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**‘[W]heþyr þu redist er herist redyng, I wil be plesyd wyth þe’: Margery Kempe and the Locations for Middle English Devotional Reading and Hearing**

Ryan Perry & Lawrence Tuck

In the late Middle Ages ‘privileged elements of professional religious reading and practice became increasingly available to pious laity’— so writes Nicole R. Rice in her book dealing with Middle English religious writing and lay piety (2009: xii). Rice’s study traces the ways in which some strategies for spiritual improvement as recorded in religious literature, and as ostensibly practiced by the professional religious, came to be applied to and appropriated by lay consumers. Such research is part of a tranche of scholarship to have signalled the variety of Middle English works that specifically targeted lay readerships, and furthermore, analysing the reception contexts of religious literature that was adopted by lay audiences, or adapted for their usage.[[1]](#endnote-1) Less often the subject of study are the locations in which such devotional reading took place, or relatedly, tracing different modes of access to spiritual literatures. Whilst the idea of lay ‘religious reading’ has been firmly established, questions of *how* and *where* suchreligio-literary material came to be consumed by lay audiences remain largely unaddressed. In terms of the *how*, we might attempt to establish through what means such texts came to be transmitted— the mechanics of reading and literary dissemination and further, to imagine the functions within devotional praxes that reading served. Pre-modern reading habits meant that many vernacular texts were often consumed via the ear rather than the eye— to be heard (and thus read aurally) as opposed to being read in social exclusion, with eyes absorbing the text— the mode of engagement with books that reminds us of modern reading circumstances. Our thinking on *where* devotional readingoccurred is interconnected with the question of *how* it happened— that is, the means of devotio-literary transmission. Our contention is that understanding the means of textual transmission and the locations in which reading (whether visual or aural) takes place are mutually self-informing facets of the study of literary reception in the Middle Ages. The two loci that this essay will primarily focus upon are the church and within the household— spaces in which texts might be performatively read or silently absorbed— or in which reading might be a communal or a solitary act (or simultaneously both). We discuss the dynamics of reading and hearing religious writing, exploring some of the various regulatory and otherwise spiritually efficacious purposes that such textual encounters were intended to serve for participants.

Several locations and means of access to religious books are signalled in a remarkable document now held in the Warwickshire Record Office.[[2]](#endnote-2) The document is a thin strip of parchment dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, with Latin directions that form a specifically tailored regimen for an urban gentleman. The directions contain details that suggest a direct and personal relationship between the author (a priest, friar or some other form of spiritual director) and the recipient (a layman living with his wife and children in an urban location). This text reveals customs of literary engagement that attest to the multiplex nature of devotional reading activity in the period. The text postulates access to religious books both in the privatized setting of the recipient’s home, where familial reading might occur, and in a church space, where, despite the public nature of this location, a more intimate form of reading is imagined by the spiritual advisor. We will now turn to this devotional regimen.

**Reading and Hearing in Church**

Cum vero missam audieri(ti)s nullo modo faciatis colloquium cum aliis, set dum cantant clerici, respiciatis in libris ecclesie, et omni die festo videatis evangelium et exposicionem ipsius et epistolam. Est quedam legenda sanctorum antiqua valde; in illa videatis et maxime in communi sanctorum in fine libri (Pantin, 1976: 420–1).

When you hear Mass, do not by any means engage in talk with other people, but while the clerks are singing, look at the books of the church; and on every feast day, look at the Gospel and the exposition of it and at the Epistle. There is a certain *Legenda sanctorum* which is very old; look at that and especially at the Common of Saints at the end of the book. (Pantin, 1976: 399)

The instructions to ‘look at’, to see the texts in the church’s books— codices that were probably chained for public consumption within the liturgical space— encourages a silent contemplation of the books.[[3]](#endnote-3) That the man should engage with clearly specified books does not merely tell us about reading practice, but also of the talismanic potential of books to articulate identity: the instructions encourage an association with textual objects only negotiable by an elite— these are books that materialise and resonate with the liturgical vocalisations of the *clerici* during the mass. Nevertheless, reading through the eyes, seeing the written words of the Gospel commentary and *Legenda sanctorum* and absorbing the text silently is surely intended too, even if the engagement with the books hints at a simultaneously performative, ritualistic function. Although situated in a public space and participating in a communal event, the ‘para-liturgical’ reading activity prescribed by the advisor is intimate, and distinguishes the reader from other lay members of the congregation.[[4]](#endnote-4) The lay recipient’s ‘comprehension literacy’, to borrow Paul Saenger’s term (1989: 142), his apparent ability to read silently and with understanding from these Latin liturgical texts, puts him in an elite category of lay devotional reader. More common among lay readers in the late Middle Ages was the faculty that Saenger calls ‘phonetic literacy’ (1989: 142). This kind of reading competence is an ability to sound out Latin texts, and it is a mode of reading that particularly applies to the saying of liturgical prayers. Liturgical prayers tended to be voiced aloud in a period when silent prayer was less typical, and judging from the examples of Latin prayers containing explanatory English prefaces, detailed comprehension of a prayer was not necessarily needed in order to render it efficacious (Saenger, 1989: 142–3).[[5]](#endnote-5) It is even possible that the enigmatic codex Margery Kempe’s book tells us she carried into church, sometimes understood to be a Book of Hours, may have been utilised in such a way.[[6]](#endnote-6) During the mass ‘on a Fryday be-for Whytson Evyn’, Margery tells us, ‘[s]che knelyd up-on hir kneys, heldyng down hir hed and hir boke in hir hand, prayng owyr Lord Crist Ihesu for grace and for mercy’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 21). Rather than understanding this as a silent and improvised prayer, her account indicates that she was either reading the prayer aloud from her book (something conventional scholarly wisdom concerning Margery would say is unlikely), or perhaps from memory, with the book opened up on the appropriate leaf and serving a totemic function. One possibility is that Margery was praying the *Kyrie* as part of the Litany of Saints (a prayer almost always found in Books of Hours) and which would normally have formed a significant part of the mass on Whitsun Eve itself, where it was chanted as part of the blessing of the font. The prayer begins with that refrain which must have been almost universally known to mass-goers, and is one that clearly chimes with Margery’s description of herself praying to Christ for grace and mercy: ‘Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison. Christe audi nos. Christe exaudi nos’ (Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us. Christ hear us.  Christ graciously hear us). Margery elsewhere describes praying the liturgy aloud during mass, when she states her habit of ‘seyn hir Mateyns & swech oþer devocyons’, exercises that she contrasts with an inner form of devotion— ‘meditacyon’— a practice her book says she began to employ more frequently in the church space around the time she commences the process of composing her book (Meech and Allen, 1940: 216). The implications of this movement from outward prayer to inward devotion will be discussed further below.

**Reading and Hearing in the Lay Household**

The regimen for the urban gentleman contained in the fragment mentioned above allows us to consider other reading scenarios in which religious texts serve functions distinct from para-liturgical reading in the church space. The author directs the man upon the use of books during dinner:

Eque cito deferatur liber ad mensam sicut panis. Et ne lingua proferat vana seu nociva, legatur nunc ab uno, nunc ab alio, et a filiia statim cum sciant legere, et cogitetis de divite nebulone cruciato apud inferos in lingua magis quam in aliis membris. Sileat familia in mensa et semper, quatenus est possibile. Aliquando exponatis in vulgari quod edificet uxorem et alios (Pantin, 1976: 421).

Let the book be brought to the table as readily as the bread. And lest the tongue speak vain or hurtful things, let there be reading, now by one, now by another, and by your children as soon as they can read; and think of the wicked Dives, tormented in hell in his tongue more than in any other members. Let the family be silent at table, and always, as far as is possible. Expound something in the vernacular which may edify your wife and others. (Pantin, 1976: 399–400).

Echoing monastic practice, reading should accompany the main meal of the day. Reading is understood as a communal activity in which guests and family participate, interchanging roles as readers and hearers. The gentleman is even advised to ‘expound …in the vernacular’ for the benefit of the less spiritually advanced— he is authorised by his advisor as a lay teacher of sorts, in a manner that parallels Margery’s own tendency to expound on religious matters at the dinner table (to be discussed further below).

The household devotional regimen of Cecily Neville, mother to Edward IV, though clearly applying to a household of significantly higher status, reveals correspondences with the habits advised to the urban gentleman.[[7]](#endnote-7) The ordinances of the household of Cecily tell us that during dinner there was a reading from one of a number of probably vernacular religious works and translations, including Walter Hilton’s treatise on the mixed life, pseudo-Bonaventure (meditations on the life and/or Passion of Christ), an apocryphal text on Christ’s infancy, the *Infantia salvatoris*, the *Legenda sanctorum*, and works of female revelatory authors— Catherine of Siena, Mechtild of Heckeborn and Bridget of Sweden.[[8]](#endnote-8) During the evening meal the reading is revisited. We are told that ‘in the tyme of supper she recyteth the lecture [reading] that was had at dynner to those that be in her presence’ (‘Orders and Rules of the Princess Cecill’, 1790: 37). Felicity Riddy (1993: 111) has rightly pointed out how the custom underlines ‘the extent to which this culture is oral’, where a text perhaps initially ‘read aloud by a clerk […] is then transmitted […] by word of mouth’. More than that, it demonstrates the extent to which the household’s ordinances focus on regulating Cecily’s piety rather than that of the household more broadly. The custom of her rehearsing the day’s earlier reading means that Cecily was constrained to focus on the reading at dinner in a manner the rest of the gathering was not. It might also be the case that her subsequent re-performance of the text was in itself understood as a devout act, a kind of spiritual or penitential practice, comparable to enunciating psalms or prayers aloud. Indeed, this kind of correspondence is hinted at in a key episode from *The Book of Margery Kempe*:[[9]](#endnote-9)

And yet I am not displesyd with þe, for, dowtyr, I have oftyn seyd onto þe þat wheþyr þu preyist with þi mowth er thynkist with thin hert, wheþyr þu redist or herist redyng, I wil be plesyd with the. (Meech and Allen, 1940: 218)

Here Christ addresses Margery in a playfully admonitory tone, advising her in respect of her own particular devotional predilections. He gently chastises her for failing to take his advice to spend more time meditating— ‘thynkyng’— but informs her that he will love her no matter what form her devotions take.[[10]](#endnote-10) The passage is obviously of note in its suggestion that Margery may have been able to read text visually, although Edmund Colledge’s argument that the expression ‘redist or herist redyng’ is formulaic, modelled on a Latin phrase frequently used in indulgences, ‘[o]mnibus visuris vel audituris’, has remained influential in scholarly understandings of this passage (1965: 217).[[11]](#endnote-11) What this passage evidences about the modes of Margery’s literacy is perhaps less telling than the subtlety of the associations and binaries that it sets up. Reading and praying with the mouth are bracketed together as somatic acts, performative engagements with text (whether learned from another person, remembered from previous readings, or recited from a codex). On the other side of the binary are the internal processes of hearing reading and to ‘thynkist with thin hert’, a term which conflates nomenclature for silent prayer and for *meditatio*.[[12]](#endnote-12) Although Christ tells Margery he will be pleased no matter what form her devotions take, the chapter nevertheless insistently promotes the advantages of silent prayer— ‘wher is bettyr preyer…than with thin hert er thyn thowt?’— and of meditation, ‘sittyn stille and ʒevyn thyn hert to meditacyon, and thynkyn swech holy thowtys as God wyl putten in þi mende’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 217–8). The *Book*, in line with affective trends in pastoral theology in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries advocating the *via contemplativa*, here suggests that such inward forms of devotion allow for a more direct engagement between the worshiper and the divine. If internal prayers and meditation are worthier than outward prayer (at least for a spiritually ambitious person like Margery) then the binary associations set up in this chapter also have the effect of similarly establishing reading-by-hearing as more spiritually efficacious than being a reader who vocalises a written text. According to the hints in the *Book* the hearer of religious literature (and by extension, a silent reader) has the opportunity to ruminate upon the text— her engagement with text is internal, rather than somatic, and thus, might be understood as being more sophisticated. As such, this passage, rather than evidencing Margery’s capacity to read visually, perhaps instead skilfully articulates her own pre-eminence in the religio-textual personal relationships that punctuate the account of her religious life in the *Book*,where she often appears as a hearer of devotional readings. It is to those persons, texts and readings that we shall now turn.

**Reading and Margery Kempe**

He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon & oþer bokys, as þe Bybyl wyth doctowrys þer-up-on, Seynt Brydys boks, Hyltons boke, Bone-ventur, Stimulus Amoris, Incendium Amoris, & swech oþer(Meech and Allen, 1940:143).

The above list of books is, in itself, an impressive collection for Margery Kempe to have been familiar with. These are the books shared with her by the ‘reading priest’, read to her in the privacy of his hired room in Lynn, and it is a list of such apparent importance to Margery that it is recorded twice (Meech and Allen, 1940: 39, 143). However, there are further books that we know she was familiar with, such as those included in another list in Chapter 62, where the ‘scribe priest’ reads ‘of a woman clepyd Maria de Oegines’, and the text mentions ‘þe Prykke of Lofe’, the ‘Stimulo Amoris’, and ‘Eliʒabeth of Hungry’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 152–4). Yet more books might be added to a complete catalogue of those Margery studied or was familiar with— the ‘swech oþer’ supplemented to the list above. One such book might be the *Stacions of Rome*, a medieval guide to the churches of Rome, which included lists of remissions given for specific visits. We are told how Margery ‘wolde a gon þe Stacyowns’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 95), which does not imply she used a copy of the book, although the possibility exists of her having shared or seen one, or that she was at least familiar with such a guide. Also, there are textual analogues found within the *Book* that relate to content found in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, *The* *Cloud of Unknowing*, Angela of Foligno’s book, and Rolle’s *Meditations on the Passion*.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Margery’s knowledge of devotional books was thus considerable, and although her reading list seems exceptional for someone living outside of a professional religious vocation, such access to devotional literatures was doubtlessly the mark of other spiritually ambitious lay people in the period.[[14]](#endnote-14) The fact that she was able to access or learn of so many different authors and their subjects has been previously examined, as has a more general study of book usage.[[15]](#endnote-15) As much as the more obvious subject of Margery’s books has drawn attention, the equally thought-provoking topic of *how* she might have read these books, and where, has not received the consideration it deserves. Although no comprehensive summary of a reading process is provided in the *Book*, there are, when compiled together, a substantial number of clues allowing us to draw certain conclusions about her reading habits.

For example, in Chapter 58, where the reading priest is introduced, and the books he reads to Margery are listed, we are also told that readings occur in ‘a chawmbyr’ he had hired, and that, at least during the original meeting, both the priest and his mother are present (Meech and Allen, 1940: 143). This ‘chawmbyr’ is presumably the living quarters for the priest and his mother while staying in Lynn, and therefore, the scenario of the three of them attending readings together is very possible. Margery’s original invitation was, after all, to ‘come & spekyn wyth hym & wyth hys modyr’. Interestingly, the ‘chambre’ is later described as a location in which literary composition might take place. In the penultimate chapter of Book One, the reader is informed of where Margery’s book was written: ‘When þis booke was first in wrytyng, þe sayd creatur was mor at hom in hir chambre with hir wryter’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 216). Margery’s reading sessions in the priest’s chamber clearly provided reciprocal benefits, as Margery caused the priest to ‘lokyn meche good scriptur & many a good doctour whech he wolde not a lokyd at þat tyme had sche ne be’. Here Margery’s account surprisingly hints that she not only had, at least in some instances, a better knowledge of scripture than the cleric, but also that she was more familiar with certain doctors’ commentaries.[[16]](#endnote-16) Where would she have received such information? Who, besides the reading priest, was providing Margery with a detailed analysis of scripture?

Chapter 58 begins with Margery praying to God to provide her with ‘redyng of Holy Scriptur’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 142). Margery expresses how her soul is hungry for ‘Goddys word’, and it is both through reading and listening to sermons (she would give ‘a nobyl for to haue euery day a sermown’) that this hunger would be satisfied. Spiritual sustenance, or food for the soul, can be seen as a theme running throughout the *Book*, as dining and spirituality often become linked together. Perhaps her two cravings, for reading and sermons, were at times combined, through having a sermon collection read aloud. H. L. Spencer (1993: 39) suggests that

many of the surviving sermon collections could have been used as pious lay

reading /…/ The distinction between reading and preaching, *lectio* and

*praedicatio*, had always been thinly drawn and, by the late Middle Ages /…/

the two were evidently perceived as complementary practices by some lay

people[.]

The *Book* thus hints at the possibility of private hearings of sermons, rather than only more public and formal preaching in church. The *Book* tells us, for example, that she attended a sermon given at Lent by an Augustinian friar ‘in hys owyn hows at Lynne’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 167). The Lollard Joan Baker claimed in her 1511 heresy trial that she ‘cold here a better sermond at home in her howse than any doctor or prist colde make at Polis cross’ (Hudson, 1988: 199–200). Although Baker’s testimony was construed by her prosecutors (and by subsequent scholarship) as specifically characteristic of her membership of a secretive cult, Margery’s *Book* supports the idea that the airing of sermons in private households was not only ‘the exclusive province of self-identifying Lollards’ (Kelly and Perry, 2013: 217). Spencer (1993: 259) writes about sermons collected for private study, where late-fourteenth-century and later homilaries contain scriptural commentaries in English, which may indicate a desire ‘to reach a lay reading public’. Margery’s sittings with the reading priest, or any of her other devotional advisors, may have included reading from such a collection, or perhaps discussion of a sermon heard earlier in church or another public setting. Through listening, she absorbs knowledge either read aloud from a book, or spoken in a sermon, which had been sourced or developed by clerks from written material. Margery ‘reads’ the words of her spiritual guides much in the way outlined in the *Cloud of Unknowing*:

Alle is one in maner, redyng & heryng; clerkes redyn on bookes, & lewid men

redyn on clerkes, whan þei here hem preche þe word of God (Hodgson, 1982: 39).

In Chapter 15, Margery meets with the Bishop of Lincoln, Philip Repingdon (Meech and Allen, 1940: 33–6). Repingdon had authored his own sermon collection, *Sermones super evangelia dominicalia*, which has been preserved in at least eight manuscripts, and of which Forde (in Wenzel, 2005: 51) shows that its purpose was ‘to make available biblical scholarship in a practical way to an educated readership’. Spencer (1993: 260) agrees that the sermons were probably for private reading, ‘albeit by theological students and clerics rather than laity’, but adds that ‘one manuscript is known to have belonged to a husband and wife’. Repingdon was clearly a man with an interest in furthering others’ devotional understanding. When he meets with Margery, the *Book* tells us he commends ‘hir felyngys & hir contemplacyons’, and advises that ‘hir felyngys schuld be wretyn’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 34). Repingdon is then said to meet with Margery again when she ‘cam to mete’ and was asked by the clerks also attending ‘many hard qwestyons’, the answers to which the Bishop liked ‘rygth wel’, and which filled the clerks with ‘gret meruayl’ that she could answer ‘so redyly & pregnawntly’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 34–5).

Margery would appear at the beginning of Chapter 58 to be looking to fill a void following the loss of ‘þe ankyr’ who had previously provided her with God’s ‘holy worde’. This anchorite was a Dominican of Lynn, and Margery’s confessor before she left to go on pilgrimage for Jerusalem.[[17]](#endnote-17) Another cleric who provided Margery with scriptural readings and interpretations was Alan of Lynn. The Carmelite is said to have ‘enformyd hir in questions of Scriptur whan sche wolde any askyn hym’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 168). As with the reading priest, Margery is said to to give something back in the relationship, as Alan finds her conversation ‘gostlyy & fruteful’. One meeting takes place when Alan is to dine in Lynn with a woman who has taken the mantle and ring, and Margery is invited to come and speak with him (Meech and Allen, 1940: 170). The dinner is described as being ‘sawcyd & sawryd wyth talys of Holy Scriptur’.

Margery could not have hoped for a much more illustrious scholar as a mentor than Alan of Lynn. Alan was a Cambridge doctor of divinity, and among his writings were indexes of St Bridget’s revelations and prophecies, and of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Stimulus Amoris­–*­­–texts that Margery evidently came to know well.[[18]](#endnote-18) He also compiled a contents-table for the *Reductorium Morale* of the monk Peter Bercheur, which Owst calls ‘the greatest achievement in systematic tabulation of the period’ (1965: 307). Margery’s dedication and enthusiasm for Bridget, her familiarity with the *Stimulus*, and her hunger for hearing sermons as part of her devotional lifestyle, all perhaps reflect Alan of Lynn’s powerful influence in expanding Margery’s religio-literary knowledge. Through their reading and speaking together they obviously formed a strong bond— signalled by Alan’s presentation of a pair of knives to Margery (Meech and Allen, 1940: 170).

These moments, when Margery is shown reading books and scripture with the reading priest, her Dominican confessor, and Alan of Lynn, provide us not only with clues about the fruitful and reciprocal nature of their readings, but also tell us something about the settings where they took place. The meetings are often recorded as having occurred in a domestic background, and in the instance with Alan of Lynn, at the dinner table. Such a devotional repast resonates well with evidence found in the instructions for the urban gentleman, and in Cecily Neville’s household ordinances. The reading of books, prayers, or scripture at table was clearly a common practice. In fact, we see Margery reciting a text of scripture to her pilgrimage companions while dining (Meech and Allen, 1940: 65–6). Margery is abruptly told to ‘syttyn style & makyn mery’ when at table, and not to ‘speke of þe Gospel’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 65). Margery’s ingrained habit of speaking of the Gospel at supper is clearly not welcomed by all, and she is made to agree to desist. Margery, however, is presented as being so accustomed to transmitting scriptural lore at the table that she simply cannot help herself, and we hear that, when next ‘at mete’, she ‘rehersyd a text of a Gospel lych as sche had leryd be-for-tyme wyth oþer goode wordys’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 66). Perhaps this ‘text’ and those ‘goode wordys’ had come from an earlier encounter with the Dominican anchorite or the reading priest, or with Alan of Lynn or perhaps even extemporised from her increasingly expansive religio-textual knowledge. Whatever the source, it is apparent that Margery’s absorption of religious text is not static and one-sided— she seeks out mentors, listens to readings or hears interpretations, participates in an exchange of ideas or directs a line of questioning, and then later relays this acquired knowledge to others. The representation of Margery’s religious discoursing thus has other resonances with Cecily Neville’s household rules; Margery is presented as someone who repeats a learned and remembered reading: she ‘rehersyd a text’, even if she cannot resist marrying diverse readings together, adding ‘oþer goode wordys’. Perhaps in deference to prescriptions on female preaching, the kind of teaching that these women engage in is framed as being recycled rather than innovatory. Whether either woman actually limited herself in such a manner is open to speculation.

Looking back to the *Book* for other specific instances where Margery is involved in reading, rather than writing, speaking, or prayer, and beyond that of the reading priest, there is the intriguing mention of a friendship with Lady Westmorland (Joan Beaufort). In Chapter 54, when Margery is standing before the Archbishop of York facing charges put against her, she is accused of having advised Lady Greystoke, a daughter of Joan Beaufort, to leave her husband (Meech and Allen, 1940: 133–4). Margery denies the accusation, and reports she was summoned to the Lady before departing for Jerusalem (Meech and Allen, 1940: 133).[[19]](#endnote-19) The Suffragan bringing the charge states how Joan ‘was wel plesyd wyth [Margery] & lykyd wel [her] wordys’, and Margery adds to this by declaring to the Archbishop that she,

telde hir a good tale of a lady þat was damp-myd for sche wolde not louyn hir

enmijs & of a baly þat was savyd for he louyd hys enmys & forʒaf þat þei had

trespasyd a-ʒen hym, & ʒet he was heldyn an euyl man (Meech and Allen, 1940: 134).

The tale bears a striking resemblance to Christ’s parable of the beggar named Lazurus, and the rich man whose crumbs he fed upon. The beggar died and was taken to Abraham, and the rich man died and was sent to hell (Luke 16.19–31).[[20]](#endnote-20)

We do not know for certain where Margery sourced her stories, but it is probable that they stemmed from *exempla*, the often entertaining apocryphal *narraciones* commonly embedded within sermons.[[21]](#endnote-21) Since the appreciative Archbishop declares that ‘it was a good tale’, it seems likely her story came from one of her numerous devotional advisers, either prepared with her in advance, or simply absorbed by Margery at an earlier hearing to be repeated at that moment (Meech and Allen, 1940: 134).[[22]](#endnote-22) Despite its original source and possible sanctioning beforehand, the tale is an example of the kind of ‘good wordys’ that Margery speaks, as she narrates it to a noblewoman— the sister of the Duke of Bedford and the Bishop of Winchester.[[23]](#endnote-23) Perhaps Margery’s reputation preceded her, inspiring Joan’s summons in order to hear her speak such words.

The most intriguing aspect of the anecdote of Margery’s visit to Joan Beaufort is what may have occurred, but is not directly conveyed within the account in the *Book*. The Beaufort and Neville family was to have a long and well-documented history of devotional practices linked with book usage. Margery may have been a guest of Joan Beaufort in a setting similar to that presented of Cecily Neville (Joan’s daughter) in her household ordinance.[[24]](#endnote-24) A day punctuated by mealtime readings and religious discussion in which *exempla* and scripture might be related seems a fitting scenario.[[25]](#endnote-25) Indeed, Cecily’s ordinances state that after supper she would retire from the public arena of the dining hall to a more private household space, where she would ‘disposeth herself to be famyliare with her gentlewomen’ (1790: 37) and such intimate female gatherings may have provided opportunities for less regulated religious discussion and storytelling, beyond the regimens and customs of great households. It is not unreasonable to assume that some book reading, or reference to material read in books, could have elicited discussion between Lady Westmorland and her pious guest. Margery evidently left on good terms with Joan, and must have felt confident of their friendship, or the impression she had made on the noblewoman, as she declares to the Archbishop that she ‘wyl gon a-geyn to hir’ for a letter, declaring she did not attempt to convince Lady Greystoke to leave her husband (Meech and Allen, 1940: 133).

The *Book* informs us that Margery read numerous books together with the reading priest. She is also said to have studied scripture with Alan of Lynn and her Dominican confessor. As we have seen, dining and devotion is also shown in the *Book* to be a regular part of her lifestyle. In fact, devotional living follows her throughout the day, in,

many dyuers tymes & in many dyuers placys, boþe in chirche & in hir

chawmbre, at hir mete & in hir praerys, in felde & in towne, bothyn goyng &

sytting /…/ in dyrkenes as on day-lygth (Meech and Allen, 1940: 88).

Margery is shown to be a truly versatile creature in her devotional habits, but it is perhaps in her gaining access to books, and making use of the knowledge stored within them, that she excels. Her example can be used to demonstrate that books and book learning were not so difficult to come by, even for a woman of the mercantile class, and that gatherings to read or discuss religious literature were relatively common among those eager to exchange devotional words. For a woman like Margery, or indeed others such as Cecily Neville, or the urban gentleman who received the pious instructions, devotional practices rooted in reading were the bread and butter of daily living. The household, and the table in particular, was a common locus for such activities. The household reading offered a setting that was less prescribed in liturgical structure ­­–– a devotional institution in its own right –– and yet developed as an imitation of the monastic lector. However, whether reading privately or in communal settings, whether reading in a domestic location or in church, Margery, and others like her, were looking to books for better ways to enact their faith.

**Conclusion: A Book that ‘serveth for the closett’**

We began this chapter by suggesting that understanding the mode of reading was essential to gain a sense of not just where reading took place, but also of the variegated nature of textual transmission in the late Middle Ages. The examples we have discussed suggest how readings might reverberate in oral/aural contexts and even in settings in which no codex was present— or that books may have been held whilst the learned text inside was rehearsed, without need of visual reading. The examples from the household regimens discussed above demonstrate the often communal nature of vernacular reading, and Margery’s recital of Gospel stories and religious *exempla* in the *Book* suggests how commonplace such communal ‘reading’ contexts might have been in fifteenth-century England. In Margery Kempe’s *Book*,reading is always presented as an interactive experience, whether within the church where her prayers would resonate with the liturgical service and might be witnessed and shared by other mass-goers, or in the household chambers or dining halls where she was read to and she redeployed remembered readings. Household regimens, of course, construct an inflexible and idealised schema for daily life that may not have always been followed rigidly even in the households they were created for, never mind providing an exact template for what took place more broadly in secular households. Nevertheless, they do serve to establish a cultural correlation between reading and storytelling at the dining table, and we may also be sure that entertaining and secular literatures were sounded out in such contexts too. As the Lincolnshire canon Robert Mannyng observed in *Handlyng Synne*, ‘yn festys & at the ale,/ Love men to lestene trotouale [idle stories]’ (Mannyng, 1983: 4). Mannyng’s words remind us that reading (or the performance of text without direct use of a codex) in the household had the potential to be less strictly controlled than the corresponding communal reading activities within religious houses.[[26]](#endnote-26) Indeed, Margery’s ‘edifying table talk’, something that might ‘merge imperceptibly’ (Pantin, 1976: 408) with reading at the table, testifies to the capacity for more creative forms of ‘reading’ and quasi-literary performance to occur around dining tables in secular households.

Interaction with religious literature also occurred in less public contexts, even if not necessarily alone. Much of Margery’s ‘reading’ appears to have occurred in small groups in non-public chambers. The will of Cecily Neville, written in 1495, reveals that certain books, at least for someone of her status, might be used within different public and private spaces, and were perhaps even produced with a particular reading space in mind. Cecily gifted a large amount of books in her will, and the sheer volume of liturgical books included, along with mountains of religious vestments and vessels, signals something of how her household encompassed an elaborate, extraordinarily well-provisioned liturgical establishment. Many of the books she gifts (among which were thirteen processionals, five antiphonaries, three breviaries, two Psalters, seven graduals, three Mass books, one book of collects, one book of gospels with epistles and one book of legends) may have been used by her in-house or visiting clergy, and the fact that she donates batches of such liturgical books to religious houses suggests as much. Other books in richly ornamented bindings, such as the ‘portuos [breviary] with claspes of gold covered with blacke cloth of golde’ or the ‘prymour withclaspes silver and gilt covered with blewe velvett’ (Spedding, 2010: 266, 268)— prestige objects that she gifts to high status secular affiliates— she may have used herself in the household chapel, perhaps accruing them as gifts as well as through commission, and utilising such visually impressive codices in the public chapel space in accordance with her lofty status. One of Cecily’s Psalters is described as having ‘claspes of siluer & guilte enameled couered with a grene clothe of golde’ (Spedding, 2010: 266). With such materially rich books, the binding clearly performed a pivotal function in testifying to the status of the ‘reader’. Cecily’s other Psalter is housed in a plain binding of ‘white ledder’ and her will describes it as a ‘Sawter that servith for the closett’— a book suited for use in the private bedchamber. It makes sense that less heavily ornamented books might ‘servith’ Cecily in such moments when alone, or accompanied by only her most intimate household *familia*, during those times and within those spaces wherein a public performance of princely identity was no longer required. It is interesting that the references to being fitted for reading in the bedchamber only occurs in relation to this Psalter and to a mass book. Perhaps in contrast with what we might expect, it is psalms and liturgical prayers, rather than mystical or meditational literature that appears to have accompanied Cecily into her most private household space. We might even allow ourselves to imagine the aged Cecily murmuring these texts aloud in the flickering half-light of her chamber, her hands grasping a plainly bound white leather book; barely needing to scan the text written in the book she intones, ‘…benedictus Deus qui non abstulit orationem meam et misericordiam suam a me’ (Psalm 66, 20) (blessed be God, who hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me).

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1. For instance the studies of the repurposing of Christological and meditational literature by translators and adaptors of pseudo-Bonaventure and other authors in Kelly and Perry (2014) and Johnson and Westphall (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Warwickshire County Record Office, CR1998/J2/76. A transcription and English translation along with discussion occurs in Pantin (1976: 398–422); all citations are taken from Pantin. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Saenger (1997: 268, and 1989: 147) discusses the Latin nomenclature for silent reading, including the direction that occurs in the regimen for the urban gentleman in respect of the church’s books, that is, to see the text (‘videre’/ ‘viderit’). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This kind of public and also intimate spiritual experience are described by Brantley (2007: 167, 8) as ‘“para-liturgical” exercises of devotion’, illustrated by the example of how late medieval devotion to the Passion could be ‘commemorated both by the collective remembrance of the formal mass, and by the personal *imitatio* so often interiorized in the individual’s life of prayer’. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Saenger (1989: 143) argues ‘in the fifteenth century […] the relationship between text and prayer was universally much closer than the one that exists today’ and describes the potential for the ‘public recitation of […] Latin texts […] even if they were not understood’ (1997: 268); an example of Latin prayers with English prefaces contained in Lambeth Palace MS 559 is discussed in Perry (2011: 442–3). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Eamon Duffy asserts this possibility (2006: 25, 55); Lawrence Tuck (2013: 236–82) argues that the Book of Hours may have had an influence on many aspects of the structure and content of the *Book of Margery Kempe*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a study of the books and belongings Cecily bequeathed in her will and the running of her pious household see Armstrong (1942: 73–94) reprinted in (1983: 135–66). For further discussion see Dzon (2009: 235–47), Riddy (1993: 110), and Perry (2013: 97–8, 121). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Among her many book bequests, Cecily bequeathed the books containing these texts to her two granddaughters who had been committed to a conventual life: Anne (prioress of Sion abbey) and Bridget (a sister in Dartford priory). For an edition and discussion of Cecily’s will see Spedding (2010: 256–72). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hereafter *The Book of Margery Kempe* will be shortened to the *Book*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See the *Middle English Dictionary,* s. v. *thinken,* version 2, no. 6 (a), for a number of analogous examples of ‘thynkyng’ being used as meaning devout meditation, and particularly upon the figure of Christ. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See also Windeatt (2004: 381). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For ‘prayer of the heart’ and ‘to read with the heart’ (silent reading) see Saenger (1989: 145–7; 1997: 268–9). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a more complete list of the books associated with the *Book*, see the chapter section ‘Devotional Books and Pious Practices’, and Appendix II in Tuck (2013: 299–329, and 340–1). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Margaret Connolly writes, for example, that the ‘appetite for religious texts in particular seems to have been voracious’, and that ‘original writing in English could not keep pace with the demand for vernacular reading material’ (2011: 133). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a study of the religious literature listed in the *Book*, see, for example, Goodman (2002: 112–20). For an essay on the cultural practices of literacy see Jenkins (2004: 113–28). For a more general study of book usage in the late medieval period, see, for example, Gillespie (2011: 145–73). For women and reading practices, in particular Margaret Beaufort’s family, as well as on Lollard practices, see Krug (2002: 65–113, and 114–52). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. It is possible that Margery’s inquisitive nature merely caused the priest to look up certain particulars, rather than suggesting that Margery’s knowledge surpassed his own. However, the syntax suggests that Margery is not merely the inspiration, but also the supplier of such gained knowledge; and the fact that it is not merely scripture, but also annotations by certain doctors, indicates that Margery is actively involved in the process of providing information for further study. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For reference to the Dominican anchorite see Meech and Allen (1940: 382). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, Windeatt (2004: 305), and Meech’s note (1940: 268). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. It is worth noting here that Margery was, in a similar way, often summoned to speak to the Abbess and sisters of Denny Abbey (Meech and Allen, 1940: 202). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Together with Matthew 5.44, on loving one’s enemies, and praying for those that persecute, Luke’s account describes Margery’s own tale. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For discussion, see Owst (1965: 320). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Compare with Margery’s knowledgeable response to a demand to interpret ‘Crescite & multiplicamini’ (Gen.1.22) by a ‘gret clerke’ at York (Meech and Allen, 1940: 121). She is also shown to repeat words learned from a sermon in Chapter 53, when she chastises a cleric examining her by saying, ‘ʒyf any man be euyl plesyd wyth my prechyng, note hym wel, for he is gylty’ (Meech and Allen, 1940: 128). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. All three are mentioned in the *Book*. See Meech and Allen (1940: 129) for the Duke of Bedford, and (1940: 172) for the Bishop of Winchester. The third brother, Thomas (Duke of Exeter), is not mentioned, although he had the strongest ties with Lynn––see Goodman (2002: 33–4). Perhaps Joan learned of Margery through her brother Thomas. For Margery’s ‘good wordys’ see, for example, Meech and Allen (1940: 20; 130; 177; and 205). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See, for example, Armstrong (1983: 141). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Besides Margery’s tale of the lady and the bailiff, she also relates an *exemplum* of a bear and a pear tree. See Meech and Allen (1940: 126–7). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For an analysis of how regimented the reading of devotional texts might be, see Perry’s discussion of a copy of the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* in Syon abbey (2013: 114-120). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)