middle English literature, see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1989), and Barbara Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* (Minneapolis, 1992).
36. On this category of literature, see Barbara Newman's superb essay, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century," *Traditio* 45 (1989-90), 111-46.
37. On the social function of women as tokens of exchange between men, see Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York, 1975), 157-210.