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‘Stronger than men and braver than knights’: women and the pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome in the later middle ages

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Abstract

Women who participated in the long-distance pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries faced a variety of economic and social barriers. Based upon the pilgrimage narratives of Margery Kempe, Felix Fabri, and others, this article examines the strategies women used to overcome those barriers both before and during the journey. While resistance to women’s pilgrimages was strong, in part, because they did not fit their quotidian roles as caregivers, it was nevertheless to aspects of those same normative roles that women appealed in order to justify their pilgrimages and shield themselves from censure during their journeys.

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Whoever builds his house out of willows, and spurs his blind horse over plowed land, and suffers his wife to go seeking shrines, is worthy to be hanged on a gallows!¹

Pilgrimage, like any other form of travel in the later middle ages, was time-con-

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¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury tales. Nine tales and the general prologue*, ed. V. A. Kolve and Gendong Olson (New York, 1989), 120–21, lines 655–58: ... ‘Whoso that buildeth his hous al of salwes,/ And priketh his blinde hors over the falwes,/ And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes,/ Is worthy to been hanged on the galwes!’ Modern translation is the author’s own.

suming, expensive, and dangerous. But by the fourteenth century, the growth of both literacy and lay piety had made pilgrimage a popular form of lay devotion. This was hardly a development greeted with universal approbation. Indeed, many writers commented on the dangers involved when ‘light-minded and inquisitive persons’ went wandering outside of their communities, overindulging their curiosity to the detriment of their souls.² This ambivalence about pilgrimage was amplified in the case of women, who earned a specialised kind of frustration and mistrust, as exemplified in the proverb above.³

Women’s participation in the pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem therefore deserves special scrutiny. Travelling to Jerusalem was the most arduous journey available to western pilgrims, requiring a year’s travel and rigorous financial sacrifice. Furthermore, unlike pilgrimages to localised shrines that sought the externally obvious benefit of miraculous healing, pilgrims to Jerusalem and Rome provided strictly personal and intangible benefits, such as the deepening of personal devotion, or indulgences that would speed their way to heaven.⁴ These realities made participation in long-distance pilgrimage an especially challenging goal for women. They found it difficult to justify such great fiscal sacrifice for an endeavour that did not overtly fulfil their quotidian duties as caregivers to others (when such pilgrimages served no one but themselves) or vital components of the household (which they would be abandoning during their travels). As such, they faced significant barriers to becoming pilgrims in the first place, and their fellow pilgrims had little need of or welcome for them once those barriers were overcome. But while it was normative roles that made such pilgrimages difficult for women, it was to those same roles that they appealed to shield and justify themselves during the journey. Thus the history of women on long-distance pilgrimages, like that of medieval women in general, ‘is in part a history of the constraints of economic disadvantage, familial duty, and prescribed social roles. But it is also in part a history of women’s agency within and against these constraints’.⁵

Although both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that women were enthusiastic pilgrims in the later middle ages,⁶ it has generally been assumed that they

² On the topic of pilgrimage as spiritually dangerous in the later middle ages, see J. Sumption, *Pilgrimage. An image of medieval religion* (Totowa, N. J., 1975), chaps 14–15; and C. Zacher, *Curiosity and pilgrimage. The literature of discovery in fourteenth-century England* (Baltimore, 1976), chaps 1–3.

³ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 262; S. Signe Morrison, *Women pilgrims in late medieval England. Private piety as public performance* (New York, 2000), 108–117; and L. A. Craig, ‘Wandering women and holy matrons: Women as pilgrims in the later middle ages, 1300–1500 C. E.’ (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2001), chap. 2.

⁴ B. Ward, *Miracles and the medieval mind. Theory, record, event, 1000–1215* (London, 1982), 124.

⁵ J. M. Bennett, Introduction to *Sisters and workers in the middle ages*, ed. J. M. Bennett, E. A. Clark, J. F. O’Barr, B. A. Vilen and S. Westphal-Wihl (Chicago, 1989), 6.

⁶ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 262, suggests that it ‘is possible that at the close of the middle ages women formed the majority of visitors at many shrines;’ J. Brefeld, *A guidebook for the Jerusalem pilgrimage in the late middle ages. A case for computer-aided textual criticism* (Hilversum, 1994), 15, notes that a figure of one-quarter to one-third female pilgrims has been suggested; and Craig, ‘Wandering women and holy matrons’ 134, has noted that women comprised anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of the suppliants in the later medieval miracle collections she examined.

rarely participated in long-distance pilgrimages at all; at least one modern scholar of the Jerusalem pilgrimage has claimed that it was ‘virtually reserved for the male sex’.⁷ But the writings of later medieval pilgrims show that this was simply not the case. Women had been travelling to Jerusalem since at least the fourth century⁸ and negative commentary on their presence had appeared by the eighth century.⁹ By the later middle ages, there were enough female pilgrims to Jerusalem that they had a separate dormitory near the main pilgrims’ hospitals in Jerusalem, ‘another great hall, wherein women were wont to sojourn since they were on no account permitted to live with men in the great hospital’.¹⁰ There is also evidence that women were grouped together on the Venetian galleys that carried pilgrims from Venice to the Holy Lands.¹¹ And women were enough of a presence in Rome to have been specifically barred from some Roman shrines¹² and lampooned in sermons and pilgrimage guides.¹³

Based on such evidence, it seems our assumption of women’s absence on such pilgrimages stems less from an historical reality than from the rarity of direct accounts of their experiences. For this reason, perhaps, few scholars have discussed women’s long-distance pilgrimages in the later middle ages. Many scholars of pilgrimage have simply noted women’s presence on such journeys without fully examining their experiences.¹⁴ P. A. Halpin (1996) has provided a fuller examination of the pilgrimages of Anglo-Saxon women, noting as she did that the sources for later medieval women are more vibrant,¹⁵ but nevertheless the later medieval sources have been neglected. K. Utterback (1996) has discussed the correspondence between the visions and pilgrimages of Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden¹⁶ rather than their experiences of travel. And S. S. Morrison’s study of female pilgrims in later medieval England (2001) uses archival sources to demonstrate that women planned

⁷ J. Brefeld, *A guidebook for the Jerusalem pilgrimage in the late middle ages*, 15.

⁸ P. A. Halpin, ‘Anglo-Saxon women and pilgrimage’, *Anglo-Norman studies XIX. Proceedings of the Battle Conference* (Suffolk, UK, 1996), 96–122.

⁹ G. Constable, ‘Opposition to pilgrimage in the middle ages’, *Studia Gratiana XIX. Melanges G. Fransen I* (Rome, 1976), 127, 131.

¹⁰ This translation, and all those used in-text here, is from F. Fabri, ‘The wanderings of Felix Fabri’, trans. Aubrey Stewart, in *The library of the Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society* vols. 7–10 (New York, 1971), vols. 7–8, 395. The Latin text is available as ‘Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Aegypti peregrinationem’, ed. by C. D. Hassler, in *Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart* vols I–III (Stuttgart, 1843), vol. II, 322: Juxta eandem domum erat alia curia magna, in qua manere solebant foeminae peregrinae, quae viris in hospitali magno cohabitare minime permittebantur.

¹¹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 528; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 418–419.

¹² J. Capgrave, *Ye Solace of Pilgrimes. A description of Rome, circa A.D. 1450*, by J. Capgrave, an Austin Friar of King’s Lynn, ed. C.A. Mills (London, 1911), 77.

¹³ For example, G. da Rivolta, *Prediche del Beato Fra Giordano da Rivalto dell’Ordine de Predicatori* (Florence, 1739), 253, mocks women pilgrims in his sermon on Luke 18:9–14; and J. Capgrave, *Ye Solace of Pilgrimes*, 77, discusses women’s excessive desire to go to Rome as pilgrims.

¹⁴ See, for example, Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 260–63; D. Webb, *Pilgrims and pilgrimage in the medieval west* (London, 1999), 236–8.

¹⁵ Halpin, *Anglo-Saxon women and pilgrimage*, 97.

¹⁶ K. Utterback, ‘The vision becomes reality. Medieval women pilgrims to the Holy Land’, in *Pilgrims and travelers to the Holy Land*, ed. B. F. LeBeau and M. Mor (Omaha, 1996), 159–68.

for pilgrimages to Jerusalem, but only discussed the actual process of pilgrimages whose destinations lay within England.¹⁷

This article will investigate women's experiences of long-distance pilgrimages by examining pilgrimage narratives of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Pilgrims, especially those who travelled to the Holy Lands, had been writing down accounts of their travels and guidebooks to the region since at least the fourth century. By the fourteenth century, pilgrimage narratives were usually detailed journals of an individual's experiences, sometimes recording events that were not related to the spiritual side of pilgrimage, such as social interactions among pilgrims, cultural differences between Europe and the Levant, and the adventures and misadventures of travel. Two narratives offer detailed information about specific women who went to Jerusalem as pilgrims. The first is *The Book of Margery Kempe*.¹⁸ Margery was the daughter of a merchant of King's Lynn, Norfolk; she married, had 16 children, and was the proprietor of several failed businesses. In spite of these mundane commitments, Kempe was anything but typical. She understood herself to be a visionary, having regular conversations with Christ and the Virgin Mary. She tried to include aspects of monastic living in her middle-class urban life, persuading her husband to live in celibacy with her and abstaining from meat and alcohol. Later in her life, she dictated a book about her spiritual development and her visions to two different clerical scribes. But she also went on pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem in 1413–15, and is the only woman to have preserved her observations about the journey.¹⁹

Kempe's atypical devotions make her *Book* a complicated source. Because she was assertive and even brash about her unusual spiritual status, many of those around her thought her mentally ill rather than a living saint, and we are left to decipher how much of her experience was shaped by her gender alone, and how much by her unusual behaviour. The *Book* is further complicated as a source because of her illiteracy: where, in this text, is the authentic Margery? J. C. Hirsch argued that we should take the scribes seriously as authors who had control over the text.²⁰ Lynn Staley suggested that the Margery of the *Book*, as a literary creation, should be treated as distinct from Kempe, the author,²¹ but others have commented on the power of Margery's personality as she roars, cries, cajoles, and preaches her way

¹⁷ S. S. Morrison, *Women pilgrims in late medieval England*.

¹⁸ M. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and trans. L. Staley (New York, 2001); the Middle English text is available in M. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. Brown Meech (London: Early English Text Society, 1940).

¹⁹ The *Liber Celestis* of St. Bridget of Sweden, the only other later medieval pilgrimage narrative that was dictated by a woman, does not contain information about Bridget's participation in pilgrimage rituals, her interactions with fellow-pilgrims, or her experiences of travel; instead, it records the visions she had while in Jerusalem. Because of this, the text sheds little light on women's experiences of pilgrimage as they are addressed here. In the words of her editor, 'Most of what we know of the Saint in the *Liber* we learn from the words addressed to her by the divine speakers: and their messages only apply in the most general terms to her personal situation'. R. Ellis, introduction to *The Liber Celestis of Bridget of Sweden*, vol. 1, ed. R. Ellis (Oxford, 1987), xiv.

²⁰ J. C. Hirsch, 'Author and scribe in the Book of Margery Kempe', *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975), 145–150.

²¹ L. Staley, *Margery Kempe's dissenting fictions* (University Park, Penn., 1994).

through the text.²² As we shall see, her interpretations of the events of her pilgrimage were so earthy, so reproachful, and so vehement that it is difficult to believe that they have been significantly modulated by the scribes' perceptions. Although one woman (and in particular, a woman as unique as Margery) can hardly be made to speak for all women, the present study hopes to demonstrate that many of Margery's experiences mirrored those of other female pilgrims.

A second invaluable source on female pilgrims to Jerusalem and Rome is the journal of Felix Fabri, a German friar who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem twice between 1480 and 1483. His book, the *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti Peregrinationem*, is a gold mine of information on all aspects of the Jerusalem pilgrimage.²³ Fabri recorded the presence of women on each of his pilgrimages and commented extensively on their behaviour and their relationships with their fellow-pilgrims.

1. Becoming a pilgrim: gender, canon law, and social strategies

Becoming a pilgrim, especially to Jerusalem or Rome, was a serious commitment for later medieval Europeans. It entailed an investment of both money and time, and willingness to place one's physical and spiritual well-being at risk outside the safety of one's home community. For this reason, pilgrimage was regarded as a penitential and sacrificial act, and thus one did not vow a pilgrimage to Jerusalem lightly. Such vows were considered a binding commitment²⁴ breakable only in favour of monastic vows.²⁵ Women and men alike faced barriers to joining this 'order' of the church²⁶ but the difficulties women faced, and hence their strategies for overcoming them, were unique.

Theoretically, women had the same right as men to engage in any devotional activity, since both doctrine and canon law held that the souls of men and women were of equal importance in the eyes of God.²⁷ For this reason, the legal status of pilgrim was gender-neutral. Those who took up a long pilgrimage were 'distinguished from other men (*sic*) by a uniform and a solemn ritual of initiation'.²⁸ Neither the uniform (a long white robe, a floppy, broad-brimmed hat, a traveller's bag or *scrip*, and a staff) nor the initiation ceremony distinguished between male

²² R. K. Stone, *Middle English prose style. Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich* (The Hague, 1970); and K. Lochrie, 'The Book of Margery Kempe. The marginal woman's quest for literary authority', *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16, no. 1 (1986), 33–56.

²³ Fabri, *Wandering*, trans vols. 7–10; and *Evagatorium*, vols. I–III. H. F. M. Prescott discussed his journeys in depth in *Jerusalem journey. Pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the fifteenth century* (London, 1954) and *Once to Sinai. The further pilgrimage of Friar Felix Fabri* (London, 1957).

²⁴ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 138–40.

²⁵ Constable, 'Opposition to pilgrimage', 123–46, esp. 135–6.

²⁶ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 171.

²⁷ L. E. Mitchell, 'Women and medieval canon law', in: *Women in medieval western European culture*, ed. L. E. Mitchell (New York, 1999), 152.

²⁸ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 171.

and female pilgrims.²⁹ Further, male and female pilgrims had the same legal rights. The legal status of pilgrims in canon and, to some extent, civil law was based in their classification as *miserabiles personae*, or persons who were suffering. Widows also fell into the category of *miserabiles personae*.³⁰ As beleaguered travellers and strangers, pilgrims and other *miserabiles personae* were owed the kindness and support of all Christians. Pilgrims could seek personal protection from harm, and hospitality from any bishop, abbot, or other churchman, and civil authorities were to refrain from taxing pilgrims or arresting them.³¹ Their property and service as vassals were also immune from claims, and 'there was no legal remedy to be had against a bona fide pilgrim, so long as he returned home to face his adversaries within a reasonable time'.³² None of these protections were qualified by gender.

In order to take on the legal status of a pilgrim and embark on the road to Jerusalem or Rome, women, like all pilgrims, had to obtain both the economic resources needed to pay for the journey and the permission of their superiors. In the case of the Jerusalem pilgrimage, the issue of economic resources was difficult for pilgrims of either gender. During the fourteenth century, the average payment to the galley-captain alone was 60 Venetian ducats; even the half-fare they sometimes charged the poor was 'a sum well beyond the means of most poor pilgrims'.³³ As a result, neither women nor men on long-distance pilgrimages represented a broad cross-section of medieval society. Instead, only a privileged few could afford the journey, as the affluent women who appeared in these narratives demonstrate. Margery Kempe, the owner of a number of failed businesses who lived on charitable donations while a pilgrim in Rome, was perhaps the poorest female pilgrim to figure in the narratives. But even she was of a comfortable background: she was the daughter of a merchant who was sufficiently powerful to have been mayor of King's Lynn, and she was married to a 'worshipful burgess'.³⁴ Felix Fabri called the six 'ancient ladies' who joined one of his two pilgrimages 'wealthy'; but he also made clear that they were not noble, suggesting that they, like Kempe, were of the urban merchant elite.³⁵ In a similar vein, Fabri described a 'Fleming' woman who travelled with her husband.³⁶ They could both afford to go, were not identified as noble, and were from heavily urbanized Flanders, and so it is probably safe to assume that they, too were of the merchant class. The remaining female pilgrims appearing in these records are

²⁹ On the pilgrims' uniform, see Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 172–73; and for a version of the initial ceremony, see J. Wickham Legg, ed., *The Sarum Missal edited from three early manuscripts* (Oxford, 1969), 452.

³⁰ J. A. Brundage, 'Widows as disadvantaged persons in medieval canon law', in *Upon my husband's death. Widows in the literature and histories of medieval Europe*, ed. L. Mirrer (Ann Arbor, 1992), 193–206, 194.

³¹ J. A. Brundage, *Medieval canon law and the crusader* (Madison, 1969), 12–15.

³² Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 170.

³³ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 205.

³⁴ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 1, 6; also *Book*, Meech, ed. 6: ...sche was maryed to a worshipful burgeys....

³⁵ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31.

³⁶ Fabri, *Wanderings* vols. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 149: Inter quos erat quidam Flandrensis cum sua uxore intrans galeam.

noblewomen: Margery records a Madam Florentine travelling with a large retinue that included knights and gentlewomen,³⁷ and Fabri briefly records the presence of a noblewoman on one of his pilgrimages.³⁸

A woman must not only have had the economic resources to become a pilgrim, she must also have permission to use those resources. Women faced particularly challenging obstacles in obtaining this permission. All pilgrims, regardless of gender, had to seek the permission of everyone with some claim upon their services or supervisory power over them, such as feudal lords, spouses (to excuse them from the marital debt), parish priests, abbots or bishops.³⁹ This list of permissions held for women as well, but was made more difficult by the legal power of husband over wife and father over daughter.⁴⁰ As such, the number and strength of potential barriers to a woman's pilgrimage depended upon her status in the sexual economy. Unmarried young women, for example, would theoretically have needed the permission of their fathers, but no such woman appeared in the narratives under examination here. This is probably significant; the normative niche for young women with high spiritual goals was the cloister.⁴¹ Women religious were rarely granted the freedom to travel from the cloister by their abbess; this could be a difficult matter even for male religious.⁴² Married women needed permission from their husbands, both as their legal guardians and as their sexual partners; the onus of the marital debt lay equally on men and women, and so a husband's refusal of permission represented a nearly insurmountable obstacle.⁴³ Only widows could have made such a decision without the interference of a male relative, but even they needed the permission of their parish priest.

Still, the women who appeared in pilgrimage narratives found ways to obtain permission, using such strategies as bargaining with their husbands, travelling with their husbands, or awaiting widowhood. We are fortunate enough to have a record of Margery Kempe's experiences as she sought permission to travel:

When the time came that this creature [Margery] should visit the holy places where our Lord was quick and dead, ...she prayed the parish priest of the town

³⁷ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 31, 58; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 79.

³⁸ Fabri, *Wanderings* vols. 7/8, 41; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 56.

³⁹ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 170.

⁴⁰ M. Wade Labarge, *A small sound of the trumpet. Women in medieval life* (Boston, 1986), 33–35.

⁴¹ Webb, *Pilgrims and pilgrimage* 238.

⁴² For example, *the Treatise on the Holy Land*, written by the Italian friar Francesco Suriano, was composed as a dialogue between himself and his sister, a nun. In it, he describes the Holy Land for her, and tells her 'Great is your fervour, my most beloved sister, and your burning desire for these most holy places of the merit of which I do not believe you are deprived, for that you cannot see them comes only from an impossibility (emphasis mine)'. Suriano, *Treatise on the Holy Land*, trans. by Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (1949; rpr. Jerusalem, 1983), 110. Felix Fabri commented on his difficulties and fears in obtaining permission, as well; see Fabri, *Wanderings*, vol. 7, 48–9. Also Constable, 'Opposition to pilgrimage', 131.

⁴³ Brundage, 'Sexual equality in: medieval canon law', in: *Medieval women and the sources of medieval history*, ed. J. T. Rosenthal (Athens, Georgia, 1990), 67.

where she was dwelling to say for her in the pulpit that if any man or woman claimed any debt of her husband or of her, they should come and speak with her before she went and she, with the help of God, would make compensation to each of them so that they should hold themselves content. And so she did. Afterward she took her leave of her husband and the holy anchorite...⁴⁴

Here, Kempe, a married woman, provided a list of people to whom she owed obligations or allegiance: those to whom she owed money, the parish priest, the anchorite who had been her spiritual guide, and her husband. Her description made her departure seem amiable, but other passages show that it was the result of complex negotiations with her husband, during which she used financial and social leverage to get her way. Kempe, much to her husband's chagrin, desired not only to travel to Jerusalem, but also to live with him in celibacy and to keep a Friday fast. Her book recorded their debate over which aspects of their life together they would give up for the sake of her devotions, and which they would keep for the sake of her husband's comfort. After a certain amount of discussion of the seriousness of her commitment to chastity, he made her this offer, which contained his first reference to her pilgrimage:

Margery, grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire. My first wish is that we shall lie 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.⁴⁵

Margery's husband must have previously withheld his permission for her to become a pilgrim, and was at this point offering it implicitly with the request that she pay his debts; otherwise, he was offering her no concessions here — nothing of 'her desire'. Kempe engaged in a mystical conference with Jesus over the propriety of these arrangements, wherein Jesus told her that she should give up the Friday fast to get her other wishes from her husband.⁴⁶ Armed with this divine instruction, Kempe returned to her husband with this counter-offer:

Grant me that you shall come in my bed, and I grant you to requite your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God so that you never

⁴⁴ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 26, 44–45; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 60: Whan tyme cam þat þ is creatur xuld vysiten þo holy placys wher owyr Lord was whyk & ded, as sche had be reuelacyon 3erys a-for, sche preyd þe parysch preste of þe town þer sche was dwellyng to sey for hir in þe pulpyt þat, yf any man er woman þat cleymyd any dette of hir hosband or of hir þei xuld come & speke with hir er sche went, & sche with þe help of God, xulde makyn a-seth to ech of hem þat þei schuldyn heldyn hem content. & so sche dede. Sythen sche toke hir leue at hir hosband & of þe holy ankyr...

⁴⁵ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chap. 11, 19; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 24: Margery, grawnt me my desyr, & I schal grawnt 3ow 3owr desyr. My first desyr is þat we xal lyn style to-gedyr in o bed as we han do be-for; þe secunde þat 3e schal pay my dettys er 3e go to Iherusalem; & þe thrydde þat 3e schal etyn & drynkyn with me on þe Fryday as 3e wer wont to don.

⁴⁶ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 11, 19–20; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 24.

challenge me by asking the debt of matrimony after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink on Friday at your bidding.⁴⁷

The clearing of the debts and their meals together on Fridays, the financial and social leverage available to Kempe, carried great weight, as her husband did agree to give up their sexual relationship in return for these favours. Carolyn Bynum has also noted the ability of medieval women to use their relationship with food as a form of social manipulation.⁴⁸ Most importantly for our purposes, the negotiations illustrate the possibility for women to obtain permission from their husbands to travel, exercising agency even within their normative social constraints.⁴⁹ It is possible that such a round of bargaining could have preceded many women's journeys.

A second option that appeared in the narratives was for women to engage in long-distance pilgrimage alongside their husbands. To go on pilgrimage with a spouse eliminated possible disagreements and restrictions imposed by the husband, and also meant that the woman would be travelling with a protector. This was relatively common. For example, Morrison has found several examples of married couples making plans for a long-distance pilgrimage together.⁵⁰ A married woman, together with her husband, joined Fabri's second pilgrimage. She earned the universal loathing of the rest of the pilgrims because of her noisy curiosity. Interestingly, her companions objected to her presence not only because of her personality, but also because she was the only woman on board.⁵¹ Apparently, to travel under the auspices of one's husband alone was not considered enough; for the sake of propriety, a woman required other female travelling companions, as well.

Finally, some female pilgrims to Jerusalem and Rome overcame the problem of spousal permission by waiting until they no longer had a husband to stop them. Indeed, the status of widowhood was an ideal basis for this form of devotion. Canon law regarded widows as *miserabiles personae*, entitled to the protection of the church and of church courts, and widows also had no husband who might deny them permission.⁵² Indeed, many widows looked to no direct authority figure at all.⁵³ For a woman of the merchant class or the nobility, widowhood often meant that she took over her husband's role as head of a craft shop or family business, or manager of family lands, until she remarried or her sons were of age to take over these responsi-

⁴⁷ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chap. 11, 20; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 25: Sere, yf it lyke 3ow, 3e schal grawnt me my desyr, & 3e schal haue 3owr desyr. Grawntyth me Ðat 3e schal not komyn in my bed, & I grawnt 3ow to qwyte 3owr dettys er I go to Ierusalem. & makyth my body fre to God so Ðat 3e neuyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr Ðis day whyl 3e leuyn, & I schal etyn & drynkyn on Ðe Fryday at 3owr byddyng.

⁴⁸ C. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast. The religious significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley, 1987), 220.

⁴⁹ Bennett, *Introduction to Sisters and workers*, 6.

⁵⁰ Morrison, *Women pilgrims*, 46.

⁵¹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 150.

⁵² Brundage, 'Widows as disadvantaged persons', *passim*.

⁵³ For brief summaries of the freedoms and complications of widowhood in the middle ages, see L. Mirror, introduction to *Upon my husband's death*, 1–17; and Lebarge, *A small sound* 164–166.

bilities. As Clara Estow pointed out for medieval Castile, ‘a widow assumed social, legal, and economic responsibilities that set her apart from the rest of adult female society’.⁵⁴

From this position of relative freedom widows found it easier to choose to become pilgrims. Morrison has found several examples of later medieval English widows who made preparations and received letters of protection in order to become pilgrims.⁵⁵ Pilgrim widows appeared in more detail in the pilgrimage narratives. On Fabri’s first pilgrimage, the group was joined by ‘certain women well-stricken in years, pious, wealthy matrons, six in number’.⁵⁶ In other places Fabri called them ‘ancient matrons’,⁵⁷ although their later perseverance in the face of seasickness, heat, and other rigours of travel did not indicate that they were elderly or frail. They too were probably of the urban merchant classes, as he described them as ‘wealthy’ but never noble; they were ‘matrons’ or mothers, but their age and the lack of any mention of husbands suggests that they were probably widows as well, free of either economic or social constraint on their movements.

2. Femininity as liability in pilgrimage groups

‘Before or during the course of the voyage’, wrote Pierre-André Sigal, ‘pilgrims sought to form groups’.⁵⁸ Membership in a group was necessary for the safety of any medieval traveller, and doubly so when one ventured beyond familiar language, customs, and legal structures. By the fourteenth century the pilgrimage to Jerusalem had become a tightly-regulated form of group tourism led by Venetian galley captains under the close supervision of the Muslim governments of the Levant.⁵⁹ While women had as much legal right as men to join such groups, and did so on a regular basis, the social milieu of long-distance pilgrimage groups was nevertheless a difficult one for women. Male pilgrims, hostile towards women’s participation, only tolerated women at the price of their silence and invisibility. Perhaps the greatest difficulty for women was that they had no specific social role in large groups of male travellers. Women who travelled to Jerusalem or Rome were not identifiably fulfilling any role traditionally ascribed to women by medieval society: they were not caregivers or providers, they were not supposed to be sexual partners, their journeys added nothing to their household economies, and their devotions were not cloistered. Since the Jerusalem pilgrimage did not include a socially acceptable niche for

⁵⁴ C. Estow, ‘Widows in the chronicles of late medieval Castile’, in: *Upon my husband’s death*, 153–168, 153.

⁵⁵ Morrison, *Women pilgrims*, 45–46.

⁵⁶ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31: et quaedam etiam mulieres, vetulae, devotae matronae divites....

⁵⁷ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 26; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 43: Videntes autem antiquae vetulae matronae necessitatem nostram....

⁵⁸ Pierre-André Sigal, *L’homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale (XIe–XIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1985), 118: Avant ou au cours du voyage, les pèlerins cherchant à se grouper.

⁵⁹ See Brefeld, *A guidebook for Jerusalem pilgrimage*, 19; Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 189–90.

women's participation, women who participated in it seemed out-of-place, underfoot, and annoying to their male counterparts, and were treated accordingly.

For these reasons, women had difficulty finding a group with which to travel. When Fabri's first pilgrimage was preparing to embark from Venice, the six 'wealthy matrons' wanted to join the group. Fabri detailed the social complexities that the matrons faced when trying to secure passage to the Holy Land:

The proud nobles, however, were not pleased...and thought they would not embark on a ship in which these ladies were to go, considering it a disgrace that they should go to receive the honour of knighthood in company with old women. These haughty spirits endeavoured to persuade us not to take passage in the ship in which these old women meant to sail; but other wiser and more conscientious knights contradicted those proud men, and rejoiced in the holy penitence of these ladies, hoping that their holiness would render our voyage safer. On account of this there arose an implacable quarrel between these noblemen, which lasted until it pleased God to remove those proud men from among us. Howbeit, those devout ladies remained in our company in both going thither and returning.⁶⁰

This situation exposes serious social tensions, which included difficulties over gender as well as class. One obtained membership in a group of pilgrims headed for Jerusalem simply by engaging the services of the galley's captain, independent of the opinion of any of the other passengers.⁶¹ In the case of Fabri's women, while the captain appeared willing to have them join, they faced a group of nobles angry at their presence, whose anger stemmed from the inclusions of women at a knighting ceremony at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The nobles' pressure on the other passengers to take passage on another ship could have been intended to force the ship's captain to break his contract with the matrons. When this ploy failed, it left the matrons at the heart of a deeply divided group of pilgrims: those who resented them and those who supported them. Fabri's language makes it entirely clear both that this division among the men on board existed and on which side of it he fell. But it surely could not have been a comfortable position for the 'ancient ladies' to be cooped up on a small ship with tensions running high over their very presence.

Even those pilgrims who had chosen to support the six matrons did not regard them as equal partners in this rigorous spiritual endeavour. Instead, both their supporters and their detractors placed the matrons firmly in the category of 'other'.

⁶⁰ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31–2: Hoc quidem superbi nobiles aegere ferentes cogitabant navem, in qua transducendae essent illae matronae, non velle ascendere, indignum aestimantes, in vetularum consortio ad militiam suscipiendam pergere. Et ad hoc conabantur superbi illi omnes nos inducere, ne navem illam conduceremus, in quam vetulae venturae erant. Sed alii milites prudentiores et conscientiosi contradicebant superbis illis, et gaudebant de poenitentia illarum matronarum, sperantes, quod propter devotionem earum navigatio nostra salubrior fieret. Unde propter illam causam orta fuit inter nobiles illos implacabilis inimicitia, et duravit, quousque Deus illos superbos de medio tulit. Manserunt autem devotae matronae illae nobiscum, cum per mare intrando et exuendo.

⁶¹ Brefeld, *A Guidebook for the Jerusalem pilgrimage* 21.

Throughout his book, Fabri emphasised the bravery of the matrons in the face of odds made overwhelming by their age and gender. Fabri wrote that he ‘was astonished at the courage of these old women, who through old age were scarcely able to support their own weight, yet forgot their own frailty...’⁶² But his view of the women as especially brave may have felt as divisive and problematic to them as being thought an especial nuisance. His attitude of praise also helped to polarize the group’s opinions, making the women the focus of an ongoing conflict among the other passengers, a conflict that reduced their ability to remain invisible to their companions.

Fabri also recounted tensions over the presence of a woman on his second pilgrimage. That group was originally made up entirely of men. At the last minute, however, the captain added a few more pilgrims, including the Fleming and his wife. The pilgrims unanimously resented her presence:

There was no one on board our galley who was not displeased at the coming of this old woman, and at the thought of one woman having to dwell along among so many noblemen, especially as she seemed when we first saw her to be restless and inquisitive...She ran hither and thither throughout the ship, and was full of curiosity, wanting to hear and see everything, and made herself hated exceedingly.⁶³

These criticisms of the Fleming woman shed light on the expectations of pilgrim groups with regard to female participants. If women must be present on pilgrimage, it was expected that they should remain silent and invisible. The Fleming woman, according to Fabri, was a problem because she was the only woman on board the galley, but it was her refusal to remain invisible that Fabri and his companions found particularly irritating. Female pilgrims were routinely expected to segregate themselves from the men with whom they travelled. According to Fabri, on board the galley, ‘women pilgrims do not come to the common table, but remain in their berths, and both eat and sleep there’.⁶⁴ Fabri described these berths as miserable and small: ‘A pilgrim can hardly move without touching his neighbour; moreover, the place is enclosed and exceeding hot, and full of various foul vapors’;⁶⁵ Fabri’s English contemporary William Wey voiced a similar opinion about the conditions

⁶² Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31: Miratus fui audaciam illarum vetularum, quae se ipsas prae senio ferre vix poterat, et tamen fragilitatis propriae oblitae, amore illius sanctae terrae in consortium militum juvenum se ingerebant, et laborem fortium virorum subibant.

⁶³ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 149–150: Ad ingressum autem illius mulieris multi turbati fuerunt, pro eo, quod ipsa sola erat in galea, quia nulla mulier erat nobiscum...Nec erat aliquis in nostra galea, cui ingressus illius vetulae non displicaret, pro eo, quod una sola muliercula inter tot generosos viros commorari deberet, signanter cum satis vaga et curiosa primo aspectu videretur; ...Discurrebat enim continue per navem, et curiosissima erat, omnia videre aut audire volens, et se multum odiosam faciebat.

⁶⁴ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 153; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 137: Mulieres peregrinae non accedunt ad mensam communem sed manent in suis stantiis, et ibi manducant, ibi dormiunt.

⁶⁵ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 15; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 138: Vix potest se peregrinus movere sine contactu collateralis; locus etiam est clausus et caldissimus ac grossis vaporibus ac diversis plenus.

in the berths: ‘choose yourself a place in the said galley on the highest level; for in the lowest under it is right smoldering hot and stinking’.⁶⁶ Thus, the demand for segregation entailed a serious sacrifice of comfort for female passengers.

The Flemish woman, however, apparently did not wish to remain in her uncomfortable berth. Fabri continued about the problem of her visibility at some length: while she was ‘a thorn in the eyes of us all’,⁶⁷ he points out that ‘those seven (*sic*) old women in whose company I had made the voyage before...made less noise and were seen less than this one old beldame’.⁶⁸ It could not have been the mere presence of an active and curious pilgrim which upset them so much, because Fabri describes the behaviour of the male pilgrims at length, casually noting that ‘some shout aloud for lightness of heart...Others run up the rigging, others jump, others show their strength by lifting heavy weights or doing other feats’.⁶⁹ The men were so outgoing and energetic on board that Fabri had to give them this warning, lest they get underfoot⁷⁰:

Let him also beware of getting in the way for the crew of the galley when they are about to run to their work, for, however, noble he may be, nay, were he a bishop, they will push against him, overthrow him, and trample on him, because work at sea has to be done at lightning speed, and admits of no delay.

It must have annoyed the galley crew just as much to have men underfoot as it did to have women there; but the ambivalence which surrounded women pilgrims was great enough that they were required to remain invisible, while Fabri simply cautioned men to get out of the way quickly when necessary.

The demand for the invisibility of female pilgrims sometimes extended to their experiences at the shrines. In a few cases, women were barred from holy places because of their gender. The authors of pilgrimage narratives offered a variety of explanations for this state of affairs. For example, some popular shrines in Rome and Jerusalem were overcrowded, and therefore considered too dangerous for a woman to enter. Sumption has examined this phenomenon briefly, and believes that closures

⁶⁶ W. Wey, *The itineraries of William Wey*, ed. B. Badinel (London, 1867), 4: yf ye goo in a galey make yowre covenante wyth the patrone bytyme, and chese yow a place in the seyde galey in the overest stage; for in the lawyest under hyt ys ryght smoleryng hote and stynging. (Modern translation is the author’s own.)

⁶⁷ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 167; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 150: Omnibus erat spina in oculis haec foemina.

⁶⁸ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 150: Nam pro vero dico, quod VII illae vetulae, cum quibus prima vice transfretavi, quietiores fuerunt et et rarius videbantur, quam illa unica anus.

⁶⁹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 150; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 134–135: Ideo aliqui statim ut de mensa surgunt, ascendunt, et per galeam inquirunt, ubi melius vendatur vinum, et ibi se ponunt, et totem diem juxta vinem deducunt...alii clamant ex jucunditate...Alii per funes currunt; alii saltant; alii suam fortitudinem probant levando onera, vel alias faciendo animosa.

⁷⁰ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 161; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 145: Caveat etiam ne galeotis incipientibus currere ad labores impedimentum cursus praebeat, quia eum, si etiam nobilis multum esset, vel episcopus, trudunt et deorsum dejiciunt, super eumque procurrunt, quia labores navales sunt celerrimi et ignei, nec capiunt moram.

of a few pilgrimage sites to women can by and large be attributed to a fear for their safety. He noted that on at least two occasions, at St. Denis in the 1130s and at an exposure of the head of St. Martial in Avignon in 1388, women, some of them pregnant, were injured in the crushing crowds.⁷¹ According to the English chronicler John Capgrave, who wrote a description of Rome's history and churches for the use of pilgrims in c. 1450, some of the shrines in Rome were also completely closed to women. He complained that there were many 'lewed causes to which I wil 3ive no credens' which explained the exclusion of women, and then provided the reason he found most likely:

All those who have been at Rome know well that the women there are very desirous to go on pilgrimage and to touch and kiss every holy relic. Now in truth these places that are forbidden to them are very small in number. And perhaps some woman was in the press (of a crowd) and either because of sickness or because of pregnancy was in great peril there; and for this cause they were forbidden to enter these houses, as I suppose.⁷²

Capgrave listed the chapel of St. John the Baptist at St. John Lateran as closed to women, but explained that they received the same indulgences as men if they touched the door of the shrine.⁷³ He did not specifically explain how women could obtain indulgences at the altars of Saint Leo and the Holy Cross in St. Peter's, however, and again women were not allowed to enter these places.⁷⁴

But women's exclusion from entering certain shrines was not always understood simply as a protective measure. Women's innate sinfulness was also used to explain why they were excluded from some shrines. Herein lay the 'lewed causes' that Capgrave refused to repeat. The Spanish pilgrim Pero Tafur, who made his pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem between 1435 and 1439, wrote that at the chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome, 'no women are allowed to enter the chapel, for the reason, as they say, that a woman once uttered such things that she burst asunder'.⁷⁵ Rather than risk another untidy incident, the shrine was simply closed to women. Nicolaus Muffel told an even more graphic story of a woman who was kneeling at the same shrine when 'nature happened to her', leaving a stain on the marble steps.⁷⁶ For fear of other women marking the shrine by menstruation, with its connotations

⁷¹ Sumption, *Pilgrimage* 263.

⁷² Capgrave, *Ye solace of pilgrimes*, 77: Al þoo which haue be at rome knowe weel þat þe women þer be passing desirous to goo on pilgrimage and for to touch and kisse euery holy relik. Now in uery sothfastnesse þese places which are forbode hem be rith smale in quantite. And uphap sum woman be in the prees eþer for seknesse or with child hath be in grete perel þere and for þis cause þei wer forbode þe entre of þese houses as I suppose. (Modern translation is the author's own).

⁷³ Capgrave, *Ye solace* 71–2.

⁷⁴ Capgrave, *Ye solace* 63

⁷⁵ P. Tafur, *Travels and adventures, 1435–1439*, trans. M. Letts (New York, 1926), 39.

⁷⁶ Capgrave, *Ye solace* 77, n. 1: ...und deweil er ob dem altar stund und sy in ansach mit poser begir, do eging yr die nature; das sicht man auf dem merbelstein do dy fraw ist gestanden.

of ritual uncleanness, it was closed to women altogether.⁷⁷ Yet another set of stories targeted women's pride as the bar to entering pilgrimage shrines. They related that women who appeared at pilgrimage shrines wearing elaborate hairstyles were mystically prohibited from entering until they had cut off the offending locks.⁷⁸ Whether or not these stories had anything to do with the official decision to close the Sancta Sanctorum and other shrines to women, the existence of such stories is telling. In the popular understanding, at least, women were automatically suspect as pilgrims, liable to defile the holiness of a shrine. This attitude offered more fuel to those who were, for various reasons, uncomfortable with the reality of women as pilgrims.

Women might be excluded from entering a shrine even if it was not officially closed to them. Fabri's six matrons, for example, did not enter the shrine at the bathing-pool of Siloam in Jerusalem. According to Fabri's description, the place was very crowded: 'those in front cried out against the impatience of those behind, and those who were last cried at the slowness of those who were in front, and those in the middle cried out because they were squeezed by both the others...' As a result, the matrons remained outside, and the male pilgrims were considerate enough to bring them some of the holy water, 'for, by reason of the aforesaid crowding and pushing, our companions, the pilgrim ladies, did not go in, but sat quietly and peaceably saying their prayers outside'.⁷⁹ This case suggests that even where a site was not officially closed to women, they at times chose to remain outside and conform to the expectations of their companions that they remain silent and docile.

There was ample reason for women to conform to group expectations while on pilgrimage, as female pilgrims who chose not to maintain their silence and invisibility could pay an uncomfortable price. Pilgrimage groups were quite content to abandon women whose presence they found annoying. Fabri and his fellows, for example, abandoned the Fleming woman on the island of Rhodes. She went on an excursion to a local church because she did not think the galley would sail that day. The galley did indeed sail, and without her. Despite his staunch defence of the six matrons, on this occasion Fabri admitted, 'except her husband, no one was sorry at the absence of this woman, because she had rendered herself odious beyond measure by her silly talk and her inquisitive prying into unprofitable matters'.⁸⁰ He softened somewhat when she caught up with the pilgrims in a boat. He observed that the other pilgrims

⁷⁷ P. Crawford, 'Attitudes to menstruation in seventeenth-century England', *Past and Present* 91 (1981), 47–73, 60.

⁷⁸ J. J. Jusserand, *English wayfaring life in the middle ages*, trans. L. Tomlin Smith (London, 1950), 217–218.

⁷⁹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 527–28; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 418–19: ...primi clamabant propter sequentium importunitatem, et ultimi propter praecedentium tarditatem, medii vero propter pressuram utrorumque clamabant...et exportavimus in scutellis et flasconibus nostris aquam sacram pro his, qui in hiatum ingredi non poterant; propter praedictas enim pressures mulieres peregrinae, sociae nostrae, non introiverunt, sed cum quiete et pace foris sedentes manserunt in sua devotione....

⁸⁰ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 190; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 169: quia extra civitatem ad quandum (sic) ecclesiam evagata fuerat, non existimans, galeam hoc die recedere. Die illius autem mulieris nemo tristis erat absentia, nisi maritus ejus, quia feceret se ultra modum odiosum suis fatuis locutionibus et curiosis indagacionibus rerum inutilium.

were not happy about her return, but extended his sympathy for ‘the straits to which she had been put by the sailing of the vessel’.⁸¹

Vindictiveness on the part of the other pilgrims may not have caused this situation. Sir Richard Guylforde, an English noble who completed his pilgrimage in 1509, recorded that a number of pilgrims were left behind on the island of Mylo because, as they were off exploring the island with the captain’s blessing, the first fair wind in many days came up, and the captain was obliged to leave immediately.⁸² But other evidence from Fabri at least suggests the possibility that leaving the Fleming woman behind was intended to be a punitive action. On Fabri’s first pilgrimage with the ancient matrons, a pregnant noblewoman was also aboard. Fabri makes little mention of her, possibly because she, like the other nobles, would have had separate housing in the forecastle cabins of the galley, and would therefore have been completely segregated from most of the pilgrims.⁸³ After a bout of bad weather and seasickness aboard ship, the galley rested in the city of Lesina for 3 days, in order to avoid a dangerous wind, and also ‘to recruit the strength of the pregnant lady, who had suffered much and became very weak during the gale’.⁸⁴ If the entire galley was willing to wait for this woman, who was noble and also invisible, to recuperate, then the abandonment of the ‘odious’ Fleming woman begins to seem potentially vindictive.

Kempe’s fellow-pilgrims, who deeply resented her flamboyant devotions, abandoned her twice. When her party arrived in the city of Constance, they met with a papal legate, to whom her companions complained about Margery’s weeping, unwillingness to eat meat, and constant devotional conversation. The legate supported Kempe, and the party left her and her money with him, refusing to travel further with her. Much to her annoyance, the party also kept her maid, ‘notwithstanding she [the maid] had promised her mistress and assured her that she should not forsake her for any need’.⁸⁵ The party agreed to let Kempe rejoin them in Venice, in return for her promise that she would leave off her devotional ramblings and vegetarianism. She failed to keep the promise. While her companions did not abandon her again until they had seen her safely back to Venice, they punished her annoying behaviour in a number of other ways, if her complaints are to be believed. She wrote that they excluded her from eating with them, stole her sheets, tried to bar her from going

⁸¹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 201; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 178: De cujus ingressu parvum gaudium erat. Compatiebur tamen misellae propter angustias ejus ex recessu navis perpassas.

⁸² R. Guylforde, *The pylgrymage of Sir Richarde Guylforde knyght and controuler unto our late soveraygne lorde kynge Henry the Vii and howe he went with his servaunts and company towardes Jherusalem* (n.p., 1511), 91.

⁸³ Fabri, *Wandering* vol. 7/8, 128; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 119.

⁸⁴ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 41; also *Evagatorium*, vol. II, 56: ...et etiam mansimus propter dominae praegnantis et gravidae refocillationem, quae valde fuerat in illis tempestatibus infirmata; mirum est quod non fuit mortua simul cum foetu in tantis terroribus.

⁸⁵ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 27, 47; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 64: ...not-wythstondyng sche had behestyd hir maystres & sekyrd hir Pat sche xulde not forsake hir for no nede.

with them to the Jordan River, refused to help her climb Mount Quarantine, denied her a share of their water,⁸⁶ and so on.

It is easy to write off Kempe's experiences as the consequence of her apparently obnoxious piety. She experienced many spiritual gifts during her lifetime, and most notably in Jerusalem the gift of tears, leading to such episodes as this: 'she fell down and cried with a loud voice, wonderfully twisting and turning her body on every side, spreading her arms abroad as if she should have died'.⁸⁷ Or: 'she...[spread] her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder'.⁸⁸ In sum, her personality was abrasive and her behaviour strange, and therefore Kempe's woes seem like a questionable representation of women's experiences. Indeed, her overwhelmingly visible and audible personality and devotions have left even modern scholars struggling to understand her. A significant number of scholars have insisted that she was insane.⁸⁹ One has tried to diagnose her with Tourette's Syndrome.⁹⁰ Feminist scholars, in contrast, have 'hailed Margery as the bold practitioner of an alternative, matriarchal, feminine kind of spirituality'.⁹¹ The diversity of modern opinions about the genesis of Kempe's behaviour mirrors the confusion of her contemporaries, whose responses to her have been accurately described as 'fragmented'.⁹²

But contemporary sources confirm that Kempe was not unique in her flamboyant devotional expression. For example, the sole extant copy of Kempe's *Book* contains marginal notations indicating that some of the Carthusians of Mount Grace Priory, who owned the manuscript, experienced similar spiritual gifts.⁹³ Richard Kieckhefer

⁸⁶ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapters 28, 49, and 29, 54; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 66–67, 74.

⁸⁷ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 28, 51–2; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 70: ...þan sche fel down & cryed with lowde voys, wondyrfully turnyng & wrestyng hir body on euery syde, spredyng hir armys a-brode as 3yf she xulde a deyd...

⁸⁸ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 28, 50; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 68: sche...walwyd & wrestyd with hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed with a lowed voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr.

⁸⁹ For recent examples, see P. Weissman, 'Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: Hysterica compassio in the late middle ages', in: *Acts of interpretation. The text in its contexts, 700–1600*, ed. by M. J. Carruthers and E. D. Kirk (Norman, Okla., 1982); P. R. Freeman, C. Rees Bogorad, and D. E. Sholomskas, 'Margery Kempe, a new theory. The inadequacy of hysteria and postpartum psychosis as diagnostic categories', *History of Psychiatry* 1, no. 2 (1990), 169–90; and N. F. Partner, 'Reading the Book of Margery Kempe', *Exemplaria* 3 (1991), 29–66.

⁹⁰ N. P. Stork, 'Did Margery Kempe suffer from Tourette's Syndrome?' *Mediaeval Studies* 59 (1997), 261–300.

⁹¹ Some of the works in this vein include C. W. Atkinson, *Mystic and pilgrim. The Book and the world of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, NY, 1983); K. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and translations of the flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991); McEntire, ed., *Margery Kempe. A book of essays* (New York, 1992); and S. Beckwith, 'A very material mysticism: The medieval mysticism of Margery Kempe', in: *Gender and text in the later middle ages*, ed. J. Chance (Gainesville, Florida, 1996), 195–215, and Morrison, *Women pilgrims*, 138.

⁹² K. Ashley, 'Historicizing Margery: The Book of Margery Kempe as social text', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 2 (1998), 371–88, 375.

⁹³ W. Harding, 'Body into text: The Book of Margery Kempe', in *Feminist approaches to the body in medieval literature*, ed. L. Lomperis and S. Stanbury (Philadelphia, 1993), 183–184.

has pointed out that ‘many of Kempe’s unconventional behaviours had themselves become conventional on the Continent, and those most receptive to her were often those who knew of the Continental conventions’.⁹⁴ Nor were these behaviours unusual for laypersons in the context of the Jerusalem pilgrimage. Fabri, who in other cases praised the silence of female pilgrims, seemed unsurprised by physical and vocal displays of piety from both men and women during their visit to the Holy Sepulchre. After describing the pilgrims’ performance of repentance, which included sobbing, throwing themselves to the ground, and beating their breasts, he singled out the women for special attention: ‘above all our companions and sisters the women pilgrims shrieked as though in labour, cried aloud and wept’.⁹⁵ Kempe was not the only woman, nor even the only pilgrim, to weep and wail at important pilgrimage sites. Her performances, however, were not contained within these generally accepted group expressions of contrition and piety, and she was thus punished for her unwillingness to conform to demands for invisibility the rest of the time.

And although Kempe was particularly vocal, even women who maintained their silence risked abandonment. Fabri recorded an incident at the Jordan River involving the six matrons, whom he had so often praised for their modesty and silence. When the group left the Jordan, one of the matrons was accidentally left behind. The remaining five matrons raised a hue and cry and begged the rest of the group to stop and wait while they searched for her. The group was as divided over this rescue effort as they had been when the matrons joined the galley; some joined the search, and ‘some rough and hard-hearted knights grumbled at the whole host being thrown into confusion for the sake of one old woman, and had their advice been followed, we should have quite given up the old woman for lost’. More generous opinions prevailed, and the missing matron was found and ‘received with joy’.⁹⁶ Again, those who resented the presence of these women were quite willing to punish them by leaving one of their number behind; only the allies that the matrons had won through their modesty prevented her from being abandoned as Margery or the Fleming woman were.

⁹⁴ R. Kieckhefer, ‘Convention and conversion. Patterns in late medieval piety’, *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998), 41.

⁹⁵ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 283–84; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 239: Super omnes autem mulieres peregrinae sociae nostrae et sorores quasi parturientes clamabant, ullulabant et flebant. The same correspondence between Margery’s devotional behaviour and that of Fabri’s matrons has been noted in Weissman, ‘Margery Kempe in Jerusalem’, 215, who argues that such ‘hysterical’ behaviour was the result of medieval patriarchy; she failed to note, however, that Fabri described all the pilgrims, men and women, as engaging in such behaviour.

⁹⁶ Fabri, *Wanderings* vols. 9/10, 32–3; also *Evagatorium* vol. III, 51–52: ...quamvis aliqui milites rudes et crudeles murmurarent, quod propter unam vetulam totus exercitus inquietaretur, et si quis secutus fuisset eorum consilium, vetulam illam omnino dimissemus in perditione...Accepta autem cum gaudio est matrona....

3. Femininity as an asset in pilgrimage groups

Female pilgrims employed a variety of strategies to cope with the antipathy of male pilgrims, all of which were founded in an attempt to conform to or appropriate normative female roles. For example, women pilgrims often conformed to the demands for their invisibility to the greatest extent possible. If women were able to remain little seen and little heard-from, there was a chance that they might earn respect, or at least a lack of open animosity, from some of their companions. Fabri's support for the six matrons was often couched in praise of their displays of humility and meekness. Indeed, he even went so far as to favourably compare their quiet behaviour to the rowdiness of the male pilgrims. When the pilgrims on his first journey went to bathe in the river Jordan, a few of the male pilgrims were nearly drowned because they took foolish risks in the swift current, trying to prove their strength. Fabri held up in contrast the positive example of the matrons, 'who bathed among the reeds with modesty, silence, and devotion, and far more sedately than we'.⁹⁷ As we have seen, this silence earned the matrons a reputation for piety and thus support in moments of difficulty.

Since women did not belong on pilgrimage, they strove to be invisible. The case of the Fleming woman also shows that women were expected to keep the company of other women for the sake of propriety, and so women pilgrims often stuck together. Many women who travelled to Rome or Jerusalem travelled in groups, like the six women who went on Fabri's first pilgrimage. Even Kempe extracted a promise of travelling companionship from her female maid, and was furious when the maid abandoned her in order to remain with the rest of their group.⁹⁸ The frustration of the men on board Fabri's galley when 'one woman (had) to dwell alone amongst so many noblemen'⁹⁹ even had a direct inverse. The reason that no women were originally on board for Fabri's second pilgrimage was that another ship captain, Master Augustine, 'had gathered together all the women on board his galley'.¹⁰⁰ Pilgrim galleys, by the late fifteenth century, could hold up to one hundred passengers. Master Augustine's galley may have had a large contingent of women among his pilgrims, or possibly an entire galley-load made up of women pilgrims. It is regrettable that we do not have any written records of the experiences of women who went in such groups. This mode of conforming to gender roles — shielding women through numbers — might even be enacted in cases where it was not planned in advance. Margery Kempe, for example, joined the pilgrim retinue of a total stranger, Madam Florentine, on her way to Rome. Madam Florentine was travelling

⁹⁷ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 9/10, 19; also *Evagatorium* vol. III, 41: ...quae supra nos in arundinibus etiam balneantur cum pudore, silentio, devotione et cum maturitate, multo magis quam nos.

⁹⁸ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 27, 47.

⁹⁹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 149–150.

¹⁰⁰ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 166; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 150: ...sed Dominus Augustinus patronus alterius galeae omnes mulieres in suam galeam collegerat.

‘with her many Knights of Rhodes, her gentlewomen and much good conveyance’.¹⁰¹ The same noblewoman found that Kempe was in dire financial straits in Rome, and although they did not even speak a common language, she saw to it that Kempe had enough to eat.¹⁰² It is especially interesting to note that their gender connection bridged class difference; Kempe was not a noblewoman.

Female pilgrims could do more than remain quiet, stick together, and hope for the best, however. They also attempted to win approval by providing services to their male counterparts. During their journey, male pilgrims had need of the services their mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, or female servants customarily provided at home. Usually, they obtained such services from women who lived along their route. Arnold von Harff, a German knight from Cologne who went on pilgrimage in 1496, included short phrasebooks in his narrative, teaching his readers how to request female services in the languages he encountered on his overland journeys to Jerusalem and Compostella. He included the word for ‘a woman’ in each language, and his list of important phrases includes such requests and comments as these, all taken from the section in Greek:

Kyratza gamysso sena ego? Woman, shall I marry you?

Kyrasche nazis gymati metosena. Good woman, let me sleep with you.

Kyrasche ego me panda dycosso. Woman, I am already in your bed.¹⁰³

Von Harff recorded ways in which to sexually proposition women in five different languages, including Arabic and Hebrew. He also provided the vocabulary needed to ask for food and other basic services, including phrases in Albanian, Turkish and Breton requesting that his shirt be washed.¹⁰⁴ Other narratives also record the presence of a service industry made up mostly of local women everywhere along the traditional pilgrim’s routes. Leonardo Frescobaldi commented on the presence of ‘a great number of low-class women, very great merchantresses’ between Alexandria and Cairo.¹⁰⁵ Such ‘merchantresses’ might offer any or all of the basic services that von Harff taught his readers how to request. Fabri, for example, warned that the wary pilgrim must be careful of which inns he chooses along the way, as ‘no one receives German pilgrims into his house save the keepers of houses of ill-fame, who for the most part are Germans’,¹⁰⁶ although he later described the German madam

¹⁰¹ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 31, 58; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 79: Hir name was Margaret Florentyne & sche had with hir many Knygtys of Roodys, many gentylwomen, & mekyl good caryage.

¹⁰² Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 38, 68; also *Book*, Meech, ed., 93.

¹⁰³ Von Harff, *The pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff, Knight, from Cologne through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France and Spain, which he accomplished in the years 1496–1499*, trans. Malcom Letts (London, 1946), 90–1.

¹⁰⁴ Von Harff, *Pilgrimage*, 77, 249, and 284.

¹⁰⁵ Leonardo Frescobaldi, ‘The Pilgrimage of Leonardo Frescobaldi’, in: *Visit to the holy places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine, and Syria in 1384 by Frescobaldi, Gucci, and Sigoli*, ed. and trans. Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem, 1948), 45.

¹⁰⁶ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 163; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 147: Et nemo peregrinos theutonicos recipit in domum suam, nisi lenones; qui ut in plurimum sunt Theutonici....

of the brothel in Crete, who sent the prostitutes away upon the pilgrims' arrival, as 'a well-mannered, respectful, and discreet woman, and (she) obtained all that we needed for us in great quantity'.¹⁰⁷

But Fabri's narrative shows that female pilgrims, if present, could also render some of these basic services. While serving their fellow pilgrims breached their protective invisibility, it also proved to their male counterparts that they had a definable purpose, and thereby overcame negative views of their presence (however briefly). The six matrons braved visibility when most of the pilgrims on board their galley became seasick, and Fabri told the tale with partisan relish:

We...cast ourselves down on our beds, very sick; and the number of the sick became so great, that there was no one to wait upon them and furnish them with necessaries. Howbeit, those ancient matrons, seeing our miseries, were moved with compassion, and ministered to us, for there was not one of them that was sick. Herein God, by the strength of these old women, confounded the valour of those knights, who at Venice treated them with scorn, and had been unwilling to sail with them. They moved to and fro throughout the galley from one sick man to another, and ministered to those who had mocked and scorned them as they lay stricken down on their beds.¹⁰⁸

The willingness of the matrons to nurse the sick, and Fabri's claim that they themselves had not succumbed, is made more remarkable by the fact that as women they were unwelcome ever to leave their bunks during the journey, and so had been confined in an unhealthy environment more than their male counterparts. They may, however, have been grateful for the opportunity to prove themselves useful, and thereby to ease some of the tensions created by their presence.

Female pilgrims also served a purpose for their male counterparts in a less direct fashion, one which, although outside of their control, nevertheless earned them a bit of social leverage. Some commentators turned women who endured the particularly difficult status of female pilgrim into exempla: concrete examples of exceptionally virtuous behaviour, sent by God to teach their male counterparts. It was clear throughout Fabri's account that he considered the matrons an excellent exemplum. In order to use them in this way, he emphasised their fragility when he introduced them into the narrative: 'old women, who through old age were scarcely able to support their own weight, yet forgot their own frailty, and through love of the Holy

¹⁰⁷ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 188; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 167: *Erat autem mulier illa urbana et reverentialis, et discreta, et omnia nobis necessaria procuravit abunde....*

¹⁰⁸ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 26; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 43: *Sed et nos, ...in lectulos decidimus aegritudinis magnae: et adeo multiplicati fuerunt infirmi, quod servitores non erant, qui necessaria cupita infirmis ministrarent. Videntes autem antiquae vetulae matronae necessitatem nostram, motae super nos misericordia nobis servierunt; non enim aliqua inter eas infirma. In quo facto confudit Deus in robore illarum vetularum fortitudinem illorum militum, qui Venetiis eas sperebant, cum eis navigare refugiebant. Discurrebant autem per galeam de uno infirmo ad alterum et suis spretoribus derisoribus in lectulis prostratis serviebant.*

Land joined themselves to young knights and underwent the labours of strong men'.¹⁰⁹ This interpretation of their pilgrimage as unusually risky, and hence unusually penitent, deeply affected some of their male counterparts, who sought to have them join the group in the hopes that their extraordinary spiritual rigour would encourage God to protect the galley.¹¹⁰ No doubt some of these same men later supported the matrons when one of them was lost at the Jordan River. Even Kempe was able to use social leverage based on the belief that God especially favoured her penitence. After her party abandoned her in Germany, she arrived in Bologna before they did. Based on the speed of her travel, one member of her former group became convinced that she must have God's favour, and helped her to rejoin them.¹¹¹

This use of female pilgrims as exempla created a logical conundrum for the author who wrote about them. He had to emphasise their good behaviour — their silence and invisibility — in the process of putting them on a pedestal; he had to emphasise their weakness as women, but also their strength as pilgrims. Fabri navigated these contrary expectations magnificently in his descriptions of the six matrons. There was a hint of his didactic use of their story in his description of how they nursed the sick, but it became an impromptu sermon when he described the arduous journey from the Jordan back to Jerusalem through the desert. This 'sermon' is worth quoting at length:¹¹²

But during all these labours our fellow-pilgrims and comrades, the ancient ladies, outdid all of us, wrested the first place from the knights, neither groaned nor bewailed their toils, but went on first in the whole line of march, stronger than men and braver than knights. These old ladies struck great shame into us by their endurance; indeed, a knight said to me 'lo! My brother, I don't believe these old creatures to be women at all, but devils, for women, especially old women, are frail, tender, and delicate, whereas these women are made of iron, and are stronger than all us knights'...Whence, however, could power have come to weaklings,

¹⁰⁹ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31: ...illarum vetularum, quae se ipsas prae senio ferre vix poterant, et tamen fragilitatis propriae oblatae, amore illius sanctae terrae in consortium militum juvenum se ingerebat, et laborem fortium virorum subibant.

¹¹⁰ Fabri, *Wanderings* vol. 7/8, 11; also *Evagatorium* vol. II, 31–2: Sed alii milites prudentiores et conscientiosi contradicebant superbis illis, et gaudebant de poenitentia illarum matronarum, sperantes, quod propter devotionem earum navigatio nostra salubrior fieret.

¹¹¹ Kempe, *Book*, Staley, trans., Chapter 27, p. 48.

¹¹² Fabri, *Wanderings*, Stewart, trans., vol. 9/10, p. 67–8; also *Evagatorium*, Hassler, ed., vol. III, p. 79–80: Sed in his omnibus comperegrinae et sociae nostae annosae vetulae antecedeabant nos, praeipientes loca militum, et nec gemeabant, nec conuerebantur de labore, sed fortiores viris et militibus adaciores primae in acie procedebant. Magnam verecundiam faciebant nobis istae vetulae sua infatigabilitate, unde quidam miles dixit mihi: ecce, frater, non credo has vetulas esse foeminas, sed daemones sunt, mulieres enim, praesertim annosae, sunt fragiles, tenerae et delicatae, istae autem sunt ferreae, cunctis militibus fortiores...Sed unde fragilibus fortitudo, mulieribus robur, nisi ab eo, qui infirma mundi eligit, ut confundat fortia, qui praetulit eas viris, ne quis gloriatur de sexu, de fortitudine, pulchritudine, juventute et de nobilitate. Siquidem nec ipsae erant viri, nec fortes, nec pulchrae, nec nobiles, et tamen omnes labores peregerunt sine defectu, per quos militia acquiritur. Et in hoc confudit Deus superbiam illorum militum, qui eas dedignabantur habere socias....

and strength to women, save from Him who hath chosen the weak things of the world to unfound the strong, and who set these women above the men, that none of him might boast of his sex, his strength, his beauty, his youth, or his noble birth — ? For these women were neither men, nor strong, nor beauteous, nor noble, yet they underwent without fainting all the labours whereby knighthood is gained. Herein God confounded the pride of those knights who had scorned these ladies for companions...

Here Fabri made the matrons serve their male companions as a lesson in humility. He dismissed the women's endurance as none of their doing; instead, they are simply tools used by God to set a positive example. Indeed, this is the only way Fabri was able to explain how old women, whom he understood to be naturally frail (despite their hardiness during the bout of seasickness), could be so strong. Fabri's support for the women did not stem from an understanding of them as spiritually worthy in their own right, but rather from the ways in which he perceived the divine speaking to the male pilgrims through their actions. Nevertheless, his attitudes generated enough approbation that the women were able to remain with the group, and even count on their help in moments of distress. Their status as exempla therefore allowed women pilgrims to apply their strength, wherever it may have come from, to the devotional endeavour they had chosen for themselves.

Later medieval women found it challenging to engage in pilgrimages to Jerusalem or Rome. Even if they were able to overcome the fiscal and legal barriers, on the journey they might be segregated into uncomfortable circumstances, denied entry into shrines, and even abandoned by their fellow pilgrims. But by conforming to aspects of the roles that were supposed to limit them, they nevertheless completed such journeys in significant enough numbers to require their own infrastructure and commentary on their presence. The most remarkable aspect of their perseverance is the self-serving nature of their goals: it was to their own salvation or desire to travel to which they were ministering by taking the journey. Perhaps this was the origin of the ambivalence of medieval culture towards female pilgrims. Each journey made by a woman to the Holy Land or to Rome was a self-centered act clothed in Christian devotion. Medieval culture approved of devout women, but was far more comfortable when that devotion, like all women's labour, was made to serve others.

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