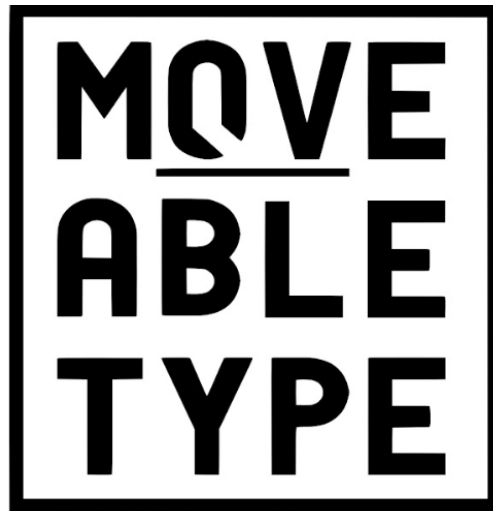




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Author: Sarah Wallace

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The Promise of Connection in Victoria MacKenzie's Retelling of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich

SARAH R. WALLACE

*For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*. By Victoria MacKenzie. 2023. 176pp. £8.99. Bloomsbury. ISBN 978-1-526647-93-1

Margery Kempe is perhaps one of the most annoying women in English literature. Julian of Norwich is among the most comforting, famous for being shown that '[a]lle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thyng shalle be wele.'<sup>1</sup> Yet to encounter either woman in writing is to be annoyed, comforted, perplexed, and struck with recognition by turns. Scottish author Victoria MacKenzie's debut novel *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain* (2023) excavates the stories of two of these pre-eminent women in English textual history—Julian's *Showings*, written in the fourteenth century, is the earliest surviving English book by a woman, and Kempe's eponymous book, from the turn of the fifteenth century, is considered to be the first English autobiography.<sup>2</sup> MacKenzie's novelised retelling alternates their voices, creating a parallel structure that plays with their similarities and differences, foregrounding the tensions of religious devotion with the contingencies of women's historical and embodied experiences.

*For Thy Great Pain* is well-attuned to how inextricable the material, social, and spiritual are from each other. The Prologue immediately introduces the particularly religious and social dimensions of Margery's distress: 'I fear that my neighbours are right, that it is the devil inside me' (Prologue). Shame and doubt seem to be the forces that impel her, as she begins to narrate her physical and spiritual discomfort. Pregnancy and childbirth are especially distressing for MacKenzie's Margery, whom a presentist reading might diagnose with pica, postpartum psychosis, and self-harm.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, womanhood in both its material and social conditions often seems to be the primary problem of Margery's life. Her father's disappointment in having a daughter, the trauma of menstruation, and the narrow life prescribed for a girl all twist around her, choking her. Margery's turn to public preaching disrupts the ecclesiastical and political hegemony of men, revealing a miasma of misogyny as ubiquitous as that believed to carry the Black Death. Margery may be shocking and annoying, the novel suggests, but in a world in which a woman receives 'no kindness or sympathy' from her husband after she is almost sexually assaulted, an annoying woman may simply be a woman who dares to care for her own wellbeing.

While the book's counterpoint narrative suggests the title comes from one woman speaking to the other, the novel actually avoids the hierarchy of declaring Margery's or Julian's pain greater. Early autobiography, from St. Augustine to Kempe, is often a relentless depiction of inner life without the detailed 'world' or 'characters' that populate the realist novel of the nineteenth century onward. MacKenzie treads a fine line between readerly expectations and the spare furnishings of the primary texts. To today's reader, both the Margery Kempe of the original text and MacKenzie's fictionalised version may seem self-absorbed to the point of

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<sup>1</sup> Julian of Norwich, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. By Denise N. Baker (W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria MacKenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain* (Bloomsbury, 2023). Subsequent citations will be parenthetically in-text and the title shortened to *For Thy Great Pain*.

<sup>3</sup> See Diana Jefferies and Debbie Horsfall, 'Forged by Fire: Margery Kempe's Account of Postnatal Psychosis' *Literature and Medicine* 32.2 (2014), pp. 348–64.

narcissism. Margery believes most of her wishes are ordained and facilitated by God; indeed, God and Christ seem to exist to defend and vindicate her:

Robert Spryngolde says there are so many against me that he fears there is only him and the stars and the moon on my side. But Christ says that one day those few of my neighbours that are permitted into heaven will see me sitting beside God as the most beloved of all the saints, and doted on by Jesus and his blessed mother. (124)

Christ appears more real to Margery than do her family members—especially her children, who are not even named in the novel. While Margery's husband and 'one of [her] youngest daughters' are arguing about the fate of the family dog, Margery hears 'the sound of air rushing through a pair of bellows... the Holy Ghost moving' (45). Narrator Margery recounts the story of the dog, but only as a backdrop to her own spiritual experience, which takes precedence even when her husband hits her daughter. Set against the violence and danger of her life, Margery's plaintive question, 'Jesus, what shall I think about?' appears as both a protest and a retreat from the assault of daily pain she experiences (Epigraph).

In contrast to the fraught social conditions of Margery's life, Julian is famous for her life as an anchoress, shut away from the social and material conditions of the world. Yet her fictionalised narrative often seems more attuned to life outside of herself. While her time of marriage and motherhood is short, with the plague killing her husband and daughter, her family brings pleasure to Julian while they live and are not merely obstacles to her devotion. Her grief for them causes her to retreat into the anchorage and mystic contemplation because she wants to 'feel what they had felt,' reflecting the promise of connection implicit in the practices of mystic devotion (46). MacKenzie is less successful with Julian's narrative than Margery's, when the former's experience of grief escapes the ordered language of the first-person linear account. One paragraph consists primarily of the repetition 'I prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed...' (44). Hovering between a simple and compound sentence, the words convey mind-numbing weariness, but I found myself wishing that MacKenzie would reach into her toolkit as a poet and make more creative use of the page to convey the agony of a mother's grief.

Throughout much of the novel, the body is often a problem for both Margery and Julian. Their meeting, however, leads to an acceptance of the embodiment, abjection, and beauty of the world. God may be in 'hazelnuts and fish scales and rain drops', but it is human touch that is ultimately a path to transcending the pitiful self. Julian—who must live decades closed off from others, not permitted even to touch her servant's hand—urges Margery to get out of her head, care for her children, and enjoy the physical world (141-44). In Mackenzie's account of their meeting, Julian sends Margery forth with a secret, and a memory of connection. In her characteristic conscientiousness, Margery thinks that she has 'never felt so utterly comforted (except when Christ comforted me himself, of course)' (143). The two women's encounter also carries a difficult promise as Margery tries 'to love [her] children better,' even though she thinks 'wearing a hair shirt might be an easier path to heaven' (156). The novel leaves the reader with such contradictions and annoyances: women who insist on self-abnegation while writing reams of autobiography; women who proclaim love for others while seeming to cut themselves off from typical ties. The Christian promise of redemption, for which both women live, does not expunge dysfunction, but in highlighting such ineluctable contradictions, the novel becomes intersubjective. It invites the reader, also, to consider and have mercy on the pain—little and great—that connects us all.

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Sarah R. Wallace pursued a SSHRC-funded master's in English and Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick, with a thesis on transcendence and post-secularism in contemporary poetry. She now lives in Alberta, where she directs the Writing Centre at Burman University. Her poetry has been published in various journals and has been longlisted for the Mitchell Prize for Faith and Poetry. She continues to research and present on the intersections of poetry, religion, and ecology.