

*The Book of Margery Kempe: A Mix of Old and New Influences on
the English Language*

Historical Context

Margery Kempe was born around 1373 to the fairly well-off Brunham family of merchants in Bishop's Lynn (currently known as King's Lynn). When she was twenty years old, she married John Kempe and went on to have fourteen children. Her first pregnancy, which occurred shortly after her marriage, is the one that leads to the events in her book.

After the birth of her first child, Margery Kempe experienced a great deal of "mental torment" which eventually led to her first vision of Christ (Johnston). Today, scientists have identified her condition as postpartum psychosis which according to The National Institutes of Health is, "extreme confusion, loss of touch with reality, paranoia, delusions, disorganized thought process, and hallucinations." All of these symptoms align with what Margery reported in her biographical book. She was also prone to fits of crying which can also be a sign of postpartum psychosis. Her tearfulness is one of her most famous and memorable traits as she is remembered throughout history.

In the Middle Ages, mental illness was not seen as we see it today, but instead as a curse or affliction from the devil. However, many other people of the time claimed to encounter similar events, so her claims were seen as authentic religious experiences and not a problem with her mind. The role of the Church in medieval Europe was one of great power and authority. Religious leaders held as much power and responsibility as lords meaning, if they endorsed Kempe's visions, then they must be accepted as authentic.

In her book, Margery chronicles her time after the birth of her first child where she decides to devote her entire life to serving the Lord in a very extreme way usually seen by well-known religious authorities. After having fourteen children, she convinces her husband, John, to commit to a life of celibacy and also embarks on many pilgrimages, most notably her journey to Jerusalem. Along the way she is arrested many times, gets stuck in Rome after losing all of her money, and resorts to begging in the streets, making her a notorious figure of the time. All the while, she is still prone to bouts of crying and visions.

While Margery's visions consist of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and other saints, her devotion to Jesus is the most intense and oftentimes sexual in nature. One part of her book details a vision of Christ coming down from the crucifix on the wall of the church and engaging in sexual acts with her.

Towards the end of Margery's life, after losing both her husband and one of her sons, she decides to tell her story. Since, like most women of the time, she was illiterate, Margery did not do the actual writing of her book. Instead, she dictated to someone who wrote as she spoke.

The Book of Margery Kempe is widely known as the oldest example of an autobiography in the English language. While not penned by her, it tells the story of her life as a woman who dedicated herself to the Church and to Jesus himself. Today, it is considered a classic in medieval literature, but it also is a rare depiction of a woman's life during the time.

Linguistic Features

There were no spelling rules during Middle English, that is, until the end of the era when books were starting to be printed. The first thing I notice when it comes to the spelling used in Margery's book is the use of the letter /y/ for the sound /ɪ/. Examples include words such as *begynnyth* (beginneth), *lytyl* (little), *wyth* (with), and *vysytyd* (visited). However, Kempe uses the letter /y/ for the sound /aɪ/ as in "Cryst" (Christ) and "tymes" (times) as well. These uses can be traced back to the 1300's and 1400's according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Middle English is where we start to see a combination of the accusative and dative case into one, meaning that there are only three categories of pronouns. However, in Kempe's book she uses both the Old English dative or genitive cases as well as the combined case in Middle English specifically *hire*, *hir*, *hyr*, or *her* as she is talking about herself in the third person. There does not appear to be a pattern to when or why she uses each form as they can be seen in consecutive sentences. For example, in lines 57-58 she says, "Summe of these worthy and worshepful clerkys tokyn it in perel of her sowle" but in lines 59 and 60, she writes, "and makyn a booke of hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons". Within the span of four lines, Kempe uses three different forms of the pronoun "her", spanning both Old English and Middle English.

Similar to Kempe's combination of cases, she seems to blend Old and Middle English syntax patterns. One key aspect of Old English syntax is its use of coordination, as seen in Kempe's first sentence of her book:

“Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyll for synful wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and unspcabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu, whos name be worschepd and magnyfyed wythowten ende, that now in ower days to us unworthy deyneth to exercysen hys nobeley and hys goodnesse” (ll 1-5).

As we can see here, Kempe has put multiple clauses together into one sentence. However, she also uses subject pronouns which were not required, therefore often dropped, in Old English syntax but had become obligatory in Middle English.

Kempe also uses the Old English negative *ne-* instead of the *nawiht* or *naht* that we see appear in Middle English. Lines 74-76 read: “The booke was so evel wretyn that he coud lytyl skylle theron, for it was neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne the lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as other letters ben”. These lines also show the use of multiple negatives which is found in Middle English.

Influence of Other Languages

Middle English is highly influenced by the Scandinavian languages and Old Norse. One big change that occurred with this influence was the change in pronouns from *hîe*, *heora* and *him* to *they*, *them*, and *their*. While the spelling of such words were not consistent, we see the use of these new Scandinavian pronouns in Kempe’s work with words such as *thei*. This emergence of the third person plural is new from Old English as we see Old Norse and Scandinavian influence.

We can also see the Scandinavian influence on plural noun endings. Middle English nouns either end in the plural *-s* or *-en* but it depends on the location for which is more commonly used. The *-s* ending was more common in the north and Midlands, while the south used the *-en*. Since Kempe was from the southern part of the island, it makes sense that she uses the latter ending more frequently in her book in instances such as *beffallen*, *loven*, and *wryten*.

Dialectal Analysis

Based on the research above, as well as locating Bishop's (King's) Lynn on a map, we can see the level of Scandinavian influence Kempe might have had in her language. Based on the map on page 101 of *A History of the English Language*, this area was along the Eastern coast that ran along the North Sea. The higher density of towns with Scandinavian names is in the north but Bishop's Lynn is located between two Danish settlements. This could explain why, in Kempe's book, we still see elements of Old English as well as Middle English and its Scandinavian influences.

It should also be noted that later in her life, Kempe moved to Norway and Germany with her son. While the Old English language was already heavily Germanic, living in Norway would have enhanced its influence on her language. It is here that her son, also John Kempe, began to scribe for his mother as she relayed her experiences. Since Margery herself had not penned her work, the use of language in her book is not dependent on her, but on her son, and later a priest in England who revised John's work. This creates a very complex language profile. It is clear that there are heavy

Scandinavian influences as well as elements of Old English that still peek through in the grammar and syntax.

Conclusion

The Book of Margery Kempe is an interesting text to analyze for its language. As a Middle English text, it definitely includes new elements like combined cases, subject pronouns, and the third person plural, while also showing that the change wasn't a hard and fast shift. Many elements of Old English are still visible in her book. The influence of the Scandinavian language, both due to Vikings arriving in the British Isles and Margery living in Norway for a time, is also seen in word endings and the third person plural as mentioned above. Again, it is important to remember that Margery, as a woman of the time, was illiterate and did not physically write this book. The language of this *The Book of Margery Kempe* is structured based on the men in her life who brought her story to life.

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