White Clothes

In a tense moment during her confrontation with the abbot, the dean, and the mayor of Leicester, an abrupt question is put to Margery Kempe. In front of a crowd so eager to gawk at her that they are standing up on stools, she has successfully confuted an accusation of Lollardy by demonstrating to the abbot and his men her knowledge of the articles of the faith and by rehearsing her orthodox belief in the Eucharist. Unconvinced and alleging hypocrisy, the mayor then takes over. His accusations that she is “a false strumpet, a false Lollard, and a false deceiver of the people” have provoked this trial to begin with, and at last he gets down to what seems to be the bottom line of his discomfort with her in his town: “I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you.” How are all of these accusations—of hypocrisy, sexual deviance, heresy, sociopolitical disruption—focused by the act of wearing white clothes? And why might Margery’s sartorial practice evoke the suspicion that she intends to lead wives away from their husbands and homes? I want to begin this meditation on queerness, community, and history with a consideration of Margery Kempe’s clothing, that constant issue in the Book that records a life at odds with most every everyday thing in late-medieval East Anglia.²

Margery goes dressed in this white garb—is clothed in a color that stands out from the clothes of the other bourgeois matrons and chaste women of her community and causes a continual stir—because Christ asks her to do so.
White clothes are a token of the merry life above: “[I]f you clothe me on earth, our Lord Jesus Christ shall clothe you in heaven” (69), she tells the bishop of Lincoln, Philip Repyngdon. These clothes mark her as Christ’s own: “You shall dress according to my will” (67), he commands her. Saint Bridget, one of Margery’s most important holy role models, was ordered to wear clothes that she herself interprets spiritually. But Margery understands her orders very materially. Both she and her Christ, in their more or less daily conversations, use them as a sort of bargaining chip: Christ promises to bring her safely on her pilgrimage journey to Rome and then back to England if she wears white clothes; and she agrees, calculating that the protection he offers will be worth suffering the discomfort of being made a spectacle. Anomalously dressed, she is visually designated “as unique,” Mary Erler writes, “a woman vowed to chastity, but wearing the garments of symbolic virginity.” Her worries that she will therefore be called “a hypocrite”—that people will slander her because she goes “dressed differently from how other chaste women dress” (67-68)—are indeed confirmed, as when an English priest sneers when she is on her pilgrimage to Rome that she “wore white clothing more than did others who were holier and better than she ever was” (120). Her priestly supporter, Wenslawe, then orders her to leave off the white clothes, and she obeys. Later in her narrative, however, when she again understands that the Lord wants her dressed in white, she is less confident: she requires some further indication from Him (thunder, lightning, and rain) that wearing them is indeed his will; when the Lord grants her this meteorological token, “then she fully resolved to wear white clothes” (141). With increasing, recurrent hesitancy, in fact, Margery obeys his behest, for the clothing is disruptive: it is “singular,” as Philip Repyngdon remarked in refusing her request for it (70); it comes between her and a spiritual advisor (140); it costs money she does not have (141); it provokes others again and again to rebuke and shame her (e.g., 142).

And it seems to confirm suspicions of heresy. After she has been released from Leicester, she gets into hot water in York, where the archbishop sharply demands of her, “‘Why do you go about in white clothes? Are you a virgin?’ She, kneeling before him, said, ‘No, sir; I am no virgin; I am a married woman.’ He ordered his household to fetch a pair of fetters and said she should be fettered, for she was a false heretic” (162).

Hope Emily Allen’s notes on Margery’s white garb refer to a new sect in Europe pretending great sanctity and wearing white that had been banned from England by the king in 1399, when a great influx had arrived in Italy from France. Perhaps Margery’s white clothes were considered not only sanctimonious but also something of a foreign “contagion,” something she might have brought back with her from her continental travels. The spread to England of continental heresies associated with free love and promiscuity “was constantly feared by the Church and the civil authorities,” as Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge write, and such deviant sexual practices seem to have been linked to Lollardy—in Roger Dymnok’s refutation of the 1395 Twelve Con-