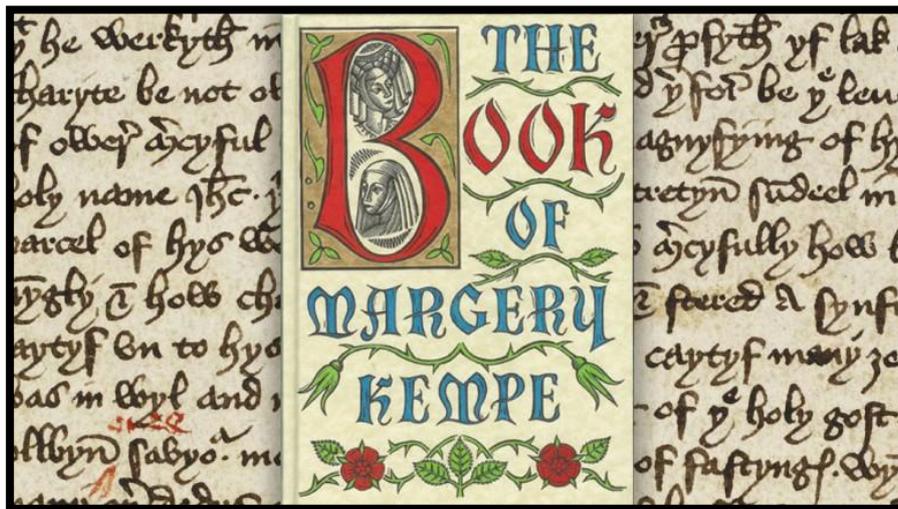


*The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501): The Construction  
of Women's Authority in a Proto-feminist Context



TFG Estudis d'Anglès i de Francès

Supervisor: Dr Carme Font Paz

Laura Pujolràs Borrut

June 2016

**UAB**  
Universitat Autònoma  
de Barcelona

“How was she created? I'm not sure if you realize this, but it was in God's image. How can anybody dare to speak ill of something which bears such a noble imprint?”

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN (c. 1390)

*To all women, and to everyone who  
has felt oppressed once in her life in  
this world of men.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	i
<b>Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
Mystical Literature in a Medieval Context .....	6
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
The Construction of Margery Kempe's Authority .....	11
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
A Wife with Two Husbands .....	17
<b>Conclusion</b>	
Is There a Proto-feminist in this Book? .....	23
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	25

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to Dr Carme Font Paz because without her supervision, guidance, knowledge and passion I would not have been able to write this paper, nor would I have known what an amazing figure Margery Kempe was. Our talks about the project have been immensely enjoyable and productive. She has provided me with helpful material and feedback, apart from her encouragement in her email messages.

I also owe my thanks to all the literature teachers I have had during my life as a student. Without them, I would not know how fascinating literature is. I would like to give my special thanks to Dr Fátima Gutiérrez, a teacher from the French Department at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, because thanks to her – my first medieval literature teacher– I discovered my love for the literature of this period that I unconsciously cherished since I was a child.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family, friends and relatives for their great support and best wishes I have received during these last four years and, especially, along the process of writing this project.

## ABSTRACT

Margery Kempe was an English Christian mystic famous for dictating *The Book of Margery Kempe* to two ecclesiastical scribes. Scholars regard it as the first autobiography written in English, an outstanding achievement coming from a woman –at a time when it was nearly inconceivable that women wrote or expressed their opinions in public in the context of a patriarchal society. Throughout her recollections, Kempe engages the modern reader into the life and customs of late-medieval England. All over the book, the reader realises that Kempe was not a conventional woman. She shared many features with what we nowadays would call a Feminist, since she was able to overcome many of the gender barriers of her time in the areas of motherhood, sexuality and marital obedience. Through a close reading of her autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501), my paper will focus on how Margery Kempe negotiated her social role as a devoted wife while being an independent woman capable of deciding what she wanted in her life without any interference from her husband. To what an extent was Margery Kempe a proto-feminist, that is, a woman who promoted a dignified view of her sex before any modern notion of feminism? Through the close reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and a careful selection of critical secondary sources, my analysis will pay special attention to Kempe's initial moves and negotiations towards marital and financial independence, mystical communication and authorial control.

## **Introduction**

Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1440) was an English Christian mystic woman whose autobiography is considered one of the earliest in English literature. The text was dictated by her in Middle English and written down by scribes in her lifetime, but the original complete manuscript of the book has been lost to us. The first modern and full edition was discovered in 1934 in a private home library, and it is based on a manuscript copied by a scribe identified as “Salthows” who transcribed it from the lost original in the fifteenth century. The oldest traces of the original manuscript (*Urtext*) that have come down to us belong to the very partial edition by the Anglo-Dutch printer Wynken de Worde in 1501, and for this reason scholars often use both sources together (Worde’s and Salthow’s) to refer to the *Urtext* of Kempe’s book.

Margery Kempe was born Margery Burnham in the prosperous East Anglian town of King’s Lynn (then, Bishop’s Lynn), Norfolk, in 1373. She was the daughter of John (de) Burnham, a substantial citizen: he was a thriving tradesman from Norfolk who sat five times in the position of local mayor, six times Member of Parliament, alderman of the merchant guild and coroner and Justice of the Peace. Unlike Margery’s father, nothing is known about her mother since she did not appear in the public records of the city, nor is she mentioned in Margery Kempe’s book. Despite her father’s influence in the context of a bourgeois middle-class community, she did not receive any formal education. For this reason, she was unable to read or write. However, in keeping with parochial practice, Margery had a command of Scripture and the Psalms from the sermons she usually attended. At the age of twenty, she married John Kempe, a burgess of Lynn and the son of a trading family who was elected chamberlain in 1394.

Soon after her marriage, she became pregnant. Giving birth to her first child was one of the most traumatic events in Kempe's lifetime, since she was very ill and went through a particularly strenuous delivery. As a result of this experience, she suffered from a nervous breakdown in which she began to entertain visions of hideous devils all around her. She also managed to overcome this traumatic experience thanks to her visions of Jesus Christ. From then on, she decided to devote herself to God and to her communications with him through her spiritual visionary experiences. But Margery Kempe was also a pragmatic woman, and sometime after her recovery she started her own brewery. The business failed and she had to quit it three years later. Then she tried to run a miller's establishment, but she was not successful with it either. After fourteen more pregnancies with its deliveries and twenty years of marital life, she succeeded in convincing her husband that he should lead a life of chastity with her. They appeared before the bishop of Lincoln to take a "pledge of purity" in return for Margery's commitment to eat and drink with John on Fridays, and to pay his debts before she left England on pilgrimage. At the age of forty, she won the consent of her husband and her Church to live apart from her family; from then on, she was allowed to go wherever she trusted herself to be sent by God. Her pilgrimage began with the Holy Land as her first destination; there she visited the city of Jerusalem and several holy places and she received "the gift of tears", which marked her as a woman with a special communion with Christ. Later she made separate trips to Spain and Prussia and travelled largely through England, visiting shrines and holy persons and listening to gifted preachers.

She spent the winter in Rome on her way back from the Holy Land. Throughout her journey, she was arrested, imprisoned, and inspected for heresy several times, but

she was never tried or “doomed”. Gail McMurray describes Margery’s fearless manner in overcoming any obstacles in her way:

When, for example, finds herself imprisoned in a kind of casual house arrest by her uneasy accusers in Beverly, Margery Kempe reports that God reassures her that such inconvenience is more precious to him than actual martyrdom by sword: “Dowtyr, it is mor plesyng vn-to me þan gif þin hed wer smet of thre tymes on þe day euery day in sevyn ȝer.” Such despisings are not only reported as proof of her future sanctity and triumph (indeed, Margery tells us that God has revealed that someday in her parish church in Lynn, Norfolk, she will be revered as saint, that “I [God] xal ben worschepyd in þe”) but also as the source of much of her privileged spiritual knowledge. (McMurray, 2001: 277)

In this illustrative passage, Kempe feels empowered by the presence of God, who inspires her to overcome any obstacle such as being held prisoner in a ‘casual’ home arrest (some private homes in Medieval England were used as temporary gaols). It also foreshadows Margery’s alleged future sanctity by displacing the authority of her speech on God’s wording.

The dynamics of this and similar episodes, that abound in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501), has led me to inquiry into the extent to which Margery Kempe was a proto-feminist, that is, a woman who promoted a dignified view of her sex before any modern notion of feminism. Through a close reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and a selection of critical secondary sources, my analysis will pay special attention to Kempe’s initial moves and negotiations towards marital and financial independence, mystical communication and authorial control.

Margery did not return to her husband until 1431, when he became disabled after a fall, and she came back home to look after him until his last breath. At the age of

sixty, she began to work on the dictation and writing of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. During the last years of her life, she travelled between 1433 and 1434, and died four years later in her hometown.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Mystical Literature in a Medieval Context**

In the late medieval period, mystical writing was increasingly being expressed in vernacular languages. The emergence of such literature in the vernacular was the result of people's need to find a way to salvation –a means that allowed them to be near to God. Medieval mysticism was essentially visual and affective. This entailed that the mystic first received revelations from God and sensed the truth. Flooded with love, medieval women mystics felt the urge to share their love with others.

Medieval mysticism was largely feminine. Medieval men with religious vocations ended up being priests, monks, or friars. However, pious women had a one and only option: joining a convent. Thus, the approved form of religious life for women was contemplative and enclosed; this fact guaranteed to them a measure of protection from the outer world. Conventual life also encouraged the development of mystical abilities. While religious communities were the only safe haven in Medieval Europe in which non-married adult women could enjoy a degree of personal independence, there were forms of pious laicity available to women who could not join conventual rule due to their family obligations. Most of these women pledged a vow of celibacy, a fact that granted them much longer lives and, thus, freedom to pursue their own call and vocation.

Medieval marriage was not only a private affair between two individuals, but also a social one. As stated in Canon Law, marriage was a special bond between husband and wife, a covenant that gave the husband the conjugal rights to “rule” over the wife in their relationship. They were meant to be the reflection of Adam and Eve. Even though

wives were expected to be submissive to their husbands, they still enjoyed certain rights. Depending on the region and the period, marriage could be conceived in several ways. It could be proclaimed in secret between the couple (which was usually regarded as problematic for the law), or arranged between the families. Marital unions in the lower classes needed the previous consent of their masters.

Upon the death of a husband, his widow could claim the privileges of her late spouse by inheriting their estate and property, even in those cases in which they had adult sons alive. When there was only a male primogeniture stipulated, he would become the heir of the land of his deceased father. In the event there were not any sons in the family, the eldest daughter inherited the property.

There were some cases of widows who held land successfully and remarried in order to keep their inherited land in the face of financial hardship. However, remarriage put the widow back under the control of her new husband and she had to submit to them as she did with her previous one. In some other cases, there were dowagers that never remarried and held their land until the end of their days, which guaranteed a larger measure of autonomy. Some widows had second and even third marriages. This was a good choice for those who had children from their first marriage, since this guaranteed the inheritance over the second husband.

The life of a peasant woman was not different from that of an emerging middle-class woman. They endured many restrictions that did not make their lives easy; they could not learn any trade, and they spent most of their time as assistants and care-givers (Jones, 2004). Generally, women had little control over their existence, since late Norman and early Tudor law privileged medium and large landowners while beginning

to take into account the growing economic influence of urban areas (Jones, 2004). Women were entitled, though, to plead to manorial and ecclesiastical courts when a husband brutally abused them or deserted the household. In the fourteenth century women could, however, start their own business. This was not so much the result of women's conquest of civic or labour rights, which were virtually inexistent both for men or women, but of the organizational nature of the concept of "business" itself. In pre-industrialized societies, many trades that did not require a highly specialized technical expertise –like blacksmiths or glass makers– could be carried out in the household and, as such, were regarded as part of the domestic, feminine sphere (Duby and Perrot, 2002). The fact that Margery Kempe worked producing or selling goods was considered an extension of her domestic role, even though in some cases women could make a lot of money from these activities, which usually involved the manipulation of food or textiles. What was unusual in the case of Margery Kempe was that her business replaced her husband's professional activity, thus becoming de facto the main or only bread-winner. Feminist scholar Alice Jardine pointed out that Margery's *Book* projects an unusual representation of her gender since Margery refuses to model her conduct either on "anchorite" behavior –that is, enclosed in a sacred space– or on that of the urban goodwife –enclosed in a domestic space (1985: 93). It is this twofold dimension of Margery Kempe's representation of a 'holy' woman in a non-aristocratic environment which has mostly intrigued scholars of the medieval period.

Taking into account what she accomplished in her lifetime, scholars have tended to approach Kempe's *Book* from the perspective of her contribution to English mysticism within a feminine context (especially the relationship between body and

soul), her authority as an independent woman within a pre-industrialized society, and her social advancement as a proto-feminist.

Scholars such as Liz H. McAvoy, Clarissa W. Atkinson, Tara Williams and Elisabeth Alvida Petroff have focused on Margery Kempe's representation of a 'modern' mystic. Each of these scholars has taken on a specific point of interest that lead to the patterns of continuity and change in the mystical elements of *The Book*. As Elisabeth Alvida Petroff has explained, men and women played an important role in what concerns English mystics, however, not in the same way or numbers, since in the fourteenth century there were more women than men. The late medieval period witnessed a fashion for the lives of saints, particularly female, since these provided a model for *imitatio* and *exemplum* for the household (Petroff, 1986: 27). It was not uncommon for priests to read excerpts of *vitas* during mass or, more frequently, in private meetings with women from high or middle-class families, as it might have been the case with young Margery. She had been deeply impressed by the life of Saint Birgitta from Sweden (1303-1373), who had also been a married woman and in 1371 had travelled to the Holy Land not alone but with her husband. The link between the earthly and the metaphysical nature of revelation is, for Sara Beckwith (1992), the key to female mysticism in the late medieval period and early baroque spirituality in a pre-Reformation context. For Margery Kempe, as for those holy women who sought an experiential, not only an intellectual and Augustinian approach to understanding the divine, the mystical way was a sensorial and communicative experience with God. They could basically reach this supreme experience through visions, prophecies, and miracles, or through piety and prayer.

As Carolyne Larrington notes:

Coinciding with the new forms of devotion often associated with St Francis – extreme ascetic practices entailing deprivation of food and sleep, intense meditation on the humanity of Christ and the events of his Nativity and Passion in particular – holy women found signs of Christ literally written on their bodies. (Larrington, 1995: 123)

However, the lives and works of women who experienced the divine in the fourteenth century were not prone to subjecting the body to self-mortification, but rather to self-dignifying moves towards individual authority. In this regard, our understanding of Margery Kempe's work as prefiguring a feministic stance (or proto-feministic) makes sense in the context of taking the body of the holy woman as the *locus* where female authority is played and displayed, since she controls the tempos and the material content of her communication with God.

Raymond A. Powell argued back in 1954 that Kempe hid an unusual literary genius that scrutinized society through her writing and made use of modern narrative techniques, such as the “narrator-scribe”, to disguise her “true social intentions” within the religious-mystical context. Lynn Staley (1994) has also noted the literary sophistication of Kempe's text, compared to other medieval women hagiographies which emphasized the highly emotional and disruptive nature of Godly communication. Kempe normalized her relationship with God by apparently displacing her authorial control, which in fact constructed “a public voice for speaking of and on behalf of God” (Hope Belcher, 2015: 155).

## Chapter 2

### The Construction of Margery Kempe's Authority

So an old monk, who had been treasurer to the Queen when he was in secular clothes, a powerful man and greatly feared by many people, took her by the hand saying to her, "What can you say of God?" "Sir," she said, "I will both speak of him and hear of him," repeating to the monk a story from scripture. (Kempe, 1988: 63)

Kempe's authorship in *The Book of Margery Kempe* has been one of the most debated topics ever since her manuscript was discovered in Lancashire by Hope Emily Allen in 1934. Since it is a controversial matter, scholars have concentrated on the only piece of evidence of authorial presence: the narrator. As seen at the beginning of the book – leaving apart the previous knowledge that the reader may have of the main character – the story is narrated in the third person singular instead of the first. R.W. Chambers notes that this *Book* "may disappoint or even shock the reader" (1954: 12), because the "I" is present through a narrator who relays a story on behalf of the author. Cheryl Glenn has approached Kempe's work as the skill of a "powerful rhetorician, since she could locate herself within the commonplace discourse of Franciscan affective piety, in which she could safely tell and own her story, while validating her visions to her "authorial audience", a sort of "hypothetical audience for whom each author designs her text" (Glenn, 1992: 541) This would entail for Glenn that actual readers -medieval and modern- have to decide whether to believe in the factuality of Kempe's text or consider it a work of fiction.

Moreover, she points out that,

No English writer had committed to writing such an intimate, revealing, and humane account of life and thoughts. Perhaps only a woman (untrained in and unconscious of standard rhetorical and literary practices) would assert her *self* this way. (Glenn, 1992: 543)

Glenn's except captures what most critics value in Kempe's work: the fact that she offered an account of her social class and her gender while authorising her individual voice.

Another detail that may mislead the reader is the prominent presence of the syntagm 'this creature' throughout the *Book* to refer to Margery Kempe. She (or her scribes) referred to her as "this creature" in several occasions. As strange as this word may sound, she had a reason to call herself like this. With this name, she did not try to dehumanize herself, but rather, it is an acknowledgement of Margery Kempe as a being created under God's supremacy. If there is any kind of denial meant in this term, it is assuredly in the humility that Kempe feels as a penitent sinner. In any case, the use of third person here is meant to replace her first-person point of view, but it is still limited to what Kempe perceives, or to what God tells her. As Lynn Staley states, "Margery's experiences are described by an omniscient, third-person narrator, presumably the scribe, whose ability to recount both God's intimate speeches to her, as well as the experience of Margery herself renders him a powerful 'witness' of her life" (1994: 35). She goes on to note that "Kempe does not directly address the reader, she addresses the reader through the scribe... Kempe embodies authority and thus freedom in the scribe who writes Margery's life" (35-36). So, Staley's depiction of Kempe's intention would

be analogous to a businesswoman who hires an assistant to answer her phone in order to project an image of power. Kempe not only wanted to explain her life and what she went through as a witness of God, but she also wished to relay it in the most impersonal possible manner; in this way the book would act as a witness of God's will. The regular use of this word shows that this illiterate "creature" was in constant collaboration with her scribes. Yet this fervent Christian actually creates herself, a troublesome and sometimes contradictory self. Within this self, three "real" selves –the mystic, the woman and the author– can distinguish a fact that allows her to be read by a diverse audience. It also shows the three different "Margerys" that the text contains: the implied author, the narrator and the author-as-character. These three are engaged in a conversation in which Kempe's intentions, values, claims and opinions are often in conflict.

Taking mysticism as the connecting point of her authorship and her authority, we have a glimpse of how her emotional reactions and her priorities change over time. Within the mystical expression, two great groups may be found: on the one hand, we can find the variety of "Dialectal mysticism" which essentially includes sermons and collective chanting. On the other hand, there are the "Corporal expressions" such as fasting, prayers, contemplation, and in Margery's particular case, the "Gift of Tears"<sup>1</sup>.

Focusing on the first group, "Dialectal mysticism", we may begin with Margery's first mystical encounter with God. As already mentioned in the introduction, Kempe

---

<sup>1</sup> The Gift of Tears was given to her by God in order to recall Christ's sorrows.

found salvation in God when she was suffering from a severe post-partum depression after her first delivery. In this episode, readers can witness her relief when the Lord was protecting her:

And, when she had long been labored in these and many other temptations, so that men thought she should never have escaped nor lived, then on a time, as she lay alone and her keepers were away from her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, ever to be trusted, worshiped by his name, never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature, who had forsaken him in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beautiful, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, said to her these words: "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I forsook never you?". (Kempe, 2001: 7-8)

After the Lord's appearance as a most amiable man to "this creature", Kempe left her former life behind and established her communication with Christ through a mystical rapport. He lifted her spirits, and sat upon her bedside with a comforting countenance. Resorting to the tradition of affective piety, she mixed her own history with the story of the sacred Scriptures and used her imagination to conjure up vivid experiences with Jesus. Her authority is based on her intimacy with God. Nevertheless, she is still a human being in need of penance and help. She often ritualizes her discourse with God through pillow talks, thus managing to display her mortal imperfection and her new-found authority.

Another occurrence of displacement of the physical experience takes place when she takes God as her mystical lover in place of her actual spouse. The power of God's "presence" in her visions allowed her to negotiate her sexuality with her husband, which was not a small matter at that time and could have easily ended up in an episode of

domestic violence. Kempe relies on God in their pillow talks to overcome this situation and she fears that her husband's resistance, as well as her lack of success with her business, are a punishment of God for not having led a pure life. She wishes to do penance by telling the story of her mystical encounters to others, regardless of how these people might receive this piece of news. Again, this was an act of courage, since despite the general acceptance of saint's lives on paper, women (or men) making any spiritual claims of direct communication with the divine ran the risk of being prosecuted for heresy. Atkinson notes that mystics "are vulnerable to charges of heresy and disobedience, because their direct communication with God tends to bypass the services and sacraments of the Church" (1983: 103). However, their conflict with worldly authority reinforces their spiritual status.

Apart from expounding on her encounters with God, Kempe also resorted to the symbols and sacraments of the Church. The most remarkable ones were, on the one hand, the white clothing, when God told her: "And, daughter, I say to you I will that you wear clothes of white and no other colour, for you shall be arrayed after my will." And, on the other hand, the ring He asked her to wear: "The foresaid creature had a ring which our Lord has commanded her to have made while she was at home in England and had her engrave thereupon, "Jesus est amor meus" (Kempe, 2001: 57).

However, wearing white clothes was seen as too striking and extravagant to the eyes of the Church and society at large, and consequently attracted ridicule, as Kempe acknowledged in chapter 44:

And then it drew in toward winter, and she had so much cold that she knew not what she might do, for she was poor and had no money, and also she was in great

debt. Then suffered shames and reproofs for wearing her white clothes and because she cried so loudly when our Lord gave her mind of his Passion. (Kempe, 2001: 77)

Despite the fact that she knew that this could happen, when she was asked by God to wear them: “A, dear Lord, if I go arrayed in another manner than other chaste woman do, I dread that the people will slander me. They will say I am a hypocrite and wonder upon me”. She wore them anyway since she considered this a self-imposed penance in the name of God.

Thus Margery Kempe's authority resides mainly in God's words, and then in her confidence that her visions are true, checked by her fits of weeping during her visions of salvation in which the agony and betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane feature prominently. Her visions granted her a position of observer while partaking of it as someone who wails for the state she (and the world) is in.

## Chapter 3

### A Wife with two Husbands

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher...for I am a woman, ignorant, weak, and frail. But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the Goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is his will that it be known? (Julian of Norwich 1978, qtd. in Petroff, 1986: 26-27)

Availing herself of the power of mysticism, Kempe gains strength and authority in being able to carry out her plan to serve God. Especially when her earthly life becomes dull and unsatisfactory. She had been used to a comfortable lifestyle that she no longer enjoyed as the wife of John Kempe; her social role as the daughter of a prominent father got diminished when she became the wife of an average tradesman. Margery's new-found status as a holy woman could thus satisfy her ambitions of a meaningful life.

Taking Margery's relationship with her husband as a unifying thread, we shall pay attention to the episode in which Margery Kempe discusses with her husband who should have the first right of access to her body: the spouse or Jesus Christ? While this choice might sound humiliating for a twenty-first readership, it was in fact empowering for a medieval wife. She was questioning the pre-eminence of her husband as head of the household and holder of her body, since she had now become a mystical body. As such, she was only responsive to the wishes of Jesus Christ. The spiritual subjection of her will allowed her to negotiate her social space.

In one scene taking place on Midsummer's eve, when Margery Kempe and her husband were about to engage in a dispute about their chastity, we see how John Kempe

wishes to make a deal with her. His proposed arrangement involved the couple sleeping together, she paying her debts before leaving on pilgrimage, and Margery breaking her regular Friday fast. She refused his initial offer by retorting that “to break the Friday I will never grant you while I live” (Kempe, 2001: 19). As a response, John threatens her with having sexual intercourse. Again, when facing a problem, Margery resorts to God, especially when demands are placed on her body:

Lord God, you know all things; you know what sorrow I have had to be chaste in my body to you all these three years, and now might I have my wish, and I dare not for love of you. For, if I would break that manner of fasting which you commanded me, to keep the Friday without food or drink, I should now have my desire. (Kempe, 2001: 19)

First she negotiates with Lord God (her Spiritual spouse) the terms of her marital arrangement, and agrees with him (even though we do not read his commands but her thoughts and words) to renounce to her Friday fasting in exchange for chastity. She then addresses her worldly husband in a courteous but firm manner:

Sir, if it pleases you, you shall gran me my desire, and you shall have your desire. Grant me that you shall not come in my bed, and I grant you to God so that you never challenge me by asking the debt of matrimony after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink on the Friday at your bidding. (Kempe, 2001: 20)

Thus Kempe uses her spiritual currency to purchase her body back, which has been under her husband’s control. Margery’s negotiation and recovery of her individual will as a woman offers a contrast with Luce Irigaray’s analysis of women’s duty as possessions in a patriarchal and capitalist culture. While Irigaray would appear to support a renewed connection with the (female) divine, Kempe seems to be doing

exactly this when she uses her close contact with God to legitimize a modification in the power relationships within her household. Margery's husband was aware of her 'intimations' with the Lord and her "Gift of Tears", the weeping and sobbing already mentioned in Chapter 1. For Irigaray, the "fluidity" expressed by women tends to disturb and intimidate the male linguistic system which is based on an economy of symbolic and stable forms. This threat is perceived during a sermon about the Passion when Margery reacts by weeping profusely. This weeping can be regarded as a legitimate response to the construction of the mass in the period, which led believers to experience the Eucharist as a participatory and visionary affair. However, her involvement in the Church's representation of Christ's body through tears has the effect of participating in Christ's suffering in the passion. Miri Rubin remarks that, for Kempe, the Eucharist is lived as the literal embodiment of Christ and "allowed her an escape from expectations in family and neighbourhood; it provided the pretext for travel and self-exploration, and most importantly it allowed her an identification of the female as object with Christ, the ultimate object, sacrificed, mutilated, all forbearance" (Rubin, 1992: 58).

In contrast with this spiritual reaction, Margery does not forget that she had simply been "John Kempe's wife" in the past. By evoking what she was back then, Kempe produces a witty description of herself as a typical medieval woman on the path to perdition, requiring God's grace. This allows Kempe to fashion herself as a woman intent on holiness who has learned from her past mistakes and now rejects the ways of the world. Karma Lochrie describes her achievement:

Kempe's use of the antifeminist image of the proud woman allows her to reverse it, to dismantle it, so to speak, through her conversion - and to take up her struggle against many of the antifeminist ideas about women which pose a threat to her search for "[the way of high perfection]". (Lochrie, 1986: 42)

Irigaray's speculations on women's love of fashion and their problematic relationship with their own bodies shed some light here on connections between women as lovers of fashion and women as wanderers in medieval sermons. The appropriation of motherhood so that it serves as a symbolic starting point for men, deprives women from a symbolic "place of [their] own" (Irigaray, 1991: 169), which they attempt to compensate with the trappings of conventional femininity. Irigaray states that:

Woman ... cannot be located, cannot remain in her place. She attempts to envelop herself in clothes, make-up and jewellery. She cannot use the envelope that she *is*, and so must create artificial ones. (Irigaray, 1991: 169-70)

Nevertheless, Kempe as a promising proto-feminist, challenges every man and circumstance through her resistance to the traditional marginalization of women in their households. Kempe's "departures" from domestic life, both literal and figurative, involved the manipulation and broadening of symbolic norms. As such they were perceived by male authorities as threatening patriarchal hegemony. Thus we see how Kempe's *Book* reflects the way in which "Western" patriarchal society constructs "woman" as excessive by constituting her as the 'other' of male government.

However, a contemporary reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* demonstrates Irigaray's contention that women in a patriarchal economy repeatedly escape restrictive systematization. In Kempe's medieval culture the incarnation of Christ provided opportunities for women to represent their association with travelling and physical

excess as spiritually empowering. When Kempe speaks on behalf of Christ in the places that she visits wide and far, she is fulfilling an integral part of her new mission in life. This causes her to be perceived as a threat to male prerogative on several occasions, as when she converses with clerics on the issue of the orthodox distinction between preaching and teaching. This was undoubtedly an issue in the difficulties Kempe encountered in her wanderings as she preached the Gospel. While in her *Book* Kempe mentioned having been tried and found non-guilty of Lollardy several times, she does, as Lochrie claims, “call into question the antifeminist tradition which forbids women to preach and which further discourages them from reading and interpreting the Gospel”. As a result her “personal battle with church authorities becomes a political battle as she attempts to assert her religious orthodoxy at the same time that she overturns orthodox antifeminism” (Lochrie, 1986: 42-3).

Before Kempe’s audience with the Archbishop, a monk reports against her publicly upon hearing that she will be in town:

There was a monk who should preach in York, who had heard much slander and much evil language of the said creature. And, when he should preach, there was a great multitude of people to hear him, and she was present with them. And so, when he was in his sermon, he rehearsed many matters so openly that the people conceived well it was because of her, wherefore her friends that loved her well were full sorry and heavy thereof, and she was much the more merry, for she had matter to prove her patience and her charity wherethrough she trusted to please our Lord Christ Jesus. When the sermon was done, a doctor of divinity who loved her well, with many others also, came to her and said, “Margery, how have you done this day?”

“Sir,” she said, “right well, blessed be God. I have cause to be right merry and glad in my soul that I may suffer anything for his love, for he suffered much more for me.” (Kempe, 2001: 90-91).

Margery is arrested for heresy after this episode, despite the fact that she demonstrates both dignity and aplomb when listening to a preacher who feels intimidated by her talent. She does not simply react to circumstances, she overcomes adversity while being endowed with spiritual authority. Fortunately, after talking with her, the Archbishop sets Kempe free on condition that she does not teach people in his diocese. Blessed by the power of God and her virtuous suffering, she musters up the strength and the courage to refuse to obey the Archbishop's conditions in exchange for her freedom.

Through her authority as a woman with a special understanding of the divine, she displays her ability to control and use men for her own purposes, and even for her own safety. As Verna Neuburger states, "Margery has, through her own lifestyle, demonstrated freedom as it is achieved" (1994: 180). Moreover, Kempe inverts the traditional pattern of those male clerics or confessors to speak on behalf of women within a divinely-sanctioned discourse. Kempe's book provides us with multiple examples of how medieval women were excluded from power and political structures, but their speech could never be fully appropriated. They owned the Word.

## **Conclusion**

### **Is There a Proto-feminist in this Book?**

The close reading of a selection of contextualized episodes in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is informative about the ways in which Kempe managed to overcome the gender barriers of her time and establish her will availing herself of her ‘holy’ status. She did so on her behalf, but her plight -as an individual with no authority over her body, her sexuality or her mobility- resonated with that of many contemporary women. Was she a feminist at a time when women were not even aware as a group that they could claim a dignified life? My analysis, albeit incomplete, points at this direction both textually and theoretically. Irigaray’s proposed subversion of patriarchal strongholds through a semiotic and feminine linguistic revolution, such as Kempe’s extradiegetic narrator-scribe who presents her direct communications with God, reveals to us that women’s relationship with the sacred Word is empowering. Kempe’s representation of Jesus Christ as a caring figure incarnated a semiotic pre-state of spiritual communion that Kempe used to transform her worldly relationships, both public and private. She escaped prison, further pregnancies, and the black hole of a depression which would have condemned her to a dull life. *The Book of Margery Kempe* holds the promise that women are born free in their will and resolution to construct their own notion of reality, even if this entails a recreation of divinity. Margery Kempe was undoubtedly a pious woman, but were her visions and divine communications real? Critics have not been able to reach a conclusive answer in this regard, probably because it does not matter so much after all. Her book attests to the fact that by wanting to write it, Kempe was giving

a voice to many more women in her lifetime. Verena Neuburger is right when she notes that “the very existence of the *Book* proves that Kempe assesses herself as a woman worth writing about” (1994: 180).

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary sources:**

Kempe, Margery; B.A. Windeatt (ed.) *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988.

Kempe, Margery; Lynn Staley (ed.) *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001.

### **Secondary sources:**

Aers, David. "The making of Margery Kempe: individual and community". In *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430*. London: Routledge, 1988: 73-116.

Atkinson, Clarissa W. *Mystic and pilgrim: the Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Beckwith, Sarah. *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Beckwith, Sarah. "Problems of authority in late medieval English mysticism: language, agency, and authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*". *Exemplaria* 4, 1992: 171-199.

Bennett, Judith M. *Medieval Women in Modern Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2000.

Chambers, R.W. "Introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*". In W. Butler-Bowdon (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe*. London: J. Cape, 1954. 3-16.

- Coulson, Carolyn. "Mysticism, Meditation, and Identification in The Book of Margery Kempe." *Illinois Medieval Association*, 19 July 2011. Web. (Accessed: 04 Apr. 2016).
- Duby, G., Perrot, M. *Histoire des femmes en Occident*. Paris: Perrin, 2002.
- Fienberg, Nona. "Thematics of Value in "The Book of Margery Kempe". *Modern Philology* 87.2, 1989: 132-41.
- Glenn, Cheryl. "Author, Audience, and Autobiography: Rhetorical Technique in the Book of Margery Kempe". *College English* 54.5, 1992: 540-53.
- Goodman, Anthony. *Margery Kempe and Her World*. Harlow: Longman, 2002.
- Hope Belcher, Kimberly. "My Body Free to God: Pilgrimage as a Technology of Self in the Book of Margery Kempe". *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 15:2, 2015:155-171.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Sexual Difference." Trans. Sean Hand. In *The Irigaray Reader*. Ed. Margaret Whitford. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991: 165-77.
- Jardine, Alice. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Jones, Terry. *Medieval Lives*. London: Random House, 2004.
- Kaminski, Phyllis H. "Mysticism Embodied Differently: Luce Irigaray and the Subject of Incarnate Love". *Religious Studies and Theology RSTH* 17.2, 2007: 59-79.
- Larrington, Carolyne. *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*. Routledge, 1995.
- Lochrie, Karma. "The Book of Margery Kempe: The Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority". *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16, 1986: 33-55.

- Manter, Lisa. "The Saviour of her Desire: Margery Kempe's Passionate Gaze". *Exemplaria* 13, 2001: 39-66.
- McAfee, Noëlle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- McAvoy, Liz Herbert. *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- McMurray Gibson, Gail, "St. Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe*". Norton Critical Editions. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Neuburger, Verena A. *Margery Kempe: a study in early English feminism*. New York: P. Lang, 1994.
- Petroff, Elizabeth Alvilda, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Priest, Ann-Marie. "Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology, and Luce Irigaray". *The Journal of Religion* 83.1, 2003: 1-23.
- Riddy, Felicity, "Looking Closely: Authority and Intimacy in the Late Medieval Urban Home", in Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003: 212-228.
- Rubin, Miri. "The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities". In *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*. 1992.
- Staley, Lynn. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1994.

- Summit, Jennifer, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000.
- Wallace, David. *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory, 1347-1645*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Watkin, E. I. *On Julian of Norwich, and In Defence of Margery Kempe*. Exeter: U of Exeter, 1979.
- Williams, Tara. *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writings*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2011: 114-149.
- Williams, Tara. "Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*". *Modern Philology* 107.4, 2010: 528-55.
- Yates, Julian. "Mystic Self: Margery Kempe and the Mirror of Narrative". *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 26, 1995.