

The Life of Margery Kempe: Medieval Saint or Insane Wanderer?

By Christina Valentine

Margery Kempe spent much of her life as a spiritual seeker in medieval England. Many considered her to be insane, while others considered her a saint. However, one thing is for certain, that her life story is nothing short of "...fascinating as it is remarkable" (Black 635). She spent her early life as a typical noblewoman in the fifteenth century. However, the sins she felt she committed had driven her to live much of her life as a traveling pilgrim. She had eventually renounced the world completely, going from "a merchant's wife to God's bride" (Chappell 46). Not only did she encounter various powerful people along the way on her journey, but she was forced to speak for herself and affirm her faith as a woman and Christian. What is most amazing, are her replies, which saved her time and again with exceeding gracefulness. How one judges her character and intent, is ultimately subjective upon reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is her life story and testimony of her faith in Jesus.

Her life began in 1373. Her father was "...an important man in the affluent port town of Bishop's Lynn (now called King's Lynn) in Norfolk, England...[and] was five times mayor of the town, two times member of Parliament, and he held various other esteemable positions" (Black 365). She was married at the age of twenty to John Kempe and subsequently had fourteen children. It was after the birth of her first child when she felt as though she were at the brink of death, that she called upon a priest to confess her sin. The priest refused to hear her, and, as a result, she began to slip into mental illness, or even possibly, postpartum depression (Morrison 167). Bedridden and tied down, she claimed to have been possessed by demons, until Jesus came to visit her and proved his existence. Jesus said to her, "Daughter, why have you forsaketh me, and I never forsook you?" (Black 639). After that experience, she had "...come to herself again"

(Black 639) and was determined to live her life in service to God. However, she still experienced worldly “pride and pompous display” (Black 639), such as wearing extravagant ornaments (Black 639), being envious of her neighbors, and the desire to be admired (Black 640). It was that pride, along with “pure greed” (Black 640), which inspired her to become a brewer. When all the froth fell, and the ale was mysteriously lost, she began another business venture, that of a horse mill (Black 640). When this also mysteriously failed, with strangely uncooperative horses, “...no man or beast would work for the said creature” (Black 640). She then, “asked God’s mercy and forsook her pride, her greed, and her desire for worldly honor, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life, as will be told hereafter” (Black 640). This disregard for pride or formal titles is evident in her, somewhat redundantly, as she frequently calls herself a ‘creature’ throughout the text. Although the reader is never made aware of the substance of her grievances, it was that perceived sin that drove her towards a saint-like life filled with bodily penance and subsequent tribulations. These tribulations she evidently welcomed when her book states that, “...all His apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins, and all who ever came to Heaven, passed along the path of tribulation, and she desired nothing so much as heaven” (Black 641).

After hearing a melody in the night, a sound so “sweet and delectable, it seemed to her, as if she had been in paradise” (Black 640), she found herself unable to “restrain herself from speaking of it” (Black 641). She felt a “spiritual ecstasy” (Black 641), which prompted her to do great “bodily penance” (Black 641), waking at two or three in the morning to go to church to pray. She was shunned and slandered because she “lived so strict a life” (Black 641). Thus began her trials after these spiritual experiences with her irregular behavior and frequent loud crying in

public as she “contemplated her unkindness since her childhood, which our Lord would many times bring to her mind” (Black 641). In fact:

“...her weeping was so plenteous and so continual that many people said she was a false hypocrite and wept for show, for support and worldly good...and a great many forsook her who had loved her before, when she was in the world, and would not acknowledge her, and she continually thanked God for everything, desiring nothing but mercy and forgiveness of sin” (Black 641).

It was in her travels, however, where she suffered the most tribulations. It was fourteen children later, and after her husband finally agreed to let her live a chaste life, that she was finally free to go on pilgrimage (Chappell 167). She claimed that God had even told her of the tribulations she would encounter as she sat in a church in York. She recalled that Jesus Christ said in her soul, “Daughter, there is much tribulation coming to you...What, daughter, are you unwilling to suffer more tribulation for love of Me? If you do not wish to suffer anymore, I will take it away from you” (Black 644). Perhaps the most noteworthy of these tribulations were at that church in York, where she had traveled to in order to find some association with some other of God’s servants (Black 644). It was there that many had made her welcome and were “...glad to hear her conversation, marveling greatly at the fruitfulness of her speech” (Black 644) as well as those who “slandered, scorned, and despised her” (Black 644). After being decried a false heretic, she was brought before the Archbishop of Canterbury, who shackled her (Black 646). She then exclaimed, “I am no heretic, nor shall you prove me to be one” (Black 647). The Archbishop had many questions for her, that he asked rudely, namely, “Why do you weep like that, woman?” (Black 647). Her reply was, “Sir, you will wish someday that you had wept as hard as I” (Black 647). The Archbishop and clerks then tested and examined her if she knew well the articles of

the Christian faith (Black 647). When she passed these, she was asked by the Archbishop to leave York as soon as she could, swearing on the Bible and also to not “...teach or scold the people in [his] diocese” (Black 647). Even after this ordeal with the Archbishop, it was her sharp tongue that bid her narrow escape from imprisonment, again and again. Even lawyers had said to her, “We have gone to school for many years, and we are still not capable of answering as you do. Where do you get such cleverness?” (Black 652), and her reply was, “From the Holy Spirit” (Black 652).

What is most remarkable about Margery Kempe, is that although she was gifted with great abilities in speech, it is widely thought that she did not know how to read or write. All of her works were eventually written down for her, by the will of many different scribes over a period of years (Black 637). However, in *The Secret Within*, Wolfgang Riehle points out that, “...in view of the high social status of her family, the widely held assumption that she could read only a little, if at all, and could not write, is untenable” (Riehle 252). It is her tears and emotional outbursts as well, which are still the subject of debate, with scholars arguing that they are mere shows of a theatrical nature with a “histrionic element” (Riehle 258). Other argue that:

The Book of Margery Kempe represents its author...as discovering over the course of her life—gradually and then suddenly, in bursts and starts—that her dissatisfaction with mainstream religious culture and her desire to live a life of intense, deeply felt devotion, were shared by other people. As the *Book* records Kempe’s experiences, it shows us what seem, at first, to be isolated, individual cases of passionate spiritual desire but goes on to demonstrate that these instances are in fact examples of a new kind of ecstatic devotion shared by believers inside and outside of religious institutions.

(Krug 2)

Whether Margery Kempe was an insane wanderer or an unrecognized saint, is up for debate. However, as Susan Morrison explains, "...that she defied male authority even at the risk of death itself speaks to the conviction of her beliefs" (Morrison 172). There also exists some criticism regarding the presentation of Kempe's memoir. In the prologue to *Perilous Passages*, Julie Chappell notes that:

The extracts selected for these late-twentieth-century editions directed a reader to earthly considerations of a more "scientific" age — prolonged postpartum psychosis, self-aggrandizement, self-fashioning—rather than an understanding of divine mercy and favor through bodily tortures, mystical revelations, and spiritual elevation sent by God as these would have been comprehended by a late medieval reader of the whole Book.

(Chappell xxi)

Basically, Chappell is insinuating that these passages are carefully selected to appeal to the modern reader, instead of in context to actual Medieval life, and with the basic understanding at that time regarding faith and mysticism. However, in Robin Waugh's book *Genre of Medieval Patience Literature* claims that overall, Kempe's work is merely patience literature, or:

...literature [that] begins to focus on...suffering...as opposed to the learning and debating power of, for example, Catherine of Alexandria. The genre ends up supporting, just like most existing cultural material does, the view that women should be kept outside of conventional learning; the genre ends up supporting, just like most cultural material does, female victim-status by narrating example of it repeatedly.

(Waugh 24)

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