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Creating the Medieval Christian Woman: Conduct Literature and Religious Identity

Hannah Kiely

College Honors Thesis

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Context for Medieval Conduct Literature...3

The Rise of Conduct Literature

Previous Work

Framing the Study of Conduct Literature

Chapter 2: Construction of the Female Religious Subject in the Primary Sources...19

Introducing the Literature

Applying the Texts

The Body

The Family

The Estate

Chapter 3: Applying Conduct Literature to *The Book of Margery Kempe*...59

Margery and The Body

Margery and The Family

Margery and The Estate

Conclusion...78

Chapter One

Context for Medieval Conduct Literature

In the late medieval era, conduct literature emerged to guide young men and women into a successful life of fulfilling various duties and expectations. My research examines how this literature shaped a common religious and social identity for aristocratic and bourgeois European women.

First, I establish a general framework on conduct literature, what forms it came in, who wrote them, and who was the intended audience. By focusing on conduct literature directed towards women, I analyze how the female identity created in these texts was influenced by Christian beliefs, which highlights the relationship between religion and society. I conclude by comparing this work to the life of Margery Kempe through *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which outlines aspects of her social and religious life. Margery Kempe lived an extraordinary life that pushed the boundaries of the identity that conduct literature seeks to construct. By comparing her own identity to that which the literature seeks to create, we can see differences in authority and power.

Although I will be using the term "conduct literature" to describe and analyze the history, tensions, and subjectivity constructed in the following texts, there are many ways to define and describe this type of literature. I will be focusing on conduct literature written for women between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries in Western Europe. This type of conduct literature emerged in the fourteenth century, but the literary tradition of instructional texts has roots in Roman and Greek antiquity.¹ The Bible could be considered conduct literature, although it is

¹ Krueger, "Introduction: Teach Your Children Well," xi.

very different from the texts that emerged in the fourteenth century. A general definition of conduct literature could be any text written as an instructional manual on how to live a good life while fulfilling the duties expected by the text. Other possible terms for conduct literature include courtesy, advice, devotional, or guidance literature. However, definitions of "good" and the different expectations of duties for different types of people led to different types of conduct literature.

The Rise of Conduct Literature

During the fifteenth century, European conduct literature became increasingly popular among the aristocracy, and eventually for the bourgeoisie as well, as they used it as a vehicle for social mobility.² Specific reasons as to why it became so popular are contested. In "*The Miroir des bonnes femmes: Not For Women Only?*" Kathleen Ashley presents two models for the rise of conduct literature. The first model is founded on gender with the idea that conduct literature was written by men to take authority over training women.³ This model is supported by Jessica Murphy in *Virtuous Necessity* when she argues that conduct literature became popular as a "response to an outbreak of misbehaving women," with the assumption that conduct manuals could train women's behavior.

The second model given by Ashley is founded on social class. Conduct literature first emerged among aristocratic and royal families in which copying manuscripts was done by a scribe, a long and costly endeavor to be shared between elites. For aristocratic families, the

² Krueger, "Introduction: Teach Your Children Well," IX.

³ Ashley, "*The Miroir des bonnes femmes: Not for Women Only?*" 87.

concept of honor was first seen as a responsibility of male household members.⁴ It was not until conduct literature started to circulate in the bourgeois system that female honor became central to a family's social status.⁵ This interpretation is crucial as it pushes the female identity into a new realm of responsibility. This model extends to the idea that conduct literature for girls and women was created from the literature that had already been written for boys and men, especially knights.⁶ Moreover, in another aspect of the class dimension of the origins of this literature, in "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature," Myra Seaman highlights that in England, Archbishop Thoresby's reforms resulted in more affordable paper and the promotion of lay-piety education, allowing for a healthy book-trade available to anyone who could afford it, including the bourgeois and even peasants.⁷ Both models that Ashley presents provide solid arguments as to why and how conduct literature for girls and women gained popularity during the Middle Ages.

Conduct literature comes in many forms, such as poems and formal guidebooks, and as already stated, was written for both young men and women. The point of these texts was to help guide them through their roles as a boy, girl, son, daughter, wife, husband, and all the other duties they must execute throughout their lives. In their introduction to *The Good Wife's Guide*, Greco and Rose claim it was common for wealthy families to combine a variety of textual sources such as "prayers, recipes, medicinal remedies, and gardening instructions," possibly in

⁴ Ashley, "The French *Enseignemenz*," 97.

⁵ Ashley, "The French *Enseignemenz*," 97.

⁶ Ashley, "The French *Enseignemenz*," 101.

⁷ Seaman, "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature," 121.

addition to other heuristic texts about how women should act, which may have included "chaste female saints' lives, tracts on salvation, instructions on modest dress, anecdotes about 'good' or 'bad' wives, and marital how-tos such as in *Le Ménagier*."⁸

Seaman argues that most conduct literature was not necessarily used as a religious tool but was highly influenced by Christianity and often used alongside devotional materials.⁹ However, this is very dependent on what type of conduct literature one is looking at, which influences the goals and approaches of these texts. The three texts I will be analyzing are all influenced by Christianity but vary in their degree of attempting to construct the female religious subject. For example, in *The Good Wif Taughte Her Daughter*, devotional advice is not specifically given but mentioned more as an assumption, whereas *The Good Wife's Guide* and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* both have specific chapters or excerpts on spirituality and religious actions, as if written by a religious authority rather than a father or husband. These specifics will be discussed further in the primary source analyses.

Each conduct text is unique, but most of the texts directed towards women share similar key values. These values include pursuits for purity, virtuousness, and honor for both the individual and the family. Due to these shared goals, there is a common construction of an identity created for the women this literature is directed towards. Approaches to the study of conduct literature are directly related to the models mentioned earlier as to how and why these texts became so popular.

⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 22.

⁹ Seaman, "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature," 124.

Previous Work

Previous work in conduct literature is made up mostly of translated and edited primary sources and some secondary scholarship that analyzes these sources. I will be using primary sources written in various medieval vernacular languages, which have been translated into modern English, making them suitable sources for this research. Three primary conduct texts will serve as the basis for my major analysis: *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris)*, and *How the Good Wif Taughte Hir Doughtir*. There has been some work done on these three sources, but not much detailed scholarship on these individual sources, unless it's an introduction to a translated version.

How the Good Wif Taughte Hir Doughtir (hereafter *Good Wif*) is frequently cited in scholarly work, usually in conjunction with the related text *How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne*, yet these references are mostly descriptions which add to a scholar's analysis of a different primary text or argument, used in conjunction with other texts. Claire Sponsler gives a brief introduction to her translation, and Roberta L. Krueger discusses the context of *Good Wif* and *Wise Man* in her article on medieval conduct guides for youth, but uses various other primary sources in her argument, including *Le Ménagier de Paris*.¹⁰ Kathleen Ashley mentioned an analysis of *Good Wif* by Felicity Riddy in her article, but it was used as an application to her theory on a different primary source.¹² Rory Critten uses *Good Wif* and *Wise Man* in conjunction with other primary texts for his analysis of bourgeois ethics.¹³ Riddy's article, "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text," is a good example of a

¹⁰ Sponsler, *Medieval Conduct Literature*.

¹¹ Krueger, "Introduction: Teach Your Children Well."

¹² Ashley, "The *Miroir des bonnes femmes*: Not for Women Only?"

¹³ Critten, "Bourgeois Ethics Again".

deeper, focused analysis on *Good Wif*, yet Riddy examines the formation of the bourgeoisie ethos and social mobility through the poem, rather than attending to the religious aspects.

The Book of the Knight of The Tower is widely cited in scholarship but there is little scholarship that focuses primarily on that text. Anna Dronzek cites it in conjunction with *Good Wif* and various other primary texts in her article, "Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth-Century Conduct Books." Although there is an analysis of the primary text here, Dronzek's argument is based mostly on secular training and education, again lacking examination of religious aspects of this work.¹⁴ *The Book of the Knight of The Tower* is examined in Myra J. Seaman's chapter, "Late Medieval Conduct Literature," but again is used in conjunction with *Good Wif* and *Wise Man*, as well as many other primary sources.¹⁵

The same goes for *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris)*. The most significant analysis of the text is the introduction to Greco and Rose's translated version.¹⁶ Although cited in Krueger's article briefly, I have found this text to be understudied compared to the other two primary sources.¹⁷ There also has been some work done on the literary aspects of these texts and how conduct literature impacted women's writing. In addition, all the primary sources I have found are accompanied by introductions or analytical essays by the translators or editors.

A crucial secondary source for my research is Hywanee Park's article "Domestic Ideals and Devotional Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe." This article is critical as it uses the same primary sources I will be analyzing, citing them in relation to the life of Margery Kempe. This analysis gives me a framework to use when comparing *The Book of Margery Kempe* to the

¹⁴ Dronzek, "Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth-Century Conduct Books."

¹⁵ Seaman, "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature."

¹⁶ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide."

¹⁷ Krueger, "Introduction: Teach Your Children Well."

three primary sources I plan to use. However, Park's analysis is focused on confirming the authority Margery keeps in her social and economic experience while still setting a standard for devotion.¹⁸ My research differs from Park in that most of my analysis relies on a deeper examination of the conduct texts and using the religious aspects of these texts in comparison to the religious standards set for Margery Kempe. While Park focuses on Margery's authority, with only brief citations of the three texts, my research focuses on a deeper analysis of the texts for comparison to the religious identity built for Margery's subject.

Framing the Study of Conduct Literature

There are many ways to study conduct literature, and I will begin with Robert A. Clark's analysis of discourse theory in "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion." Clark outlines how women were classified by their commitment to chastity rather than a socioprofessionnal status through devotional literature. This classification was based on an "archaic and static triadic model of Christian society as consisting of virgins, the chaste, and married people."¹⁹ However, he highlights the tension between a woman's spiritual merit determined by this classification and the expectations they are held to in their social lives.

For Clark, discursive practice theory asserts that subjects come to understand themselves as subjects through the literature they consume. However, understanding oneself as a subject is much deeper than internalizing conduct literature. Clark analyzes the argument of three discourse theorists and their respective arguments. The first scholar is Michel Foucault, who argues that power is a component exercised through discursive practice. Not only is the literature impacting

¹⁸ Park, "Domestic Ideals and Devotional Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe."

¹⁹ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 161.

women's understanding of themselves, but it impacts who has authority over them and who attempts to construct them as an ideal female subject. Second is Teresa De Lauretis, who highlights the tensions between discourse and culture. For De Lauretis, the identity of a gendered subject is always shifting, thus allowing for construction to go beyond discursive influence and weave between cultural expectations as well, which may be contradictory to discursive construction.²⁰

The third is Judith Butler, who emphasizes the relationship between discursive and material practices. For Butler, discourse creates a material subject, allowing for the production and regulation of "the *intelligibility* of the *materiality* of bodies."²¹ Like Foucault, Butler claims that the subject understands themselves through discursive practice, which then becomes a material practice as the effects are "real" effects.²² An example could be a woman influenced by her conduct text about appropriate dress according to her class status, and then understanding herself through that class based on her fashion, as expected of her by the text.

Clark identifies strongly with the three scholars as he works to locate power dynamics at the center of discourse practice through conduct literature. However, in a theory that goes beyond discourse analysis into cultural analysis, Clark argues that conduct literature often has a power center in which expectations are set through stated forms of conduct.²³ Through this, the

²⁰ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 163.

²¹ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 163.

²² Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 163.

²³ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 164.

literature attempts to establish a tension between an active and contemplative life, which for women often results in a balancing act between the family, the home, and the body.²⁴

However, I find it interesting that this balancing act excludes the devotional factor of the woman. A possible explanation for this observation might be that devotion was expected to be intertwined with the expectations within the family, home, and body. Another explanation might be that conduct literature was compartmentalized so that expectations set for the home, family, and body were separate from the distinct devotional programs created to build a religious subject. It's where this construction of religious identity intertwines with these other factors that I seek to analyze in my primary sources. I explore how a religious identity for women was constructed through these conduct texts even though devotional norms are not substantially detailed in them.

In returning to the subject of power and authority behind the curtain of conduct literature, Rebecca Kruger argues that most conduct literature, although ostensibly not related to a devotional religious practice, was often written by male priests and clerics. Or, if the authors were not religious officials, they were at least likely familiar with and influenced by "scripture; religious treatises on virtues and vices; lives of the saints; and psalms and prayers; as well as collections of exempla used in composing sermons."²⁵ Suppose we return to Foucault's view portrayed by Clark that power can be conducted through discourse. In that case, we see how that might line up in conduct literature as men attempt to use their power to create an ideal female subject built on a religious foundation. As Clark argues, the woman becomes physically engaged

²⁴ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 164.

²⁵ Krueger, "Introduction: Teach Your Children Well," xiv.

in a battle between devotional duties where power is held by a spiritual director and conjugal duties where power is held by her husband or another male family member.²⁶ Thus, in theory, the woman is unable to escape her subjectivity under this male authority.

However, this is only a theoretical analysis of power dynamics. There is insufficient scholarship to truly know how effective conduct literature was in creating a female subject in comparison to other internal and external factors. Literature written by men for women was certainly created, yet how can we know for sure that mothers were not raising their daughters in contrast to the literature's expectations? Clark argues we must have faith that women took some control in constructing their identity: "The end result is the same: men's control over women's bodies. But this would discount the very real nature of the conflict engaged and the very real participation of the subject in negotiating between these conflicting demands."²⁷ The important point is that men exercised power by formulating literature that set expected standards for women in the Middle Ages to create a female subject through discursive practice. Even more importantly, this literature is producing the religious identity alongside the secular. This includes the authority and power dynamics of male family members and of male religious officials.

In Foucault's article, "The Subject and Power," we see an argument, as described by Clark, that can align with the claim that men sought to command authority over women through discursive practices. However, although the application of Foucault's argument may work in theory, the application of this argument to the context of medieval conduct literature for women may not work. Hwanhee Park supports this opposition in comparing conduct literature to the life

²⁶ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 176.

²⁷ Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," 178.

of Margery Kempe. Park highlights the authority Margery was able to find from the identity constructed in conduct literature, whether intended or not. Foucault's theory is fruitfully juxtaposed to Park's analysis. Foucault's argument does not specifically focus on the power dynamics of conduct literature. Still, he does focus on the dynamics of power between subject and agent. This relationship can be directly applied to the authors of literature and the subject they intend to create.

Foucault begins by defining the relationship of struggles for authority, which he argues is not so much about *who* is harnessing the power but *how* it is harnessed. He states, "The main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much "such or such" an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power."²⁸ This technique is what creates an individual as a subject. In our case, conduct literature is the technique, which attempts to harness agency over the identity.

Critical to Foucault's theory and to study the dynamics of conduct literature's relationship to forming a religious identity is the concept of pastoral power as a technique. According to Foucault, pastoral power originated from medieval Christian institutions, which produced "a code of ethics fundamentally different from that of the ancient world."²⁹ This gave agents of power a new type of authority over the subject as it encompassed everything about the subject's mind and "inner truth."

Moreover, Foucault observed a change in pastoral power that we can apply to what we see in the rise of conduct literature in the Middle Ages. Pastoral power's main focus was to

²⁸ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 781.

²⁹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 782.

ensure salvation in the world. This focus increased who could hold pastoral power, allowing the family as an institution to mobilize into these roles of pastoral power. This can be directly applied to conduct literature as one of the main objectives of most conduct literature for women was to attain honor. The concept of honor during these time periods is a balancing act between one's inner religious identity and their public reputation, and honor can contribute to the elevation of both.

We are also able to see that in two of my sources, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* and *The Good Wife's Guide*, the texts were written by the girl's father and husband, respectively. Although both authors likely used the help of religious officials, we see how the pastoral power was extended to their role as the male head of the family as an institution. This power was then wielded through the literature they wrote, a technique to hold authority over an identity they sought to create, which they hoped their daughter or wife would live up to. Whether or not this technique weakened or strengthened their religion is unclear. Each of the three texts I study may have different intentions. *Good Wif* worries about the daughter's ability to "flourish," whether that means in a religious or social way we can't be sure. However, the poem focuses more on social reputation than it does actual piety and devotion. The same pattern follows in *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, a fault on reputation is a much higher concern than actual sin itself. Out of the three texts *The Good Wife's Guide* might attempt to actually strengthen a woman's devotion. The book gives better descriptions of how she should pray, and how she should think of God or the Virgin Mary during certain activities or hours of the day. So we can see how this newfound pastoral power may have neutralized or weakened piety for the female reader in the

first two texts, with more concern for her public religious reputation, while it may have attempted to strengthen piety in the latter text.

When we turn to how to actually execute this power, Foucault asks "'How,' not in the sense of 'How does it manifest itself?' but 'By what means is it exercised?' and 'What happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others?'" (emphasis in original).³⁰ This question is essential to the analysis of power dynamics in conduct literature, in which Foucault argues to separate power relationships from relationships of communication because "the production and circulation of elements of meaning can have as their objective or as their consequence certain results in the realm of power" in which the consequences are not necessarily an aspect of the objective.³¹ In this case, the strength of the agent's power over creating this ideal subject seems to be weakened, as the woman, in this case, can choose to be subjected to the expectations, unless there are other forms of power which come alongside that of conduct literature, such as physical harm for not living up to the expectations. Forms of power exterior to conduct literature are outside the borders of my analysis on the conduct text, but we will see the role they play over Margery's authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Moreover, Foucault argues that exercising power is not just a relationship between subject and agent, but a way in which certain actions modify others.³² In this sense, we can see how the agent uses conduct literature to modify the subject's behavior. Foucault even goes as far

³⁰ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 786.

³¹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 786.

³² Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 788.

to define "conduct" within the realm of power relations, stating, "For to conduct is at the same time to lead others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities."³³ When we apply this definition to the term "conduct literature," we can see how Clark's examination of discourse theory might work to exercise an agent's dominance over a subject through the literature.

An important discussion Foucault raises is the relationship between power and strategy. For Foucault, there is a strategy, an intention to power. I argue that we can sketch a strategy through the exercise of power in conduct literature. There are three applications of strategy for Foucault, all of which are relevant to my analysis. The first application is the intention that rationality will fulfill an end goal.³⁴ We can see this applied to conduct literature in an author's strategy to create an ideal female religious subject through stated expectations. The second application is the assumption that the agent of power's thoughts and perspective align with that of the subject, thus giving the agent the ability to manipulate the subject. We can see this applied in conduct literature as the male authors assume to know what a woman is thinking in her roles as a daughter, mother, or wife and thus feel as though they can relate to her in order to hold power over her. This is relevant in the sense that all of the authors of the texts I analyze were male, holding the intention to write in detail about how women should act, even when those women might not want to act in that way. The third and most important application for Foucault is the confrontation between agent and subjects of power, in which the agent deprives the subject of the

³³ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 789.

³⁴ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 793.

means of combat, forcing them to give up.³⁵ This third application is particularly interesting when looking at the life of Margery Kempe. By turning to Park's analysis, we can see how Margery may have been able to confront the various agents of power around her while still living within the boundaries that conduct literature set for women of that day. Furthermore, Margery's life is a great example of a subject finding a vast sense of empowerment and authority from what might be otherwise seen as resisting the expectations set by conduct literature.

In "Domestic Ideals and Devotional Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe," Park discusses how conduct literature validates Margery's spiritual authority in a secular, domestic realm. This can contribute to a new perspective that conduct literature actually gave significant power and authority that otherwise wouldn't be available to women. As Park argues, women were not only in charge of running estates and taking care of how they presented themselves and their families. Women were also the teachers of the family; it was their duty to raise devout children and even give religious teaching, as Park argues in the case of Margery Kempe.³⁶

However, although Park argues the subject the authors created actually might have given women much more autonomy than intended, my conclusions do not agree. I have found that women were given little authority over their body, the workings of the family, and the estate. Whether or not these women ignored this suppression and took power not given to them we cannot know. The little authority they were given in the texts were often diverted to a head servant, and always founded on the dominance of the husband.

Furthermore, in regards to constructing a religious identity through these tensions between the body, the family, and the estate, I have found that *Good Wif* and *Book of The*

³⁵ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 794.

³⁶ Park, "Domestic Ideals and Devotional Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe," 6.

Knight of The Tower use devotion in these roles as a performative act for public consumption.

This differs from the *Good Wife's Guide* where more emphasis is given by the author to focus on one's inner religious identity equal to their public religious identity.

There are many ways to study conduct literature, and it's important to understand how discourse can form power dynamics between agent and subject. Even more important is to acknowledge that although women's medieval conduct literature may appear oppressive at first glimpse, there may be doorways of empowerment within the words. In the next section, I offer a deeper examination of three primary sources while applying the previous theories discussed to better understand how the female religious subject was formed in this secular literature.

Chapter Two

Construction of the Female Religious Subject in the Primary Sources

As I have discussed earlier, Robert Clark observes that three tensions are often present within conduct literature which contribute to forming the female subject. The three tensions are between the woman's duties to her body, the estate, and the family. These components all cause the subject to struggle between contemplative and active life, thus creating tension between the religious and secular borders of the identity formed from this literature. Moreover, Foucault has highlighted the use of pastoral power which I connect to conduct literature in its pursuit to develop both internal and performative devotion for the subject. I will begin with a brief overview of the three sources I focus on in my analyses: *How the Good Wif Taughte Hir Doughtir*, *The Good Wife's Guide*, and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. These three texts are all well known pieces of conduct literature which have both important similarities and differences in forming a female religious subject. I will be referring to these texts with shorthand titles: *Good Wif*, *The Guide*, and *Knight of The Tower*. After introducing these three texts, I will compare them by focusing on each of the three tensions separately and analyze how a religious subject is formed by the literature. I argue that the strict regulations set to form the subject's performative devotion are so unattainable that it must create space for the subject to form her own internalized devotion.

Introducing the Literature

How the Good Wif Taughte Hir Doughtir is often paired with a similar poem, *How the Wise Man Taught His Sonne*. Although similar in form, *Good Wif* dates back to 1350, while

Wise Man dates back to 1430³⁷. Although their literary and aesthetic qualities are often dismissed, they are an important marker in the evolution of conduct literature. The two other sources I use in my research, *The Guide* dating back to sometime between 1392-94, and *Knight of the Tower* dating back to 1373, are examples of later medieval conduct literature, produced as fully formed books for both the aristocracy and later for the middle class. *Good Wif* and *Wise Man* mark the transit from early advice poetry for an exclusive aristocratic audience, to a later bourgeois readership.

Both poems share a similar length. *Good Wif* is written in 220 lines, whereas *Wise Man* is written in only 150. The translation I use is by Claire Sponsler in which the Middle English passage is presented parallel to the modern English translation. The authors of the poems remain unknown but Sponsler has suggested they were likely written by clerics. The first stanzas of each poem support that the assumed mother or father were not the authors as they are referred to in third person:

The good wife taught her daughter,
 Many a time and often,
 How to be a thoroughly good woman,
 And said, ‘Daughter dear to me,
 Some good advice you need to learn,
 If you ever want to flourish’³⁸

Listen, lords, and you shall hear

³⁷ Sponsler, *Medieval Conduct Literature*, 285

³⁸ Sponsler, “The English *How The Good Wif*,” (poem hereafter cited as *Good Wif* with stanzas indicated), 1-6.

How the wise man taught his son.
 Pay attention to this matter,
 And learn it if you can.
 This song was made with good reason,
 To make men true and steadfast;
 When something begins well,
 It ends well at last³⁹

It is important to note how both poems begin when thinking about intended audience and context of readership. From the first line in *Wise Man*, “Listen, lords” and “pay attention,” may indicate this poem was presented orally and to an older audience of men, hence the term “lords.”

However, in *Good Wif*, we don’t see the same public announcement. The contrast between private and public presentation might hint at the gendered ways of raising girls and boys. As we will see later, the female readers constructed from the literature are advised to stay quiet and contained, a hint at this pattern of keeping women in a private sphere.

Good Wif introduces the imagined daughter wanting to “flourish” and then moves quickly to a goal of marriage, which she can only attain by acting in a “godly manner.”⁴⁰ The poem continues with religious conduct: when to go to Church (always), pay tithes, and make offerings. This transitions into how to behave, dress, and maintain a good reputation. The text then turns to how to take care of the estate and finances, care for the husband, and behave as a proper wife. Motherhood is discussed last, focusing specifically on how to deal with daughters.

³⁹Sponsler, “The English *How The Wise Man*,” (poem hereafter cited as *Wise Man* with stanzas indicated), 1-8.

⁴⁰ *Good Wif*, 7-9.

In comparison, *Wise Man* starts on a different foundation than *Good Wif* in that while the daughter's goal was to flourish by attaining marriage, the son's goal in *Wise Man* is to become "true and steadfast."⁴¹ The son is imagined to be weak and moldable, but there is no mention of marriage. There is much less religious conduct for the son, in which he is only told to pray but not instructed that church is necessary. The poem does include advice on how to behave in social and public settings, and taking care of physical health. Eventually, the son is instructed to take care of his wife and be kind to her, but this lasts only one stanza. The poem ends with instructions to be kind and humble, and to think about how this conduct will help him at his time of death. There is no instruction on handling the children or the estate, and very little instruction on religious practice.

Both *Good Wif* and *Wise Man* follow similar plotlines, but they diverge in what they emphasize. Unlike the other texts I examine, these two poems offer a platform to compare the construction of religious identity on the basis of gender.

I argue that *Good Wif* works to construct a religious female subject by attaching her "flourishing" to being married. However, if we compare the modern English to the Middle English text, "If evere thou wolt thee" translates to "If you ever want to flourish"⁴² This is the most important sentence in the poem as conduct literature was often used in hopes of creating a subject who was fulfilling duties and virtues through performative devotion.

Performative devotion would thus lead a daughter to her own honor which could then lead to her husband and family's honor. As discussed earlier, I argue honor is the bridge between conduct literature and salvation, in which the concept has both religious and secular aspirations.

⁴¹ *Wise Man*, 6.

⁴² *Good Wif*, 6.

Thus the construction of the female religious subject in this text is based on secular behavior and reputation which then contributes to the daughter's religious practice, producing both honor and salvation for not only her but also her husband. By concerning the subject with performative devotion over internalized devotion, the text constructs a desire for social honor. This is an example of how the bourgeoisie might have been using a text like this for social mobility rather than religious honor.

The next source I use, *Knight of The Tower*, is another well known piece of conduct literature, commissioned in 1373 by a French knight, Sir Geoffrey de la Tour Landry.⁴³ The knight's intention with the text was to create a manuscript for his daughters on how to be good wives, as he had previously commissioned a text for his sons on how to be knights.⁴⁴ The original manuscript of the text no longer exists, but there are reproductions as families had scribes copy the text for their own daughters to use. Due to the various duplications by different families, some stories have been added to the book as it has evolved.⁴⁵ By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the book had grown in popularity as Europe grew into the "century of conduct."⁴⁶

I have used two different translations in my research to compare between Middle English and Modern English. Rebecca Barnhouse has given adequate Modern English translations in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women*, and although her commentary and analysis on the translations were interesting I did not find it adequate for academic research, and thus only focused on her translations from William Caxton's version.

⁴³ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 5.

⁴⁴ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 5.

⁴⁵ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 8.

⁴⁶ Seaman, "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature," 121.

William Caxton's translation in Middle English was used in my research to better understand the text as a comprehensive book. Caxton's translation is made up of about 187 pages, and 143 excerpts or chapters. However, unlike *The Guide*, the excerpts do not necessarily follow a comprehensive narrative, comprised of distinct, separately titled sections that do not necessarily follow a numerical order. Barnhouse's translation does not include every chapter or excerpt from the Caxton translation. Because of this, I am focusing mostly on the Modern English translations and matching them to Caxton's Middle English for better understanding of the text.

Lastly, *The Good Wife's Guide*, also known from the original French translation as *Le Ménagier de Paris* is a well known courtesy text believed to be written towards the end of the fourteenth century in France.⁴⁷ Greco and Rose claim that *Le Ménagier de Paris* is the last known surviving text with such comprehensive topics of conduct.⁴⁸

An important note about this text was that it was handwritten during a period when the printing press would have been available. This could indicate, as Greco and Rose argue, that the book was copied for a single client, with the idea that the book itself was perhaps not popular enough for a broader audience⁴⁹.

The Guide is 339 pages, divided into fifteen chapters. These chapters include a wide variety and range of topics: Prayers and Orderly Dress, Behavior and Attire in Public, The Mass, Confession, the Vices and Virtues, On Chastity, Devotion to Your Husband, Obedience, The Care of the Husband's Person, The Husband's Secrets, Providing Your Husband with Good Counsel, Le Chemin de povreté et de richesse, Horticulture, Choosing and Caring for Servants

⁴⁷ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 1-3.

⁴⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 1.

⁴⁹ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 3.

and Horses, Hawking Treatise, Menus, and Recipes. This range of topics which focus on many different aspects of a woman in her identity as a wife supports Greco and Rose's characterization of the book's comprehensiveness.

The book is written from the perspective of a husband who is presumed to be in his fifties, writing the advisory text for his fifteen year-old bride. The text was constructed with the help of many sources, the majority of which include exemplary stories and biblical references. Significant stories cited in the text are the story of Griselda, a tale about a husband who continually tests his wife's obedience to him by putting her through various traumatic events, which she somehow passes with flying colors. The author also includes the story of Melibee as an example of a wife who provides her husband with good counsel. Several biblical women are referenced frequently throughout the book including, the Virgin Mary, Sarah, Leah, and Rebecca.

The book begins by building a foundation for the religious expectations for the young wife including proper prayers to recite throughout her day, and how to dress and behave. The author then instructs her on how to behave in Mass and gives her a description of the seven deadly sins, including the subcategories within each sin⁵⁰.

The seven deadly sins are followed by the seven virtues to counteract the seven sins. Humility counteracts pride; friendship against envy, kindness against wrath, prowess against accidie and sloth, mercy or charity against avarice, temperance against gluttony, and chastity against lust. Out of the seven virtues, the author argues that temperance is the virtue to be maintained above all others⁵¹. According to the text, "This virtue has lordship over the body, for

⁵⁰ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 67.

⁵¹ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 83.

the body is mastered through temperance just as the horse is mastered by the bridle” -

“Temperance consists of nothing other than moderation, the median between too much and too little.”⁵² This emphasis on temperance is an important contribution to how these conduct texts construct a female religious subject.

The book continues with chapters on how to serve and be obedient to a husband. There’s an interesting balance between being entirely subservient and inferior to the husband, while also providing good counsel and managing the estate for the husband’s return from his outside duties, which is supported in the concluding chapters of the book.

Applying the Texts

With this introduction to my three primary sources, I now turn to examine the three tensions identified by Clark (the body, the family, and the estate), as they are present in *Good Wif, The Guide*, and *Knight of The Tower*. Analyzing these tensions allows me to address my primary question: how is the female religious subject constructed in late medieval conduct literature? I have found that the texts work to constrict the female religious subject by creating unattainable standards regarding how she performs her devotion and is perceived by the public eye. These unattainable standards allow space for her to contemplate and maybe create her own inner religious identity. An example of this is the development of Margery Kempe’s internalized devotion, which we will explore later.

For the female subjects constructed in the text, their duties must be fulfilled for them to attain honor for themselves, their family, and their husband. Although some of their duties may seem secular, their fulfillment is still essential to the wife’s salvation and thus the husband’s as

⁵² Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 83-84.

well. This is wielded through the author's pastoral power, which seeks to attain salvation for the family, but also to maintain honor in both a religious and public, secular realm.

The Body: How a religious subject is constructed

Dress

In all three texts, dress and fashion are important tools for constructing and containing the female subject's body in the creation of her religious identity. All three texts have similar suggestions on when and how a woman should dress, and what she should wear. Patterns of conduct around dress include saying one's prayers before or while getting dressed in the morning, making sure one's clothing is well kept and in order, and not wearing clothes that are new in style or flashy. These ideas are briefly suggested in *Good Wiff*. For example, the mother exhorts her daughter:

Give of your own goods and do not be stingy,
For seldom is that house poor where God is its steward⁵³

Here the author attempts to guide the female subject to not hoard her goods, including her clothing. This is an example of performative devotion in which the reader is taught through discursive practice to know herself morally based off how she is or is not connected to her material goods. Note that the quote does not focus so much on the reader's internalized views about her connection to her goods, but more so recognizing the performance of giving, as to be recognized by others for this form of devotion.

Furthermore, the poem advises the female subject to not react or compare herself to another woman's fashion:

If your neighbour's wife has on expensive clothes,

⁵³ *Good Wiff*, 20-21.

Do not mock or scorn, do not burn with envy,
 But thank God in heaven for what he has given you,
 And you shall, my daughter, live a good life.”⁵⁴

This is all that is advised to the young woman regarding her relationship to her clothing and material good. It’s clear that she should keep her appearance neat, humble, and somewhat unassuming, a pattern I have found among my three sources in regards to conduct of the body. *Good Wiff* is more concerned about the performative devotional acts of giving and appearing unbothered by other’s successes and neglects the development of the reader’s internal devotion as to why she must dress modestly.

Conduct on dress and fashion is much more detailed and contextualized in *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower*. In *The Guide*, attention to dress comes immediately with the opening discussion on prayer: “You can say these prayers at Matins or when you awake in the morning, or at both times, or while getting up and dressed, or after dressing—all are fine times as long as it is before breaking fast and addressing other business.”⁵⁵ From this quote we can infer that the subject should be starting her day with prayer, and dressing is either done after or during the prayers are said. For context, the prayers that the subject should be reciting are two proper prayers for “Our Lord” and two proper prayers for “Our Lady.” In the original French version of the text, the author gives a Latin and a French version of the prayers for the subject to recite.

Although the narrator is relaxed while suggesting when to recite the text, he doesn’t necessarily mind when it is said if it is committed to a regimen of religious practice. This act displays a nice balance for the subject between the development of both an internalized and

⁵⁴ *Good Wiff*, 146-151.

⁵⁵ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 57.

performative act of devotion. The prayer is performative in that it might be said out loud, but internalized in that it won't be seen by the public.

The author continues with a detailed description of exactly what the female subject should be mindful of when dressing, "Before leaving your chamber or home, be mindful that the collar of your shift, of your camisole, or of your robe or surcoat does not slip out one over the other, as happens with drunken, foolish, or ignorant women who do not care about their own honor or the good repute of their estate or of their husband, and go with open eyes, head appallingly lifted like a lion, their hair in disarray spilling from their coifs, and the collar of their shifts and robes all in a muddle one over the other."⁵⁶ The use of the term lion to describe what a woman should not be is particularly important as a lion represents dominance and power. The lion is a relevant biblical animal cited as the dominant animal and even signify God or God's voice.⁵⁷ The identification of a woman as a lion gives her some form of pastoral power and social authority that the author is clearly objecting to. The text clarifies that how the subject dresses reflects not only her own status and reputation, but also her husband's status and reputation.⁵⁸

The author further elaborates this example of the slovenly women: "When spoken to about it, they provide an excuse for themselves on the basis of diligence and humility, saying that they are so conscientious, hardworking, and charitable that they have little thought for themselves. But they are lying: they think so highly of themselves that if they were in honorable company, they would not at all want to be less well served than the sensible women of equal rank, or have fewer salutations, bows, reverences, or compliments than the others, but rather

⁵⁶ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 57.

⁵⁷ Harris, "The Lion in Medieval Western Europe," 188.

⁵⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 57.

more.”⁵⁹ This is an extremely important quote to take note of because here is evidence of women attempting to state what they are, or rather what they see their identity as, arguing their unkept appearance is a result of their “diligence and humility.” However, watch as the male author quickly refutes this idea, “But they are lying.”⁶⁰ Here is clear evidence of a male author attempting to reconstruct what makes an honorable female subject versus a dishonorable female subject. In this way, the author constructs that an honorable female subject keeps her appearance in order, while a dishonorable woman’s fashion is not so well kept. For the author, it does not matter if a woman claims she is dressed poorly because of her honor. In the author’s eyes a poorly kept appearance makes a dishonorable woman, no matter her own claim about her identity.

Composure

Composure is the next subcategory of conduct of the body in forming a female religious subject. As we have seen previously, the texts work to control the female subject’s body by constructing advice on when and how to dress. Closely connected to advice about dress is guidance about composure, or how a woman should hold her body and maintain her bearing. In *Good Wif*, conduct of composure begins in the second stanza,

Daughter, if you wish to be a wife,
See to it that you behave in a godly manner⁶¹

As discussed earlier, the foundation of this poem is built upon the relationship between the daughter’s “flourishing” and her attainment of marriage. By behaving in a “godly manner,”

⁵⁹ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 57-58.

⁶⁰ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 57.

⁶¹ *Good Wif*, 7-9.

the author is referring to the daughter's devotion through attending church. Moreover, the author gives specific advice on how to behave in church:

When you sit in church, recite your prayers,
Do not chatter to friends or acquaintances,
Do not laugh scornfully at young or old,
But be of pleasing conduct and of good tongue
Through your pleasing conduct
Respect for you will increase⁶²

The author creates an ideal subject that is quiet and minds her business in order to gain respect from others. This advice on how to behave in church is similar to the advice given in *The Guide*. Before the female subject even arrives in church, the author suggests that she always has another “gentlewomen” accompanying her while traveling there or anywhere else.⁶³ The female subject is advised never to allow a dishonorable woman in her company and when walking in public, “keep your head upright, eyes downcast, and immobile. Gaze four *toises* straight ahead and toward the ground, without looking or glancing at any man or woman to the right or left, or looking up, or in a fickle way casting your gaze about in sundry directions, nor laugh nor stop to speak to anyone on the street.”⁶⁴ As we can see, this advice is very restrictive to the woman's body. Conducting the body in this way works to construct a subject whose body is directed narrowly and compactly, similarly as we have seen how she is advised to dress and keep her appearance. However, it seems somewhat unreasonable to deny a young woman from any

⁶² *Good Wiff*, 25-30.

⁶³ Greco, “The Good Wife's Guide,” 59.

⁶⁴ Greco, “The Good Wife's Guide,” 59.

freedom of socialization in a church or in public. This further suggests how space might have been created for her to develop a sense of internalized devotion.

This author continues with how the subject should act in church. Similarly to how the subject is directed to act in *Good Wif, The Guide* advises the female subject to find a private area of the church, and to not move herself after that. Similarly to how she was advised to travel, she is exhorted not to move her head or eyes, and to stay purely focused on her book or a statue while reciting her prayers.⁶⁵ While confessing the author advises to “make yourself solitary, your eyes turned toward the ground, your soul in heaven.”⁶⁶ The author claims that if the subject stays focused in this way and goes to confession often, “honor and great benefit will come to you.”⁶⁷ This latter claim is important because it asserts that keeping one’s body direct, small, and out of the way will contribute to the female subject’s honor. Also note how emphasis on advising the reader to focus inward, might help develop an internalized devotion. This contributes to my larger argument that *The Guide* was the most concerned with developing an internalized devotion next to a performative devotion. Honor is a key word here because as I have argued and continue to argue, honor is the bridge for a female subject between the literature and salvation. This path of action then benefits the husband’s honor, and thus their shared attainment of salvation. To return to *Good Wif*, in reference to behavior outside of church the author states,

Be of seemly appearance, wise, and good mannered,
Do not change your expression no matter what you hear;
Do not be a loose woman, no matter what happens,
Do not laugh too loud or yawn too wide,

⁶⁵ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 59.

⁶⁶ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 62.

⁶⁷ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 59.

But instead laugh softly and mildly,
 And do not be too unrestrained in your behaviour⁶⁸

Here we can see how the advice is similar to advice given in *The Guide*. A pattern is created to restrict and regulate one's behavior. The author continues in advising the subject to walk slowly, to not talk too much, and keep one's head and shoulders together and direct. The author warns that if the subject does not follow this advice, she will acquire a bad name and an "unsavory reputation."⁶⁹ This is a good example of the literature having primary concern for the subject's social honor. Unrestrained behavior results in a "bad name" and an "unsavory reputation," but there is no mention of how that behavior might impact her faith or internal piety. However, poor reputation will contribute to a woman's dishonor, but in the social realm rather than the devotional realm.

This advice on controlling one's body and not casting the eyes about is continued in *Knight of The Tower*. As this author states, "Always look directly in front of you and if you must look to the side, turn your face and your body together, holding yourself firm and sure, for those who frivolously cast their eyes about and turn their faces here and there are mocked."⁷⁰ Again, poor composure results in being "mocked," a public rejection. This quote is a bit different from *The Guide* because that text does devote some chapters to the subject's internalized devotion.

The author of *The Guide* then gives an exemplary tale to warn the subject of why she should not move her head about. In the story, the King of England needed a wife and there were three daughters of the King of Denmark that he was interested in. Although the first two

68

Good Wif, 53-54.

⁶⁹ *Good Wif*, 60-64.

⁷⁰ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 79.

daughters were prettier than the third, the King was not drawn to them because one moved her head, eyes, and body too much, while the other talked too much and too loudly. So, although the third daughter was not as pretty, “She was sober in manner, and when she spoke, which was rare, she was demure. She held her head firmly instead of looking all around her the way her sister did.”⁷¹ So here we see how the author warns the female subject that if she moves her body too much, or speaks too much, she will lose her prospects of marriage. This follows accordingly with the earlier advice regarding the social consequences of having poor composure and behavior. If the subject fails to bring herself social honor through her composure and behavior, then according to the author, she would fail to bring her husband honor, and thus nobody will take her in marriage.

As I have shown, all three texts provide guidance around the female subject's composure and behavior in an attempt to persuade her that these performative bodily practices must be followed in order to attain a good reputation and honor.

Nourishment

Nourishment is the next subcategory of conduct of the body in forming a female religious subject. Unlike the first two subcategories of dress and composure, the subcategory of nourishment is advised more so through moderation rather than patterns of restriction. This idea follows nicely with the virtue of temperance preached by the author of *The Guide*.

Good Wif does not have much advice on nourishment. There is no discussion on eating, but the author advises the subject to drink alcohol only in moderation as drunkenness will bring shame:

⁷¹ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 80.

For those who are often drunk,
Lose their prosperity⁷²

Here I argue shame can be used as another key word that could contribute to a bad reputation or dishonor. Shame comes from public disapproval, in which the subject would have been rejected for failing to partake in an act of performative devotion. Performative devotion, which is absorbed by a public eye, diminishes the risk of shame.

An interesting note about *Good Wiff* is there is no mention of fasting. Fasting was a major component of late medieval piety and one frequently discussed both in *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower*. Fasting was used to control one's body as a contribution to one's chastity or purity.⁷³ According to Bynum, women found it especially attractive as a way to control themselves and renounce both themselves and their environment.⁷⁴ But only a moderate amount of fasting was encouraged in conduct literature is subject to her husband and must not fail in her duties to her family and the estate. As I noted earlier, *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower* advise not to eat before the subject recites her morning prayers. This advice also follows in the evening for Vespers. In preparation for evening prayer, the subject in *The Guide* is advised to eat little or nothing at all so she can focus her attention on the next morning's Mass and not on "worldly thoughts."⁷⁵ Thus we see the author's construction of the religious identity by restricting eating in the evening in order to further the wife's faith and devotion. Again, this is an example of a patriarch applying pastoral power to ensure his wife can contribute to leading himself and his family to salvation.

⁷² *Good Wiff*, 76-79.

⁷³ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 2.

⁷⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 5.

⁷⁵ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 60.

The Guide includes an outline of the seven deadly sins and seven virtues. Gluttony is a sin which can result in an overindulgence in food and drink. As the author warns, “For one dies by eating and drinking too much.”⁷⁶ Moreover, the author defines temperance as finding moderation, nothing too much and nothing too little. Thus, the author of *The Guide* advises moderation in nourishment. However, this is not to say that fasting is not a present act in the subject’s life. Although fasting is not discussed frequently in *The Guide*, it is mentioned in the discussion on the virtue of chastity, in which the fourth degree of chastity “consists of fasting and keeping always before you the remembrance of death, which can so suddenly seize the unwary and drag them off forever.”⁷⁷

Fasting is also discussed frequently in *Knight of The Tower*, as well as other restrictive advice on eating and drinking. Similarly to *The Guide*, the author advises the subject to not eat before her morning prayers. Here we can see a pattern throughout all three texts on the importance of morning prayers in building the religious female subject.

There are many stories pertaining to fasting in *Knight of The Tower*, many of which warn the subject of what will happen if she does not fast. In one excerpt, *How good daughters ought to fast*, not fasting is connected to being spoiled. One daughter fasted and was “devout,” while the other daughter did not fast and was “spoiled.” The daughter who did not fast lost the love of her husband and he had an affair because of it. This story is important because not only is fasting related to devotion but it’s also related to the subject’s ability to uphold a marriage, a home, and a loyal husband. As the author warns in the excerpt, “And thus her husband hated her and he took his heart from her and gave it to another so that her household went to ruin,” that there are

⁷⁶ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 83.

⁷⁷ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 84.

social consequences for the subject who doesn't fast.⁷⁸ This excerpt gives us evidence of the tensions between the body, the family, and the estate. Not only did she lose her husband, but she lost the honor of her household.

Fasting is also essential to the reader before she is married. The author of *Knight of The Tower* advises that the young woman fasts three or four days a week until she is married as this will "subdue your flesh so it won't become aroused."⁷⁹ But there are even more restrictions. The author advises the subject to fast on Friday for Christ's suffering, but if the subject can't fast on Friday, she is advised to not eat anything that had to die, and to fast Saturday in honor of "Our Lady and her virginity."⁸⁰ Here we can see how the author attempts to construct a female religious identity by creating conduct of the body through fasting in order to uphold her virtue of chastity.

Knight of The Tower also gives exemplary stories of how fasting can save the subject from dangerous situations. One of these stories describes how a prostitute fell into a deep pit. Although she had committed sin through her prostitution, because she fasted on Fridays and Saturdays she heard a voice that she had been saved. The voice instructed her to keep her body clean from sin.⁸¹ In the context of the quote, the prostitute was "saved" meaning she lived. This is not to be confused with attaining salvation. This is a great example of performative devotion for social benefit. Fasting becomes transactional in the story. As long as the prostitute fasts, she can get herself out of life-threatening situations.

⁷⁸ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 55.

⁷⁹ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 56.

⁸⁰ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 56.

⁸¹ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 62.

Chastity

Chastity is the most important and valued subcategory of conduct literature within forming a female religious subject. Construction of conduct around chastity and virginity receives the most attention from the authors of my three sources. *Good Wif* traces the importance of continence and virginity throughout the poem, not only for the subject, but also for her future, nonexistent, daughter. *The Guide* has an entire chapter devoted to the concept, in addition to its being mentioned in almost every other chapter as well. *Knight of The Tower* also discusses the importance of chastity in many, if not most, of its sections.

Before I begin my analysis, I would like to contextualize chastity and virginity in late medieval Europe. Whereas understandings of chastity are a bit more obvious, the concept of virginity is much more complex. Chastity is a term which can be a synonym for virginity in the appropriate context, but ultimately means “sexually appropriate.”⁸² In the case of the conduct literature referenced here, chastity would refer to marital loyalty or refraining from sex. Virginity is a much more subjective term. In *Versions of Virginity In Late Medieval England*, Sarah Salih argues that piety is subjective, further proving that a subject’s identification with devotion through virginity can differ from other understandings of the term. As Salih states: “Likewise, medieval virgins and medieval women, not to mention different individuals within those categories, have different experiences of the body.”⁸³ Salih’s argument is framed on the idea that virginity involves more than sexual experience, and in some ways creates a third gender.⁸⁴

⁸² Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 16.

⁸³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 6.

⁸⁴ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 1.

If prior discussion in the *Good Wiff* poem regarding modest dress, meek behavior, and restrictive eating did not contribute enough to the larger value of keeping oneself contained, the poem gives examples of what to avoid in regard to chastity and virginity. The author advises the subject “not be a loose woman, no matter what happens.”⁸⁵ A “loose woman” can translate to a woman who is casual and frequent with her sexual interactions with various people. This would align well as an opposite definition to chastity.

Later in the poem, the author advises the subject to take note of where she shows herself in public settings,

Do not go to wrestling matches or to cock shootings,

As if you were a strumpet or a harlot⁸⁶

Like the term “loose woman,” a strumpet or harlot is a reference to a woman who is a prostitute or casual with her sexual interactions with various people. The author continues into the next stanza advising the subject to not socialize with men publicly in fear of one capturing her heart,

Do not socialize with every man who passes in the street;

If any man speaks to you, greet him briefly;

Let him go along the road; do not stand next to him,

So that he might not by any villainy capture your heart,

For not all men are true,

Who know how to use pleasing words⁸⁷

Here we can see how the author intends to warn the subject of a man’s intention toward her.

Although the quote is not a direct threat to the subject’s chastity, we can sense a warning from

⁸⁵ *Good Wiff*, 55.

⁸⁶ *Good Wiff*, 81-84.

⁸⁷ *Good Wiff*, 90-93.

the author about how a man's intentions could at some point threaten this virtue. This fear expressed by the author could also contribute to a belief that a woman is too vulnerable and weak to know what is best for her or how to protect herself.

Discussions about the virtue of chastity are extremely frequent within *The Guide*, as the author devotes an entire chapter to the virtue. Chastity was also explained during the discussion of the seven virtues which counter the seven vices. The author provides the seven degrees of chastity: work towards a clear conscience, refrain from speaking coarsely, keep vigilance over the five bodily senses, fast and remember death, leave wicked companions, stay busy doing good work, and practice true prayer.⁸⁸ These degrees are discussed in the context of devotion, but the chapter *On Chastity*, focuses on how chastity benefits the subject socially. This is an example of the formation between performative devotion and internalized devotion. *The Guide* at least gives construction of chastity as an internalized devotion in the discussion of sin and virtue, and then chastity as performative devotion in the latter chapter.

Although highlighting this concept, the author acknowledges to the subject that he is not necessarily concerned about her own violation of chastity, but still thought it best to put it in the book for future readers. We can't know exactly what the author's intentions were, whether it was a play of reverse psychology or a genuine belief in and respect for his wife. He describes the betrayal of chastity as a social consequence, as noted from the beginning, "It is a certainty that all qualities are diminished in a maiden or a woman who lacks virginity, continence, or chastity. Neither wealth, nor beauty, nor intelligence, nor noble lineage, nor any other excellence can ever erase a reputation for vice, particularly in a woman, if she has committed it once, or even been

⁸⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 84-85.

suspected of it.”⁸⁹ So not only must the subject avoid crossing this boundary of chastity, she must also be cautious of being perceived through social suspicion, even if she is indeed innocent. Here is where the performative devotion dominates that of internalized devotion. Social suspicion can ultimately contribute to a reputation that the subject is not performing devotion as the literature advises. The public will then also assume she lacks an internalized devotion, ultimately impacting her honor, and that of her husband’s.

Similarly to Salih’s understanding of virginity, Katherine Harvey discusses in an article the issue of a woman’s physical integrity aligning with her physical state. Although the article is discussing a contemporary issue over the status of consecrated virgins, it draws from medieval definitions that women did not have to be physically virginal in order to be accepted as a consecrated virgin. In describing the complexity of the definition of virginity, Harvey shares: “Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) suggested that corporeal virginity could be restored through a miracle, and spiritual virginity through the forgiveness of sin. For Peter Damian (1007-72), those who questioned God’s ability to restore both physical and spiritual virginity were guilty of questioning His power. If, Damian fumed, God could be born of a virgin, then of course he could achieve the much lesser feat of repairing lost virginity.”⁹⁰ Understanding virginity as a state that can be taken or restored on both physical and spiritual levels is abstract. However, it’s relevant to how the author of *The Guide* views virginity in relation to honor and as we will see how Margery Kempe wrestles with her own sexuality and identification as a virgin.

In *The Guide*, the author cites Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory, and “others” as claiming that as long as a woman is deemed “honorable” she may be deemed and called a virgin.⁹¹ Giving

⁸⁹ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 86.

⁹⁰ Harvey, “Like a Virgin?” 3.

⁹¹ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 86.

a woman the title of “virgin” even if she does not physically conform to sexual definition of virginity, just because she is deemed “honorable” is a significant claim. Yet it aligns with the type of argument that Salih and Harvey make in their respective explorations. Salih reminds us that a woman’s virginity “can be conceptualized as a stage in the female life cycle, of virgin, wife, widow; it can be a bodily state; it can be a social identity, a religious career; temporary or permanent.”⁹² If we apply Salih’s understanding of what the author in *The Guide* is trying to say, we can see the intersection between virginity and honor as a social concept on the bridge to salvation.

Even though *The Guide* cites Augustine, it may not accurately represent his interpretation. Bonnie Kent has noted that Augustine supports the idea that women do not lose their virtue from rape: “nothing done to the body without the will’s consent can damage a person’s moral character.” Moreover, “Augustine insisted that a woman ravaged without her consent retains her chastity.”⁹³ The *Guide* describes a virtuous woman as a “gem,” and something loved by God as much as he loved “the Blessed Virgin.” The author states, “By the treasure found in the field and the gem we can understand every virtuous woman, because whatever her estate—maiden, married, or widowed— she can be compared to a treasure and a jewel, because she is so virtuous, so pure, so spotless that she pleases God, and he loves her like the Blessed Virgin, whether her estate be married, widowed, or maiden. And be assured, no matter his rank, noble or not, can have a better treasure than a principled and modest wife.”⁹⁴ Note how foundational this quote is to the intention of conduct literature. As long the reader is “principled” and “modest” she will be loved by God as much as the “Blessed Virgin.” This is a

⁹² Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 16.

⁹³ Kent, “On the Track of Lust: *Luxuria*, Okham, and the Scientists,” 363.

⁹⁴ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 87.

key vehicle to salvation for the husband, while still having a wife who fulfills all his various needs. This will also make for a good comparison with Margery Kempe as she struggles to identify as a virgin while also having birthed fourteen children.

After *The Guide* sets a framework of virginity for the subject, the author turns to the story of Lucretia. This story is built on the same framework argued above regarding Augustine's view of honor and consent as the story was also derived from Augustine's comments in the *City of God*.⁹⁵ Lucretia, a married woman, is forced to have sex by Sextus, an emperor's son. After this incident, Lucretia felt so much shame and dishonor for herself, but her husband comforted her and explained why she had not sinned: "He began to comfort her gently and to pardon her, pointing out many good reasons why her body had not sinned: since her heart had not consented or taken pleasure, and he began to invoke examples and authorities."⁹⁶ However, Lucretia feels so much inner shame and dishonor for what happened to her that she kills herself with a sword believing that she will never recover herself or her husband from the shame of the situation. This is a rare example in the conduct literature of a woman's internalized devotion manifesting into her performative devotion. Publicly, she is reaffirmed of her chastity but internally she cannot bear own guilt over the betrayal she feels in her inner religious identity.

Unfortunately, the author uses this as a warning tale to his female subject that although rape itself might not lead a woman to sin or lose her chastity, the risk of losing one's honor and reputation in society is a greater threat. The author concludes the chapter by reminding the reader that the smallest suspicion can bring irreparable damage to not only her honor but also the honor

⁹⁵ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 91.

⁹⁶ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 91.

of her husband and family.⁹⁷ This is a powerful tension between piety and social reputation, as honor becomes the bridge between the literature and salvation.

Knight of The Tower includes instructional excerpts preaching similar values to both *Good Wif* and *The Guide*. However, although the values outlined are similar, the method is quite different. There is no specific chapter dedicated to leading the subject into the dos and don'ts of keeping her virginity and protecting her chastity. The subject must absorb these values through exemplary stories of what to do and what not to do. For example, in the story “Concerning the two daughters of the Emperor, one sinful and one devout,” the author shares how the sinful daughter lost her chastity and was impregnated by a knight. When the girl’s father found out, he had her drowned, while the devout daughter was saved from dishonor.⁹⁸ This story is particularly interesting because it shows how internalized devotion prevents a social dishonor. The devout daughter is labeled devout because she “had good manners, loved God, and always honored and prayed to him...” which connects the subject’s perceived devotion and her good manners. Somehow that combination of devotion and manners stands in for a more explicit description of protecting her chastity.

Similarly, the author again warns the subject of the consequences for her reputation in regards to her chastity. In the excerpt, *How wedded women who have set their love on someone of a lower degree than themselves are not worthy to be called women*, the author advises the subject that whoever sets their love on “married men, priests and monks, and servants or people of no estate” have no esteem or value, which leads to his conclusion that any type of love below her station will only bring dishonor and shame to that subject.⁹⁹ The title of this section is

⁹⁷ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 92.

⁹⁸ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 46-47.

⁹⁹ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 164.

particularly interesting. Not only would the consequences include dishonor and shame, but the designation of “woman” is taken away from a guilty subject. Furthermore, we see how the importance of class and social status is intertwined with a subject’s performative devotion. The author constructs a female subject around the values of chastity by connecting the virtue to her devotional practice, her social reputation, and her own identity of being a woman.

The foregoing analysis of these three sources demonstrates how their respective authors attempted to construct a female religious subject by claiming authority over the body through performative devotion. The body is one of three tensions identified by Robert Clark. From the evidence provided, all three authors instruct the female subject to keep her body small, hidden, and contained. The authors want her to keep her body still, to stay quiet, to keep her hair out of the way, to wear clothes that do not draw attention, and maintain protection over her body, all in order to attain honor in both social and religious spheres. The subjects' perceived devotion through the use of the body contributes to her social reputation. Both the subject’s religious and secular identities work to reward her with the title of “honor” or “shame.” A woman’s honor, at both social and religious levels then becomes the bridge for not only her own salvation, but more importantly that of her husband’s.

The Family

The second tension that Clark identifies as a duty of the female subject is her role in the family. As I discussed earlier, the role of the wife in *Good Wif* is founded on the subject’s ability to flourish. Coinciding with this ability is how she does or does not act in a godly manner.¹⁰⁰ Living in a godly manner could be acts of either performative or internalized devotion. Based on

¹⁰⁰ *Good Wif*, 6-9.

the pattern we see in *Good Wif*, performative devotion was likely more important to having a godly manner. Manner represents the acts or traits of a subject as perceived by others, and thus is more fitting to a performative way of devotion. However, the author gives some striking advice:

If any man pays you attention and wishes to marry you,
Do not scorn him, no matter who he is,
But tell your friends and do not keep it secret”¹⁰¹

This advice is surprising because, as noted earlier, the subject was advised to remain quiet, and not draw attention to herself. However, when it comes to a marriage proposal the subject is advised to be vocal. This transition also highlights the expectations in class difference between *Good Wif* and the other texts. The poem, written for a bourgeoisie audience, was more concerned with social mobility, something a good engagement could offer. Thus, announcing and vocalizing this event might be an attempt at attaining a social honor, one that the poem is already so concerned with achieving. We can already see a transition in the subject’s identity where she is allowed to take up more space than usual.

The next stanza in *Good Wif* constructs the wife’s relationship to her husband. The author advises the subject to love and honor her husband before everything else, and to act meekly and compliantly:

And so may you keep him in a good mood and be his darling;
Pleasing and meek words can slake anger”¹⁰²

Here we can see the emergence of the subject's role towards her husband as one of complete obedience. The subject’s identity is constricted in that she must remain meek towards her

¹⁰¹ *Good Wif*, 32-34.

¹⁰² *Good Wif*, 40-43.

husband, but her power is great as she is responsible for his emotions, according to the literature. If we circle back to the first stanza, we see how the behavior of the subject contributes to her ability to “flourish,” directly impacting her attainment of honor.

Although outwardly the subject is expected to be obedient to her husband, inwardly the author advises the reader to always trust herself over anyone else.¹⁰³ Although the advice is not detailed, it’s important for opening a bigger door for the subject’s authority as a wife. This pattern is extended in *The Guide*. The sixth article of the book begins with the author’s orders: “be humble and obedient to the one who will be your future husband.”¹⁰⁴ This advice is continued in a somewhat extreme way, telling the subject to always listen to her husband’s commands even if they are odd, and to always put her husband’s happiness above her own.¹⁰⁵

The author continues by supporting his advice with biblical evidence from chapter five of the Letter to the Ephesians, “God commands women to be subject to their husbands as to lords, because the husband is the head of the wife just as Our Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the Church.”¹⁰⁶ This connection is continued with a discussion of the subject’s honor in relation to her obedience: “For, through their obedience many women have gained and have come to great honor, while others by their disobedience have been humbled and have fallen from their rank.”¹⁰⁷ As I discussed earlier in *Good Wif*, the subject’s obedience is directly related to her honor. Yet more importantly, obedience is correlated to her rank. Rank has social connotations that prove obedience to the husband. Obedience as described in *The Guide* is performative. This is another

¹⁰³ *Good Wif*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 104.

¹⁰⁵ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 104.

¹⁰⁶ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 104.

¹⁰⁷ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 105.

example of strict constructs around devotion in which the reader might have created space to develop an internalized devotion that diverted from the strict obedience to the husband.

Furthermore, the role of obedience is also expected of the subject in *Knight of The Tower*. In *How women ought not to be jealous*, the author narrates a story of a woman who attempted to talk back to her husband, which results in her getting punched. In addition to assaulting her because she was not gracious and obedient, her husband took on other lovers and felt resentful towards the wife.¹⁰⁸ The author uses this story to demonstrate how a lack of obedience towards the subject's husband can lead to unfavorable, even disastrous results. I also argue this story warns the reader to not perform in ways which express her internal feelings. The wife's internal subjectivity is lost in this moment, disappearing under the narration of physical violence. Unlike the other two sources, this excerpt does not necessarily focus on the wife's status of honor or reputation. We will see later how this course of action turns out for Margery Kempe. The manifestations of the wife's internalized subjectivity are at stake, one vastly different from the performative devotion expected of her.

In another dimension of family responsibility, the role of a mother is the first instance of the subject's ability to have authority over someone else other than herself. Although like most of the actions advised by the author through the texts, everything revolves around obedience to the husband. So, although the role of the mother is the first glimpse of authority given to the subject, we must remember that she is still under the jurisdiction of the husband.

Good Wiff gives advice only for when a subject's children might misbehave, in which case the author advises the subject to: "take a rod and beat them in a row, until they cry for

¹⁰⁸ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 90.

mercy, and acknowledge their guilt” rather than scold them.¹⁰⁹ Although this seems like a harsh punishment for a child, the author argues that this is how a parent can show affection, as they claim, “the more beloved, the more the need.”¹¹⁰ If we follow the theory that conduct literature was a vehicle for pastoral power to bring the family salvation, beating one’s own children is definitely a unique performative devotion. However, it is an important factor in constructing the subject’s religious identity as it gives the subject a physical authority over her children, an authority she does not necessarily have for herself.

The author of *Good Wif* continues by focusing on how to mother a daughter, the main concern being that she is not “ruined.”¹¹¹ Notice how this stanza shows the author constructing a religious female subject in the role of a mother, and how she should construct a religious subject out of her daughter. Both the author’s daughter (the subject), and the subject’s daughter must fulfill the tension of authority of their body through chastity. At least that is what I imply from preventing the “ruin” of a subject.

The stanza presented below, which addresses how to raise a daughter, starts with protecting her chastity, but quickly moves into building and protecting her social reputation. Here we can see the balance between both the religious and secular concerns of the subject’s daughter, who is a female subject herself.

See to it that none of your daughters

Is ruined:

From the time that they are born,

Busy yourself and accumulate

¹⁰⁹ *Good Wife*, 188-191.

¹¹⁰ *Good Wif*, 194.

¹¹¹ *Good Wif*, 195.

Wealth for their marriage,
 And marry them off as soon as they
 Are ready.
 Girls are lovely and affectionate,
 But fickle in love,
 My dear child.”¹¹²

The author constructs a female religious subject who would protect her daughter’s chastity, secure her daughter’s social reputation, and show authority and dominance over her children. In this case, concern for the daughter’s performative devotion dominates her internalized devotion. Moreover, the reader is assumed to have financial responsibility for accumulating wealth for her daughter’s dowries. Interestingly, the author gives no guidance on how to help the daughter choose a husband, perhaps it is assumed the reader would give the poem to her own daughter one day. These are all major components of freedom constructed by the author for the subject, possibly due to the context of being in a lower class, and thus having less resources. To compare authority, *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower*, do not give nearly as detailed advice on raising children, and thus autonomy is questioned.

The advice given in *Knight of The Tower* does not take as harsh a view as is seen in *Good Wif* when it comes to reprimanding children. However, in the excerpts given in Barnhouse’s translation, most of the sections on parenthood are directed at both parents, or just to the father. Excerpts in the book advise the subject to pray for one’s children, and if a parent curses their child, they will have consequences with the devil.¹¹³ This excerpt is unique because it constructs

¹¹² *Good Wif*, 195-200.

¹¹³ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 105.

a religious identity as a parent, not just as a mother, wife, or woman. By neutralizing the gender binary of parenthood, the mother might find herself with some authority. Thus, neutralizing gender for parenthood builds a religious identity for both mother and father which creates a shared identity through parenting.

The only excerpt provided in the Barnhouse translation relating to motherhood is entitled, *How the good woman ought to appease her husband's ire when he sees him angry*. In this excerpt the author advises the subject to love her husband's children from a different mother so as to honor her husband and benefit her future. As the author states, "She can't show her lord any greater love than to love his children from other women"¹¹⁴ Yet this quote relates less to motherhood than to the wife's performative devotion towards her husband. In the story, the wife's reward for loving her husband's son is not salvation but saving her social reputation. After her husband dies, his son fights for her to keep her rights, thus preserving her social honor and likely her financial status.

Here we see a subject constructed to honor two different men for her own benefit and protection later in life, but not necessarily after death. Where the construction of the internalized religious identity for the subject comes in is not so clear. Loving the son is an act of obedience towards the subject's husband, which ultimately promotes her own honor, and thus her ultimate salvation as well. However, this would be an indirect path to salvation as honor becomes the bridge between conduct literature and salvation. The concept of honor again splits between religious and social concerns, in which the story above is a prime example. The woman's honor is caught on a hook of social benefit through performative devotion rather than internalized devotion.

¹¹⁴ Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 112.

Whereas *Knight of The Tower* gave little instruction on motherhood to the subject, *The Guide* gives even less. The subject is instructed to give the book to her own daughter someday, but unfortunately that is all the authority she seems to be given, perhaps because the author was purely oblivious to a woman's reality. Surely a wife during this time period would have a bigger role as a mother, but from these three texts, the authors do not construct the female subject to have much authority over her children, as it's barely even addressed.

The Estate

Whereas the authors do not construct much authority in the female subject's identity in regards to motherhood, the subject is given the most authority over the estate. Conduct literature was created for aristocratic women. In this context, the estate would likely have been a large property with many different varieties of servants, grounds keepers, chefs, etc. Running a large estate would also require adequate knowledge of finances.¹¹⁵ This class status would apply to the readers of *The Guide*, and *Knight of The Tower*. The authors of both of these texts were from the aristocracy, attempting to guide their subject to the aristocratic identity they were assumed to carry out. Unlike these sources, *Good Wif* was written for a bourgeois subject. The subject formed in *Good Wif* was still expected to manage servants and the estate, but probably not on such a scale that we can assume from the subjects constructed in *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower*. This difference in social position played a large role in constructing the female subject's authority within the literature.

Rather than beginning with an analysis of how the female subject is constructed to take care of the estate in *Good Wif*, I will begin by looking at *The Guide*. *Knight of The Tower*,

¹¹⁵ Ashley, "The French *Enseignement*," 101.

although written for a subject from a larger estate, does not go into much detail on how to care for servants or manage a household. *The Guide* dedicates five chapters to caring for the estate: *Horticulture*, *Choosing and Caring for Servants and Horses*, *Hawking Treatise*, *Menus*, and *Recipes*. This is a significant amount of material for a subject to retain, in which she is given authority in managing all that is stated and advised, secondary to her husband. I argue this is an example of the text giving a reader too much information, set at unattainable standards. Although these specific expectations do not directly impact her internalized religious ideas, the contribution of this information on top of all that was previously given is too much. Thus the conduct literature likely forces the reader to question an alternative way of life, creating space to develop her own ideas about faith, fueling an internalized devotion different from what she is expected to perform.

Caring for an estate may seem like a secular role; one might wonder what managing servants and finances, and knowing when to plant certain vegetables and what meals to make out of them might have to do with religious practice. However, the texts I am studying have built solid foundations of how the subject should practice the seven virtues so as to counteract the seven vices. If we return to these virtues: humility, friendship, kindness, prowess, mercy, temperance, and chastity, fulfilling the duties required of running an estate requires the enactment of these virtues as well. Furthermore, in fulfilling these duties of the estate, the subject remains obedient to her husband's orders, and thus manages her own honor and that of her husband.

The chapter on horticulture in *The Guide* advises the subject on how to seed and harvest food and other plants. The author frames these duties around religious days. For example, from

All Saints Day, which in our calendar is November 1st, bog beans can be grown.¹¹⁶ Savory and marjoram can be sown in February but last only until St. John's Day, or rather June 24th.¹¹⁷ As we can see, the subject is advised to plant seeds by following religious days, forcing secular and religious practice to intertwine: "After the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady plant peonies, serpentine, lily bulbs, and currant bushes."¹¹⁸ This chapter isn't extraordinarily long but does include a variety of vegetables, flowers, and herbs which should be planted in accordance with the religious days.

The first sentence of the article, "take note that whatever you sow, plant, or graft," may indicate that the subject would be responsible for partaking in manual labor herself.¹¹⁹ Rather, the author may be giving the subject this information so that she knows it well enough to instruct her staff to do so. However, this may be a point of contention as the author goes back and forth on how much authority he really wants to give the subject.

In *Choosing and Caring for Servants and Horses*, the author warns the subject of three types of servants: day laborers, "other workers," and "domestics."¹²⁰ When it comes to hiring day laborers, the author advises the subject to tell their household steward, Master Jehan, to take authority over hiring and managing them. Here, the only authority the subject has is to notify the steward to hire and manage other workers, but she does not have the authority to hire and manage them herself. By taking this authority away from the wife, the author is expressing how incapable a woman might be at managing these matters.

¹¹⁶ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 209.

¹¹⁷ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 210.

¹¹⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 212.

¹¹⁹ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 209.

¹²⁰ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 215-216.

We see the subject gain some authority over the estate when it comes to paying servants. In regard to “other workers” which the author includes as “wine growers, threshers, field hands, and the like, or tailors, cloth makers, shoemakers, bakers, farriers, candle makers,” the author warns the subject to pay them quickly and regularly.¹²¹ If the wife was responsible for payment she would then need some knowledge over finances, and thus have some power.

Authority is then deceptively taken away from the subject when the author discusses selecting chambermaids. The author claims to give the subject power and authority by advising her to use what I assume to be a head chambermaid or servant, “Concerning chambermaids and house varlets, who are called domestics, understand my dear, that I leave you the power and authority to have them chosen by Dames Agnes the Beguine (or another woman you choose to have in our service), to hire, pay, retain, or dismiss them from service as you wish, in order that they may obey you better and fear to anger you.”¹²² I argue that this is a facade of authority given to the subject. The author claims to give her power and authority over servants, but in reality she is given the power and authority to communicate with the head of staff to manage all of the important details about the servants. An aspect of authority, however, is that the servants must obey and fear the wife. We also see the subject has authority to pay “other workers,” but the authority to pay chambermaids is left to Dames Agnes the Beguine.

Moreover, the author follows this advice by stating, “Nevertheless, you should consult me privately about this and act accordingly to my advice, because you are too young and could easily be even your own people.”¹²³ This statement ultimately takes away any authority the subject might have had over the servants of the estate. The author assumes that the reader is not

¹²¹ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 216.

¹²² Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 216.

¹²³ Greco, “The Good Wife’s Guide,” 216.

smart enough to know how trustworthy those around her are, even those who are close to her and with whom she is familiar.

When we turn to the subject's authority given by the author in *Good Wif*, we see much more space for opportunity to rule over servants. The author states,

Wisely govern your house and servants;
 Be neither too harsh nor too affable with them,
 But see what most needs to be done,
 And set your servants to that task both swiftly and quickly."¹²⁴

Notice there is no mention of a husband's role in governing anyone. However, in the next stanza the author states,

If your husband is away from home,
 Do not let your servants be idle,
 But watch who does a lot or a little.¹²⁵

This quote may infer that the husband still has more authority and power over the estate than the wife. If the servants are likely to be less motivated to work when the husband is gone, the author may be arguing that the wife does not have much authority or power over them.

Although the subject may be secondary in the line of authority in the estate, she is still advised to actively participate in her role as a housewife. This role includes working with the servants, and watching them to make sure their duties are fulfilled.¹²⁶ Although we see this active participation in the *Good Wif* poem, we must also remember that this poem was written in the

¹²⁴ *Good Wif*, 102-105.

¹²⁵

Good Wif, 108-110.

¹²⁶ *Good Wif*, 116-135.

context of the bourgeois rather than the aristocracy. A lower class audience might be expected to be working alongside hired staff, whereas the aristocracy might find that less necessary.

Looking at *The Guide*, it may be less surprising that the subject doesn't have to participate in as much manual labor as the subject constructed in *Good Wif*. However, the subject constructed in *The Guide* still has duties outlined by the author. In this chapter, Dame Agnes the Beguine is the subject's assistant in managing the female servants while Master Jehan is in charge of managing the male servants. The subject's main duty is to uphold her staff's virtue in the name of the estate. This is the subject's main authority and it is where we see the religious identity constructed into her pursuit of honor through that of the estate. Through performative action and authority over her servants, the wife is responsible for their honor which contributes to the honor of the household.

The subject is instructed to make sure that all of the servants of the estate are assigned duties constantly so they do not fall into laziness and idleness, as those traits "are the root of all evil."¹²⁷ Laziness and idleness also fall under the seven deadly sins. Furthermore, the subject is advised to uphold the young female servants virtue of chastity by making sure they sleep in close proximity to the subject so she can watch over them and make sure they do not run off in the night.¹²⁸ Again, we can see how the religious identity is constructed through performative action in the female subject as she has the authority to uphold the virtue of her servants.

I have just discussed three primary sources of conduct literature, ranging in form and intended audience. By using Robert Clark's theory of the three tensions the female subject must balance in forming her identity, I argue that little authority is given to the female subject in

¹²⁷ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 222.

¹²⁸ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 223.

regards to her body, her role in the family, and her role over the estate. However, the authority the subject is given, works to form a religious identity through the fulfillment of the seven virtues. Moreover, the high standards set by the literature likely forced the reader to question these acts of faith and question how her internalized piety may differ. As we can see, the ideal subject constructed by these authors attains honor for herself which then contributes to the honor of the husband, their family, and their estate. The pastoral power wielded in the literature aims to lead the family to salvation, but I argue the larger concern is actually the subject's performative devotion as viewed and labeled by society. Using authority wisely is of the utmost importance for the subject in order to attain the idealized identity constructed by the authors.

Chapter 3

Applying Conduct Literature to *The Book of Margery Kempe*

From my analysis of these three conduct texts, I establish that the subject can use the little authority she is given to forge a religious identity. The conduct literature builds a religious subject by advising the pursuit of the seven virtues through the three tensions between the body, the family, and the estate. I will now compare the subjects constructed in these conduct texts with the subject constructed in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In *The Book*, Margery portrays herself as deeply rooted in her religious identity, mostly expressing this devotion by describing her embodied actions such as speaking to God, counseling others on their sin, and dramatic crying and writhing her body. The other arenas of tension in conduct texts identified by Clark, that is the family and the estate, are relevant but not as developed. In contrast to Margery's role in the estate, it's actually her identity away from it that matters. Margery identifies herself as a pilgrim, a role that is disconnected from duties of estate. I will begin with a brief description and summary of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and will then turn to an analysis of the tensions I analyzed in my discussion of conduct literature. In addition, I argue that most of Margery's performative devotion is a manifestation of her internalized devotion.

The Book of Margery Kempe recounts the story of Margery Kempe, an Englishwoman stuck between the roles set for her as a wife and her own desires and beliefs about piety and devotion. The text was written sometime between 1436 and 1438, during a time when English prestige and prosperity were less secure, and there was a heightened fear of instability.¹²⁹

The manuscript of *The Book* was rediscovered in 1934, and the translation into modern English I use was translated and edited by Lynn Staley in 2001. The translated book is divided

¹²⁹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, xii.

into two books, "Book One" and "Book Two," adding up to 184 pages. The text was not written in chronological order; rather it was pieced together with random memories.¹³⁰ In her translation, Staley also includes two sections entitled "Contexts" and "Criticism," which include articles relevant to *The Book*. The original text as translated by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 and later reprinted by Henry Pepwell in 1521.¹³¹ However, these printings altered the original manuscript to make Margery seem more tame and devout than she actually was portrayed.¹³²

Originally the text was seen as a diary of a slightly unhinged woman, written with the help of a male priest. However, Staley argues that recent work has illuminated *The Book* to be a product of the imagination.¹³³ Staley believes that Margery might have written the book herself, portraying the author as a priest. Margery might have created a fictional author in order for her text to be "authorized" by a male cleric, which would give the text more validity.

Speaking in the third person, Margery is referred to as "this creature." This has been argued by Lynn Staley as an attempt to neutralize the presence of gender in her identity. Staley makes an interesting argument that a reason for Margery's distancing from her gendered identity was to protect herself from the possibility of being suspected of heresy. As Staley argues, "By distancing herself from her subject, Kempe thus screened herself from such charges, as well as from charges that she, a woman, had dared to set herself up as a figure of spiritual authority."¹³⁴ Yet I don't find this argument convincing because Margery frequently draws attention to herself and does not present herself in a gender-neutral manner or in a way that attempts to neutralize her femininity.

¹³⁰ Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 2.

¹³¹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ix.

¹³² Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ix.

¹³³ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, x.

¹³⁴ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, xi.

Margery does push the boundaries of the identity expected of her by her community. *The Book* begins right after Margery is married and her first child conceived. These events are traumatic for Margery. She got very sick after conceiving, and childbirth triggered a religious awakening, "she despaired of her life, thinking she might not live. And then she sent for her ghostly father, for she had a thing in conscience which she had never shown before that time in all her life."¹³⁵ The book continues with a detailed account of how Margery grapples with her strengthening commitment to God while fighting the expectations of how she must act in the social realm.

Unlike the subject constructed in the conduct literature, Margery finds immense authority in her increasingly intimate relationship with God. This authority allows her freedom over her own performative devotion but contrasts with her lack of authority in her relationship to her husband and community. Unlike the subject constructed in the conduct literature, Margery's performative devotion is mostly manifested in her authority over her body. When looking at Clark's comparison of the subject's tensions between the body, the family, and the estate, most of Margery's authority is seen in relation to the control of her body. *The Book* barely speaks of her motherhood and much less of her role in an estate. Margery fulfills her wifely duty of subjecting her body to her husband and producing fourteen children, but not without a fight, and one she eventually wins.

In "Forged by Fire: Margery Kempe's Account of Postnatal Psychosis," Diana Jefferies and Debbie Horsfall discuss how the illness that triggered Margery's relationship with God has been identified by medical historians as postnatal psychosis, a dangerous mental illness.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 6-7.

¹³⁶ Jefferies and Horsfall, "Forged by Fire," 348.

However, Jefferies and Horsfall also highlight how labeling Margery's experience as a mental illness does not necessarily undermine her entire religious identity. The article argues that her postnatal psychosis likely occurred for about eight months, although her relationship with piety and devotion continued throughout her life.¹³⁷ This struggle with the body lays the framework for the development of Margery's religious identity.

If we look back to the conduct literature I have discussed earlier, it is clear that the authors attempt to control the woman's body by how she walks, presents herself, dresses herself, nourishes herself, and protects her chastity. These constructs are framed in Margery's life, yet she does not follow any of them except fasting and guarding her chastity. However, her fasting goes beyond what is asked by the literature and, although she aims to protect her chastity, both practices go against the will of her husband, thus exceeding the ultimate boundary set by the literature. As I argued earlier, the ultimate goal of conduct literature was to teach a wife to obey her husband. This way, with the use of pastoral power, both wife and husband would attain honor, and thus salvation. Margery's identity fights against the expectations set upon her by her community, and we see backlash against her throughout the book as she struggles to be accepted and even finds herself in physical danger.

Margery and The Body

Chastity

Throughout *The Book*, the most significant struggle Margery endures in relation to authority over her body is her inability to renounce sexual activity. This experience is stated in the very first sentence, "When this creature was twenty years of age or somewhat more, she was

¹³⁷ Jefferies and Horsfall, "Forged by Fire," 362.

married to a worshipful burgess and was with child within a short time, as nature would."¹³⁸ Here we see that the text begins with the loss of Margery's virginity and the conception of her first child, in which she becomes very ill with postnatal psychosis.

Virginity is a relevant concept for Margery's religious identity even though she is not technically a virgin. However, some medieval definitions of virginity are different from what was originally assumed. Margery struggles with the loss of her virginity, as we see by her postnatal psychosis, and throughout the book we watch Margery struggle to identify as a virgin. This is seen not only by her struggle to maintain her chastity but also by how she dresses, identifies herself in her relation to God, and envisions her own salvation.

Margery's struggle with chastity only continues. From this illness, Margery increasingly calls upon God to help her as she believes she might die and greatly fears damnation for a sin that remains unknown. Although *The Book* states that Margery fasted and did penance, she did not fully participate in confession.¹³⁹ Confession is an important component of virtue in both *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower*. Margery fails to fully confess scares her and makes her feel extremely guilty. Although she does call on her confessor while she is sick, she doesn't share all of her sins, thus leaving her with a lingering feeling of dread for damnation.¹⁴⁰ Margery then goes through a time of trial with the Devil in which she was constantly tormented: "She spoke many a reproving word and many a harsh word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness."¹⁴¹ This is an important phase for Margery in the construction of her religious identity. She portrays herself as lacking in all virtue, she is everything the conduct literature

¹³⁸ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 6.

¹³⁹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 7.

¹⁴¹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 7.

doesn't want her to be, she is everything her husband, family, and friends don't want her to be. Yet when God visits her in a vision, and her religious identity seemingly begins to develop, Margery, although increasingly devout, still fails to fit into the framework set on her by the literature, her husband, and community. Margery's failure to fit into the identity expected by the conduct literature is because the conduct literature emphasizes the development of performative devotion, while mostly abandoning the development of the subject's internalized devotion. However, Margery's devotion is developed internally and thus produces a performative devotion that is beyond the boundaries that are constructed in conduct literature.

According to *The Book*, Margery's postnatal psychosis, as labeled by medical historians, ends when Jesus visits her in a vision asking, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I forsook never you?"¹⁴² This is Margery's first vision in the text, which arguably stabilized her and brought her back to a former version of health: "And anon the creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as well as ever she was before."¹⁴³ However, Margery continues to receive visions and struggle with control over her performative acts.

As Margery continues to develop her relationship to God and construct her spiritual identity, she increasingly wants to live chastely: "And after this time she had never desire to common fleshly with her husband, for the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she had rather, she thought, eat or drink the ooze, the muck in the channel, than to consent to any fleshly commoning, save only for obedience."¹⁴⁴ As we see that Margery does not want to have sex: she also does not want to consent. Yet Margery does "consent" because she knows she must be obedient to her husband, "And so she said to her husband, 'I may not deny you my body, but

¹⁴² Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.

¹⁴³ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 10.

the love of my heart and affection is drawn from all earthly creatures and set only in God.' He would have his will, and she obeyed with great weeping and sorrowing because she might not live chaste."¹⁴⁵ There are two major issues here: Margery's submission to her husband, and a complexity to the meaning of consent. The intention of conduct literature was to create an obedient wife; this is something Margery must accept, but she pushes the boundary by constantly protesting her wifely duties. So, although Margery constantly protests against John, she is still stuck under his final say.

The second component is the complexity of consent. Earlier I discussed how *The Guide* gave the title of a virgin to any honorable woman, as influenced by Augustine's perspective on rape. Augustine argues that a woman's chastity is not lost through sex if she does not consent and does not receive pleasure.¹⁴⁶ Yet this line of consent is blurred here for Margery. Margery does not want to consent, yet she does consent. But how does one consent if they do not want to endure what they consented to? Margery's claim: "She obeyed with great weeping and sorrowing because she might not live chaste" undermines the obvious meaning of consent.¹⁴⁷ However, her performance of protesting does allow space to assert her authority over her body even when she had to concede to her husband's desire. Margery's protesting thus does not align with the expectations of the conduct literature.

Margery does continue to fight for her chastity, and through this, she attempts to find authority over her body. Margery's lack of control over her body caused her a lot of suffering, convincing herself that she would not be saved for the sin she felt she was committing with her husband. The guilt and fear Margery had over having sex causes her to further exceed the

¹⁴⁵ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 10.

¹⁴⁶ Kent, "On the Track of Lust: *Luxuria*, Okham, and the Scientists," 363.

¹⁴⁷ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 10.

expectations created by the conduct literature. *The Guide* and *Knight of The Tower* advise the reader to wake up and say prayers anytime before breakfast, but not necessarily with religious officials. Margery goes beyond this, waking at two or three o'clock in the morning to go to church for the entire day.¹⁴⁸ Not only does this overcompensate for what the conduct literature suggests, but it fails to succeed in the other expectations she would have throughout the day as a wife and mother.

Composure

Although chastity was the major concern Margery had over the control of her body, a side effect of her guilt was her uncontrollable sobbing and physical movements. The reason for the sobbing was two-fold: her fear and guilt of damnation and sin, and an increasing love and obsession with God. This physical expression of devotion could be called performative devotion. It is not performative in the sense that discursive practice instructed her for social honor, but rather it is a public manifestation of her internalized devotion. The text does not only display her sobbing as an act to prove her piety to others, but also as a bodily sensation she cannot control, "And therefore, when she knew that she should cry, she kept it in as long as she might and did all that she could to withstand it or else to put it away until she waxed as blueish gray as any lead, and ever it should labor her mind more and more, unto the time that it broke out."¹⁴⁹ Clearly the text portrays Margery enduring physical discomfort in order to resist her weeping, and thus this sobbing was not a forced display of piety for social labels of honor.

Margery's inability to control herself does not conform to the advice given in the conduct literature and proves that lack of composure pushes others away. Margery's expression of piety

¹⁴⁸ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 51.

removes her from social honor, and in the process rejects the pastoral power applied in the conduct literature. *Good Wif* cites the importance of behaving in a godly manner and of pleasing conduct in church.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, *The Guide* advises, "make yourself solitary, your eyes turned toward the ground, your soul in heaven."¹⁵¹ *Knight of The Tower* advises the reader to stay so composed that she should move her eyes only with her body.¹⁵² This advice is not representative of Margery's experience in church; in fact, her behavior is quite the opposite.

As already proven, Margery's internalized devotion forces her to also partake in performative devotion. An example of this can be seen when Margery goes to church and her sobbing angers those around her: "As this creature was at Canterbury in the church among the monks, she was greatly despised and reprovved because she wept so hard, both by the monks and the priests and by secular men, nearly all day, both morning and afternoon, also in so much that her husband went away from her as if he had not known her and left her alone among them."¹⁵³ Notice in this quote that all of the people rejecting her are men; priests, laymen, and her own husband are so disturbed by her lack of control over her body, her noise, and the space she takes up. Margery becomes publicly dishonored in these arenas as she fails to fit the constructs of honor as wielded by pastoral power.

However, these acts of performative devotion do fit Margery's definition of honor, and we see how she is continually promised salvation through her own visions. When Margery is sobbing around "good women," she is accepted, comforted, and taken care of. As stated in *The Book*, "When these good women saw this creature weep, sob, and cry so wonderfully and

¹⁵⁰ *Good Wif*, 7-9, 25-30.

¹⁵¹ Greco, "The Good Wife's Guide," 62.

¹⁵² Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 79.

¹⁵³ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 21.

mightily that she was nearly overcome therewith, then they ordained a good soft bed and laid her thereupon and comforted her as much as they might for our Lord's love, blessed may he be."¹⁵⁴ This is an important example where Margery rejects the patriarchal pastoral power and can attain honor by the confirmation of other women. This contrast of how honor and dishonor are viewed in the two gendered arenas is a significant aspect of the attainment of salvation within and beyond conduct literature.

Dress

Dress is another important point of religious expression for Margery. The conduct literature is concerned with the woman not wearing flashy or trendy clothing, and Margery does not always fulfill this expectation. In the beginning of the book, Margery is concerned with what others think of her, particularly men. This might be an example of patriarchal power still having some effect on Margery as she is still concerned with honor in a secular realm. *The Book* notes how Margery wore flashy clothing to attract looks from males: "And yet she knew full well that men spoke much villainy of her, for she wore gold pipes on her head and her hoods with the tippetts dagged. Her cloaks also were dagged and laid with divers colors between the dags so that they should be more conspicuous to men's sight and she the more worshiped."¹⁵⁵ So, although her style goes against the advice of conduct literature, she wants to be worshiped, and she wants to be worshiped by men. This is particularly striking as Margery is married and also still grappling with the guilt and despair of not being able to remain chaste. It makes one curious as to why she seeks male validation when she actively attempts to detach herself from the type patriarchal pastoral power we see in conduct literature.

¹⁵⁴ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 57.

¹⁵⁵ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.

However, Margery's expression through fashion transitions with the development of her religious identity. Although the conduct literature uses dress as a way to signify modesty and almost to avoid being noticed, Margery moves from flashy fashion seeking male validation to dressing in a way that would present herself as a virgin. Her performative devotion through dress is thus seen as a way to express her religious identity. Yet, unlike her uncontrollable sobbing, which receives public backlash and is simply a performative product of her internalized devotion over which she lacks control, Margery's performative devotion through dress does seek public validation and honor.

Dress is something Margery can control. She actively seeks permission to dress in white as a virgin. When it comes to dressing, her performative devotion is not simply an uncontrollable product of her internalized devotion. *The Book* portrays Margery seeking the permission from the Bishop of Lincoln, 'My Lord, if it pleases you, I am commanded in my soul that you shall give me the mantle and the ring and clothe me all in white clothes. And, if you clothe me on earth, our Lord Jesus Christ shall clothe you in heaven, as I understand by revelation.' Then the Bishop said to her, 'I will fulfill your desire if your husband will consent thereto.'¹⁵⁶ Here we see Margery's internalized devotion, which is her wish to be a virgin and a bride of God. *The Book* makes clear that Margery has no interest in her marriage to John and solely wants to devote her life to God, expressed in a performative way to attain honor in both her internal and external realms. Yet, her internalized devotion does force Margery to partake in performative devotion within her control to display to others her own idea of what it means to be honorable and seek salvation.

Nourishment

¹⁵⁶ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 26.

Nourishment is another major point of expression and control for Margery, in which her fasting actually exposes the unattainability of the standards set by conduct literature. Fasting, alongside chastity, is one of the few expectations set by conduct literature that Margery lives up to. Yet, Margery's fasting creates numerous problems due to the public scrutiny she receives.

Fasting is a product of Margery's internalized devotion in which she is commanded by God, through her visions, to fast often, even more so than the conduct literature commands. Fasting creates a lot of issues in Margery's social arena, thus proving it not as a performative act for social honor, but another performative product of deeply internalized devotion. While negotiating her chastity with her husband John, he argues that she must stop fasting if she wants to keep her chastity: "Margery, grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire. My first desire is that we shall lie still together in one bed as we have done before; the second, that you shall pay my debts before you go to Jerusalem; and the third, that you shall eat and drink with me on Fridays as you were wont to do."¹⁵⁷ Fasting becomes a negotiation strategy between John and Margery, thus undermining any sense of Margery's unequivocal obedience to her husband as well as displaying the unrealistic expectations about fasting and obedience set in conduct literature.

Moreover, while traveling with her fellow pilgrims, they tell her that she cannot keep traveling with them unless she stops reciting the gospel and stops fasting. The public backlash against Margery's fasting also suggests that some of the standards set by the conduct literature were unrealistic and unattainable. Margery's community is not as committed to fasting, and are actively annoyed and dishonor her in a secular way for extreme fasting. *The Book* describes Margery as annoying and impervious to social cues. Thus, to add the other social effects of

¹⁵⁷ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 19.

fasting, such as being irritable and perhaps even more annoying, it makes sense that Margery's community would reject her for these actions. In embodying an extreme version of the conduct literature advice, Margery points to the unrealistic and unattainable goals of that literature. For the very act of fasting, which is commended in conduct literature, leads to behavior that is annoying and unlikely to contribute to public honor.

Margery and The Family

Motherhood

Margery does not fulfill all the roles expected of her by the conduct literature. Although the conduct literature does not go into depth about motherhood, there is mention of it in all three texts. We know that Margery had fourteen children, but only one of them receives any attention in *The Book*. In Book Two of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the complex relationship between Margery and one son is narrated. Margery wanted him to "leave the world and follow Christ," which we conclude was a wish for him to become a religious figure.¹⁵⁸ However, this only pushed her son farther from her: "He fled from her company and would not gladly meet with her. So on a time that the mother met with her son though it was against his will and his intent at that time."¹⁵⁹ This dynamic between mother and son expresses that Margery had strong wishes for her son's future, perhaps what she wanted for herself, but could not have.

The text declares that her son "fell into the sin of lechery," in which he became very ill.¹⁶⁰ The son was thus fired from his job and rejected by those around them. The people who had pity on him, however, blamed Margery for doing "right evil, for through her prayer God had

¹⁵⁸ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 161.

¹⁵⁹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 161.

¹⁶⁰ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 161.

taken vengeance on her own child."¹⁶¹ Here is an important example of her community connecting Margery's internalized devotion of prayer to "right evil," thus demonstrating Margery's failure to attain social honor through patriarchal power. Margery, of course, denies this accusation. An interesting comparison can be made with the *Knight of The Tower*. The text warns parents that if they curse their child, they will have consequences from the devil.¹⁶² But Margery, far from cursing her child, tries to save him and yet ends up blamed by her community. And like most of the social rejection she endures, Margery doesn't care and argues he should come to her and pray for grace.¹⁶³ Margery's response is actually very significant as she rejects the community's claims of dishonor, and centers herself as a pillar to salvation by forcing her son to go to her for grace. In this way she rejects patriarchal pastoral power, and instead gives herself pastoral power.

Eventually, Margery's son does return to England with a wife. *The Book* expresses the drastic transition the son has undergone, in which he gives all of the credit to his mother's prayers: "For before his clothes were all dagged and his language all vanity; now he wore no slashes, and his dalliance was full of virtue. His mother, having great marvel of this sudden change, said unto him, "Benedicite, son, how is it with you that you are so changed?" "Mother," he said, "I hope that through your prayers our Lord has drawn me, and I purpose by the grace of God to follow your counsel more than I have done before."¹⁶⁴ Thus we see Margery's son finding her own honor and attainment of salvation through his mother's pastoral power rather than from John. This dialogue between mother and son is especially important because Margery is not

¹⁶¹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 162.

¹⁶² Barnhouse, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, 105.

¹⁶³ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 162.

¹⁶⁴ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 163.

necessarily seen as a mother here; she is more seen as someone with religious authority who is using her advantage of prayer to help someone who happens to be her son. It's important to note that Margery is never expressed in an especially maternal way. This is even more confirmed by the lack of description of raising and educating her children.

Wifely Duties

The only other time we see Margery's dedication to her family is after John's fall in which he is unable to survive comfortably without Margery's help. We have seen throughout *The Book*, Margery's reluctance to fulfill the wifely duties expressed in the conduct literature. However, as she gets older, she must return home to take care of her husband, something the conduct literature argues she should have been doing the whole time if she wanted to be deemed honorable.

The Book claims that eventually Margery succeeded in at least partially realizing her goal: she and John lived apart after taking their vow of chastity. Yet this concession to Margery's desire was instigated by their concern for public honor: "They, having knowledge how prone the people were to think evil of them, desiring to avoid all occasion, in as much as they might goodly, by their goodwill and their mutual consent, they parted asunder touching their board and their chambers, and went to board in divers places."¹⁶⁵ So, although their performative devotion to chastity, a manifestation of Margery's inner devotion, was an act of piety, the community was still quick to scrutinize. Furthermore, even though Margery and John then fully separated to avoid the criticism of the community, Margery was rebuked for not being at home with John when he fell down a ladder and injured himself, so much so that they threatened to hang her.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 131-132.

¹⁶⁶ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 131.

The tensions here become intersectional as Margery fails to live up to any exterior source's expectations, including her family, friends, and the conduct literature I have discussed.

Margery and God

Although *The Book* does not show Margery fulfilling the familial duties set for her by conduct literature, she does express a desire to fulfill the roles of sister, daughter, wife, and mother in her relationship with God. This desire comes from the visions Margery has with God, which frequently occur throughout *The Book*. From an external perspective, Margery abandons many duties that would be expected of her by the conduct literature. However, for Margery, it is her internalized devotion that stops her from fitting into these boundaries.

When Margery wants to remain chaste with John, she increasingly wants to improve her relationship with God. This happens by identifying herself as God's daughter, God's sister, God's wife, and God's mother. Throughout *The Book*, Margery is referred to as "daughter" by God during her visions: "Daughter, you are not yet so poor as I was."¹⁶⁷ Margery's identification as a daughter of God and the obedience she shows in that role, is an example of her transition of taking away pastoral power from John and giving it to herself through her interactions with God.

Moreover, Margery builds an identity as a wife of God when she has a vision in which she marries God: "And then the Father took her by the hand in her soul before the Son and the Holy Ghost and the Mother of Jesus and all the twelve apostles and Saint Katherine and Saint Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins, with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul, "I take you, Margery for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, so

¹⁶⁷ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 67.

that you be buxom and obedient to do what I bid you do."¹⁶⁸ This is an important passage as we see the balance Margery faces between her duties as a wife as set by the conduct literature and then the detachment of these duties from a man she is still married to devote herself in marriage to God. Notice how the quote also commands Margery's obedience to God. Here we see the pastoral power shift from John, to God, in which the pastoral power is wielded through Margery's visions.

In addition to wife and daughter, Margery also identifies herself as both the sister and mother of God. This identity is confirmed in a vision Margery has, in which God says: "Therefore I prove that you are a very daughter to me and a mother also, a sister, a wife."¹⁶⁹ Here, Margery is confirmed of all four relationships to God. Moreover, the vision continues with God describing what specific acts of devotion identify her in each relationship: "When you study to please me, then are you a true daughter. When you weep and mourn for my pain and for my passion, then are you a true mother to have compassion for her child. When you weep for other men's sins and for adversities, then are you a true sister. And, when you sorrow because you are so long from the bliss of heaven, then are you a true spouse and a wife." Here is a notable passage where a pleasing action triggers a father/daughter complex and compassion triggers a mother/son complex. Interestingly, if Margery weeps, or expresses outward emotion for other men, the relationship between her and God, or subject and agent, changes to a sister/brother complex. Rather, when Margery expresses sorrow or outward emotion towards God, the relationship transforms to husband and wife. These dynamics of obedience to men in Margery's

¹⁶⁸ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 64.

¹⁶⁹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 24.

environment versus her obedience to God, highlight the familial patriarchal power Margery so boldly seeks to avoid.

Margery and The Estate

If there is one tension raised by Clark that is the most abandoned by Margery, it is that of the estate. It appears Margery's last concern is running a household and managing servants. The only mention of managing duties of the estate is when she is home taking care of John and when she is interacting with her servants while traveling.

The first mention of Margery and her estate is towards the end of her postnatal psychosis. Claiming she has returned to health, Margery asks John for the keys of the buttry, and the servants are extremely hesitant: "Her maidens and her keepers counseled him that he should deliver her no keys, for they said she would but give away such good as there was, for she knew not what she said, or so they thought"¹⁷⁰. This quote shows the distrust Margery's servants had of her, an expression of the failed role set by the conduct literature. Although Margery neglects these duties of the estate, she was at one point economically inspired. After she has recovered, Margery attempts a few business ventures including a brewery and a horse mill.¹⁷¹ Margery failed at both ventures, in which she was ultimately chastised by the town. She was already neglecting proper conduct, and furthermore entering a public sphere as a woman to make her own living. At this point Margery wanted to be worshipped by others, but the failed ventures prompted her to develop an internalized devotion.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.

¹⁷¹ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 9.

¹⁷² Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 10.

One of the most important aspects of Margery's identity in comparison to the subject constructed by the conduct literature is her abandonment of the estate and her commitment to traveling. Most of the stories in *The Book* occur during Margery's travels, and in some of these she was accompanied by John, a group of travelers, or someone who she received a vision about that would help lead her. Her identity as a pilgrim is another tool Margery uses as a way to detach from male pastoral power and empower herself through her internalized devotion. Whether it be abandoning her duties of estate, poorly managing her servants, or failing in her economic pursuit of running various businesses, Margery boldly fails in filling these roles.

In another aspect of managing her estate, Margery's servants are mentioned sporadically throughout *The Book*, mostly during her various travels. As with most of Margery's relationships with others, her relationship with her servants is difficult. In one instance, Margery was travelling and was rejected by everyone for her weeping. Margery's travel companion abandoned her because of this, and then her own servant as well: "Her maiden, seeing trouble on every side, waxed rude against her mistress. She would not obey nor follow her counsel. She let her go alone in many good towns and would not go with her."¹⁷³ This is a prime example of what the conduct literature warns might happen if servants are mismanaged. Although the conduct literature suggests managing servants under tight surveillance, Margery often abandons them or behaves in ways in which her servants are taken away from her.

By comparing the expectations set by the conduct literature I have discussed, it is clear that Margery fails to fulfill these duties. Margery's performative devotion is a manifestation of her internalized devotion, an inner identity which I argue could have come from the strict expectations set upon her by society, even conduct literature being a possible vehicle. Through

¹⁷³ Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 25.

Clark's discussion about the roles set for a woman regarding her body, her family, and her estate, Margery avoids these duties through her performative devotion.

Conclusion

Medieval conduct literature worked to create an ideal subject based on the views of male authors through the application of pastoral power. In this project, I have provided theories of studying conduct literature as influenced by Robert Clark, in which I continue by drawing on Michel Foucault from "Subject and Power." I highlight tensions in the three areas of body, family, and estate that the readers of this literature would have been expected to live up to, emphasizing that the religious identity constructed was framed on performative devotion. This performative devotion is what I defined as acts of devotion that receive public attention and approval. Thus, the conduct literature constructs religious identity in the same manner as other aspects of a woman's duty—publicly observable actions that support the welfare of her husband and household.

Using Foucault's theory on pastoral power, I argue that conduct literature was a vehicle used by family patriarchs in the name of familial salvation, but also to pursue honor, which took on both religious and secular social desires. Because the expectations of performative devotion set in the conduct literature were so strict, it was likely unattainable for any reader to live up to all the mandates set before her. Thus, I conclude that this likely fueled the development of an internalized devotion in which the reader might have asked herself how her faith could expand beyond what the male authors had written out for her and her faith.

I analyzed three texts, *How the Good Wif Taughte Hir Doughtir*, *The Book of The Knight of The Tower*, and *The Guide*, by studying how a subject was constructed in these texts to pursue performative and/or internalized devotion through the three tensions of the body, the family, and

the estate. I conclude that all of the three texts construct a female subject with a concern for performative devotion, yet *The Guide* also has concern for the subject's internalized devotion.

I applied the subjects constructed in these three texts to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in which Margery sought to step beyond every boundary set for her in the conduct literature. Margery was not concerned with her family or her estate and entirely committed to her internalized devotion which was heavily identified by her body through her chastity, fasting, and composure. The subject imagined by the conduct literature proves her devotion by being quiet, contained, and obedient. Margery embodies none of these qualities, she expresses her devotion in her own terms, which overstep what is advised by the literature. Margery is not the subject built in the three pieces of conduct literature examined here. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a product of how one woman wanted to express herself by neglecting the responsibilities of being a wife, yet still be assured of salvation, a concept not envisioned let alone supported in conduct literature.

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