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Margery Kempe and the Counter-Surveillance of the Medieval Spectacle

Karma Lochrie

This paper argues that Margery Kempe deploys spectacle as part of her own self-fashioned counter-surveillance strategy. Drawing upon Sarah Stanbury's analysis of the medieval gaze in terms of "the eye of piety," this essay argues that spectacle and pious gaze work together to disable surveillance efforts in Kempe's narrative. It also places this version of spectacle against Michel Foucault's idea of the spectacle as a punishment technology that becomes superseded by the panopticon. Coupled with Kempe's counter-surveillant spectacle is her self-styled *sous-veillance* in the form of reversing the interrogative gaze upon her interrogators. Finally, Kempe's *Book* negotiates the implied gendered surveillance of medieval conduct books for women in her narrative of her conversion. At the level of the text Kempe calls on her readers to exercise a "surveillance of care" rather than a "surveillance of control" in their narrative surveillance of the subject of her autobiography.

Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* that the public "spectacle" of premodernity was replaced by modernity's panopticon and a shift from the public gaze in which the many watched the few on a scaffold to a more sinister private, concealed gaze in which the few watched the many (32-69, 195-228). The many, in turn, internalised the sense of being watched. Foucault's genealogy from spectacle to panopticon concerns itself solely with state-sponsored surveillance, and therefore, he understands the "spectacle" exclusively as a technology of punishment that depends on the exhibition of a prisoner's punishment. But what about the individual who, living in fifteenth-century England, finds herself the target of several overlapping surveillance publics from the

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parish church of St Margaret's in King's Lynn, where Margery Kempe worshipped with neighbours, to her fellow pilgrims, to the monks and members of the Archbishop of York's court, to the mayors and civic leaders of Beverley, Bedford, and Leicester? Kempe repeatedly makes a spectacle of herself through her weeping in all its variations, causing distress, confusion, hostility, and wonder wherever she goes. In addition, however, Kempe's clamorous spectacle of weeping and somatic distress serves as a counter-surveillance form of resistance that scrambles the scrutiny to which she is subjected. Margery's "noise," as Julie Orlemanski has argued, opposes the very intelligibility of the religious, political, and social scepticism aimed at her – as a kind of apophatic rhetoric, or *vox inarticulata illiterata* that "signifies the radical exteriority of a divine signifying order" (128). Her weeping also performs an auditory and visual spectacle that challenges the very culture of fear, shame, and internalised watchfulness that surveillance produces. Kempe's tears refuse to be modest or respectful of public places and authority figures, and in this sense, they are outrageous. Even readers are challenged by the fact that so much of Kempe's book is devoted to "the crying plot" with its noise, spectacle, and inevitable rebuke.[1] The spectacle Kempe repeatedly performs serves as "the irritating grain of sand around which the *Book* forms its pearl," in Orlemanski's apt description (136), and this means it threatens to alienate her reader as much as it does many of her townspeople and religious authorities. It also complicates our reading of her because it seems to disperse the narratorial perspective and brings static to our sense of her as a subject and authorial persona in ways that might annoy or confuse us.[2] In addition to these more familiar effects of Kempe's crying plot, I would like to suggest that, contrary to Foucault's narrative of the spectacle, Kempe's exhibitionist weeping served as one of her strategies for neutralising and/or rebuking the very mechanisms and agents of surveillance newly emergent in fifteenth-century culture.

With the advent of Lancastrian rule and the Church's efforts to counteract Lollard heresy, England during Kempe's lifetime experienced a significant increase in state and religious forms of surveillance. The perceived threat of Lollardy stimulated a series of ecclesiastical legislations aimed at limiting religious discussion and writing. Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 was aimed at Oxford University, but it also had the

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[1] Orlemanski uses the term "crying plot" to delineate the serial incidents of Kempe's

[2] This idea is indebted to Orlemanski's analysis of the "dispersal of authorial agency and the dispersal of narratorial perspective" (127).

wide-ranging effect of censuring all religious argument outside the universities.[3] In addition, Article 7 of the Constitutions forbids anybody to translate a text of Scripture into English without permission, effectively rendering English quotation of Scripture evidence of potential heresy. When Kempe appears before Archbishop Henry Bowet of York, she quotes the Gospel story of Christ's blessing all who "hear the word of God and keep it" in defence of her own right to preach against Arundel's explicit legislation to the contrary. Moreover, the very fact that she quotes Scripture in the vernacular provokes the clerks to accuse her of being possessed by the devil.[4] Kempe is repeatedly interrogated precisely because her behaviour flagrantly violated the Constitutions. Her position as a bourgeois laywoman, rather than a female religious, increased her vulnerability and her visibility.

The fifteenth-century culture of surveillance was not limited to religious speech and writing: Paul Strohm has demonstrated that the Lancastrian regimes of Henry IV and V engaged in surveillance practices against their enemies and perceived threats of revolt against their regimes. In particular, Strohm points to Henry IV's "leading role in forging a link between Lollardy and sedition" and his capitalising on the various plots against him by manufacturing his own narratives of malicious and treasonous rebellion (65). At the civic level of government, too, Christian Liddy documents a late fifteenth-century culture of surveillance in which sheriffs, juries of city wards, and townspeople in general were encouraged to report "the names of all persones dwellyng commyng or repairyng vnto your said wardes which fynde conterfet forge or tell any fals or feyned tales or tydynges or sowe any sedicious langage" (London Metropolitan Archives, COL/CC/01/01/008, fol. 49r, qtd in Liddy 316). Such a highly charged atmosphere of suspicion and mutual surveillance could prove dangerous to anyone speaking inconvenient truths, as Mum tells the narrator in an early fifteenth-century text, *Mum and the Sothsegger*. The narrator observes that no one speaks the truth or advises the king, but indulges instead in a self-serving quietism in which they "ever kepe thaym cloos for caicching of wordes" ("are ever vigilant due to the overhearing of words," l. 164; my translation). The phrase "caicching of wordes" is particularly interesting be-

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[3] The definitive study of the effects of the Constitutions on a fifteenth-century culture of censorship as well as the rise of vernacular theology is Watson. Edwin D. Craun also examines the atmosphere of suspicion in fifteenth-century England created by the Constitutions.

[4] *Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Staley, 52.2971. All future quotations will be cited by chapters and line numbers from this edition in the text. The translationsare my own.

cause it is not used anywhere else in the Middle English corpus that I have found. It is tempting to wonder whether the phrase's peculiarity to this text represents the Mum author's attempt to attach a name to what he saw as a pervasive auditory surveillance responsible for significant threats to truth-telling in his time.

Kempe's announcement in her book that she is embarking on the way of high perfection omits mention of that other way through the landscape of fifteenth-century England and the Holy Land that is fraught with danger for her – danger in the form of interrogations of the heterodoxy of her faith before the Archbishop of York, charges by various religious and lay persons that she is a practising Lollard, critiques of her as a rogue woman and wife, and accusations of her usurping the role of priest, telling bad stories about clergy, and luring wives away from their husbands in a sort of domestic sedition. In order to negotiate her fifteenth-century predicament where the "catching of words" circulates from domestic to civic to ecclesiastical spheres and beyond, Kempe adopts a decidedly counterintuitive strategy, that is, an unruly public spectacle that is as noisy as it is visible. In calling her spectacular weeping a strategy, I do not mean to suggest that it is a ruse, or that it is *merely* a screen against the surveillance she encounters. She herself struggles with the publicity, disruption, and condemnation that her weeping and somatic expressions occasion, going even so far as to ask Christ to relieve her of these involuntary manifestations of mystical affect. Even though Kempe's unruly weeping seems to be beyond her control or regulation, it nevertheless functions counterintuitively (no doubt) to repel surveillance through heightened visibility, exposure, and noise. "Try catching this," Kempe's weeping seems to be saying in a direct challenge to that very auditory and visual surveillance that surrounds her. Moreover, as I shall argue, Kempe's strategy of the spectacle must be understood in terms of new theories of the way in which medieval spectacles differed from the way we think of spectacle today, and indeed, even the way Foucault theorised spectacle in *Discipline and Punish.*

In addition to her spectacular counter-surveillance strategy of weeping, Kempe also deploys a second strategy that might be considered a premodern version of what we now call "sous-veillance," or "watchful vigilance from underneath."[5] Sousveillance designates a reversal of sur-

[5] The term was coined by Steve Mann and usually designates the recording of an activity from the perspective of a participant, including the monitoring of authority figures. Annette Kern-Stähler is the first medieval scholar to have considered how sousveillance functions in a medieval context: "The Bishop's Spies: Surveillance in Late Medieval

veillance insofar as the human subject who is usually the target of surveillance turns the technology back on the one who surveils, often exposing their wrongdoing and effectively disorienting their oversight. According to contemporary scholars of surveillance, it is one way of appropriating the tools of social control and opposing the surveillance state, or in this case, institution. Typically, sousveillance involves the use of body or phone cameras to document such things as police overreach and abuse. Kempe, of course, was born too early to mount this type of sousveillance, but she does deploy the technique associated with contemporary sousveillance of "reflectionism," that is, confronting power by reflecting it back to itself. Kempe implements this reflectionism by using narrative and the tradition of fraternal correction to reverse the direction of scrutiny by way of critiquing the very persons surveilling her. This second strategy proves to be a very dangerous – but also very effective – way of negotiating institutional authorities who have the power to silence her.

Confessions of a Bad Wife

Before Kempe engages with the forces of surveillance that would curtail her mystical expressions, she frames her autobiography in terms of her own shedding of two forms of gender and domestic surveillance that precipitate her postpartum madness and subsequent recovery from it. After the birth of Kempe's first child, she recounts her dramatic descent into what is termed today postpartum depression, but which looked something like possession by demons at the time. Despairing of her life, Kempe is tormented by the certainty that her one unconfessed sin will damn her soul to hell. When she goes to her confessor to be finally relieved of this sin, however, he over-hastily rebukes her, causing great shame, but even more importantly, causing her to cut her confession short. Following this aborted confession Kempe descends into a frightening madness marked by tears, self-harming, raging, and despair. This first mise-en-scene of Kempe's desperation and confession might not seem particularly gendered insofar as men and women were considered equally susceptible to sinfulness, pride, and fear, such as Kempe describes. However, Kempe seems to draw explicitly on medieval conduct books for women when she claims that the devil has personally advised

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Monastic Houses," paper delivered at the New Chaucer Society (July 2018, forthcoming).

her that she need not confess this sin that she has kept secret her whole life. Kempe's vulnerability to the devil's persuasion mimics that of all women going back to Eve. Geoffrey de la Tour Landry's fourteenth-century conduct book, for example, warns against women who, like Eve, believe too easily the devil's persuasion:

> Eue, oure furst moder [. . .] trowed to lyghtly whanne the serpent made her to breke the comaundement of God in Paradys, whanne she bote upon the appill, whereby she was deceyued, as mani other symple women be now a dayes, that trowen lightly flateringe of foles, wherby they fal into synne and vnto vnclennesse, for they enqueren not, nor take no reward nor doute not, the last ende of suche thinges ar thei consent to doo. (148)[6]

> Eve, our first mother [. . .] believed too easily when the serpent made her break the commandment of God in Paradise, when she bit into the apple, whereby she was deceived, as are many simple women nowadays who believe the flattering of fools too readily, whereby they fall into sin and uncleanness, for they do not investigate it, nor take into account, nor consider the outcome of such things before they consent to do them.

Rebecca Krug has persuasively argued for understanding Kempe's account of her despair and madness, as well as her recovery, in terms of medieval devotional works of spiritual consolation (esp. 24-59), but surely, there is a case to be made that Kempe's framing of her concealed sin draws as well on medieval conduct books for women, in which women are figured as especially vulnerable to the devil's suggestions and those of young men.

Having been driven mad from her failed confession, Kempe undergoes a form of domestic surveillance by her husband, who, out of concern for her and others, finally divests her of the keys to the buttery, the very symbol of her office as a housewife and overseer of the family household. While her madness robs her of herself in one respect, her husband and their servants rob her of another part of her identity: her role and authority as housewife. Kempe's initiation into her spiritual journey, therefore, begins in a two-part mise-en-scene of gender surveillance in which her very failures to live up to either the model housewife or the model Christian woman are the very mechanisms that propel her into her spiritual journey and her ultimate escape from these particular forms of gender surveillance. Although her husband and her fellow

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[6] See Ashley's discussion of female courtesy books (27-28). See also Burger on the Virgin's exemplary "prudent caution" regarding the angel's prophecy of her becoming the mother of God (82). (My translation).

townspeople will later remonstrate with her for being a bad wife, Kempe establishes from the beginning of her book that, although she suffers this judgement from others, she is personally immunised from this particular gender critique and the surveillance it weaponises.

Kempe's relapse from her spiritual path likewise takes a distinctly feminine form, according to medieval conduct books and religious texts: "alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of the pepul" (2.201-02), and for that reason, she embarks on her two failed businesses of brewing and milling. In this incident, however, Kempe not only measures her experiences against the norms established in conduct books and religious texts; she also becomes exposed to the social censure and surveillance of her fellow townspeople, whose conjectures throughout the book serve as a kind of surveillance-refrain of the moralised gender categories against which Kempe endeavours to establish her own spiritual experience and direction. In this particular case of Kempe's relapse into pride and the desire to be admired, Kempe's narrative concurs with the lateral surveillance of the townspeople, but from here on out, the narrative of Kempe's *Book* positions her in opposition to the surveillance of her fellows.

Kempe's shift away from her old life here not only marks a mystical beginning point of her narrative, but it also signifies a disabling of the mechanisms of gender surveillance. Kempe frames her own pre-conversion spiritual and mental crisis in the very terms of conduct books for women such that, when she makes the pivot away from that life, she also exits the hold that the ideal of the good wife has on her. When John exclaims to her on the way from York, "ye arn no good wyfe" (11.528) after she answers his hypothetical question saying she would rather see him dead than have sex with him again, he articulates her implicit condition on the outside of the particular medieval panopticon of the housewife's conduct book. She is no good wife; John is right; and neither does she suffer from the internalised prohibitions that accompany that genre of surveillance for women. Nor is she bullied by the antithesis of this ideal, the "wicked wife" of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue."[7] Kempe embarks instead on another scene of surveillance in her pursuit of the way of high perfection.

Making a Spectacle: "The Crying Plot"

[7] I am referring to Jankyn's "Bok of Wykked Wives," from which he reads to the Wife of Bath until she persuades him to burn the book (see Chaucer).

I want to focus on two different ways in which the "crying plot" of Kempe's autobiography, with its bodily and auditory "spectacle," undoes the surveillance that would normally silence, or at least contain, her, at the same time that it opposes "noise" to the intelligibility of religious discourse in particular.[8] As I noted at the beginning of this essay, Orlemanski associates Kempe's "noyse" with a "trope of apophatic rhetoric" insofar as it distinguishes itself from the language of written and oral discourse, instead "mim[ing] the radical exteriority of the divine signifying order" (128). Like Orlemanski, Julian of Norwich articulates the meaning and signification of Kempe's tears as a language opposed to the intelligible rationale of the Church and the world. In Kempe's conversation with the famous anchoress of Norwich, Julian adduces St Paul to argue that "wepynges unspekable" (18.976) are evidence of the Holy Ghost's movement in the soul. She urges Kempe to set her trust in the spectacle she becomes through her weepings and writhings instead of the "langage of the world" (18.983-84), which would discipline Kempe's religious expression and subordinate it to the Church's guidance.

In practice Kempe's weeping and writhing produce confusion as well as wonder, irritation, and outright aggression. Kempe's "unspeakable weepings" begin, as she tells us, on Mount Calvary:

> Sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr [. . .] And sche had so gret compassyon and so gret peyn to se owyr Lordys peyn that sche myt not kepe hirself fro krying and roryng thow sche schuld a be ded therfor. And this was the fyrst cry that evyr sche cryed in any contemplacyon. (12.1572-80)

> She fell down because she could not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would burst asunder [. . .] And she had such great compassion and such great pain in seeing our Lord's pain that she could not keep herself from crying and roaring even though she should be dead as a result. And this was the first cry that every she cried in any contemplation.

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[8] Orlemanski argues for a "complex dynamic and ongoing interplay" between the noise and intelligibility in Kempe's book (125). My focus is on the ways Kempe's unintelligible noise and visible spectacle oppose the forces arrayed against her, but I agree with Orlemanski that Kempe's noise alternates with an intelligible discourse within her own narrative.

The reactions to Kempe's new manner of crying are swift, sharp, and desperate to find a rational explanation:

> Sum seyd it was a sekenes; sum seyd sche had dronkyn to mech wyn; sum bannyd hir; sum wisshed sche had ben in the havyn; sum wolde sche had ben in the se in a bottumles boyt; and so ich man as hym thowte. Other gostly men lovyd hir and favowrd hir the mor. Sum gret clerkys seyden owyr Lady cryed nevyr so ne no seynt in hevyn, but thei knewyn ful lytyl what sche felt. (18.1600-04)

> Some said it was a sickness; some said she had drunk too much wine; some cursed her; some wished she had been in the harbor; some wished that she had been in the sea in a bottomless boat; and so each man had his own explanation. Other spiritual men loved her and favoured her the more. Some great clerks said our Lady never cried so nor did any saint in heaven, but they knew too little of what she felt.

The battery of reactions – from the spiritual men who loved her for her spectacle of compassion and understood it, to those who diagnosed it (she had a sickness) to those who attributed it to drunkenness, to all who wished her dead – this cacophony of responses comprising the "language of the world" is stymied by Kempe's spectacle, which, it turns out, exceeds language and scientific knowledge, bespeaking a language all its own. The spectacle – with its noise, its disturbing somatic expressions of writhing and turning blue as lead – induces a sensory overload in Kempe's spectators. Instead of avoiding scrutiny, as we might expect of someone like Kempe who so ignites controversy, her scenes of mystical weeping demand surveillance through a heightened, inescapable visibility.

There is a gendered aspect to Kempe's spectacle of divine possession, as I have already argued in previous work on Kempe.[9] By insisting on the publicity of the female voice and body, Kempe is always countering the surveillance of feminine conduct. Between the scenes of gender and religio-social surveillance into which Kempe inserts herself, her counter-surveillance performance also does much more than simply frustrate her observers and her readers. Instead of seeking to evade, circumvent, or foil the surveillances that she actively engages, Kempe insists on a hyper-visibility and hyper-audibility in public places during mass, Corpus Christi processions, and sermons that actually draw

[9] See Lochrie, 167-202.

attention to herself – that demand a hearing. During this period of Western history where spectacle itself was reserved to priests administering sacraments, royalty, Church processions, medieval drama, civic celebrations, and, finally, to the crucified body of Christ, we should not underestimate how radical Kempe's frequent spectacles of roaring and writhing are. We, who live in the era of the spectacle – dominated by social media, web and street cameras, and for those of us in the United States, by Donald Trump – we might not appreciate fully the scope and power of Kempe's counter-surveillance spectacle.[10] We who live, too, in the era of the "masculine gaze," the "phallic look," and the Foucauldian panopticon might be forgiven for overlooking the way that the medieval spectacle works differently in relationship to the gaze than we are accustomed to.

There are many spectacles, after all, not just the spectacles of domination and control outlined by Foucault. We might want to distinguish, for example, among spectacles of control, resistance, contradiction, and even spectacles of deconstruction.[11] The same is true of gazes: there are many different kinds of gazes that do not all derive from, or work in tandem with, the masculine gaze or the institutional gaze of Foucault's panopticon. For example, instead of the "eye of power" that controls the object of its gaze, whether incarcerated or feminine, medieval devotional texts speak of the *oculus pietatis*, or "eye of piety," as Sarah Stanbury has argued (266). *The* object of the medieval devotional gaze – the object, in other words, that supersedes all others in the daily lives and in religious images of the Middle Ages – is, of course, the body of Christ. Instead of a distanced or even gendered vision and investment of control in the one who gazes, the "eye of piety" engages in a loss of self through its gaze interacting with the devotional body in a conflation of the erotic, sacred, and ecstatic. Stanbury distinguishes between this "eye of piety" and the "male gaze" we have come to expect from our own visual regime:

> That labile, boundary-crossing nature of this gaze, its circulation rather indiscriminately between the private self and both male and female loved

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[10] Guy Debord characterised modern society as "the society of the spectacle," in which the spectacle "is a social relation among people, mediated by images," and living has been displaced by representation (Thesis 4). Since Debord's work, Tony Bennet has coined the phrase "exhibitionary complex" to describe the society of the spectacle (73-102). For a discussion of Trump in terms of Debord's idea of the society of the spectacle, see Zaretsky.

[11] Kershaw itemises these four kinds of spectacle (595).

> devotional images suggests that gender is not the first or the prime determinant of its trajectory, or, [. . .] its desire. (268)

This particular pious gaze, Stanbury further argues, is intersubjective, rather than unidirectional; tactile, rather than distant; and it often works dramatically to elicit empathy and compassion in the devotional gazer (268).

But what of the spectacle of this gaze? As I have already suggested, the primary medieval spectacle was the body of Christ, not the female body. We know that Kempe's spectacular weeping and bodily unruliness are the physical, corporal effects of her own witnessing of the Passion of Christ. It is the nature of the late medieval devotional spectacle to invite the viewer's gaze, her imaginary identification, compassion, even a "tactile intimacy" (Stanbury 269). But I want to ask here by way of thinking through the whole dynamic of spectacle and the gaze in relationship to surveillance, what happens when the "eye of piety" herself becomes the spectacle, in effect, displacing the body of Christ, the story of his Passion, or the celebration of Mass? This is the radical transformation that Kempe performs again and again in her narrative, causing discomfort for all not only because of the noisy disruption, but because her "spectacle" actually channels the spectacle of the holy body, voicing its suffering and compelling the viewer's desire, identification, and love. Kempe, in essence, *becomes* the holy spectacle that is Christ's body, rendering rational explanations risible and disabling the emergent gaze of surveillance.

Extending this idea of the medieval spectacle and gaze from Stanbury's work, I think that we need to think of the medieval spectacle as the reverse of Foucault's account of the "scopic regime of modernity," in which *visibility* and not *the gaze* controls visual relations (Stanbury 279). As a counter-surveillance strategy, therefore, Kempe "makes a spectacle of herself" and in the process, she commands the centrality and the visibility associated primarily with the spectacle of Christ's body. Her recurring spectacle, in turn, seriously confounds the kinds of surveillance, civic and religious, she encounters. Kempe as spectacle indulges in an incoherent noise and bodily display that not only silence others but activate a way of seeing that is specular, emotional, and compassionate. Unlike Foucault's objectified and controlled prisoner, Kempe as spectacle activates that other kind of gaze, one that is accustomed to looking with wonder on Christ's body, reading its wounds and its gestures, and discovering an intimate knowledge of oneself and one's community in the process of looking.

The gaze of surveillance is powerless against this spectacle, as the visiting friar to King's Lynn discovers when he banishes her from his sermons (Kempe, Book I, Part II, Chapter 61). This is because Christ's body as the public spectacle of devotion and the site of personal and communal identification defines the medieval spectacle such that Kempe's becoming spectacle invites a response of wonder and compassion. The rebukes for her weeping actually seem to acknowledge the power of her spectacle in their efforts to explain it away. The spectacle that is a manifestation of divine passion and human compassion can never be reduced to the object of religious or civic scrutiny, no matter how many times Kempe is arraigned before mayors or archbishops or slandered by monks and friars. In view of this divergent premodern spectacle that defines Kempe's public weepings, I suggest we give it a name to distinguish it either from the "spectacle of domination" that we are more familiar with since Foucault, or the spectacle of Christ's body, although Kempe is implicated in that spectacle. I am torn between calling it a "spectacle of vulnerability," in which Kempe both performs her own undoing by compassion and mystical ecstasy and poses a confounding resistance to surveillance inquiry, and a "spectacle of implication," in which the viewer is implicated in Kempe's noisy spectacle either because she is moved by it or because she is not. Either way, the viewer does not enjoy the distance that we customarily assign to the gaze; rather she is alternately repelled or undone, depending on her own spiritual vulnerability. For all her detractors, who reveal the fragility of their own authority and their faith by condemning Kempe's spectacle, there are many spiritual advisors such as White Friar William Southfield and Julian of Norwich, who admire it, and common unnamed persons who marvel at her for Christ's love of her and who worship Christ, who abides within the spectacle. The individual and collective surveillance of Kempe's fellows, religious observers, civic and religious authorities are repeatedly disarmed by the spectacle which Kempe becomes.

Adventures in Sousveillance

Spectacles, in Kempe's case, are not just occasions for others to watch; they sometimes gaze back. A second aspect of Kempe's resistance to fifteenth-century surveillance might be considered a premodern version

of sousveillance. As I have already suggested, this term is generally applied to modern uses of things like body cameras by citizens (or the usual surveillance objects) to become subjects turning surveillance back on the surveillants, that is, by reflecting powerful persons and corporate entities back to themselves, and often exposing them in the process. For example, in the United States citizen videos made by smartphones of police altercations with Black suspects have contributed to the Black Lives Matter movement and a larger cultural awareness of the lethal racist treatment of Black men by law enforcement. Kempe, it goes without saying, did not have a smartphone by which to conduct her sousveillance, but she did have exempla designed to indict her detractors and offering direct critique especially of high-level Church representatives. Edwin D. Craun has discussed the ways in which Arundel's Constitutions sought to restrict "fraternal correction," or "the late medieval practice of admonishing others charitably for their evil conduct in order to reform them" (1).[12] Kempe risks the surveillance of Lollard heresy in her rebuke of clerical corruption, both petty and serious. Her storytelling comes under a scrutiny that smacks of Arundel's repressions when, after successfully disputing her right to speak of the Gospel against the Archbishop of York's demand that she neither teach nor "reprove" the people of his diocese, a doctor of divinity charges that "sche telde me the werst talys of prestys that evyr I herde" (Book I, Part II, Chapter 52). In her own defence Kempe launches into the "example" of the wayward priest who becomes lost in the woods. After he decides to rest for the night in a garden with a lovely pear tree, he is horrified when an ugly bear devours all the blossoms of the tree and defecates them in the priest's direction. Kempe goes on to elaborate the tale's critique of the priest as both pear tree and bear, corrosively destroying his own offices with corrupt living and an indifferent performance of his spiritual duties. Kempe's tale goes beyond exposing clerical sin and ineffectiveness by rendering those clerks obscene: bears, in effect, shitting the priestly office! Surely this should be considered a special subcategory of "fraternal correction" in which Kempe's tale shames the reprobate priests.

Kempe's accuser confesses at this point that he is "struck to the heart" by her tale. Kempe takes this opportunity to turn the tables on

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[12] For restrictions on this practice under anxieties about Lollard reforms, see 126-27; and Watson (827). Article 3 of the Constitutions in particular prohibited clerics from preaching about clerical sins to the laity. In addition, as Craun points out, the Constitutions' prohibition against lay preaching might be levelled at those laypersons who criticised clerics.

her accuser by reversing the direction of the surveillance. "Yyf any man be evyl plesyd wyth my prechyng, note hym wel, for he is gylty" (52.3014-15). Kempe ceases to be the subject of interrogation at this moment, when she redirects the interrogation against her back onto her accusers and those in authority over her. This is a marvellous instance of premodern sousveillance in which Kempe uses the very technologies of the cleric – the exemplum – to critique an entire religious class, but also to provide a future test of those who endeavour to silence her. It is a sousveillance strategy that essentially immunises Kempe from future clerical threats. We might view it as a kind of narrative trolling by which Kempe incenses her surveillants but also reverses clerical scrutiny of herself through her shitting bear exemplum. I think we should not underestimate her accomplishment here: the exemplum is, in Larry Scanlon's words, "one of the Church's chief vehicles for the reproduction of authority" (25). Kempe's story succeeds in appropriating that authority at the same time that it reverses the direction of the exemplum's corrective lens. This is "fraternal correction" but with a difference insofar as it successfully disables and reverses the surveillance that Kempe is under, and at the same time gives her the power and authority of surveillance against the clerical class using their own technology of the humble exemplum.

Of Kempe's many altercations with clerics, monks, and archbishops, it is noteworthy that Kempe issues one of her correctives to Archbishop Arundel, the very person responsible for the Constitutions that were responsible for the heightened surveillance of laypersons preaching and critiquing "up," that is, criticising priests and clerics. After speaking all day to him "until the stars appeared in the firmament" about her manner of living, her contemplation, and her weeping, she examines him and boldly finds him wanting:

> My Lord, owyr alderes Lord almyty God hath not gon yow yowyr benefys and gret goodys of the world to maynten wyth hys tretowrys and hem that slen hym every day be gret othys sweryng. Ye schal answer for hem les than ye correctyn hem or ellys put hem owt of yowr servyse. (16.841-45)
>
> My lord, the Lord of us all almighty God has not given you your office and great goods of the world in order to maintain traitors and those that slay Him every day by swearing great oaths. You shall answer for them unless you correct them or else release them from your service.

Considering Arundel's position and his hostility to those who challenge the Church, Kempe's remarks are an extraordinarily risky act of

sousveillance. She warns him of his own damnation lest he fail either to reform or remove those clerks under his authority who swear so recklessly. He neither defends his ministers nor rebukes Kempe, but "suffred hir to sey hir entent and gaf a fayr answer" (16.845-46). This is just one form that her sousveillance takes, something we might call a corrective counter-surveillance. We see Kempe deploy this particular kind of sousveillance many times in her book: when she repels the Archbishop of York's rude questioning of why she weeps so much by saying, "Syr, ye schal welyn sum day that ye had wept as sor as I" (52.2943); or when she refuses to tell the mayor of Leicester why she is dressed in white clothing because "ye arn not worthy to wetyn it" (48.2729-30). Instead of answering either of her interrogators, Kempe repels their questions, suggesting that they are too worldly and lacking in spiritual insight to be trusted with her answer, despite their positions of authority.

These are just a few of many moments in Kempe's book in which she uses counter-surveillance in the form of the reversal of the gaze or optics of surveillance. In conjunction with this reversal, Kempe also modifies the focus of that surveillance. Under her sousveillance the targeted questions and accusations aimed at Kempe's unorthodox religious practices and femininity become a critical politics and ecclesiology.[13] The aggregation of these acts of sousveillance in Kempe's book make up a kind of supervening idea in the book that the very behaviours for which she is questioned and persecuted are in fact reflections on a clergy, a political class, and even a society that are harshly out of sync with society's spiritual direction. We might think of her tears, her stories, and her sousveillance as effectively inducing shame (when they do not simply provoke anger and resistance) in her accusers. And this is as important as all the shame that Kempe herself undergoes in her book because, beyond its effects of reversing the surveillance being used against her, the shaming of mayors, archbishops, and clerics not only shifts the balance of power in her encounters, but it also installs a reformist agenda within her very personal account of her way to high perfection.

This Creature and the Surveillance of Care

[13] I am borrowing Craun's use of the phrase "critical ecclesiology" (3) to refer to the implied institutional correction that Kempe's critiques suggest.

It is no coincidence that Kempe's book comes to us in the form of an autobiography – indeed, as most scholars concede, the "first" autobiography in English. Autobiography might be understood as a genre that itself narrativises surveillance in the sense, as one theorist of the genre remarks, that "the self who reflects on his or her life is not wholly unlike the self bound to confess or the self in prison, if one imagines self-representation as a kind of self-monitoring" (Gilmore 20).[14] Kempe's autobiography might indeed deploy a kind of narrative surveillance, but I would like to insist once again that it is not the sinister kind of surveillance that Foucault associates with the panopticon and the inducement to internalised self-monitoring. Just as there might be many kinds of spectacles and gazes, so, perhaps, we might entertain the possibility of more than one kind of surveillance. David Lyon, a scholar of modern surveillance, makes what I think is a very apt distinction between two kinds of surveillance: a *surveillance of care*, in which, for example, a parent "watches over" a child so that it does not stray into the street, and a *surveillance of control*, in which one "watches over another for the purpose of directing, prescribing, and constraining behaviour for the purpose of achieving control (3).[15] We are accustomed since Foucault to understanding surveillance primarily – even exclusively – in terms of the latter, with its unobserved observer and its subject made visible by being watched. Reflecting back on the *Book of Margery Kempe*'s opening scenes of surveillance, we might assign them to the two kinds of surveillance Lyon outlines: the priest's overhasty rebuke of her representing the controlling and constraining surveillance, while her husband John's removal of her keys to the buttery constitutes a surveillance of care and protection (Krug 24-57). Having already considered some of the ways that Kempe evades and transforms the surveillance of control exerted by her fellows and religious authorities, I would like to consider how Kempe fashions a rhetorical "surveillance of care" in her autobiography to serve as a counternarrative to those surveillances of control she encounters in social scrutiny and religious orthodoxy.

Kempe's larger engagement with surveillance in her autobiography goes beyond the strategies she uses as spectacle and sousveillance critic

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[14] Although Gilmore locates this surveillant autobiographical impulse in the "post-Enlightenment," I am suggesting that Kempe's surveillant narrative might in fact be a product of, and response to, the surveillance of her times.

[15] Other scholars of surveillance have critiqued the relevance of Foucault's panopticon for contemporary surveillance: see Lyon, Haggerty, and Ball, "Introducing Surveillance Studies" (1-11) and "Theory 1: After Foucault" (20-45) in their *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*.

of religious and civic authorities; as author of her autobiography, Kempe actively shapes another kind of surveillance at the rhetorical level. Her narrative strategy negotiates the reader's surveillance of her experiences, aligning us with her throughout her mystical and worldly experiences. One way she achieves this is through her ingenious signature mode of self-reference as "this creatur," a moniker that is typically read as a third-person reference. I think that description is somewhat misleading, or at least, it is only half of the story of this odd way of referring to herself, because the reference is also strangely intimate. In other words, "this creature" seems to incorporate both first- and third-person forms of address insofar as it is at once highly personal and grammatically screened, rendering the woman behind the "creature" at a second remove.[16] In this respect, Kempe is both surveilled subject of her own autobiography and screened "every person" who invites the reader's identification and her spiritual transformation. As many of us are aware, the Middle English word "creatur" means "living being," "person," or "created thing" (*MED*). In the context of Kempe's narrative, the word has the effect of both generalising the referent and humbling it, in the sense that Kempe is simply "a creature," one among many. At the same time, Kempe uses "*this* creature" (more often than not) to set herself up as an object of surveillance – as the object of the reader's monitoring gaze – while also implicating the reader in her story through the generalising effect of the phrase "this *creature*." *This* creature elicits empathy and a sense of connection in the reader, endearing us to the screened subject and making "this creature" "*our* creature." Surveillance, I am arguing, shapes Kempe's book at a narrative level. Her trope of "this creature" is designed to incorporate surveillance into her very story, creating a surveillant object (and subject) of the narrative, both screened and intimately engaging her reader across the depersonalised moniker. It is a brilliant narrative neutraliser and subtle bit of counter-surveillance in its own right. In an often-cited essay outlining the eleven ways of resisting and subverting surveillance and tantalisingly entitled "A Tack in the Shoe," Gary Marx lists a series of "moves," such as the "distorting move" from which his essay takes its title, by which a person may elude the polygraph by stepping on a tack hidden in one's shoe to distort the baseline for truth on the test (369-90). If I were to classify Kempe's strategy for resisting, neutralising, or undermining surveillance, along the lines of Marx's "tack in the shoe," I might label her book's

[16] Orlemanski also remarks on the distancing created by "this creature" as the subject of Kempe's book and "the impression of first-person intimacy" (126).

self-reference the "empathic screen," a device that both deploys surveillance as a principle and reverses its normally distancing effects by generating empathy for, and attachment to, "this" creature.

The success of her autobiography depends on Kempe's shaping the surveilled subject of the text into one that the reader can identify with and care about. One way in which she does this is by adapting her narrative to the genre of devotional consolation, as Krug has argued. In addition, I would like to suggest that Kempe's book consistently draws on God's surveillance of care for her, and that this model of "watching over" (as opposed to simply "watching") is installed in the book so that the reader may adopt a similar disposition to "this creature." In other words, our recognition as readers of God's grace in Kempe's life not only furnishes us with hope for our own lives, but it also disposes us to reading with that surveillance of care that Christ provides Kempe throughout her spiritual journey.

We can even observe Kempe self-consciously and deliberately guiding readerly surveillance towards the creature of her book through this twinning of readerly and Godly surveillance of care. In the proem to her book, she stresses that all Christ's works in her life are "for ower profyth yf lak of charyté be not ower hynderawnce" (ll. 6f.). Charity is required for the reader's instruction, but also for her disposition towards the creature of the text. It is surveillance, but it is worlds away from the surveillance that so threatens and endeavours to constrain Kempe in her daily life. It is a surveillance that is not "paranoid," but "reparative," to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms for two types of reading – that is, it disables the surveillance of control (or paranoid, moralised surveillance) found in female conduct books and even fraternal correction, and substitutes through our reading of the book a different kind of surveillance, one of hope, inexpressible spiritual feeling, surprise, and discovery. Even Kempe's experiences of her world turned upside down, humiliation, and interrogation are rendered through the reader's surveillance – so long as "lack of charity is not their hindrance," of course – into "solas," "comfort," and a sense of companionship with "this creature" of Kempe's book. Far from triggering that internalised gaze described by Foucault in the prison's panopticon, Kempe's narrative cultivates something else in its reader, a surveillance of care through which we are expected to suffer with her, find consolation in spiritual victories, delight in her intimate colloquies with Christ, and experience intense spiritual desire and joy by practising a surveillance of care in our reading. The surveillance Kempe appeals to in her readers is one that ultimately unites us in a collaborative community, rather than dividing us in para-

noid self-reflection.[17] Surveillance, in Kempe's autobiography, becomes an ethical narrative practice through which we are implicated, not as invisible gazers and moral judges of "this creature," but as her "even-Christians" – as her modern fellows visiting from a surveillance society Kempe could never herself have imagined. Spectacle, it turns out, is as crucial to Kempe's newly invented genre of autobiography as it is to her resistance to contemporary fifteenth-century surveillance.

I want to conclude with a brief reflection on what Kempe's use of spectacle in her public devotional practice and in the very rhetorical framing of her book means for twenty-first-century surveillance. As I have already indicated, the examples of Kempe as spectacle should make us less quick to use Foucault's panopticon for premodernity, at least in the realm of devotional spectacles and scrutiny. The premodern spectacle is not always merely the object of desire and subjection. It can also be the subject of the gaze, "proclaiming its authority through its very visibility and display" and unruliness (Stanbury 278). I have also suggested that, despite Kempe's repeated subjection to ridicule and stern critique, the gaze of surveillance she negotiates is not primarily gendered, that is, it is not the male gaze through which the female body is both eroticised and dominated. Insofar as Kempe's body always echoes the primary object of the devotional, the body of Christ, it assimilates itself to that body, escaping in successive moments throughout her life and book the gender categories that otherwise define her.[18] In these respects Kempe might seem worlds removed from the contemporary scene of surveillance and spectacle, where spectacle has been rendered an illusory medium that compels our consumption, and surveillance technology renders us all so many passive bits of data. How relevant can Kempe and her noisy, annoying, unruly spectacles be in a world where the devotional spectacle no longer works the way it did in fifteenth-century England, where instead the political spectacle seems to swallow us all?[19] I guess I am not as pessimistic as I should be, for I regard Kempe as teaching the twenty-first century something about spectacle not as fetish or inducement to consumption, but as an unruly practice that, even in a secular world, resists the world's brutalities and surveillances. In the process, as Kempe might add, we may also find a measure of desire and our compassion.

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[17] See Krug's discussion of Kempe's collaboration with her readers (11-23).

[18] This is Stanbury's argument for Chaucer's Griselda, who as spectacle likewise "echoes" the body of Christ and escapes gender categories (283).

[19] This is a rewording of Robert Zaretsky's phrase "The spectacle swallows us all."

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