

The Difficult Women: Margery Kempe and Sonia Orwell*

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I. Prologue: The Two Difficult Women

For English medievalists, one of *anni mirabilis* was the year 1934 when the unique manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Winchester manuscript of *Mort D'Arthur* were found in unlikely places.¹ Though the two manuscripts seem to have nothing to do with each other, Margery Kempe in the first manuscript relates to an unexpected woman of 20th century who transposed the latter manuscript. It is Sonia Orwell who is known better as the second wife of George Orwell. Eugene Vinaver, who made his name by editing the *Mort D'Arthur*, gave a job of transposition of the Winchester manuscript to then a girl of nineteen who looked “as if

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¹ “In July came the announcement by Walter Oakeshott of is discovery in the Fellows Library at Winchester College of a text of *Le Morte d'Arthur*... In August Coleridge's autography fair copy of an early recension of *Kula Khan*... In September a country house near Chesterfield yielded *The Book of Margery Kempe*” (Kelliher 259).

she had stepped straight out of Malory's romance" (Spurling 25). The point that they come across is "transcription." From the proem of the book, we find Margery obsessed with getting her scribe to write her life into letters. Sonia, starting with the transposition of the Winchester manuscript, lived a life of a female junior editor who transcribed male authors' texts into items in journals or books. In the late Middle Ages, women could guarantee, if any, their textual authority only through male scribes. That explains Margery's anxiety over her scribes. Sonia took over the role of scribes as an editor, but her position did not have *auctoritas* medieval scribes enjoyed.² She was only a passive channel through which male textual power was transferred to printed materials. Margery and Sonia took textual positions and productions different from each other, but female inferiority in power relations runs parallel for them. It is through these two women of no close relationship that this paper aims to show how stubbornly this inferior status of women (writers) subsists even across the time span of 600 years even under radical changes favorable to women such as Renaissance, industrial revolution, women's suffrage, the rise of women writers, and many others.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guar in their classical criticism about women writers in 18th century claim, a pen has far more metaphorical relationship with penis than their homophonous appearance suggests. Patriarchal imagery of the pen coupled with that of male sexual organ forecloses the proper place of writing not only for medieval women but also for modern female writers. In Middle Ages, a pen was an exclusive tool for men, and it was a symbol of authors as well. A medieval author, *auctor* in Latin, was a privileged man who inherited the authority (*auctoritas*) from the ultimate *auctor*, God. It was unusual for women to hold a pen in times when literacy was a privilege even for men. That is why we have lamented dearth of Middle English Women writers. We have a small

² For detailed information about *auctor* and *auctoritas*, refer to A. J. Minnis's *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (10-15).

number of English female writers in Middle Ages, and only two out of them are canonized writers: Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Therefore, Margery Kempe was unique in that she left us with a manuscript of her life considered as the first autobiography in England. However, she was denied a pen or stylus to write her life. It was with the hands of two male scribes that she managed to record her unique life of a Medieval English woman. However, its sole manuscript transcribed by a monk in a Carthusian monastery came to the world only to get lost in the tumult of the Reformation. Her manuscript depicts an annoying woman whose crying, unruly piety, and challenge to clerical authority made it "difficult to love Margery" (Oliver 324).

After the long period of absent women writers, we witnessed the rise of women novelists, as Jane Spencer reveals in her book under the same title as the quote, starting from Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft, and many other 18th and 19th-century female writers. Even though these women writers helped substantially shape the genre of the novel, most of them were erased from the proper history of the novel by critics like Ian Watt, whose seminal magnum opus, *The Rise of the Novel*, traces back the origin of the novel with a handful number of male writers such as Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding; and Walter Allen's *The English Novel* which removes the female novelists from his list of major authors. Dale Spender and Jane Spence on the 2nd wave of feminism in 80s tried to reverse "this neglect of eighteenth-century female novelists" (Seager 90), and to restore the lost history of women writers. Whether the exclusion of women writers was from systemic conspiracy or desultory gender bias is still in the dock. Nevertheless, the fact remains the same that women writers struggled to voice their existence in male-dominated space for writing.

It is in the early 20th century that women writers began to understand the importance of editing and publishing literary texts as well as writing them. With the advent of the modernist poetics, female editors were

indispensable channels through which the modernist masterpieces like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" came into being. These daring experimental works were judged not proper candidates for conservative major publishers, but the female editors in small or "little" magazines like the *Little Review* or *The Dial* took interest in them. For Virginia Woolf, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, (though somewhat later than others) Sylvia Plath, and many other female writers, their editorship was inseparable whole of their iconoclastic projects. Despite the enormous influence they had on shaping the burgeoning modernist movements, however, they as editors "faced exhausting struggles even to achieve passing notice" (Marek 2).

In some cases, the poetry or fiction women wrote has received far more attention than their editorial and critical work; in other cases, women's editorial contributions have been overlooked, denigrated, or even attributed to men. Any assessment of the nature of modernism that aims to provide a sufficient overview, however, must address how women's writing, criticism, and publishing affected literary history, and how the roles these women chose had distinctive effects on what they accomplished. (5)

Against this hostility of the literary scene dominated by overwhelmingly masculine poets like Ezra Pound, we run into a girl who was a beautiful, poor, and undereducated "creature" with an unquenchable longing for the dazzlingly lime-lighted literary world. Sonia Mary Brownell found herself not creative enough, and poured her passion into editorial job at magazines. For those who could not understand her, she was "the quintessential literary groupie, a grasping, pretentious, drunken name-dropper who only married Orwell for his belated fame and the royalties" (Lewis). According to David Plante's memoir, she was one of the difficult women he met and built up friendship with, as his book title

testifies it. Sonia Orwell and Margery Kempe were both “difficult women” for men. Binding them together just for their being difficult for men cannot be simply justified from a traditional historical approach. Historical and material conditions of sheer differences cannot help getting in the way of comparing the two women. I will look for a way to bind these women apparently incompatible with help of a burgeoning critical approach, queer temporalities which deconstruct “a naturalized progression of temporality and unveil how multiple times equally jostle and claim their share in every movement of critical exercises” (Lee 60).

II. Footnote and Queer Temporalities

Margery Kempe and Sonia Orwell cannot be farther apart from each other in terms of times, religious orientations, educational backgrounds, and sexualities.³ Except the felicitous temporal coincidence of the discoveries of the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* Margery dictated and that of *Mort D’Arthur* Sonia transcribed, they are merely research subjects in different fields of English studies. Strangely enough, it is in an unlikely space called a footnote that I witnessed their rendezvous. While conducting a research for my paper, “Finding and Re-finding of *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” I bumped into a footnote in David Wallace’s *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory, 1347-1645* in which a biography of Sonia Orwell happens to be referred to in order to introduce the birth of Eugene Vinaver’s edition of Winchester Malory. The only biography of Sonia

³ In this short paper, it is beyond manageable scope to discuss the historical or material conditions which should be unique to Margery or Sonia, respectively. The purpose of this paper is not to compare their numerous different conditions from a simple historical approach, but to write a universal narrative of women writers under the order of patriarchy from a particular coincidence of transcription on a larger temporal scale with help of queer temporalities.

Orwell, *The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell* by Hilary Spurling, told me a story of a marginalized life of a female editor difficult for her male acquaintances as well as for herself.

The footnote where the two women met each other is a marginalized place buried in the bottom of the page where items apparently necessary but getting in the way of main narrative for a given argument are stored in case of future reference. The footnote shares the same destiny as woman writers faced. Their histories have been sometimes deleted and sometimes marginalized. They seem to many literary historians like byproducts of the main narrative in male-dominated histories which should be suppressed under the mantle of narrative. They like a "mad woman" were quarantined "in the attic" out of sight. The footnote, however, does not just passively support the main narrative; odds and ends in the footnote occasionally creep out of the bottom and subvert the flow of the narrative. They, originally inserted for the qualification of the argument, happen to bring out the logical flaws which otherwise remain apparently invisible. This subversion has a tradition stemming from the medieval manuscript culture. In medieval manuscripts, the margins surrounding the inscribed text were reserved for the scholia (commentaries and annotations on texts)(Copeland 83). Commentaries did not stand as mere paraphernalia for right interpretation; they more often than not guided the interpretation and, though not that usual, overturned the established reading of the text.

The serendipity of Margery and Sonia's gathering in the subversive space of footnote in itself is interesting enough to attract me to ask questions about their relationship. However, this personal interest of mine does not validate linking the two women of totally different temporal backgrounds. Historicism advises me not to try tying them up without *Sitz im Leben*, knowledge of the setting where the texts were born. New historicism tells me the impossibility of the historicist project for complete understanding of the settings or the context from the cultural materialist

reasons. Moreover, innately violent are both of the critical approaches which presume a critic's privilege over the texts he or she analyzes as objects. If a critic approaches two subjects in different temporal positions at the same time, things get worse than generally expected. First of all, because just one valid estimation of historicity of an object is a herculean task, the historical positioning of two objects comes close to impossibility. Secondly, the position of the critic whose perspective relates to the objects is not stable. The critic's bearings always fluctuate along ideological and psychoanalytic undercurrents. Thirdly, the scientific paradigm rules in literary criticisms. As a natural science denies (tries to get rid of) the biased gaze of observer, critics dream of clear-cut interpretation of a text without the gaze still in the age of postmodernism in which stable structures of interpretation were deconstructed and replaced by endless delay of signification process. It seems too self-evident to deny the impossibility for the critic to comprehend the multiple literary texts at the same time.

It is between Scylla and Charybdis of (new) historicism that I am coming alongside the women of different temporalities. Luckily, I have found a guide who is willing to lead me to the way that I can witness their convocation. It is Carolyn Dinshaw who as a medievalist and gay theorist liberated Margery Kempe from her shackle of temporality. Dinshaw, in her recent publication about queer temporalities, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, takes Margery out of her time to the *now* in which any possible temporalities merge without presumption of temporal superiority. In a drama of her *now* she created from her own personal experience, Dinshaw arranged a meeting of three women: Dinshaw herself, Hope Emily Allen (1883 - 1960), and Margery Kempe (c. 1373 - after 1438). Allen was an independent female medievalist who first identified the manuscript Additional 61823 as *The Book of Margery Kempe*. She was appointed as a chief editor of the manuscript, but her right of editor-in-charge was stolen by an ambitious male assistant. Allen as one

of the first few woman medievalists struggled in hostile world of medieval studies dominated by male scholars. Dinshaw set the first stage of drama in the library at Bryn Mawr College, her alma mater where she as a graduate student met Allen in the form of archive. Allen, according to Dinshaw, was so immersed in the life of Margery that she “felt a complex contemporaneity with Margery” (119). She did not approach Margery just with critical distance, but embraced her with “more and more connections, with perhaps less and less distance, so that finally the closed form of the professional, scholarly book was unable to accommodate them” (122). The immersion of the female lives was still breathing in the form of archive Dinshaw rummaged in the library of Bryn Mawr College.

The multiplicity of times in the archive that day was composed of temporalities that went back to Margery through Hope Allen and up to me (both in my 1970s incarnation and my early-twenty-first-century one), meeting in my *now* that shared with Margery’s and Hope Allen’s a refusal of the evanescence of chronological time in favor of an expanded present. (124).

Across more than half millennium these three women of different sexual and religious orientations, and, most of all, different temporalities gather in the *now* Dinshaw prepared for their séance. Dinshaw claims that “desire can reveal a multi-temporal world in the *now* (a queer world, that is),” ... “*asynchrony*: different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of *now*” (5). Her sheer desire of calling them up from their respective temporality reveals not only how densely multiple temporalities push around in the *now* but also how a critical practice from queer temporalities can appropriate the *now* as a megaphone which can amplify the silenced voices of the gathered women. As the theory of queer temporalities elaborates, queers do resist the linear temporal progress from past, present to future. They do not give birth (that is, future-oriented

perspective available no more), and in turn their temporality does not follow the heterosexual normativity required by the bio-politics of our time. "Queer temporalities. . .are points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically" (Freeman xxii). Therefore, the theory of queer temporalities ignores the alleged temporal distance of objectivity between a given text and a critic as a (new) historicist insists because the artificial divisions of time for them are already tangled in each moment of unceasing temporal flow with past, present, and future oozing into one another. This asynchrony helps gather temporally estranged queers or women against the binding temporal logic of the bio-politics.

It is from this perspective of queer temporalities that I am trying to summon the two women from different time slots in history to my *now* of this critical writing. As Dinshaw invited the marginalized women to hear (not to analyze) their muted voice, so I will call up Margery and Sonia to give my ears to their story of desperate quests for authorial voice and failures.⁴ However, I expect from readers a question of whether a male

⁴ We can easily sniff out temporal queerness in Margery's narrative in which the linear sequence of hagiographic temporality is ceaselessly hampered by her desire to tell her story of an extraordinary life sometimes bluntly secular and sometimes overtly sacred with an excuse of her poor remembrance of things gone long past. "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan thyngys befellyn" (Kempe 5). It is in her dramas of piety, as her affective piety let her indulge in them, that she can reenact her part of biblical dramas in her *now* while ignoring temporal differences. As for Sonia, her two official marriages are telling in terms of her attitude toward temporalities. She married Orwell in terminal illness waiting for his death. Nine years after his death, she married Julian Pitt-Rivers who was a gay anthropologist (Spurling 117-130). It appears significant that she did not follow the temporality of heterosexual normativity along which people expect their future in terms of their progenies (or reminisce about their past in terms of their progenitors). As gays who do not procreate are supposed not to

critic like me is qualified to practice this feminist and queer approach. To answer this preliminary question, I appeal to “queer universal” referring to the multiple ways of sexual identity which fails “to line up consistently. . . [and] also describes a state experienced by everyone” (Marcus 196). Among Margery, Allen, and Dinshaw, Dinshaw only is a queer proper. Margery after delivery of 14 children led a celibate life, and Allen was a single unmarried woman through all her life. Despite their difference in sexual orientations, they come in on this queer universal. Likewise, Margery, Sonia, and I hardly share anything in terms of race, gender, and temporality, but we as marginalized beings “fail to line up consistently” with what society and its normative decorum demand. I will arrange a temporal venue for our gathering here in my paper.

III. Margery and Two Scribes/Two Editors

Margery Kempe was born in 1373 in a wealthy bourgeois family of Lynn. After birth of the first child, she broke down in mental crisis (comparable to postpartum depression according to our medical terminology). Locked up in her pantry for nine months, she saw devils encouraging her to “forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth” (Kempe 70). With the visitation of Jesus in the form of a man, Margery regained her sanity and faith. After this divine encounter, she started her pilgrimage to shrines and religious authorities abroad as well as domestic, even to Jerusalem - extremely unusual for a married woman in the late Middle Ages. Her long peregrine life is full of dangers sometimes spiritual and more often than not

follow the linear developmental ideas of temporality, so Sonia who got married without any procreational purpose was disinterested in temporal progression. It seems that her whole sense of temporality was fixed on the present moment for someone (whether he is about to die or a gay) right before her who she could help with sheer benevolent will against the aporia of temporal existence.

mundane. Margery suffered from business failures (which she believes are God's punishment), irresistible sexual urges (again a test from God) and fear of rape, suspicion of Lollardy (which could have led her to fire and faggot), abandonment during the pilgrimages, and many others. Among them, most noteworthy is fierce hostility from men. This hostility reflects their difficulties with her.

"The Book of Margery Kempe documents the paranoia that Margery Kempe arouses in some of the men that she meets" (Davis 51). As Isabel Davis argues, one of causes of their anxiety might be the fear that she was tempting their wives from their home, that is "the patriarchal anxieties about women who refuse to live by convention" (51). Margery, they assumed, brought down the barriers surrounding the convention of the patriarchal order. For their eyes, Margery appears sometimes to stay inside the convention and sometimes to sit on the border or stand outdoors. Therefore, it is natural that they should find Margery difficult to deal with. From her husband to male neighbors to clergy, they were uncomfortable with accompanying her despite their patriarchal right of superiority. Her husband, John Kempe, is an example of how difficult Margery could be to men. Margery thought she married a man out of her social and economic class because her father was a successful merchant and three time mayor in Lynn. She went so far as to pay his debt on the condition that her marital debt should be suspended in order to guard her celibacy. An episode in Chapter 11 nails the difficulty with Margery John must have suffered. A few weeks after the deal of compensation of marital debt by remission of his monetary debt, one morning on their way to York, John asks her "if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kindly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens ... whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys..." (Kempe 23). To this question, Margery curtly said "Forsothe I had levar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne agen to owyr

unclennesse" (Kempe 23). John's reply of comic relief ("Ye arn no good wife") conveys not only realistic touch of Margery's narrative but also the frustration of a man with his patriarchal right forfeited against the common law.

Male clergy bore acerbic grudge against Margery because she transgressed the patriarchal convention from various directions like her white outfit, uncontrollable crying, direct quotes of the Bible, pseudo-sermons, and stinging rebukes for clerics. All these transgressions verge on subversion of the social order structured by normative dichotomy. Even though God commanded Margery to wear the white mantle, it was a sure sign of virgin holy women unimaginable for a married woman like Margery. Her crying was an expression of holy rapture (a mode of affective piety) which was impeccable in itself. However, sudden fits of her crying challenged the male clerics who could not understand the untranslatable language of female affect. Direct quotes of the Bible, pseudo-sermons, and stinging rebukes for clerics could not more provoke male clerics dangerous considering their fear of heresy stoked by the Arundel's Constitutions. All of them were definitive traits of the Lollards whose theology encouraged woman participation in teaching and preaching, and even the idea of female clergy. That is why Margery was often under suspicion of lollardy. However, it is Margery's strategically ambiguous position across the border between orthodoxy and heresy, clergy and lay, men and women that aggravated their difficulty in judging her. In addition to that, she took advantages of female mystics who can directly communicate with God. Her visionary experiences proved by some church authorities such as Thomas Arundel, the archbishop of the Constitutions, sometimes successfully overruled harsh complaints of clerics on the lower lung of church hierarchy.

However, when God commanded Margery to write down her life for benefits of people, she needed the help of male scribes. Though her literacy

is still in debate, it is more than safe to argue that she could read her vernacular well enough despite her claim of illiteracy.⁵ About her writing ability we are not sure. There is a reason more important than verification of her literacy why she borrowed the hands of male amanuenses. Against the persecution of the Lollards under Arundel's Constitutions, writing a sensitive witness of the difficult life must have been susceptible to serious censorship. In the tradition of medieval hagiography, a life or ideas of woman saint require the hands of male clerics to see the light of the world. Even Saint Catherine of Siena was obliged to let her books written by male scribes. In order to safeguard her life-writing, Margery chose one scribe who was not good at English nor German. His sudden death left a helplessly unreadable manuscript. The second scribe, once reluctant to take the task because of her notoriety and his acute alexia, miraculously deciphered the first manuscript and added his transcription of her life to the first one.

The presence of the two scribes in the making of *The Book of Margery Kempe* has been a stumbling block for many critics to approach Margery Kempe as an author of the same status as Julian of Norwich. Critics like John Hirsh stated "that the second scribe, no less than Margery, should be regarded as the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (150). Lynn Staley came to rescue her from this humiliating demotion and reinstate her as a social critic as well as a writer who can rival Chaucer or Langland (4-5). According to Staley, her writing itself was a social fiction to criticize the society and its fiction including the scribes. That is, Margery Kempe the writer invented the scribes to hide her barbed criticism. Staley in early 90s after the second wave of feminism projected too much of "[her] feminist agenda (of investing the role of agency to historic women) into one of the best candidates, Margery Kempe" (Lee 69). In recent debate over Margery

⁵ For the issue of Margery literacy, refer to Josephine Tarvers's "The Alleged Illiteracy of Margery Kempe: A Reconsideration of the Evidence."

Kempe's authorship, Nicholas Watson seems to be open to the negotiation between the second scribe's authorship and that of Margery. He definitely concludes that *The Book of Margery Kempe* is the result of "a successful collaboration" between them (397).

Should we be satisfied with Margery being one of collaborators in the making of her own "autobiography"? This hypothetical collaboration means that Margery turned into a palimpsest whose original scripts were scratched off for the space for another male inscription (Chappell, "Proym"). Volatile nature of orality of Margery's dictation vaporizes itself before the solid materialization of the act of writing determinately clinching the meanings of the narrative. In addition to the scribal interventions, *The Book of Margery Kempe* was abridged to a short narrative in a print compilation of holy women in 1501. "A truly discreet Margery" was born in this shortened variant and the difficult Margery we witness in the *Book* suddenly dematerialized instead (Voaden 147). The hands of Henry Pepwell and Wynkyn de Worde, printers and editors, recreated the shorter version "out of the boke of Margerie kempe of Lynn, and named it as "A shorte treatise of contemplycy on taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste" (Kempe 353).⁶ Were it not for the lucky retrieval of the manuscript, Margery should remain as a flat character like one in a medieval hagiographic exemplum who, shorn of all difficulties for men, was supposed to mirror the male fantasy of holy women. Her textual body remains a pale shadow of her narrative of difficult life under the superimposed words and structure of male hands.⁷

⁶ For a shorter version and its context, refer to Sue Ellen Holbrook's "Margery Kempe and Wynkyn de Worde."

⁷ In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, two conflicting temporalities drive its narrative forward. Secular temporality of Margery's mercantile and bourgeois and sacred temporality of her religious experiences entwine each other. For more details about temporalities in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, refer to Heegoo Lee's "The Book of Margery Kempe: Criticism and Queer Temporalities" (64-5).

IV. Sonia, a Female Editor for Male Authors

Like Margery's missing sole manuscript, Sonia's life personal as well as literary was lost in the memory of people save only as a second wife of George Orwell. Her image was irrecoverably disfigured by George's biographers as "a monster of obstinacy, greed and willful obstruction" (Spurling 152). Contrary to her greediness that her critics presumed drove her to marry a well-known author of imminent death, she died of brain tumor penniless not even to pay her outstanding bills at hospital, hotel, and her funeral. Sonia ran through her fortune in preserving the literary reputation of George Orwell as he detailed in his will. She devoted not only her wealth but also her "professional acumen" of editorship to publishing four volumes of Orwell's posthumous *Collected Essays*. She lived her last years of otherwise productive life as "the widow Orwell."

She seems not to have been satisfied with merely being an editor of men's writings. From her relationship with Jean Rhys, we can read her zeal for women's creative writings as well as for editing. Without Sonia's inexhaustible care and understanding, the acclaimed postcolonial write-back of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* would never have been born. Creative and talented though she had been, her short temper and chronic depression as well as her husband paralyzed in bed distracted Jean's creative energy from materializing in a finalized novel. It was Sonia only who understood "a huge lake" of creativity and maddening writer's block in the novelist. Sonia helped the first part of the novel published in the *Art and Literature* to encourage Jean to immerse herself only in writing (Spurling 158). With everything taken care of by Sonia, Jean could publish the enduring classic of 20th century in 1966. It seems that Sonia knew (as Virginia Woolf did) what is important when a woman is writing a literary work: "circumstances" both material and mental. *Wide Sargasso Sea* must have been a vicarious experience for Sonia who had to end up as a mere editor.

However, to the eyes of male writers or editors, contrary to her literary ambitions, she seems to have known that “her talents were modest, so she sought to associate with those of promise, whose careers she could help to promote and sustain” (Sheldon 73).

Sonia started her career of editor unexpectedly when Eugene Vinaver took the task of editing the legendary *Mort D'Arthur*. It was not her expertise that gave Sonia the job of transposition at the age of only nineteen. It was her enchanting look of “luxuriant pale gold hair, the colouring of a pink and white tea-rose, and the kind of shapely, deep-breasted, full-hipped figure” (Spurling 25). As the Euston Road Venus, her nickname among the artists who knew her, hints, she was an enchantress among the writers and painters along the street. This girl hid something of discerning spirit prerequisite for editors under her appealing beauty. She braved the male dominating world of literature and art, and established herself as one of editors of *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, an influential literary magazine in 1940s with prestigious contributors such as W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Graham Green, and most importantly George Orwell. Until Sonia joined *Horizon*, its female junior editors had been amateurish underworkers recruited from acquaintances or relatives of Cyril Connolly who was the founder and editor of the magazine.

Once in the position, Sonia took control of the full editorial rudder from a perspective different from her male colleagues. As she was fluent in French, she preferred Continental taste to that of the insular. To their surprise and rage, she criticized male editors' practice of “ranking authors and their books in order of precedence,” and “writing grandly editorial we” rather than I (Spurling 64). Under Sonia's beauty was cached not only literary acumen but also “an edge of provocation” of a female editor “dressed demurely in plain dark shirts and sweaters with lace-collared white blouses” (Spurling 54-55). Her drinking habit of knocking back and strong, decisive language of argument intimidated her male colleagues. For

a male writer like David Plante, she must have emerged “a compulsive manipulator of literary and intellectual people” and “a cold, angry, restless woman, murderously defensive, a dinner party drunk, possessed of no redeeming gifts of mind or spirit” (Gornick). Hilary Spurling, Sonia’s friend and biographer, believed that male colleagues retaliated her aggressiveness with exaggerated anecdotes of her high-handed attitude, harsh words, and drinking, which they brought forth as evidence for her incompetence as an editor as well as a woman. These negative portraits for a woman editor were actually wholesome characteristics of male editors. All these bear witness of how difficult she was to men in her world as Margery was to her men. Sonia’s drinking grated on men as much as Margery’s crying did on her men; Sonia’s harsh language got on their nerves as those of Margery did on her clergy.

Sonia’s provocative attitude can mislead us to surmise that her life stood aloof from male society. Ironically, Sonia’s life revolved around men, usually the named of her time. As Margery had sought after authorization of archbishops such as Thomas Arundel, Sonia looked for academic and literary stars of her time starting from Vinaver, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, finally to George Orwell. Psychoanalysis of Sonia’s attachment to them is beyond the scope of this paper. An apparently easy but reasonable answer must be a survival instinct of a young woman of humble background and virtually of no higher education who struggled for literary fame only with good look, French, and literary taste. All these combined, she was not qualified yet for the male dominating world of literature and art. In addition to them, she was forced to mentally virilize herself by visible ways of sexual licentiousness, drinking, and aggressiveness. However, it was only on the shoulder of literary he-giants that she could be recognized and get her membership, which did not last long and could not be renewed.

Sonia made a tireless effort to be an independent editor who can finalize the literary work with movable types into a printed magazine or

book. However, it was Sonia herself who was finalized into an image of a difficult woman. For Gordon Bowker, a biographer of George Orwell, Sonia was just “the centre of a good deal of sexual speculation and gossip, a voluptuous mystery after whom not a few men lusted” (341). Even for the eyes of George, her image was not that different from that of male colleagues around her. He immortalized her image in one of his character, Julia of *1984*. She was “the girl from the fiction department.”

She was a bold-looking girl of about twenty-seven, with thick dark hair, a freckled face, and swift, athletic movements. A narrow scarlet sash, emblem of the Junior Anti-Sex League, was wound several times around the waist of her overalls, just tightly enough to bring out the shapeliness of her hips. (Orwell 10)⁸

As the Ministry of Truth does in the novel which ceaselessly revises the past to tally with the ever-changing policies of the totalitarian regime, the history of Sonia as an editor has been edited to let it comply with the stereotype of a female editor who they expected should be sleazy only with pretension of editorial expertise. Before the lucky discovery of the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, people had assumed that Margery was a holy anchorite because they had only an abridged version of her life edited for an anthology of holy meditations. Sonia suffered just the same. Were it not for Spurling’s biography, Sonia should remain just as a difficult editorial “secretary” (Bowker 341) of the male head editor who coveted the literary fame and its benefits of George Orwell. And we would never know the Sonia who believed “all editors are equal,” and

⁸ Sonia’s image was imprinted on another novel as well as *1984*. Connolly created a character, Elsa, based on Sonia who is “a commando sergeant fighting behind enemy lines and disguised as a very pretty girl” in his unfinished novel, “Happy Deathbeds” (Sheldon 75). Elsa embodies Connolly’s ambivalence toward Sonia whose sexual attractiveness and difficulties like her aggressiveness and lesbian tendency made him stay confused.

therefore gave Ian Angus of no experience in editing an equal share of copyright against the claim of Harcourt Brace, the publisher of Orwell's *Collected Essays*, that Sonia's name alone should be on the title page.

V. Conclusion: One Invisible Woman and Parallax View

Margery and Sonia lived their lives apparently different from each other. The one thing they share across the long time gap of more than five hundred years is that they were difficult women for men and their society. Their difficulties worked as queerness which fails to line up with the dominant regimes of each society of theirs. Their difficulties rubbed against each fiber of their society. However, the difficulties endowed them with some visibility in history who otherwise should have remained invisible without traces. Even though their life and their writing were deformed by male scribes or editors who found them difficult to deal with, their lives survived the male prejudices to leave clues to identifying what they used to be before the disfigurement. Like palimpsests, their difficulties were scratched or torn off from a paper or manuscript page and instead on it was reinscribed a new writing of deforming male hands. However, it is under the male letters newly penned that we can read off the dim letters of their lives difficult for men.

For a conclusion, I would like to invite another woman who transposed the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as Sonia did for Vinaver. She is a wife of Sanford Brown Meech who edited the manuscript with Allen. It is a well-known fact that Meech who at the time was an assistant to Allen usurped the editorship for one of the important Oxford book series for Early English Text Society (EETS) from Allen. At first, he was just a fresh doctorate who had worked for Middle English Dictionary project. The first job description for him was to transpose the manuscript and to write

on the linguistic aspect of the manuscript, but in the end he put his name on the title page as *the* editor of the manuscript before that of Allen. An ironical fact is that Meech saddled his wife with a cumbersome but very important task of transposing the manuscript which is a preliminary step for the entire editing process. However, he did not even acknowledge her contribution in the preface or the introduction. I want my readers to imagine what if she was a difficult woman of literary desire and ambition. It is highly probable that Meech should record her difficulties on spaces other than in the acknowledgement in the book. Though she would appear twisted, for example, like a harsh women of exorbitant demands, she should remain at least visible enough for us to rehabilitate her image out of the noise brought out by male super impositions.

The same object looks different according to varying positions of our observation. It is called a parallax shift. What male counterparts found difficulties in Margery and Sonia turns out to be their enthusiastic quest for a religious or literary identity. What we find here in the two women of different temporalities is that they were not difficult for men, but male society was difficult for them. We naturally assume that the two views from different positions can be synthesized to bring out the better image truer to the imagined original as we need both eyes to gain depths in vision. According to Slavoj Žižek, however, the synthesis of the two visions like Hegelian synthesis of thesis and antithesis, is an illusion (3-13). His argument simply is that “we do not get to the truth of the event by considering one or even all of these perspectives. Nor do we get to it by trying to adopt a kind of impossible God’s eye view that would take into account absolutely everything that led up to the event” (Dean 377). This impossibility comes from the ontological conditions of reality or the (Lacanian) Real which is not identical with itself. In other words, parallax gaps are already there in the object, and changes of position only multiply or widen the gaps. All these imply that we will never comprehend what

Margery and Sonia truly were nor can we simply measure the gap between them or between male version of their history and our version.

I believe queer temporalities will help sort out this quandary of incompatible antinomies or gaps in parallax views. This queerness tears down masculine structure of temporality to bits of asynchronous *now*. All the moments are equally overlain independently of its respective position in the temporal hierarchy. In the *now* of queer temporality is arrested even a parallax shift which requires minimal duration of temporality while moving from one position to another. It is in the queer *now* that the “impossible God’s eye view” is made possible to command a comprehensive view of all different things from different temporalities only for a very short moment. It is in that moment that we can temporarily enjoy their being together while forgetting their gaps. As such, we can enjoy Margery and Sonia’s gathering, share their frustration in their life and writing. The asynchronous *now* in the footnote where Sonia meets Margery works like a singularity in which general laws do not apply. As subatomic microcosm of quantum explains birth of a galaxy or celestial beauty, their small meeting in the footnote will shed light on women’s struggles for writing and their difficulties not for men but for themselves on the long historical scale.

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ABSTRACT**The Difficult Women: Margery Kempe and Sonia Orwell****Heegoo Lee**

The manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Winchester manuscript of *Mort D'Arthur* were found in 1934. Though two manuscripts seem to have nothing to do with each other, Margery Kempe in the first manuscript relates to an unexpected woman of 20th century who transposed the latter manuscript. It is Sonia Orwell who is known better as the second wife of George Orwell. The point that they come across is "transcription." From the proem of the book, we find Margery obsessed with getting her scribe to write her life into letters. Sonia, starting with the transposition of the Winchester manuscript, lived a life of a female junior editor who "transcribed" male authors' texts into items in journals or books. In the late Middle Ages, women could guarantee, if any, their textual authority only through male scribes. That explains Margery's anxiety over her scribes. Sonia took over the role of scribes as an editor, but her position did not have *auctoritas* medieval scribes enjoyed. She was only a passive channel through which male textual power was transferred to printed materials. Margery and Sonia took textual positions different from each other, but female inferiority in power relations runs parallel for them. It is through these two women that this paper aims to show how stubbornly this inferior status of women (writers) subsists even across the timespan of 600 years with help of theory of queer temporalities.

Key Words | *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Sonia Orwell, queer temporalities, women editors, medieval scribes