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### Medieval Memes, Misericords, and Margery Kempe

The article interprets medieval mercy seats (misericords) as collections of memes (memplexes), rooted in pre-modern oral culture, allowing for a cognitive shortcut in an otherwise long and obscure discussion of the origins of many misericords' exact iconography. It then proceeds to examine the use of such memes in 'The Book of Margery Kempe' (c. 1438) as a means for economic storytelling and self-fashioning.

*Keywords:* animals; fools; Margery Kempe; memetics; misericords; scatology; sexual imagery; storytelling

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### Мемы, мизерикорды и Марджери Кемп

Предметом статьи являются средневековые резные украшения изначной части церковных сидений в алтарной части храма, предназначенных для духовенства и певчих (мизерикорды), чья логика совместного появления — если она вообще подразумевалась — часто ускользает от современных исследователей. Статья предлагает рассматривать их как комплексы мемов (мемплексы), уходящие своими корнями в устную культуру Средневековья и раннего Нового времени. Такой подход позволяет избежать многословных и зачастую безуспешных попыток установить точное происхождение или значение иконографии подобных изображений. Статья использует пример «Книги Марджери Кемп» (ок. 1438 г.), первой духовной «автобиографии» на английском языке, в качестве иллюстрации того, как позднесредневековая рассказчица применяет комплексы современных ей мемов, знакомых, в частности, по мизерикордам, для создания определенного образа себя без необходимости пространных описаний.

*Ключевые слова:* животные; Марджери Кемп; меметика; мизерикорды; непристойное; сторителлинг; сюжетность; туалетный юмор; шуты

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# Medieval Memes, Misericords, and Margery Kempe



## Introduction

Against the wall in a dark corner of St Gregory's Pottergate, Norwich, once a bustling parish church with some of the finest East Anglian wall paintings, now a rather tired-looking antiques centre, stand late medieval carved oaken stalls. Their four seats are usually up, displaying elaborate carvings of two angels, a winged lion... and a squatting man, hands on his knees, with a characteristic strained expression on his bearded face. What could this possibly mean? His iconographic younger brother from St Mary's, Fairford, reveals somewhat more as to their activity: if one is willing to brave dust and cobwebs and stick their head right under the carving, they can feast their eyes on the man's genitals and a wavy turd between the man's feet, intricately carved by a fifteenth-century carpenter.



Figs 1–2. Squatting man, St Gregory's, Norwich. Source: [https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Norwich\\_St\\_Gregory/Norwich%20St.%20Gregory%202.3.jpg](https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Norwich_St_Gregory/Norwich%20St.%20Gregory%202.3.jpg); Defecating man, St Mary's, Fairford. Both 15<sup>th</sup> c. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/paulodykes/8814262718/>, photo by Paul Dykes.

The humour capitalising on ‘the lower body stratum,’ to borrow Bakhtin’s phrase, never gets old and seems to be an integral part of human development, if my children and their friends are anything to go by. Anyone who read Rabelais would never look at a gosling without thinking of Book I, chapter 13 of his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, to reference the topic of this journal issue. Why, however, a scatological image is found where an eschatological one would be expected, is still a subject for debate. Since the mercy-seats, which in their upright position provided a ledge for the relief of the ill or infirm ecclesiastics, were there to support the clerical backsides during long services, it would have been natural *not* to encounter godly subjects depicted on these misericords, but that is not the case. Even though the interest in the carved seats of medieval English choir stalls has not waned since the first scholarly attempt to analyse them was published in the early twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> there is still less interpretative work done on church carvings in general and misericords in particular, compared to their ideological cousins, medieval manuscript marginalia. Michael Camille, in his seminal study of marginalia, allows misericords only four pages and, while praising their liveliness, sees them as totally derivative.<sup>2</sup> One of the main reasons for such bias is that carvings are very rarely accompanied by text which would aid further contextualisation, or at least suggest a more precise dating and localisation through palaeographic evidence.

### Memetics and orality

Some rare textual evidence appearing on misericords suggests that much of their subject matter originated in oral tradition, such as two seats from St Mary’s, Whalley (Lanc.), inscribed with proverbs, one in French and one in English.<sup>3</sup> The context of the vast majority of other, uninscribed carvings, have now been lost or obscured, as medieval culture is known to us in a fragmentary and somewhat fossilised form, not as a lived experience.<sup>4</sup> I therefore propose to treat misericords as examples of medieval memes, that is as a cultural equivalent of genes, a meme being ‘a cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent

1. Bond F. *Wood Carvings in English Churches. Pt. 1: Misericords*. London, 1910.

2. Camille M. *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. London, 1992. P. 93–97.

3. URL: [http://www.misericords.co.uk/whalley\\_des.html](http://www.misericords.co.uk/whalley_des.html), n6 and s8 (last accessed on 28.05.2022).

4. For a broader discussion see *The Profane Arts: Norms and Transgressions* / ed. N.R. Kline and P. Hardwick. Turnhout, 2016.

persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means', usually through a self-reinforcing positive feedback effect, selected against others in the meme-pool.<sup>5</sup> Memes are rooted in our neurologically wired ability to imitate, and there are two main pathways for their transmission: 'copy the instructions' and 'copy the product' (roughly corresponding to genotypes and phenotypes in biology).<sup>6</sup> This also accounts for the transmedial nature of medieval memes, current in visual and performing arts as well as texts and general communication. This approach allows for a cognitive shortcut in an otherwise long and obscure discussion of the origins of many misericords' exact iconography.<sup>7</sup> Memes current in the pre-digital age were usually not exact, but they did not have to be digital to be hi-fidelity, as we know from the mostly uniform sacred texts, copied for centuries by hand. I therefore find it productive to think about misericords as memes and their collections (stalls) as complex memes, that is memplexes, akin to geneplexes, groups of genes of an individual organism.

Despite some criticism of the usefulness and applicability of the meme concept,<sup>8</sup> memetic theory has already been consistently and quite successfully used to discuss tenth-century material from England by Michael Drout in his 2006 monograph,<sup>9</sup> which traces the influence of the Benedictine Reform on both lay practices as expressed in wills and on examples of Old English 'wisdom' texts. To Drout, as to a number of other theorists whose thinking he employs, memetic theory provides a verifiable definition of tradition and culture, which he views as 'a sort of eco-system of competing and cooperating memes exquisitely adapted to that culture' and 'an unbroken train of identical, non-instinctual behaviors that have been invariably repeated after the same recurring antecedent conditions'.<sup>10</sup> He later develops this approach in his more recent monograph, in which he combines evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, and the use of computer-aided statistical analysis of vocabulary to suggest that the aesthetic success of certain cultural forms ensures their partial or complete replication, and the recognizable patterns then create positive feedback by enhancing pleasure and, thus, the 'survival fitness' of these memes.<sup>11</sup> Without trying to produce an all-encompassing

5. «meme, n.» Oxford English Dictionary Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/239909](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/239909) (last accessed on 28.05.2022).

6. Blackmore S. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford, 1999. P. 59–66.

7. E.g. Hardwick P. *English Medieval Misericords: The Margins of Meaning*. Woodbridge, 2013. For other examples of cognitively-informed approaches to medieval material see *Cognitive Sciences and Medieval Studies / ed. J. Dresvina and V. Blud*. Cardiff, 2020.

8. Such criticism is most succinctly put in Oxford theologian Alistair McGrath's critique of Richard Dawkins' ideas, see: McGrath A.E. *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford, 2005. P. 128–138. McGrath also holds a doctorate in biophysics.

9. Drout M.D. C. *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century*. Tempe, Arizona, 2006.

10. Ibid. P. 7, 9.

11. Drout M.D. C. *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature: an Evolutionary, Cognitivist Approach*. New York, 2013.

framework for the late-medieval English material, similar to what Drout has done to Old English literature, I concur that the combination of the Oral Theory and memetics is an extremely productive lens through which to look at medieval culture.

Reminding fellow medievalists about the orality of much of medieval culture is like preaching to the choir, but I know from my own experience that the worldview of a modern historian, especially of a literary one, is inevitably logocentric. The further we depart from the literate elites and bureaucratic or ecclesiastical concerns, the more information, and particularly stories, slip through the cracks of time. A lot of what was not verbally recorded we only know about from images, or visual memes, such as manuscript marginalia or carvings, and the persistent motifs of knights and snails or of hybrids and grotesques, now less than transparent, testify to their place within the memetic fabric of the medieval



Figs 3–4. Macclesfield Psalter, East Anglia (1320–1330). Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Ms 1–2005, fol. 76r. Source: <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/illuminated/manuscript/discover/the-macclesfield-psalter/folio/folio-76r/section/owner>; Luttrell psalter, Lincolnshire (1320–1340). British Library, Ms. Add. 42130, fol. 145r (both fragments of marginalia).

society. Offensive gestures, popular puns, recurrent jokes are often bypassed in favour of the sober, religious, more cultured contents.<sup>12</sup>

These examples also highlight the humorous side of many memes: just as modern Internet memes often need to be funny or at least amusing because it both enables sharing and makes them memorable (that is, making them doubly mnemonic), so are the ones from the Middle Ages, when non-oral reproduction required a considerable commitment. Self-reproductivity was important where there was no external quality control, e. g. from the Church for biblical and liturgical texts: early medievalists are well familiar with the challenges faced by Charlemagne in encouraging a standardised hand for the imperial government and reaching a consensus about a standard Bible. The illustrations to Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland* are a case in point: it is highly likely that he drew the marginalia to it himself, becoming the first known author in the West to illustrate his own text, or at least closely supervised the artist(s).<sup>13</sup> He must have known that once the text was 'published', he had little to no control over its reproduction and circulation — something Chaucer anxiously spelled out almost two centuries later at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* and in his verse addressed to Adam, his scribe — so the selection of the images had to be memetic to ensure the work's proliferation. Indeed, the pictorial choices heavily favour sensational, Game-of-Thronesque topics, such as the white mare 'sex, stew, and bath' kingship ritual and other examples of bestiality, the rape of a woman in a sacred mill with the offender's sinning member struck with hell fire, or the self-castrating beavers who bite off their testicles to avoid being caught by the musk-hungry hunters, to name a few.<sup>14</sup> Given Gerald's penchant for jokes at others' expense, these images, apart from startling their audience, must have made them laugh: after all, slaughter and laughter are only one letter apart, and violence against the Other, verbal or physical, was a satisfying sight for centuries.<sup>15</sup>

There are over twenty surviving medieval manuscripts of the *Topography*, several of which are illustrated, so Gerald's strategy evidently worked.<sup>16</sup> He was, however, supported by both ecclesiastic and bureaucratic structures and rated considerably

12. Jones M. *The Secret Middle Ages*. Stroud, 2002. Esp. xvii.

13. Brown M.P. Gerald of Wales and the 'Topography of Ireland': Authorial Agendas in Word and Image // *Journal of Irish Studies*. 2005. Vol. 20. P. 52–63.

14. One of the most famous versions has been digitised here: URL: [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_13\\_b\\_viii\\_f034v](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_13_b_viii_f034v) (last accessed on 28.05.2022).

15. Screech M.A. *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*. London, 1997.

16. Bartlett R. *Gerald of Wales: A Voice of the Middle Ages*. 2nd edition. Stroud, 2006. P. 174–175.

high in the medieval literary food chain. It is true that one of his other works, *De Rebus a Se Gestis*, the first ‘autobiography’ produced in England, exists in a single incomplete copy, but it is doubtful that it was ever intended for wide circulation, unlike the *Topography*. The first vernacular autobiography in England fared even less well initially: known in early sixteenth-century printed extracts, its only extant manuscript was rediscovered in 1934 in the cupboard of a country house of an old English Catholic family during a game of table tennis. Since then its popularity has superseded that of Gerald as it has enjoyed print-runs comparable to all of his bestsellers put together, entering university syllabi, and inspiring an industry of academic writings. Dictated by Margery Kempe (1373 – c. 1440) sometime in the late 1430s, it has now firmly entered the medieval canon, although admittedly reading her book is somewhat less fun than reading about its author.

### **Margery Kempe, a storyteller**

Born Margery Burnham or Brunham c. 1373 in Bishop’s Lynn (now King’s Lynn), Norfolk and hailing from a wealthy local mercantile family, she became Margery Kempe by marrying John Kempe (born c. 1365), a member of another established local merchant family. In 1393 Margery suffered a mental breakdown following the birth of their first child, with episodes of self-harm, depression, and hallucinations, from which she, according to her *Book*, was healed through a visit by Christ. After several failed attempts at establishing her own businesses (running a mill and a brewery), she became intensely religious, went round England on pilgrimages and eventually travelled to Rome, Jerusalem, Germany and Norway. Margery claimed to have had regular visions of Christ, Mary, and saints, and suffered (or one may say enjoyed) bouts of uncontrollable screaming every time she heard or saw anything she would interpret as a reference to Christ’s Passion. Later in life she dictated her story to a succession of three scribes, the first of which may have been her son John Kempe, a citizen of Danzig.<sup>17</sup> The last we hear about her is in 1438 when she was

17. Sobecki S. ‘The writyng of this tretys’: Margery Kempe’s Son and the Authorship of Her Book // *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. 2015. №37. P. 257–283.

admitted to the Guild of the Holy Trinity of Lynn as one of its very few female members.

Given its focus on Margery's miracles, visions, and prophecies, as well as on their validation by contemporary ecclesiastics, the *Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter *BMK*) may have been composed with her subsequent beatification in mind as a future hagiographer's aid. If it were a conscious effort, it did not imitate the known examples of the genre one would expect to see from an educated ecclesiastic such as her last amanuensis, although realistically her scribes probably did what she told them just to get Margery out of their hair, knowing that she would not take 'no' for an answer either from an Archbishop or from God. It is clear however that whether the initiative came from God, as the *BMK* insists, or from Margery herself, the end product was intended to be read and its author remembered. Despite being generally a narrative of conversion and displaying a confessional mode, following Augustine's *Confessions*, the *BMK* is really one of a kind: as Barry Windeatt, one of the leading specialists on Margaret, puts it, 'The way in which the *Book* does not match sustainedly with any single genre is mimetic of how Kempe's own way of life could never fit comfortably with established roles and lifestyles'.<sup>18</sup> His use of 'mimetic' to highlight the imitation chimes in with the purpose of this essay, in which I view Margery's self-description as referencing a number of contemporary medieval memes to summon a certain image or reaction in her audience. I favour the word 'meme' over related terms 'trope' and 'stereotype' because trope, as a recurrent theme, in a literary or cultural context, is too general, while stereotype requires both oversimplification and consistency. Consistency in self-representation is not Margery's *forte*: her fragmented, discontinued narrative often points to an externally assembled self by means of a varied array of available exemplars.<sup>19</sup> To quote Windeatt again, 'the self is being presented through a collage of incidents, quarrels, and vindications, thematically associated and mimetic of the bitty unevenness of reiterated acts of self-assertion'.<sup>20</sup> The religious spectrum of these exemplars is better known, as she explicitly lists them herself: St Catherine, Marie d'Oignies, Elizabeth of Hungary, Angela of Foligno, Bridgit

18. Windeatt B. Medieval life-writing: Types, encomia, exemplars, patterns // A History of English Autobiography / ed. A. Smyth. Cambridge, 2016. P. 13–26.

19. On exemplarity of medieval autobiographies see Fleming J.V. Medieval European Autobiography // The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography / eds. M. DiBattista and E. Wittman. Cambridge, 2014. P. 35–48 (especially 35). See also Dresvina J. Attachment and God in Medieval England: Focusing on the Figure. Leiden; Boston, 2021. P. 65–71.

20. Windeatt B. Medieval life-writing... P. 24.

of Sweden, Catherine of Sienna, Richard Rolle.<sup>21</sup> Others, however, are less evident, and it is these I address in this essay, essentially reading Margery's self-presentation as a collection of often conflicting memes.

To be successful, memes have to be contagious, and one way to make them contagious is to be a good storyteller. Throughout her book we see Margery earning material goods, recognition, and spiritual benefits through telling stories, that is passing on and reinforcing memes. For example, when she ran out of money while in Rome, she met a man on the street, and 'they fell into conversation as they went on their way together, and she told him many good tales and fine exhortations until God visited him with tears of devotion and compunction so he had great comfort and consolation. And then he gave her money, by which she was very relieved and comforted for a good while' (*BMK* I:38; similar stories happen in *BMK* I:12, 15, 27, 30, 33, 40).<sup>22</sup> Stories were expected to be told everywhere, especially during long journeys (as we know from *The Canterbury Tales*), at meal times or other communal activities. Short memorable stories were often used for preaching, as evident from medieval priests' manuals, bestiaries, or collections of exempla, especially as the focus switched to the laity after 1215. Margery loved hearing preachers (and most probably mined their sermons for memes), even though they sometimes did not like having her in the audience due to her inevitably vocal reaction, as a preaching celebrity visiting Lynn soon discovered: 'whether through the holy sermon or whether through her meditation, grace of devotion had such a strong effect in her mind that she fell into a fit of noisy weeping. Then the good friar said, "I want this woman out of the church; she's annoying people". Some people who were her friends answered back, "Sir, do excuse her. She can't stop it"' (*BMK* I:61). Her success as a devout and edifying storyteller relied on her reputation, also spread orally: when Margery is arrested by the Mayor of Leicester on suspicions of Lollardy, a certain man from Boston (a neighbouring town on the other side of the Wash, a member of the Hanseatic league and thus an even more important port than Lynn, with which the Boston merchant community had close links) 'said to the landlady

21. *The Book of Margery Kempe* / ed. B. Windeatt. Cambridge, 2004. P. 9–18.

22. All modern English quotations are from *The Book of Margery Kempe* / trans. Anthony Bale. Oxford, 2015.



Fig. 5. A group of medieval peasants, presided over by a woman, gathered for a meal and some story-telling, 14<sup>th</sup> c. BNF, Ms. Fr. 22545, fol. 72r.

where she was lodging, “Truth to tell”, he said, “in Boston this woman is regarded as a holy woman and a blessed woman” (*BMK*, I:46).

Moreover, Margery is clearly a compulsive story-teller, just as she is a compulsive pilgrim: she cannot help it, even in the face of potential threat — as we shall see in the examples below — which makes her a perfect ‘meme-host’. The place of these stories is outside of the official ‘literary marketplace’, i.e. the literary produce of the properly educated, qualified, gendered, and vetted authors (especially after Arundel’s statute *De heretico comburendo* 1401 and the *Constitutions* of 1409), which likens Margery to a modern-day fanfic writer, publishing informally online: in fact, Margery’s narrative strategies fit all the five academic definitions of fanfiction.<sup>23</sup> Current internet memes and fanfiction are not-too-distant cousins, producing the content that appears amateurish and often ‘low-culture’ yet simultaneously more accessible and more exciting. Pious fanfic, under the name of affective piety and devotional contemplation, was encouraged among the late-medieval laity: implanting themselves into an existing canonical narrative was recommended by the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, which famously advocates imagining oneself as a minor character of the sacred

<sup>23</sup> Coppola F. *The Fanfiction Reader*. Ann Arbor, 2017. P. 2–13, see also my forthcoming essay in *Groniek*, 2022.

history and fantasising about it.<sup>24</sup> Margery truly excelled in this practice, and it is perhaps natural that the early fifteenth-century Middle English adaptation of *Meditationes* was produced by Nicholas Love, the prior of Mount Grace, where the sole surviving manuscript of the *BMK* was later kept. Another aspect of modern fanfic is that it is often interested in going transmedia: turning moving image into prose, but also the other way around through cosplay and LARP (live-action role play). The biggest modern book fandoms tend to be of texts that have already gone transmedia, which is also true for the Bible in the Middle Ages. Words are cheap to work with, they do not require paints, gold, glass, wood, or expensive casts not cast with props. Just as anyone can post a meme or publish fanfic as long as they have a portable device with internet access, Margery plugs herself in virtually any community to access an audience everywhere she goes.

### Shared memes in the BMK and misericords

As Chris Wickham recently put it, ‘Margery Kempe was doubtless, on the basis of her book at least, a totally infuriating person, but she managed to create a Margery-sized space for herself and defend it against people of every social level’.<sup>25</sup> If anyone needed

<sup>24</sup>. For most recent extensive discussion see *Karnes M. Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Chicago, 2011.

<sup>25</sup>. *Wickham C. Medieval Europe*. New Haven, 2016. P. 189.



Figs 6–7. Female heads: misericord and bench end, St Margaret’s, King’s Lynn, both 15<sup>th</sup> century. Source (6): [https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Kings\\_Lynn-St\\_Margarets/N02.jpg](https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Kings_Lynn-St_Margarets/N02.jpg); Source (7): [https://d3hgqlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/5f19ec7e19f5a/content/pages/uploaded\\_images/11.jpg](https://d3hgqlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/5f19ec7e19f5a/content/pages/uploaded_images/11.jpg).

an embodied metaphor of a space fitting for a person so idiosyncratic as Margery, that would be the choir stalls with misericords. In fact, one of the fifteenth-century misericords still in King Lynn's main church, St Margaret's, is now habitually referred to as 'Margery Kempe'; a carved bench end from the same set has also been appropriated by the popular imagination as her portrait.

Medieval stalls with misericords are still found in most of the places of worship in England and Europe which Margery visited on her pilgrimages. She may well have had access to at least some of them: when she is praying, she is often found in the choir, sometimes prostrate, perhaps re-imagining herself as a nun and utilising monastic memes ('as this creature lay in the choir at her prayers'; 'as she lay still in the choir, weeping and mourning for her sins' *BMK* I:23, 85). Either many of these places were less restricted than we imagine, or it was due to Margery's almost radiational ability to penetrate even the least accessible spaces. Both Margery and misericords combine marginality and centrality — just like the misericords are in the chancel yet are below and upside down, in the same way Margery was trying to be mainstream in her devotional activities but overdid it to the point of grotesqueness. This penchant for paradox, for the ability to surprise the mind by combining familiar patterns, is what makes them particularly memorable — or memetic.

This theatre-like larger-than-life sense about both made the *BMK* easier to remember, just as the colourful exempla (memes/memeplexes) and crazy marginalia would have been memorable and were indeed used as mnemonic devices, as known from both medieval theory of *memoria* and modern neuropsychology.<sup>26</sup> Margery's own exempla are quite unforgettable, with their almost gargantuan excessiveness, extreme emotions, the 'demonstrative mode'; they are distinctly vernacular, i.e. designed to be broadly understood and recognised. The fragmentary, episodic nature of her narrative which however constitutes a recognisable whole is parallel to the choir stalls, populated with misericords and other assorted carvings. Just like misericords, Margery's *Book* was meant to facilitate edification, remembering, and memorising.

26. See works of Marry Carruthers, especially *Carruthers M. The Book of Memory: a Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, 2008.

### Memplex 1: The Parable of the Wise Fool

Two examples of Margery’s using memes easily recognisable by her audience without having to explain her point are particularly striking, not least because of the boldness of the exemplars she employed in the context of not just one but two archiepiscopal courts. The first story was told at Canterbury c. 1415, after Margery had been ridiculed and berated by the monks of Christ Church for weeping in their church and threatened with imprisonment:

Then this creature said: ‘I beg you, sirs, give me leave to tell a tale.’

Then people said to the monk, ‘Let her say what she wants.’

And then she said, ‘There was once a man who had sinned gravely against God, and when he had confessed and been absolved, his confessor commanded him that as partial penance he should hire people for one year to chide him and rebuke him for his sins, and he would give them silver coins for their labour. So one day he came amongst many people, such as are here now – may God save you all – and he stood amongst them, as I am doing amongst you, them despising him as you do me, the man laughing and smiling at having good sport at their words. The most important amongst them said to the man, ‘Why are you laughing, you scoundrel [Middle English ‘brothel’], when you’re so deeply despised?’

‘Ah, sir, I have a very good reason to laugh, because for many days I’ve been taking silver out of my purse and hired people to chide me for remission of my sins, and today I can keep my silver in my purse, thanks to you lot.’

‘Right so I say to you, worshipful sirs, while I was at home in my own region, with great weeping and mourning day by day, I mourned because I did not have any of the shame, scorn, and spite for which I was worthy. I thank you all very much, sirs, for what I have received today, morning and afternoon, in right measure, may God be blessed for it.’ (*BMK*, l:13)<sup>27</sup>

According to Margery, the monks did not enjoy the story and ran after her onto the street shrieking that she should be burned

<sup>27</sup> Many years ago I used this episode as a linguistic example for an academic job interview at Canterbury in front of an all-male panel (manel); the person eventually hired was the only male applicant.

as a Lollard, which suggests that it hit a painful spot. Here Margery utilises the ‘wise fool’ meme, and the derogatory term ‘brothel’, generally meaning a useless or a marginalized person, but which can also be translated as ‘a fool’. Images of fools are frequently found on misericords as a warning. The two cat-as-bagpipes-playing fools on a Boston misericord (c. 1390), probably familiar to Margery, still solicit a chuckle, but although they appear foolish, they in fact reflect and amplify the foolishness and sinfulness of the world as well as those who laugh at the fools without realising their own shortcomings and lack self-knowledge and humility.<sup>28</sup> The depiction of The Pillar of Christ’s Flagellation, venerated by two angels and censed by two more, appears in the same set as a reminder of just how humiliation and suffering was essential for salvation and for the Imitation of Christ.

Confrontational speech in the face of authority was perceived as a fool’s prerogative, as the medieval meme of David or Solomon and his fool to illustrate the *Dixit Insipiens* demonstrates. Unlike the God-denying Marcolf,<sup>29</sup> Margery casts herself as a God-affirming jester. Actual late-medieval court fools occupied an ambiguous, limbic space in the social hierarchy, even more so than minstrels and other professional performers, neither ‘cleric, freeman nor serf’, ‘flitting from one group of courtiers to another’.<sup>30</sup> Like Margery in her status of neither married woman nor a virgin, neither monastic nor lay, or misericords, neither entirely bawdy nor holy in their choir stalls, fools paradoxically drew attention to themselves while ‘at the same time existing outside acknowledged frames of reference’, which allows them to comment on the world

<sup>28</sup> For more on misericord fools see in Grössinger C. *The World Upside Down: English Misericords*. London, 1997. P. 105–108 and Hardwick P. *English Medieval Misericords...* P. 75–79.

<sup>29</sup> *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf: a dual-language edition from Latin and Middle English printed editions* / ed. N.M. Bradbury and S. Bradbury. Kalamazoo, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Southworth J. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*. Stroud, 1998. P. 1.



Figs 8–9. ‘Fools’ and ‘Pillar of Flagellation’ misericords, St Botolph’s, Boston, c. 1390. Photos by Ilya Sverdlov.



Figs 10–11. *Dixit Insipiens* initial, Psalter and Book of Hours (Sarum; c. 1433, England). Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Douce 18, fol. 113v.  
Fool with his bauble, Christchurch Priory, late 15<sup>th</sup> c. Source: [https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Christchurch\\_Priory-Dorset/N13%20Upper.jpg](https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Christchurch_Priory-Dorset/N13%20Upper.jpg).

around them.<sup>31</sup> On a misericord from Christchurch priory, the fool is holding a bauble which is perhaps meant to represent the jester's likeness so that he can converse with it, entertaining and edifying his audience. The fictional alter ego of the jester, the channel for his ventriloquism, is similar to the distancing of the author from the ideas he or she presents, such as Chaucer the Author telling the story about Chaucer the Pilgrim or Kempe the Author telling the story about Margery the Creature.<sup>32</sup> This diluting of authorship, also present in memes, provides at least some safety to the vehicles for risky subjects.

### Memplex 2: The Parable of the Farting Bear

About two years later, c. 1417, Margery found herself in perhaps a greater peril when faced with Henry Bowet, the Archbishop of York, in his residence, to be questioned on the orthodoxy of her views. This time, even apparently fettered, she had friends and supporters among the audience and behaved with great moxie, parrying with the annoyed prelate and refusing to leave his diocese on his terms. The way Margery recalls the events is most likely to her own advantage:

At once a powerful cleric produced a book and quoted St Paul to support his position, against her, that no women should preach. She, answering this, said, 'I don't preach, sir, I enter

31. Hardwick P. English Medieval Misericords... P. 27.

32. Staley L. Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions. University Park, Pennsylvania, 1994.

no pulpit. I use only discussion and good words, and I'll do so as long as I live.'

Then a doctor who had previously examined her said: 'Sir, she told me the worst tale about priests that I have ever heard.' The Archbishop commanded her to tell that tale.

'Sir, by your reverence, I spoke about only one priest by way of example, who, as I have learned, went astray in a wood (through the punishment of God, for the profit of his soul) until night-time came upon him. He lacking any shelter, found a pretty garden in which he rested that night, which a fair pear-tree in the middle of it, flourishing and ornamented with flowers and blossoms which he found delectable to look at. Then a large and vicious bear came, and ugly sight, shaking the pear-tree and causing all the blossoms to fall. This lawless beast ate and gobbled down all those pretty blossoms. Then, when he had eaten them, he turned his rear-end towards the priest and voided them all out of his nether regions' (*BMK*, I:52).

The priest was understandably repulsed and baffled by this unappetising spectacle. He struggled to understand what it was supposed to mean until a mysterious pilgrim explained that the priest was himself the pear tree, flourishing when he served Christ. Yet he was also the bear who violated the fruits and flowers of his soul by living a life of sin and performing his office without devotion. 'Then the Archbishop, having greatly enjoyed this tale, commended it, saying it was a fine story'; he subsequently allowed Margery to leave his diocese on her terms, and paid a member of his retinue five shillings to guarantee her safe passage and, no doubt, make sure that she definitely gets out of his diocese. The man sensibly surmised that Margery would be a handful and asked for a noble (over six shillings) but Bowet made it clear that he wanted to part with Margery, not with more money.

The premise of Margery's biting story is a satire of the clergy, popular in many guises. One of the memes depicted priests as predators preaching to the prey they are about to devour: thus, another Boston misericord shows a wolf dressed in rich ecclesiastical robes and holding a pastoral staff preaching to two hens, while

his chaplain, the fox, recognisable by his ruff and his open book, stands to the left; to drive the message home, the supporters are carved with nesting hens. Another meme referenced by Margery is that of scatological animals, usually bears and apes. Both of those signified unbridled passions<sup>33</sup> and appear together in a fifteenth-century misericord at Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon Avon: the muzzled bears in the centre represent the badge of the earls of Warwick, presumably implying that the local lords have learned to keep their predatory behaviour under control, while their companion apes in supporters pee in a flask (right) and examine the urine (left). This activity links up to the third meme, of a quack physician (usually an ape), here on a Boston misericord examining a flask of urine of one patient fox, while the other is waiting for its turn, holding a poop bucket to be examined next.<sup>34</sup>

These examples, not subtle by any means, at least use fable setting to comment on human vices. Margery's farting bear is a thinly veiled avatar for the unscrupulous priest, but some medieval memes which followed a long and venerable tradition

33. Tisdall M.W. *God's Beasts*. Plymouth, 1998. P. 30.

34. For more examples in manuscripts and misericords see *Sprunger D.A. Parodic Animal Physicians from the Margins of Medieval Manuscripts // Animals in the Middle Ages / ed. N.C. Flores. New York and London, 1996. P. 67–81 and Hardwick P. Through a Glass, Darkly: Interpreting Animal Physicians // Reynardus. 2002. №15. P. 63–70.*



Figs 12–14. Fox preaching to hens, St Botolph's, Boston, c. 1390. Source: [https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Boston\\_SB/BostonSB05.2.jpg](https://www.misericords.co.uk/images/Boston_SB/BostonSB05.2.jpg)  
Muzzled bears flanked with apes, Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Photo by Juliana Dresvina.  
Ape doctor, St Botolph's, Boston, c. 1390. Photo by Ilya Sverdlov.



Figs 15–16. Farting monks misericord, St George's Chapel, Windsor, 1477–1484. Source: *Grössinger C. The World Upside Down: English Misericords*. London, 1997. P.74. Farting bonnacon, Worksop Bestiary, before 1187, England. Morgan Library, Ms. M.81, fol. 37r.

of fart-and-excrement-humour in religious context, do no veiling whatsoever.<sup>35</sup> One of the misericords of St George's Royal Chapel, Windsor Castle, presents two monks, one of whom bares his bottom to fart out what looks like demonic lions, while the other, smaller monk holds up a turd as if it were a relic. The farting scene brings to mind Chaucer's "Summoner's Tale", in which the money-grubbing friar's plan backfires (literally) as he gets his comeuppance from Thomas, a sick man and bereaved father whom he had scammed. Thomas promises to give the friar something as long as John divides it equally amongst the other friars: all John has to do is to put this hand down Thomas's back and find a hidden gift. Predictably, as the greedy friar reaches for 'the clifte' (cleft), Thomas emits a massive fart.<sup>36</sup> Chaucer, like Shakespeare, was a collector and generator of memes, who also preferred existing well-known stories to original plots and must have worked with a popular meme here.<sup>37</sup> One further wonders if the creatures with mane, emitted by the flatulent friar in the misericord, is an inversion

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, *Allen V. On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages*. New York, 2007 and *Hardwick P. Talking Dirty: Vernacular Language and the Lower Body // The Playful Middle Ages* / ed. Paul Hardwick. Turnhout, 2010. P. 81–91.

<sup>36</sup> *Geoffrey Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales*. ll. 2145–2149.

<sup>37</sup> *Cooper H. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford, 1989. P. 177–178.

of another medieval meme, that is of the mythical *bonnacon*, the beast who when pursued by hunters lets out deadly farts or missiles of explosive faeces in self-defence.<sup>38</sup>

### Memplex 3: Margery's initial self-depiction

It has been noticed many times how post-conversional Margery models and depicts herself in relation to a number of religious celebrities, but what is less apparent is that throughout the book she is both casting herself and seen by others through a collection of 'memes' related to medieval middle- and lower-class women. Such an approach is economic as it positions her within an immediately recognisable social-cultural context and allows her to recreate a larger setting with just a few energetic touches: it benefits both her audience, who can imagine the rest without having to spend time reading elaborate descriptions, and Margery, saving her both space and time to focus on more important details such as God's visions and speeches to her. As Michael Drout puts it, 'the traditional referent' (which he also calls a 'triggering meme') is able to 'summon entire meme-plexes by metonymy'.<sup>39</sup>

Margery's text is written from the perspective of a woman who developed a strong aversion for sexual activities after years of pregnancies, births (she said she bore fourteen children, at least one of whom survived), marital rape, and multiple attempts to buy back the command of her body. She does, however, admit that in her youth she enjoyed sex with her husband. According to medieval medical theory, women were more sexually voracious due to their cold and moist nature, requiring hot and dry male semen to restore the balance of humours, which engendered the stereotype of a lecherous woman, further reinforced by the reading of Eve's sin as sexual. A misericord with a naked woman tempting an eager man in monastic garb illustrates this lurid view of women. Although this meme mostly aged well, there was an attempt to rewrite it by M.R. James, who catalogued this misericord as (try not to laugh) St Zosimas sharing his cloak with St Mary of Egypt.<sup>40</sup> At least he did not try to physically touch it up to make it more pious, which apparently happened to a supporter from a Bristol

38. Barber R. *Bestiary*, MS Bodley 764. Woodbridge, 1992. P. 47–48; White T.H. *The Book of Beasts*. New York, 1984. P. 33.

39. Drout M.D. C. *How Tradition Works...* P. 171.

40. James M.R. *St George's Chapel Windsor: The Wood-work of the Choir*. Windsor, 1933. P. 38.



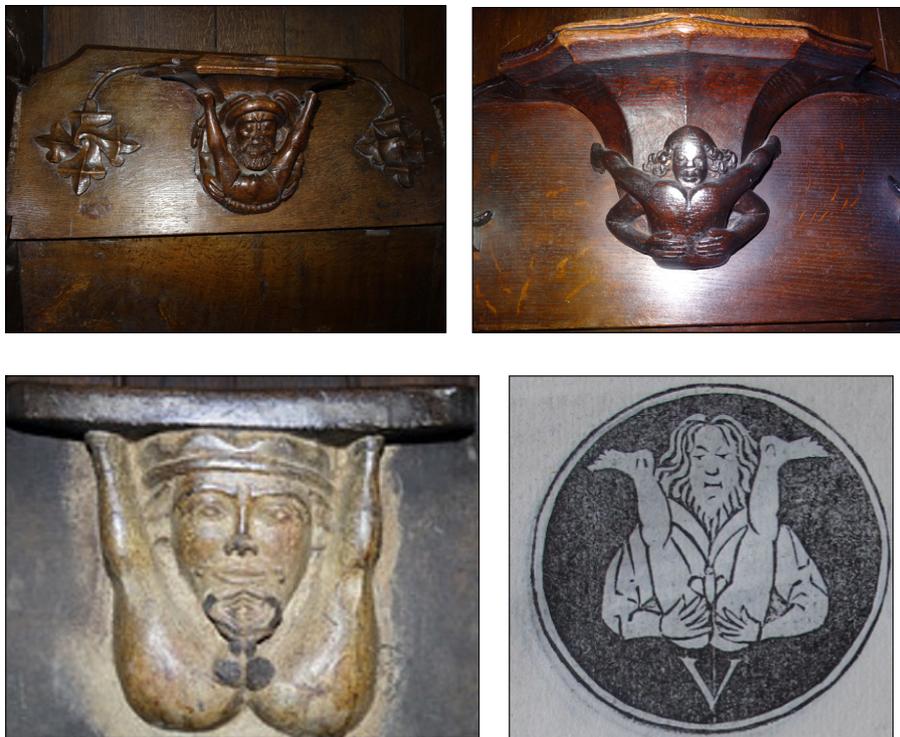
Figs 17–18. A monk and a naked woman misericord, Windsor, St. George's Chapel, 1477–1484. Source: *Grössinger C. The World Upside Down...* P. 94.  
 Woman sucking on a penis, Bristol Cathedral, right supporter, early 16<sup>th</sup> c.  
 Photo by Juliana Dresvina.

cathedral misericord. However, despite the late nineteenth-century retouches, there are still no doubts that it is not a bottle that the naked woman is trying to put in her mouth.

Penises figure in Margery's visions during her period of sexual obsession when she was seeing men flashing their genitals at her and encouraging her to choose the ones she likes best ('She saw, as she truly thought, various religious men, priests and many others, both heathen and Christian, coming before her eyes, so that she could not avoid them or put them out of her view, showing their bare genitals to her', BMK I:59). An acrobat-like man displaying his nether regions is a frequent motif found on misericords: two are found in Oxford colleges, All Souls and in Magdalen, but the latter is not the copy of the former: if the All Souls 'flasher' is displaying his (breeches-covered) genitals, the Magdalen one seems to be sniffing his own bottom. Similar images, this time explicitly displaying their genitals, are found on a misericord in St Mary's, Swine, on another one in All Saints', Gresford, on the screen from All Saints, Hereford, a canopy from Ripon Cathedral, and in Jacobus Publicius's *Oratoriae artis epitoma*, to serve as a mnemonic device for the letter V (vir).<sup>41</sup> Once again, the meme got lost on some modern viewers as the online catalogue describes the carving in St Mary's as a 'Griffin with large claws biting its tail'<sup>42</sup> — more elegant, perhaps, but far less truthful than 'A man with a vulva on his chin seemingly copulating with himself'. Suspiciously, this set is the only one known in England to have been made for the use of female patrons, Cistercian nuns.

41. *Giacomo Publicio. Oratoriae artis epitoma: vel quae brevibus ad consvmatvm spectant oratorem.* Venice, 1485, or Augsburg, 1490. fol. hvij verso (unmarked).

42. URL: [http://www.misericords.co.uk/swine\\_des.html](http://www.misericords.co.uk/swine_des.html) (accessed 28 May 2022).

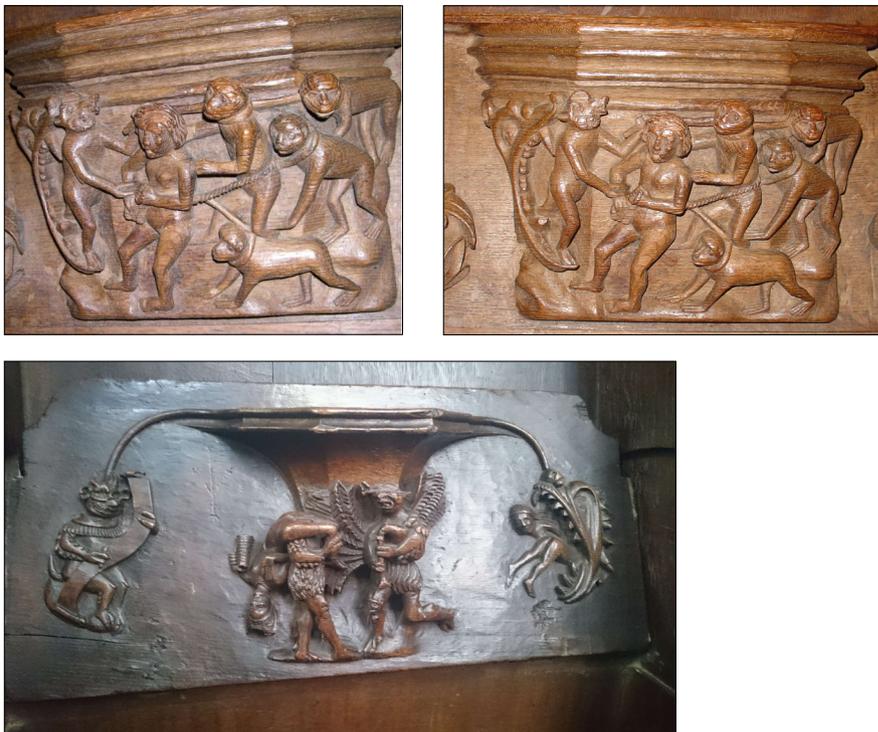


Figs 19–22. All Souls College and Magdalen College 'flashers', Oxford, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Photo by Juliana Dresvina; St Mary's, Swine, Source: [misticords.co.uk](http://misticords.co.uk); Jacobus Publicus' 'flasher'.

A recent scholar interprets his lozenge-shaped object as a beard, yet remarks that it 'bears a curious resemblance to female genitalia'.<sup>43</sup> If, however, the unidentified object is viewed as hands, the Swine flasher becomes a sort of phallic ouroboros — phalloboros? — in an act of autofellatio. One way or another, the nuns were presented with a unique opportunity to sit both on a male face and a penis during a church service — not, perhaps, what the stalls commissioners initially had in mind.

Margery is regularly seen as a temptress, although not always in exclusively sexual terms, by the authorities: the Archbishop of York would not let a younger (and presumably more suggestible) man accompany Margery out of his diocese, and the Mayor of Leicester claims that she came to his city to lead away good burgesses' wives, like a piped piper, similar to the naked woman leading apes into the jaws of hell on a Bristol cathedral misericord (BMK I:52, 48). This ability to intoxicate and lead people astray

43. Chunko-Dominguez B. *English Gothic Misericord Carvings: History from the Bottom Up*. Leiden; Boston, 2017. P. 66.



Figs 23–25. Naked woman leading apes to hell, Bristol cathedral, early 16<sup>th</sup> century.  
 Wicked ale-wife, St Lawrence's, Ludlow, late 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
 Photos by Juliana Dresvina.

connects Margery with another medieval meme, a wicked ale-wife, as she was indeed briefly a brewer. On a misericord from St Lawrence's, Ludlow, the wicked ale-wife, naked except for her fashionable horned head-dress, is carried off to hell by a devil while still holding her tankard (used for giving short-measure). The right supporter then has her flung into the Mouth of Hell, while on the left devil Titivillus is writing down her sins.<sup>44</sup>

Medieval women's supposed obsession with fashion was one of the stock criticisms of contemporary preachers and moralists. Margery eagerly reports on herself:

Nevertheless, she would not put aside either her pride or her pretentious costumes that she had been used to, neither for her husband nor on any other person's advice. And yet she knew full well that they said a great many insulting things about her, for she wore gold piping on her headdress, and her hoods were

44. Grössinger C. *The World Upside Down*. P. 81.

dagged with tippets. Her cloaks were so dagged and lined with many colours between the dags, so that it would be more striking to people's eyes and she herself should be more admired (BMK I:2).

Here Margery evokes the meme of a fashionista, appearing as a personification of Superbia and depicted as a caricature of an ugly woman wearing a fashionable headgear both reminiscent of a fool's cap and the devil's horns, well known from Quentin Matsys's satirical painting *Ugly Duchess* (1513) and later reworked in John Tenniel's illustration of the Duchess from *Alice in Wonderland*. The direct connection between women's fashion and the devil is highlighted in a misericord from St Mary's, Minster Thanet, where the evil one lurks between the woman's horned headdress. Mystic and hermit Richard Rolle (d. 1349), one of Margery's devotional heroes, recalls how his attempt to chastise a woman for her dress boomeranged, 'because in my eagerness to restrain the feminine craze for dressy and suggestive clothes I inspected too closely their extravagant ornamentation. She said I ought not to notice them enough to know whether they were wearing horned head-dresses or not'. He humbly concludes: 'I think she was right to reprove me'.<sup>45</sup>

Another association between women and demons was a belief that women are more easily distracted during the services. A fourteenth-century misericord from Ely cathedral depicts two women in the church, with their fashionable devotional accessories

45. *Rolle R. Incendium Amoris* / ed. M. Deanesly. Manchester, 1915.



Figs 26–27: Superbia (Pride). St Lawrence's, Ludlow, late 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
Devil in a woman's headdress. St Mary's, Minster Thanet, early 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
Photos by Juliana Dresvina.

(one with her psalter, the other with her rosary – the items Margery possessed as well) busy chatting to each other rather than attending to the words of the priest, with demon Titivillus embracing them fondly.<sup>46</sup> A verse version of this story appears in the Vernon Manuscript (Bodleian Library MS. Eng. poet. a. 1, England, 1381–1400), fol. 303r, in which the future St Augustine of Canterbury, while serving one day as a deacon to Pope Gregory, saw two women gossiping during the reading of the Gospel and the devil writing down every word they say; so many were the words that the fiend had to stretch the parchment with his teeth to make more space but they still did not fit, so he banged his head against the church wall in despair, which made Augustine laugh. The scene on the misericord is reminiscent of Margery’s inability to concentrate on the evensong at St Margaret’s in her hometown of Lynn, after having been indecently propositioned by her co-parishioner. She was ‘so troubled with the man’s words that she could neither hear evensong nor say her pater-noster, nor think any good thoughts...’ (*BMK* I:4). Eventually she ‘went to the man to know if he would then consent to take her’, only to discover that he was testing her and would have nothing to do with her!

Surprisingly for Margery, this time she did not try to have her own back, perhaps recognising her own behaviour as less than

<sup>46</sup> More on the topic can be found in Grössinger C. *Tutivillus // Profane Images in the Marginal Arts of the Middle Ages* / ed. E.C. Block. Turnhout, 2008. P. 47–62.



Fig. 28. Devil embracing two chatting women. Ely cathedral, 14<sup>th</sup> c.  
Photo by Juliana Dresvina.

honourable. The members of her immediate family seemingly fared less well, especially her husband, John Kempe. Possessing a stronger personality, she clearly viewed herself as superior to him and her subordination went only as far as she was prepared to comply with the rules of the society she lived in. For example, once she finally got fed up with the marital debt coercion, she balanced the books by literally paying off John's debts out of her own pocket on the condition that he would no longer make any claims to her body, but not until 23 June 1413 when she was already forty (*BMK* I:11). Judging by the 'Wife of Bath's Tale', the belief that what a woman most desires is the sovereignty over her husband or partner was widespread, and in its extreme this meme appears on many misericords as the image of *virago*, a man-beating wife. Margery repeatedly ignores John Kempe's advice and does not tire in reminding him of his inferiority; although she never seemingly resorts to the actual physical violence, such as on a Boston misericord depicting an unsuccessful hunter walloped by his wife for not bringing any game, John Kempe regularly took verbal beatings from his wife for not being a husband she imagined him to be. He may have recognised their domestic setting on another Boston misericord, where a peaceful dinner is about to turn violent as the wife raises her serving spoon menacingly, while the husband is shielding his head in advance, while still holding the bellows — a hint that he is fanning his wife's passions.

The flip side of Margery's dominance, however, was her capability. Even after her conversion Margery still subscribed to the stereotype of a very practical housewife in her visions and medita-



Figs 29–30. Hunter beaten by his wife; A domestic scene. St Botolph's, Boston (both c. 1390). Photos by Ilya Sverdlov.



Figs 31–32. Woman warding off a dog, St Mary's, Fairford, 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
 Dog with a pot on its head, Magdalen College, Oxford, late 15<sup>th</sup> c.  
 Photos by Juliana Dresvina.

tions: she frequently finds herself swaddling Mary and then Jesus, cleaning, cooking, feeding, instructing the Divine child, and finally even offering Mary a nice cup of hot soup after they bury Jesus (*BMK* I:6; 81). She hardly depicts herself looking after her own family past the reference to her husband giving her back the keys after she recovered after her first birth and her undertaking her other responsibilities (*BMK* I:1) and having to care for John in his old age after his serious head injury (*BMK* I:76). Margery never mentions her children, except John Kempe Jr, and only in Book II when he is already an adult, so one wonders if these domestic visions are in fact Margery's compensation for all those years of neglect her family suffered while she was away on her numerous pilgrimages. Yet perhaps she did not have to spell out her ability and experience in running a household at length — a few touches would suffice to summon in her audience's mind scenes such as portrayed on a misericord from St Mary's, Fairford, with the dog trying to steal meat from the pot, but the housewife so confidently on top of the situation that she does not even bother to get off her stool. A supporter from Magdalen College chapel represents a development of this episode, more successful for its canine participant, with the dog having a pot over its head.

## Conclusions

'The meme-based approach is extendable but not totalizing', writes Michael Drout in his recent elaboration of a meme-based study of early medieval English material. He continues: 'It recognizes that

there are multiple traditions operating at multiple scales and different times, and the theory can only explain them if the particular local, historical, and contingent influences of those traditions are teased out of their matrix and examined.<sup>47</sup> Instead of taking a longitudinal perspective, like Jack Zipe's examination of fairy-tales which purposely coevolved to remain relevant,<sup>48</sup> or Drout's own testing of memetics in the linguistic environment, this essay attempts to expand memetics theory to transmedia examples — something which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been done before.

Thinking about medieval material in terms of memes helps us understand the meaning and function of recurrent itinerant topics in various cultural media of the period. 'Copy the instructions or idea' and 'copy the design' approach (genotype vs phenotype) is also a useful way to explain, to both students and hard science colleagues, why some of these iterations of one topic can be so different and some so similar, such as the 'flasher' meme. Memes are 'selfish', just like genes in Dawkins's definition,<sup>49</sup> as they do not have to be 'useful' to spread (think of an earworm you accidentally heard) — they just need to outcompete other memes, through chance or personal circumstances, for a space in our brain. This is probably why Margery sometimes uses potentially self-harming memes when describing herself: they are the most readily available to her at that particular moment.

I do not try to suggest that the experiences Margery was trying to describe are not genuine nor do I mean to write her story off as complete fiction. Many of the memes, such as biblical or Shakespearean phrases like pearls before swine, the blind leading the blind, wild goose chase, or a laughing stock, still regularly used to this day, are durable because they are suitable for encapsulating and expressing something of a shared human experience. Even if we cannot know what really happened to Margery, her use of memes to tell her story is successful as long as they help us engage with it. Understood through memetics, Margery is both a useful 'vehicle' (in Dawkins's term) for the 'replicators' (that is, memes expressed in misericords) and a beneficiary of the multiple memes she carries, as they make her book so memorable and fit enough to

47. Drout M.D. C. Tradition and Influence... P. 217.

48. Zipes J. Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre. New York, 2006.

49. Dawkins R. The Extended Selfish Gene, the 40th anniversary edition. Oxford, 2016.

survive. Nearly six hundred years later, like a weird yet adorable platypus, Margery is still winning at cultural evolution.<sup>50</sup>



Figs 33–34: Platypus Internet memes; meme by Juliana Dresvina.

50. I wish to thank Maria Artamonova, Daniel Gerrard, Melek Karataş, Godelinde Perk, Ilya Sverdlov, and two anonymous reviewers for their help in this essay's preparation and apologise for making them look at indecent medieval images, notionally for the sake of science.

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