

Sacred Art and the Artful Conversion of Margery Kempe

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Two famous early examples of crosses or crucifixes that speak are the cross that spoke to St. Francis in the Church of San Damiano, Assisi, and the lamenting cross in Geoffrey de Vinsauf's poetical treatise the *Poetria nova*. The crucifix at San Damiano is said to have spoken in 1207, the latter vents its verse complaint in a Latin treatise work composed some time between 1208-16. Although being instances of the same phenomenon, the two belong to opposite levels of Church hierarchy. While St. Francis (1181/82-1226) had turned his back on worldly riches shaping his life into an act of *imitatio Christi*, leaving his privileged life as a wealthy merchant's son and willingly placing himself at the very bottom of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the emerging new mendicant orders, de Vinsauf was an accomplished man of letters, who moved in circles close to the top of the system, dedicating his work to the powerful and equally learned Pope Innocent III. Hence de Vinsauf drew both on Scripture and classical poetic and rhetorical sources for his Lament of the Cross ("Sanctae Crucis quaerela"), while St. Francis imitated the style of the Gospels in his sermons and for the *Cantico del Sole*. In this paper I wish briefly to draw attention to a less known instance of a speaking cross, described in 1436 in an account reporting an incident that

occurred in 1413: Margery Kempe's account of her conversion to a chaste life in her "autobiography".¹

The Fourteenth Century was a period of turmoil in the Church, not least after the devastating impact of the Black Death, which – together with the Pope's Babylonian imprisonment at Avignon – many interpreted as God's punishment of the excesses of the clergy. The unrest continued into the Early Fifteenth Century with attempts by the Church to control popular or reformist movements within its ranks. In England John Wyclif and the so-called Lollards constituted a threat to Church authority and were severely suppressed, the first Lollard to be burned, William Sawtree, was executed in 1401.² Alongside of lay preachers who advocated the simple life of Christ to the masses in opposition to Church authority,³ the period also saw the rise of female mystics like St. Brigid of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, and – outside the monastic world – the strange case of Margery Kempe (1373-1438). Of course, Margery herself was no Lollard, she accepted church authority

¹ The classical edition of Kempe's work which gives the Middle English text is *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen. EETS 212. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940. A modern translation is *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. Barry A. Windeatt. London: Penguin, 1989. For the sake of convenience I have used the modern spelling version printed in ed. Frank Kermode, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2 vols., I: The original Middle English version in the Allen and Sandford edition is printed in Appendix 1.

² For an account of the Lollards, see Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*, London: Hambledon, 1984. See also Leonard Trinterud, "Origins of Puritanism," *Church History* 20 (1951): 35-57.

³ Karma Lochrie points out that the charge of lay preaching was specifically aimed at Lollards at the time, and argues that Kempe was drawing a distinction between preaching and teaching in order to invoke the defense that the latter was not only allowed, but the duty of every Christian. "*The Book of Margery Kempe: The Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority*," pp. 42-47 in ed. Sandra J. McEntire, *Margery Kempe. A Book of Essays*. New York and London: Garland, 1993, pp. 33-55.

on the crucial issues of preaching and communion. This economically independent housewife of King's Lynn in East Anglia, being the daughter of John de Brunham, five times mayor, alderman and MP for the town, was the mother of 14 children. Yet she strove for most of her life to fashion herself into a mystic and possibly a saint in imitation of St. Brigid and Elizabeth of Schönau, whose peregrinations she followed throughout Europe. In this she not only enjoyed the support of some monks and priests, but also the support of the great mystic Julian of Norwich.

She dictated her own life, conflicts with the clergy, and her pilgrimages and mystical experiences to two monks in what appears to be an attempt to leave behind her own version of a saint's life. The manuscript was lost for centuries, and was only retrieved in 1934 when it was brought to the attention of the scholarly world in the 1940-edition by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen.

It is commonly held that Kempe did not know how to read and write, a question which I believe is based solely on the fact that she did not write down her own experiences, but dictated them to two scribes. I do not think we should rule out the possibility that she actually could read, but that is not really relevant for my argument here, in view of the fact that the medieval oral tradition and the capacity of medieval people to absorb and remember far more than people living within a literate culture based on printed texts. We should not be surprised, therefore, when we find evidence that Kempe in her prose had absorbed stylistic features of the *Ars dictamini*, and of the *Gospels*.¹

Dhira B. Mahoney has suggested that for Kempe "preaching is associated with learned men; it implies rhetorical

¹ The only study of her prose is that of Robert Karl Stone, *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich*. The Hague: Mouton, 1970.

training, ... the patriarchal language."¹ Although it seems clear that Kempe had not received training in composition and formal rhetoric, readers better informed than Mahoney about the characteristics of scriptural rhetoric, will know that Kempe hardly would resist or even consider to make a stand against the rhetorical schemes and compositional strategies the Evangelist, or indeed in Christ's own prose himself in the Gospels. A particularly striking example of this rhetoric of parallelism and balance we see for instance in *The Sermon of the Mount*, of which I present a survey in *Appendix 1*. Surely, it is patriarchal power per se, not the forms of language that constitute the issue here. Kempe had the opportunity to absorb both the oratorical style of preachers trained in the *Ars praedicandi* and in scriptural passages read to her. Kempe's culture was indeed an oral and visual one, where only a few select commanded the techniques of writing and reading. Indeed, Kempe's prayer that concludes the second part of her work contrasts markedly with the colloquial language which dominates throughout *The Book* in being "formal and rhetorically effective," but also shows the extent to which she had learnt by listening. And by composing orally. In his sketchy analysis of the style of Julian of Norwich and Kempe, Robert Stone has brought out that both use rhetorical schemes such as anaphora, anadiplosis, antimetabole, parallelism, and antithesis to what Mahoney thinks is a "surprising extent." (p. 50). The surprise is obviously due to a preconceived view about Kempe and patriarchy, and is not based on empirical data.

Although Stone's most elaborate examples stem precisely from the prayer, which is intended to be a final flourish to *The Book*, parallelism and balance are indeed found in many places in Kempe's work. One of the passages that – in terms relating one of the crucial events of Kempe's life – could be said

¹ Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language," in ed. Sandra J. McEntire, *Margery Kempe. A Book of Essays*. New York and London: Garland, 1993, pp. 37-50 (p. 47).

to approach the concluding prayer in importance and rhetorical finish, is precisely the episode in which she makes a private agreement with her husband upon the direct intervention of Christ, and that marks her conversion to a chaste life,

The episode which occurred on Midsummer Even, 23 June, 1413, displays a highly conspicuous narrative design that brings to mind the balanced composition of Fourteenth and Fifteenth representations of the Passion, and indeed of *sacre conversazioni*. Apart from the balanced disposition of what Cicero had called *loci actionis* ("places of action"), that is, parallel or similar actions, we find in it an obvious and highly effective use of temporal references and symbolic numbers. All of these significant elements have been distributed around the first appearance of the cross about the middle of the episode. The cross would appear to be the presence in the episode that leads to the resolution of the unresolved and protracted conflict encountered in the episode's first half.

The conversion episode first relates how Margery and her husband "upon a Friday on Midsummer Even" are on their way from York to Bridlington "in right hot weather," carrying a bottle of beer in her hand and he a cake in his bosom. From these prosaic details you will have realised that we are not dealing with a pious account of a saint's virtuous life. When the husband waxes amorous and requests to commune "kindly" with Margery, this becomes even clearer. He puts the question in terms of an in-set mini-narrative in the form of a balanced periodic construction (**a b b¹ a¹**):

Margery, (**a**) if there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless I should commune kindly with you as I have done before, (**b**) say me truth of your conscience – (**b¹**) for ye say ye will not lie – (**a¹**) whether would ye suffer my head to be smit off or else suffer me to meddle with you again as I did sometime? (p. 371)

The background for his question is that Christ has asked her to keep a strict Friday and to end all sexual relations that is, break her prescribed conjugal bond. Consequently, they have not had sex for eight weeks, because she has prophesied, that the husband will be slain within three years unless he cease to "meddle" with her. Upon her reply that she would rather see him dead than turn to uncleanness, he bluntly answers "Ye are no good wife." (p. 371) Then she repeatedly asks him to consent to making a vow of chastity in front of a bishop, but to no avail. She is still bound by her conjugal bond.

When they therefore resume their journey towards Bridlington, Margery begins to fear for her chastity, particularly when her husband wishes to rest by a cross along the road and pulls her down to him. He now proposes a bargain: "Margery grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire." But first he wants her to share bed with him as before, to have her pay his debts before she goes on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and to eat and drink with him on Fridays. Somewhat surprisingly she only explicitly refuses the last request which to us may seem the least to grant, but her refusal on this point is grounded in the pledge she has made to Christ. Be this as it may, her answer does not content an impatient husband who obviously wants it all: "Well, he said, then shall I meddle with you again." (p. 372)

This deadlock situation between demands and counter-demands, which seemingly will end in carnal action, marks a transition to a higher level in the account: we are now about to pass from an earthy conversation between married folks to what seems to amount to a *sacra conversazione* between Margery and Christ.

This turn of events occurs, when – before the execution of John's threat to demand his due – Margery is allowed to say her "last" prayers. She walks into a field and next to a cross at which she addresses Christ in a long passionate appeal, which ends as follows: "Now, blessed Jesu, make thy will known to

me unworthy that I may follow thereafter and fulfil it with all my might." (p. 372) At the very point at which we expect a short reference to "meddling" or "uncleanness," Christ – presumably in the form of the wooden figure on the cross at which she prays – heeds her prayer and addresses her "with great sweetness," asking her to resume negotiations with her husband.

And he shall have that he desireth. For, my dearworthy daughter, this was the cause that I bade thee fast for thou shouldest the sooner obtain and get thy desire, and now it is granted thee. I will no longer that thou fast, therefore I bid thee in the name of Jesu eat and drink as thy husband doth. (p. 372)

Upon this act of divine intervention Margery accepts the conditions put by her husband, cleverly putting her acceptance in the form of an offer in which he is seen to make a concession before she makes hers: "Sir, if it like you, ye shall grant me my desire and ye shall have your desire." Her husband's answer is equally formal: "As free may your body be to God as it hath been to me." No reference is of course made to the probably final meddling of Margery and her husband which was an important part of his demands. The text instead tells us that they kneeled under a cross, saying "three Pater Noster in the worship of the Trinity," before they ate and drank together in great gladness of spirit. The episode concludes with a final reference to the day and the date: "This was on a Friday on Midsummer Even," thus rounding off the episode in the way it opened.

The see-saw movement of this brief linear account of the episode, the structure of which in many ways corresponds to that of the dramatic sub-genre of tragicomedy, should be evident; it consists of a series of demands and counter demands, moving up to a stale mate situation, or (for Margery) a situation of imminent threat, until a solution is reached by

direct divine intervention. In addition to this five-part, linear structure, typical of many fairy tales, the episode also displays a spatial structure that marks it off as a finished textual artifact.

Figure 1. The topomorphical structure of the conversion episode

Time references	References to place	action
Friday / on Midsummer Even	on the road	1. John requests Margery on to agree to sex; she refuses 2. Margery asks John to let make a vow of chastity; he refuses
Friday	at a cross and a cross road	3. John puts forward three demands, demanding sex
Friday	at a cross in a field	4. Margery goes to pray at a cross; Christ speaks to her and proposes a solution
Friday / on Midsummer Even	at a cross in a field	5. John and Margery reach a settlement and celebrate in great gladness of spirit

We first note that the episode opens (part one; see **Figure 1**) with references to food and drink (ale and bread) and that it concludes when the food and drink are consumed in a meal of thanksgiving that is a secular and low-life analogue to the communion. In part two Margery asks her husband to make a vow of chastity and in part four Christ proposes how Margery should go about it to achieve her husband's consent. The central third part of the episode, is set in a symbolically charged place, at a cross along the road. It is here John puts forward his three demands, two of which are to be granted in the final fifth part. The peripety of the episode comes about when the couple

are in the presence of the cross or the crucifix, suggesting the centrality of Christ's suffering in Margery's life.

In addition to this balanced structure of five parts, we note the use of holy numbers to a similar effect: Margery has been chaste for eight weeks, there have been three years of prognostication, three conditions are put forward and finally Margery and her husband say three Pater Noster in honour of the Trinity. Of course, these do not represent a particularly sophisticated use of scriptural or holy numbers, but they do help to structure the narrative and doubtlessly contribute to reinforcing the narrative's spiritual dimension. One could extend this deployment of holy numbers and analogous events even further to see a general typological dimension in the simple events of Margery and her husband's life. One cannot avoid noting that John hypothesizes about being beheaded in the initial part of the episode, a piece of information that makes sense both in relation to his namesake St. John the Baptist who was decapitated, and to Midsummer Even, the evening preceding the saint's feast. Equally interesting is the concept of debt as found at various points: John wants Margery to settle his debts before she goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and she wants him to guarantee that he shall "ask no debt of matrimony after this day while ye live" (p. 373). Inevitably, one must relate this prosaic talk about the fact that Christ who brings about this reciprocal settlement concerning worldly prosaic debts, is the redeemer of mankind, who absolves his human *debitores*. In this way Margery Kempe adds a scriptural and typological dimension to this crucial event in her life.

If in retrospect we consider the structure of the episode within the life of Margery Kempe in relation to the episode of the cross that spoke to St. Francis in St. Bonaventura's *Legenda maior* (post 1266), we also note a striking similarity. The cross episode in the *Legend* relates how the young Francis has "gone out to meditate in the fields" [ad meditandum in agro]. Here he entered the ruined Church of San Damiano"

where he lay down "prostrate before a crucifix," while absorbed in prayer:

Then he was filled as he prayed with no small consolation of spirit; and as with tear-filled eyes he gazed upon the Lord's Cross he heard with his bodily ears a voice proceeding from that very Cross which said to him three times: 'Francis, go and repair my house, which, as you see, is falling totally into ruin!' [...]"Francisce, vade et repara domum meam. Quae, ut cernis, tota destruitur!"

Legenda maior, II.i: 265

The episode is the crucial turning-point in the life of St. Francis and the next episode in the *Legenda maior*, "The Renunciation of Worldly Goods," we find him between his wrathful father and the Bishop of Assisi, who protects him. The renunciation marks the transition to a chaste and humble life in service of Christ. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, too, we note a similar pattern: Margery kneels "down beside a cross in a field," praying to "Lord God" "with great abundance of tears" (372). When Lord Jesu Christ responds with great sweetness, he resolves her dilemma by lifting her pledge to fast on Fridays, making the private agreement with John Kempe possible. Like in the episode in the life of St. Francis, then, the words of Christ enable Margery to renounce the world, that is, her conjugal duties to her husband.¹ Of course, there may not be a direct link between *The Book* and accounts of St. Francis's life on this point, but we know that a versified Latin life of the saint was written in England as early as 1232 by a poet at the court of Henry III.² Also, we know that Margery was particularly interested in St. Francis, because when she went on her

¹ See Elizabeth M. Makowski, "The Conjugal Debt and Medieval Canon Law," *Journal of Medieval History* 3 (1977): 99-111.

² Alastair Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, p. 231. The poet's name was Henricus Abrincensis, *Legenda Sancti Francisci Versificata*, reprinted in *Analecta Franciscana*, vol X.

pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she did not go directly to Rome, but visited first the shrine of the saint at Sta Maria degli Angeli at Porziuncula.

In this manner we may discern in the conversion episode not only the compositional practices and formulas typical of scriptural rhetoric and sacred art, but we also realise that Margery Kempe's unusual text links up with an Italian Franciscan tradition in which a more direct personal rapport is seen to develop between the Godhead and devout Christians, a relationship most frequently represented by means of speaking crucifixes whether they be artifacts like the San Damiano crucifix, or poetic like the "Sanctae Crucis quaerela" in the *Poetria nova*. As such these episodes may be interpreted as *sacre rappresentazioni* in which an actual speech act is taking place.

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Appendix 1

Text taken from: *Bibliorum Sacrorum iuxta vulgatam clementinam*, cur. Aloisius Gramatica. Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1929. I am grateful to Mr. Lasse Hodne, who noted the balanced design in the English version of the sermon and brought it to my attention.

Evangelium secundum Lucam 6, 20-26

- 20 Et ipse, elevatis oculis in discipulos suos dicebat: **A**
Beati pauperes, quia vestrum est regnum Dei.
- 21 *Beati qui nunc esuritis, quia saturabimini. **B***
*Beati qui nunc fletis, quia ridebitis. **C***
- Beati critis, cum vos oderint homines **D***
- et cum separaverint vos exprobraverint
et eiecerint nomen vestrum tanquam malum propter
Filium hominis:*
- 23 *gaudete in illa die et exultate;
ecce enim merces vestra multa est in caelo; **A**
secundum haec enim faciebant prophetis patres
eorum; **E***
- 24 *veruntamen vae vobis divitibus, quia habetis
consolationem vestram!*
- 25 *Vae vobis qui saturati estis, quia esuretis! **B***
*Vae vobis qui ridetis nunc, quia lugebitis et fletibis! **C***
- 26 *Vae, cum benedixerint vobis homines! **D***
*Secundum haec enim faciebant pseudoprophetae
patres eorum. **E***

A – A marks the figure *epanados*; linkage between beginning and middle.

E – E marks the figure *epanados*; linking middle to end.

B – C – D: B – C – D mark sequential repetition with balance or antithesis.

Antithetical balance between eight instances of anaphoric repetition: four times

"Beati" versus four times "Vae."

Central emphasis here occurs when the words "Filius hominis" are situated in final position in line seven, while being part of a subsidiary triadic structure: homines – Filius hominis – homines.

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Appendix 2:

Margery Kempe's text as cited from eds. Meech and Allen:

Capitulum 11 It befel up-on a Fryday on Mydsomyr Ewyn in rygth hot wedyr, as pis creatur was komynng fro-zorke-ward beryng a botel wyth here in hir hand & hir husband a 12 cake in hys bosom, he askyd hys wyfe pis gwestyon, "Margery, yf her come a man wyth a swerd & wold smyte of myn hed les pan I schulde comown kendly 15 wyth zow as I haue do be-for, seyth me trewth of zour consciens—for ze sey ze wyl not lye—wheþyr wold ze suffyr myn hed to be smet of er allys suffyr me to medele wyth zow a-zen as I dede sum-tyme?" "Alas, ser," sche seyde, "why meue ze pis mater & haue we ben chast 20 pis viij wekys?" "For I wyl wete þe trewth of zour hert." And pan sche seyde wyth gret sorwe, "For-gode I had leuar se zow be slayn pan we schuld turne a-zen to owyr vncleennesse." And he seyde a-zen, "Ze arn no good wyfe." & pan sche askyd hir husband what was 25 þe cause þat he had not medelyd wyth hir viij wekys be-for, sythen sche lay wyth hym euery nygth in hys bedde. And he seyde he was so made a-ferde whan he wold a towchyd hir þat he durst no mor don. "Now, good ser, amend zow & aske God mercy, for I teld zow 30 ner iij zer sythen þat ze schuld be slayn sodenly, & now is pis þe thryd zer, & yet I hope I schal han my desyr. Good sere, I pray zow grawnt me þat I schal askyn, & I schal pray for zow þat ze schul be sauyd thorw þe mercy of owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst, and ze schul haue mor mede in 35 Heuyn pan zyf ze weryd an hayr or an haburgon. I pray zow, suffer me to make a vow² of chastyte in what

¹ A hand in red in lower margin with middle finger pointing at I am.

² vow repeated in red in inner margin.

fast, þerfor I byd þe in þe name of Ihesu ete & drynk as thyn husband doth." Pan pis creatur thankyd owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst of hys grace & hys goodness, sythen ros (119) up & went to hir husband, seyng¹ | vn-to hym, "Sere, yf 5 it lyke zow, ze schal grawnt me þat ze desyr, & ze schal haue zour desyr. Grawntyth me þat ze schal not komyn in my bed, & I grawnt zow to qwyte zour dettys er I go to Ierusalem. & makyth my body fre to God so þat ze neuyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett 10 of matrimony aftyr pis day whyl ze leuyn, & I schal etyn & drynkyn on þe Fryday at zour byddyng." Than seyde hir husband a-zen [to]² hir, "As³ fre mot zour body ben to God as it hath ben to me." Thys creatur thankyd God gretly, enioyng þat sche had hir desyr, þreyng hir 15 husband þat þei schulde sey iij Pater Noster in þe worshep of þe Trinite for þe gret grace þat he had grawntyd hem. & so they ded, knelyng vnder a cros, & sythen þei etyn & dronkyn to-gedyr in gret gladnes of spyryt. Pis was on a Fryday on Mydsomyr Ewyn. Pan went þei forth to- 20 Brydlyngton-ward and also to many oper contres & spokyn wyth Goddys seruawntys, bopen ankrys & reclusys & many oper of owyr Lordys louerys, wyth many worthy clerky, doctors of dyuynyte, & bachelers also in many dyuers placys. & pis creatur to dyuers⁴ of 25 hem schewyd hir felynghs & hyr contemplacions, as sche was comawndyd for to don, to wetyñ yf any dysseyt were in hir felynghs.

bysshoppys hand þat God wela." "Nay," he seyde, "þat wyl I not grawnt zow, for now may I vsyn zow wyth-owtyn deedly synne & pan mygth I not so." Pan sche seyde a-zen, "zyf it be þe wyl of þe Holy Gost | to (119) 5 fullyllyn þat I haue seyde, I pray God ze mote consent þerto; and, yf it be not þe wyl of þe Holy Gost, I pray God ze neuyr consent þerto." Pan went þei forth to- Brydlyngton-ward in rygth hoot wedyr, þe forn-seyd creatur hauyng gret sorwe & gret dred for hyr chastite. And, as þei cam be a cros, hyr husband sett hym down 10 vnder þe cros, clepyng hys wyfe vn-to hym & seyng pis wordys on-to hir, "Margery, grawnt me my desyr, & I schal grawnt zow zour desyr. My fyrst desyr is þat we xal lyn styll to-gedyr in o bed as we han do be-for; þe secunde þat ze schal pay my dettys er ze go to Iherusalem; & þe thrydde þat ze schal etyn & drynkyn wyth me on þe Fryday as ze wer wont to don." "Nay ser," sche seyde, "to breke þe Fryday I wyl neuyr grawnt zow whyl I leua." "Wel," he seyde, "pan schal I medyl 30 wyl zow a-geyn." Sche prayd hym þat he wold zeue hir 20 leue to make hyr praerys, & he grawntyde it goodlych. Pan sche knelyd down be-syden a cros in þe feld and prayd in pis maner wyth gret habundawns of teerys, "Lord God, þu knowyst al thyng; þow knowyst what sorwe I haue had to be chast in my body to þe al pis iij 25 zer, & now mygth I han my wylle & I dar not for lofe of þe. For, zyf I wold brekyn þat maner of fastyng which þow comawndyst me to kepyñ on þe Fryday wyth-owtyn mete or drynk, I wuld now han my desyr. But, blyssyd Lord, þow knowyst I wyl not contraryen þi wyl, and 30 mekyl now is my sorwe les pan I fynde comfort in þe. Now, blyssyd Ihesu, make þi wyl knowyn to me vn-worthy þat I may folwyn þerafter & fullyllyn it wyth al my myghtys." And pan owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst wyth gret swetnesse spak to pis creatur, comawndyng hir to 35 þe a-zen to hir husband & prayñ hym to grawntyñ hir þat sche desyred. "þe xal han þat he desyresth. For, my derworthy dowtyr, þis was þe cause þat I bad þe fastyn for þu schuldyt þe sonar opteyn & getyn þi desyr, & now it is grawntyde þe. I wyl no lengar þow 40

Appendix 3:

St. Francis Cycle, Scene IV: The Miracle of the Crucifix, reproduced from Alastair Smart, Plate 46.

