Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich

Mysticism in the Middle Ages consistently demonstrated that loving God and communicating with him was a deeply personal and life-altering experience. Seeing the Creator and conversing with him brought joy and profound philosophical understanding to many laypeople throughout Europe and permanently changed the Catholic Church's perception of God. Few historical figures exemplify this impact more than Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich.

Context

Both women lived from the late fourteenth century to the early fifteenth century in England - a tumultuous and unstable period in the country's history. The Catholic Church was in an extended crisis, triggered by the Great Papal Schism from 1378-1417 when three different cardinals had each claimed the papacy was rightfully theirs'.[1] Within Britain from the mid-to-late 1300s, the philosopher John Wyclif had insisted that the Catholic Church was flawed and corrupt, and therefore that priests could not administer sacraments as they themselves needed absolution. This idea led him to criticise the exclusive privilege of teaching scripture that clergy possessed, and the people who agreed with him and who then followed his teachings became known as the Lollards.[2] One of their primary aims was for the Bible to be translated from Latin to local languages a concept that scholars have connected Kempe and Julian with as both their works – with excerpts of scripture - were written in Middle English.[3] Tensions between the Lollards and the Church peaked when Archbishop Thomas Arundel helped Parliament to pass his *Constitutions* in 1401, which restricted non-institutional preaching and biblical essays.[4] The next king, Henry V, passed further regulations against Lollardy.[5] All these limitations were continuously implemented on Lollards and Catholics alike throughout Kempe and Julian's spiritual careers.

The socio-economic impact of the Black Death was also still being felt across Europe.[6] Those remaining, while committed to a life of purity and spirituality, were also more likely

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[1] Robert N. Swanson, 'Obedience and Disobedients in the Great Schism', *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae,* vol. 22(1984), p. 377.
[2] Paul J. Patterson, 'The Book and Religious Practice in Late Medieval England', *Religion and Literature,* vol. 37, no. 2 (Summer 2005), pp. 1-2.
[3] Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum,* vol. 70, no. 4, (Oct 1995), p. 837.
[4] Patterson, 'The Book and Religious Practice' p. 3.
[5] Raymond A. Powell, 'Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety', *The Catholic Historical Review,* vol. 89, no. 1, (Jan 2003), p. 21.
[6] Liz Herbert MacAvoy, 'Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine', *Mystics Quarterly,* vol. 28, no. 2 (June 2002), p. 69.

to be favourably viewed by donors if they led lives of powerful holiness.[7] In Norwich, at the time Julian made her vows to the Church, a growing wool trade was increasing the general income of the city, leading to a cathedral being built and a post-plague resurgence in incumbent religious orders there.[8] These included Benedictines living in the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, and preachers around the city from the Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite and Augustinian organisations.[9] The rapid growth of these orders also contributed to a national growth in the belief that physical strain and suffering drew a believer closer to God.[10] There was consequently a rise of commentaries and analyses made by mendicant orders discussing scriptural interpretations and their implications upon faithful livelihoods, particularly from their female members.

The range of Catholic scholars drawn from these different orders in medieval England and the circulation of their works are widely reflected in Kempe and Julian's writings. This was because of the growth in what Constable dubbed "domestic monasticism", or self-inflicted spiritual isolation to concentrate on one's relationship with God.[11] Because women had to pay a fee to enter convents, this lifestyle appeared cheaper.[12] The deep analysis of scriptural instruction by different orders also impacted their mystical experiences. Kempe's belief that meditating on the life and works of Christ is the primary method by which one can comprehend the extent of His life could have been inspired by the *Meditationes vitae Christi* by the Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus, or by *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Christ* by the Benedictine Prior Nicholas Love.[13] Kempe herself was adopted as a daughter by a Carmelite Friar named Master Aleyn, and received rare support for her visions from a Dominican, Thomas Constance, and an Augustinian from her birth town of Lynn.[14] Julian of Norwich's mystical visions also merged the three spiritual, intellectual and corporeal categories of revelations established by Augustine himself.[15]

Mysticism had already been extensively written about by many male philosophers and intellectuals, most prominently in Richard Rolle's *The Form of Living* and Walter Hilton's

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[7] Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, *Through Julian's Windows; Growing into wholeness with Julian of Norwich,* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008), p. 8.
[8] Ibid., pp. 17-18 and p. 20.
[9] Ibid., p. 20.
[10] Giles Constable, 'From church history to religious culture: the study of medieval religious life and spirituality', in *European Religious Cultures: Essays offered to Christopher Brooke on the occasion of his eightieth birthday,* (2020), p. 9.
[11] Constable, 'From church history to religious culture', p. 11.
[12] Obbard, *Through Julian's Windows*, p. 7.
[13] Powell, 'Margery Kempe', p. 4.
[14] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 68, lines 3922 and 3946; Christopher Ronan, *Domestic Mysticism in Margery Kempe and Dame Julian of Norwich; The Transformation of Christian Spirituality,* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), p. 163.
[15] Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350-1550,* (Herder & Herder; Crossroads Publishing, 2012), p. 433.

Scale of Perfection.[16] But as for the mystical visions women would experience, these would often garner only a small audience, and their literary description and preservation was even less common.[17] Their widespread publishing is another rare practice for the time. Before 1350, anchoresses such as Julian wrote ecclesiastical commentaries for close friends, but not for congregational use.[18] The monastic manual *Ancrene Wisse* stated that nuns could not write letters without their superior's permission, and this was a rule so strict that its enforcement was also reflected in literature.[19] In Chaucer's tale, the Second Nun was encouraged never to reveal her true identity for her hagiography on St Cecilia.[20] But Kempe and Julian found means to disseminate their interpretations of God's will and nature heard.

Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe was born Margery Brunham in 1373, the daughter of the mayor of Lynn and Justice of the Peace.[21] When she was twenty years old, she married John Kempe and during their marriage she gave birth to fourteen children – the last of which she bore in 1413, around the time she met Julian of Norwich.[22] Despite having so many children, Kempe never enjoyed married life, and persuaded her husband to enter a chaste relationship when she helped absolve him of his fiscal debt.[23] It was through this agreement that Kempe entered her own life of religious seclusion, even though she was not an enrolled anchoress with legitimate vows of celibacy.

Kempe wrote down her life's experiences, as well as her visions and their significance, in her autobiography *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The composition of her work was gradual: Book 1, which consists of 89 chapters, was finished around 1436-38, and Book 2, which has only 10 chapters, was completed while Kempe was in Germany.[24] As Kempe was illiterate, she had to find a scribe to put her life to paper. This was most likely Robert Springolde, her confessor from the parish of St Margaret's.[25] In Chapter 62 of her *Book*, the reader first encounters Springholde's personal narrative when he details other mystics whose divine visions moved him to tears: "He red also of Richard Hampol,

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[16] Nicholas Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum,* vol. 68, no. 3, (Jul 1993), p. 647.
[17] Ibid., p. 651.
[18] Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change', p. 837.
[19] Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', p. 651.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Cindy Vitto, 'Margery Kempe: Medieval Mother and Mystic', *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1991), p. 50.
[22] Ibid., pp. 50-51; Laura L. Howes, 'On the Birth of Margery Kempe's Last Child', *Modern Philology,* vol. 90, no. 2, (Nov 1992), p. 220.
[23] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 472.
[24] Ibid., p. 473.
[25] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 8, line 462.

hermyte, in *Incendio Amoris* leche mater that mevyd hym to gevyn credens to the sayd creatur. Also, Elizabeth of Hungry cryed with lowde voys, as is wretyn in hir tretys."[26]

The work itself is in non-chronological order save for the first chapter, in which Kempe is rescued from a deathly illness (brought on by the birth of her first child) by: "owyr merciful Lord Crist Jhesu [...] clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde".[27] From this moment on, her dedication to Christ was solidified and her relationship with him was strengthened. Further on in her *Book* are the details of her multiple pilgrimages to holy sites around Europe. First, she journeyed to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 1413, where she gazed upon Mount Calvary and "went forth to the place ther Seeynt Jon Baptyst was born".[28] She also saw the "Flod of Jurdon" and "Mownt Qwarentyne", and these glimpses into Christ's suffering drove her to "wepyng, sobbyng and crying".[29] Her next pilgrimage was to Rome, where she saw St Bridget of Sweden's (another female mystic) tomb at San Lorenzo in Panisperna, and then embarked upon an expedition to Santiago de Compostela in Spain in 1417.[30] For unclear reasons, her *Book* gives very little information on her Spanish pilgrimage. Her last journey was to Germany in 1433-34, where she travelled with her widowed daughter-in-law.[31] She also undertook pilgrimages in her English homeland, most notably to the Bridgettine Abbey in Syon.[32]

On these journeys, her zealous devotion to God and her frequent but alarming emotional outbursts startled and alienated many of her fellow pilgrims. [33] The violence of her self-expression risked being viewed as a sign of demonic possession.[34] But this isolation rarely disconcerted Kempe and instead deepened her empathy for Christ's own loneliness.[35]

Julian of Norwich

Julian was not a married woman who committed to chastity in later life like Kempe, but a Benedictine anchoress. Scholars agree that she lived around 1342-1430, but the precise dates and circumstances of her birth and death are unknown.[36] The lack of biographical

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[26] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 62, lines 3642-44.
[27] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 1, lines 167-171.
[28] Vitto, 'Margery Kempe: Medieval Mother and Mystic', p. 52; Powell, 'Margery Kempe', p 14. Quote from *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 30, line 1732.
[29] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 30, line 1726.
[30] Powell, 'Margery Kempe', p. 22; McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 473.
[31] Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Medieval English Women in Rural and Urban Domestic Space', in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* vol. 52 (1998), p. 22.
[32] Powell, 'Margery Kempe', p. 14.
[33] Nicole Klan, 'Affective Piety and Pentecostal Evangelism:" Experiential Theology and "The Book of Margery Kempe"', *Religion and Literature,* vol. 42, no. ½, '"Something Fearful"': Medievalist Scholars on the Religious Turn', (Spring-Summer 2010), p. 167.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Vitto, 'Margery Kempe: Medieval Mother and Mystic', pp. 52-53.
[36] Speech by Pope Benedict XVI, in Paul IV Hall, Weds 1st Dec 2010, on Julian of Norwich. Accessed 20/05/2025 and available at:
https://web.archive.org/web/20210301164258/http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-

evidence for Julian is only part of the historiographical issues there are with studying her: her mysticism was proclaimed to exist without concrete evidence, and the vowess encouraged her readers to look instead at the story she told and its narrative.[37]

Julian's close interactions with God began, similarly to Kempe, with a near death experience. She fell gravely ill in May 1373, and as she lay dying, she saw Christ bleeding on the cross in front of her.[38] In this vision, God in his Son's form told her that to suffer for his children and her fellow Christians was "a blisse".[39] She said that this "Shewing" was "horrifying and dreadful, sweet and lovely [...] and this most fulfilled me with comfort and assuredness of soul".[40] Julian's consequent divine visions are detailed and contained in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

As Kempe's *Book* is made up of two non-chronological parts with the first substantially longer than the second, so is Julian's. The parts are called manuscripts, with the first dated pre-1393 and the second pre-1388.[41] Having written her work herself, it is likely that Julian was taught to read and write when she became an anchoress, in contrast with Kempe's illiteracy.[42] Julian's work was distinct because it was dedicated to every Christian, as she believed that every faithful priest or layperson deserved to improve their relationship with God.[43] This approach of Julian's also differs from Kempe's exceptionalism, as the latter viewed herself as the daughter, sister and wife of Christ. Julian also emphasised the importance of loving oneself as well as loving God and taught that only by committing a sin could humans learn from their mistakes.[44]

Both women's lives intersected in 1413. Kempe sought the anchoress' advice about the authenticity of her visions and trying to decipher what God's will was for her, and she wrote that "the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good cownsel", and she told Kempe to be "obedyent to the wyl of owyr Lord God".[45] In contrast with Kempe's antisocial

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xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101201.html ; Denise N. Baker, 'Julian of Norwich and Anchoritic Literature', *Mystics Quarterly,* vol. 19, no. 4, (Dec 1993), p. 148.

[37] Amy Appleford, 'The "Comene Course of Prayers": Julian of Norwich and Late Medieval Death Culture', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* vol. 107, no. 2, (Apr 2008), p. 191.

[38] Speech by Pope Benedict XVI, in Paul IV Hall, Weds 1st Dec 2010, on Julian of Norwich. Accessed 20/05/2025 and available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210301164258/http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101201.html ; Appleford, 'The "Comene Course of Prayers"', p. 202.

[39] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 436.

[40] *Revelations of Divine Love. Recorded by Julian, Anchoress at Norwich. Anno Domini 1373. In Iumine tuo ridebirous lumen. A version from the MS in the British Museum,* ed. Grace Warrack, (Methuen &Company, 34 Essex Street Strand, London, 1901), p. 16.; Appleford, 'The "Comene Course of Prayers"', p. 202.

[41] Nicholas Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum,* vol. 68, no. 3, (Jul 1993), p. 638.

[42] Obbard, *Through Julian's Windows*, p. 21.

[43] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, pp. 427-28.

[44] Ibid., p. 465.

[45] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 18, lines 960 and 962-63.

existence, Julian showed her fellow mystic great compassion, and showed her a path towards spiritual freedom.[46]

Themes of Kempe's and Julian's works

There are many elements of the two women's writings that have impacted English Catholic theology. For instance, both women's works show inspiration from Pauline scripture; Julian's through its exploration of sinning and salvation, and Kempe's through her statement that Saint Paul was sent by Christ "to strengthyn thee and comfortyn thee that thu schuldist boldly spekyn in my name fro that day forward".[47] Both also believed in a God that was loving and forgiving, instead of angry and vengeful. In her text *Ordo ad visitandum infirmum*, Julian recalls how close she was to death when Christ visited her, and that he wanted to receive her soul not necessarily because she was worthy of heaven, but because he loved her.[48] In that first revelation, she claimed that one of the many truths about himself that Christ demonstrated to her was that "He made all things for love, by the same love keepeth them, and shall keep them, without end."[49] According to Kempe, the breadth of God's love and his capacity for forgiveness applied not only to Christians, but to Muslims and Jews.[50] She did not believe that a parental and caring God would want to condemn anybody to an eternity in hell after death.[51]

The two women put such emphasis on the extent of God's love, that they referred to him many times as more of a motherlike figure than a patriarchal one. Throughout the Middle Ages, the maternal image of God was attributed to a greater focus in biblical commentaries on Christ's human nature, and therefore his sentimental capacity.[52] The *Ancrene Wisse* – from which Julian took guidance and inspiration - created the metaphor of a hermit's four-walled cell as the womb of Christ.[53] The anchoress wrote in Chapter 60 of her *Revelations* about Christ's maternal capacity to feed his children: "The Mother may lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother, Jesus, He may homely lead us into His blessed breath, by His sweet open side".[54] She believed that as our birth mothers gave us earthly life, so Christ gave us eternal life; as our birth mothers fed us with milk, so Christ nourishes us with his body and blood; as our mothers are the foundation of our education, so Christ is our teacher.[55]

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[46] Obbard, *Through Julian's Windows*, p. 64.
[47] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 429; *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 65, lines 3796-97.
[48] Appleford, 'The "Comene Course of Prayers"', p. 194.
[49] *Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 18.
[50] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Chapter 30, Book 1, lines 1720-22.
[51] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 484.
[52] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages,* (University of California Press; Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 1982), p. 129.
[53] Ronan, *Domestic Mysticism*, p. 114.
[54] *Revelations of Divine Love*, p. 150
[55] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 459 and p. 461.

Aside from acting as a maternal figure, both Kempe and Julian experienced a variety of familial relationships with Christ. One dimension of these experiences was for the women to have intimate conversations with and relive the lives of important female biblical figures. Christ frequently calls Kempe his "dowtyr" in their interactions, such as when he discourages her from dying for her faith.[56] Kempe lived out her visions in several other chapters of the Gospel: she serves as a maidservant to St Anne and helps to raise the Virgin Mary, then she told the Virgin of her destiny to bear Christ to whom Kempe would be a nursemaid.[57] She also helped with the birth of John the Baptist in chapter 6, and in the following chapter met the three wise men and went to Egypt with the Holy Family.[58] Later on in the first book, she witnessed Christ's journey with the Cross and then his resurrection.[59] Kempe's nurturing depiction of the Holy Family is also significant to Julian, as it is argued that the Triune God and Mary both kept her company in her solitary life.[60]

But in a stranger fashion, Kempe envisioned Christ as her husband and lover. She often used erotic language to describe their relationship, which again was not uncommon among medieval female mystics (such as Catherine of Siena). Their bonds with God were consistently limited by ecclesiastical authorities through a prohibition on their becoming priests or any ordained member of Catholic Church hierarchy beyond nuns and anchoresses, so they may have transitioned their relationships with Christ into physical territory as a direct reaction.[61] The female sexual experience was also heavily restricted in medieval times as well as their religious experience, which could have led to frustration in their verbal and written expression.[62] Kempe described in her Book that she married God on her pilgrimage to Rome in the Church of Twelve Apostles, on Nov 9, 1414 – she viewed Christ as her true husband, as opposed to her earthly husband.[63] Her passionate feelings for Christ can also be explained by her literary and spiritual inspiration from the mystics Hilton and Rolle, and their works "*Stimulus Amoris*" and "*Incendium Amoris*".[64] The latter work in particular illuminated Rolle's heart burning fervently with the love of God – a motif frequently present in Kempe's work - and explored the issue of carnal love between two humans impeding their love of God, which could have influenced Kempe to enter her chaste marriage.[65]

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[56] Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer,* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 170.
[57] Powell, 'Margery Kempe', p. 9.
[58] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 6, lines 419-20 and Chapter 7, lines 436 and 442.
[59] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapters 78-80.
[60] Ronan, *Domestic Mysticism*, p. 4.
[61] Julie B. Miller, 'Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* vol. 15, no. 2, (Fall 1999), p. 27.
[62] Ibid., p. 44.
[63] Ronan, *Domestic Mysticism*, p. 5; McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism,* p. 483.
[64] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 17, line 899.
[65] Powell, 'Margery Kempe', pp. 7-8 and p. 11.

This alternative method acquired by Kempe and Julian to deepen their bond with God might also shed a light on their attitudes toward authority in general. Perhaps due to her insecurity that she was not a virgin when she became a mystic, Kempe clashed with the Bishop Repingdon in 1413 over her wearing virginal white clothes, telling him that this exemption bore similar repercussions to God's favour shown towards the Israelites and that she wanted to be a visual beacon of His preference.[66] God also told Kempe when specific members of the clergy were corrupt: in the twelfth chapter of her *Book,* Christ warned her against a monk that had "'synned in letthery, in dyspeyr, and in worldly goodys kepyng".[67] There is substantial academic discussion on whether Kempe herself had Lollard sentiments. During her lifetime, Kempe was interrogated concerning her links to Lollardy by both the Steward and Dean of Leicester, but was eventually given freedom by their Bishop.[68] However, while Kempe frequently disdained ecclesiastical authority, she was still orthodox in her religious practices. This devotion was demonstrated when she insisted on the presence of a confessor for the relief of her sins, and still faithfully practised the sacrament of the Eucharist.[69] Kempe sometimes worried if her visions were false, so she went to "worthy and worshipful clerks" on the orders of the "Holy Ghost".[70]

Kempe's *Book* demonstrated the understanding and acceptance of mystics in medieval society if clergy believed their visions to be true; although Kempe often quarrelled with Church officials, she eventually accepted their jurisdiction.[71] By contrast, Julian of Norwich never directly spoke out against members of the clergy. As Kempe wanted her favouritism by God to be well-known, Julian insisted that Christ used her as a vessel for His divine revelations (which could still be considered controversial), but she did not own any religious authority herself.[72] In her *Shewings,* Julian wrote that God was most pleased with any of His children who "take the prechyng and the techyng of holy church".[73]

The significance of Kempe and Norwich in English Catholic history lies not only in their mystical experiences but also in the events of their daily religious lives - all of which illustrated the importance of kindness and compassion. They felt God's presence through erotic interactions with Christ and by living through biblical episodes, which the Church at the time did not always look kindly upon. Both women used their faith as a stabilising influence in difficult personal and societal circumstances and were medieval examples of the spiritual effectiveness of solitary meditation and prayer.

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[66] Mary C. Erler, 'Margery Kempe's White Clothes', *Medium Ævum,* vol. 62, no. 1(1993), pp. 79-80.
[67] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapter 12, lines 597-98.
[68] *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Book 1, Chapters 46-49.
[69] Cole, *Literature and Heresy*, p. 156; Klan, 'Affective Piety and Pentecostal Evangelism', p. 166.
[70] John C. Hirsch, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe: Paramystical Practices in Late Medieval England,* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1989), p. 42.
[71] Ibid., p. 45.
[72] McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, p. 428.
[73] Hirsch, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe*, p. 71.

Kasia Macklow-Smith

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