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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MYSTIC SELF **THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE**

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Abstract: *This paper intends to analyse Margery Kempe's story as it was dictated by the illiterate Margery Kempe to a scribe. The Book of Margery Kempe is considered the first English-language autobiography and it is a record of her mystical visions and her struggles to follow a saintly life. Margery Kempe is unique in trying to explain her personality, and to show the obstacles she encountered in her attempt to construct her mystic self. The article briefly talks about her life, the general characteristics of her personality and the different influences that shaped her way of life and affected her choices, like the English mystic writers or the feminine mystic tradition. The final chapter tries to define the inimitable way in which she chose to lead her life by analysing the different levels of liminality which characterise her existence. Her work itself is in a liminal position. At the threshold between a hagiography and an autobiography, The Book of Margery Kempe is a testimony of a woman's struggle to unite her existence with God and thus to transcend her identity and to open her self to God. Margery's aim in life was to be united with God and she prepared for that moment her entire existence. When she recorded her memories she wrote them according to the patterns of hagiographies which were known to her, trying to explain herself and her actions to others, remembering and analysing her self. By preserving her unique liminal position, and evolving slowly on a spiritual path, Margery Kempe creates a mystic identity, or self, for herself.*

This paper intends to analyse Margery Kempe's story as it was dictated by the illiterate Margery Kempe to a scribe. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is considered the first English-language autobiography (Dinshaw 222), and it is a record of her mystical visions and her struggles to follow a saintly life. In her book she attempts to explain her actions and to justify her unconventional behaviour. No other female mystics have recorded details about their lives in addition to their revelations. Margery Kempe is thus unique in trying to explain her personality, and to show the help and the obstacles she encountered in her attempt to construct her mystic self. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a testimony of a woman's struggle to unite her existence with God and thus to transcend her identity and to open her self to God.

Margery Kempe's life

Margery Kempe, whose father had been the mayor of King's Lynn (then called Bishop's Lynn) several times, was at the age of twenty an ordinary married woman. Her existence up to this age had been the life of a middle class woman, divided between the attention she gave to her family and to her position in society. She was probably born about 1373, and in 1438 she was recorded as a member of the Guild of the Holy Trinity at Lynn, but the exact year of her death is not known.

Her first mystical experience followed the birth of her first child, when she was twenty. She was rescued from her depression by the image of Christ talking to her, but she did not take up a religious existence right away. We learn that she was a proud woman, who wanted to preserve her superior social position among the other women in the town by having the best clothes and objects, and she never seemed

to lack money although her husband had debts, which she paid, and both the businesses she started (brewing and milling) failed (chapters 1 and 2).

Although she was not leading a very religious existence, she started having more and more mystical experiences like the one described in the 3rd chapter: “On a nygth, as this creatur lay in hir bedde wyth hir husbond, sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradise” (chapter 3).¹ As we can see, she used the phrase “this creatur(e)” to talk about herself, which has led some critics to dissociate Margery Kempe the author(ess) from Margery Kempe the protagonist². We learn from her story that she did not feel satisfied by her spiritual progress in the next years, and that she had temptations which she tried to resist, but sometimes she was not very successful in resisting them. One of her major obsessions was with being chaste, and she tried to convince her husband to give up his marital rights for a very long time before she finally succeeded. She liked travelling and she went on pilgrimage at first to Norwich, which was not far, then to London, Canterbury and York, and later on to Jerusalem and Rome (where she stopped on her way back from the Holy Land). She also travelled to Santiago de Compostela and in her last book, when she was around sixty, she went to Danzig and Wilsnack in Brandenburg, Germany.

Margery Kempe was a woman who refused to abide by the rules that defined the accepted type of a medieval woman, and she was constantly rebuked because she would not be placed in an established category. She felt that Jesus Christ himself talked to her, and sometimes the Virgin Mary, and that they repeatedly assured her that she was doing the right thing behaving the way she did. She saw herself as a great spiritual heroine, whom God loved and glorified, as she was told in one of her spiritual conversations:

Than owr blisful Lord seyde unto hir mende, “Dowtyr, I wil not han my grace hyd that I geve the, for the mor besy that the pepil is to hyndryn it and lette it, the mor schal I spredyn it abroad and makyn it knowyn to alle the worlde.” (ch.56).

Different traditional influences

The two major influences in her life are both drawn from the written texts that were read to her, firstly the male tradition of English mystic writers (the best known being Walter Hamilton and Richard Rolle, who are both mentioned in her book, and secondly the female examples of mystics (like Julian of Norwich, whom she talked to, or Mary d’Oignies³, and especially Saint Bridget of Sweden, who was canonized in Margery’s lifetime, whose room in Rome she visited, and with whose maid she talked).

Margery proved over and over again that she was instructed in her faith and that she knew her dogmas very well. Such detailed knowledge and theoretical understanding could only be gathered from the books written by male authors, who focused on instructing young Christians on how to progress spiritually. Not only did Margery learn the basic knowledge about her Christian faith, but she also liked telling emotional tales with strong moral meaning. Such behaviour was inspired from a male rather than a female tradition, and she was reprimanded several times for her habit of talking to different people and of telling them moral stories (one such time was in York, where she had to explain herself and to say that she was only *talking* and not *preaching* to the people, chapter 52).

¹ All the quotations from Margery Kempe are from the edition: *The Book of Margery Kempe*, edited by Lynn Staley, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996.

² This is the case with Lynn Staley in her book *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*.

³ Mary d’Oignies’ life was well known in England and the priest who wrote Margery’s *Book* mentions the fact that his doubts concerning Margery’s sincerity disappeared when he heard about another religious woman who had behaved in a similar way (chapter 68): the reference must be to Mary d’Oignies. She was married but she persuaded her husband to live chastely and she devoted her life to looking after lepers. She had visions and she cried loudly and uncontrollably, especially at the thought of Christ’s passions. She wore white clothes despite having been married and she had the gift of prophecy.

Her visions and the way she perceived God were similar to the ecstatic experiences of female mystics, as was her emphasis on Christ's physicality (especially on His suffering). Even more importantly the writing of a book in which to record her tribulation was common practice among the female mystics. Margery's connection to Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations* is very profound, as on the one hand she legitimizes her lifestyle and visions by quoting Saint Bridget of Sweden's life⁴ and on the other hand she feels that she is a continuer of Saint Bridget's revelations, and that she is moved by the same divine inspiration. It is because of this inner belief that we can explain her confidence in describing experiences that surpass Bridget of Sweden's visions, and she also feels entitled to confirm the authenticity of Saint Bridget's book (chapter 20).⁵

Margery mentions in the 18th chapter of her *Book* her meeting with the well known recluse Julian of Norwich. Margery's memory in this respect is impressive because in the fragments of the lengthy conversations between Julian and Margery, which are recorded in Margery's *Book*, one can recognise Julian's style found in her *Revelations of Divine Love*:

...her recollection of what was said to her at their meeting by dame Julian of Norwich is also impressive with a different kind of accuracy, in that what Margery Julian as saying rings true in context, and even in style, with Julian's own writing (Windeatt 26).

When analysing the way Margery Kempe understood or even constructed her personality we realise that she was greatly indebted to the textual tradition (although ironically she could neither read nor write, or so she declared). We have to agree that Margery Kempe follows the medieval pattern laid out by Mary Carruthers, namely that *a medieval self ... was constructed out of bits and pieces of great authors from the past* (Carruthers, 180). Margery Kempe's identity at this level should be discussed in *rhetorical terms. So instead of the word "self" or even "individual", we might better speak of a "subject-who-remembers" and in remembering also feels and thinks and judges* (Carruthers 182). This is even more appropriate for Margery Kempe than for other medieval people because she felt the need to *remember* and *think* about her life by committing it to paper.

Considering the fact that Margery Kempe had her first mystical experience when she was twenty, and she succeeded in obtaining her independence from the constraints of marriage when she was around forty, one realises that she had lived most of her life in a middle-class environment which must have influenced her mentality. The urban middle-class mentality is responsible for her ability to negotiate various circumstances:

The merchant community of King's Lynn [is] a world in which the pragmatic instinct of even the devout led them to grope for financial and material equivalents for the things of the spirit (Duffy, 297).

The first example is the way she negotiated her freedom from conjugal duties, by agreeing to pay her husband's debts and also to stop fasting and to join him at dinner on Fridays. She definitely needed good negotiating skills to deal with the people she met on her extensive journeys: she needed male companions to travel with her, money to pay for food and accommodation, and friends to support her. She knew when to give money for a certain service and when to ask for it in God's name, and she also knew when to answer the questions she was asked or when to keep quiet.

Another aspect of her mentality was the constant attention she paid to the opinions of others. However she did not want to oppose others, and did not want to be ostentatious. Whenever she was asked by God to do something which might give rise to controversy (like eating meat again) she complained

⁴ Saint Bridget was also married and had eight children before she was widowed. She devoted her life to God and she stayed in Rome and went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. She had a great influence and she was of a high social rank and therefore she was able to found a new religious congregation, the Brigittines, or Order of St. Saviour.

⁵ The Bridgettine influence is also important because Margery visited different places where Saint Bridget had lived.

about people's opinion, as in ch.66: *Thei wil have gret merveyl and, as I suppose, despisyn me and scornyn me therfor.* (also in chapter 12) Yet, on the other hand she considered that their scorn helped her spiritually, because she interpreted her suffering as endured for the sake of God. In either way we can see that besides the vertical dimension of her personality that connected her with God, there was also a horizontal aspect which created a link with the people around her.

Her relations with people were centred on her need to express her love for God. The simple common folk, who listened to her stories were either enthralled by her eloquence, or quite the opposite accused her of being a lollard (a heretic), while the noble people, especially belonging to Church hierarchy tested her orthodoxy and always found her a blameless believer. She needed to be read different religious texts and she needed to talk about God, being unable to refrain from talking about Him, even if she had to suffer the scorn and the rejection of the others: "for I must nedys speke of my Lord Jhesu Crist thow al this world had forbodyn it me." (chapter 26) The fact that she constantly had to defend her position sharpened her intelligence and increased her knowledge of the Church dogmas and of Scriptures. We can see that as she became older she seemed more certain of herself, and this is witnessed by the way she answered back on several occasions. She did not look meek or afraid (as she confessed to having been on one of the first occasions when she was accused of being a lollard: *And the creatur stod styлле, tremelyng and whakyng ful sor in hir flesch wythowtyn ony erdly comfort...* chapter 13) She had a totally different attitude when she was waiting to be brought for the second time in front of the Archbishop of York. It was she who in chapter 53 comforted the jailer ("Ser, ovyrthyntyth ne repentith yow not that ye met wyth me. Doth yowr lordys wille, and I trust al schal be for the best, for I am ryth wel plesyd that ye met wyth me") and another person who was arrested because of her ("*Havyth mekenes and pacyens, and ye schal have gret mede in hevyn therfor.*") We witness therefore in her text the way she defined her identity in relation to others: on the one hand she felt that God's love and her own spiritual life increased when she was publicly reproved by many people, and on the other hand she felt that listening to a sermon or talking to others about God were essential for her spiritual existence.

General characteristics of her personality

After analyzing these four influences – the female mystics' lives, the patriarchal mystic instructive literature, the urban commercial mentality and the reactions of the people towards her - we must point out a few distinctive elements that define her personality, her mystic self.

Maybe the most often talked about feature of her behaviour was her loud and frequent weeping, which she tried to control or to stop entirely, which only made it worse. Her violent weeping was a constant cause of distress, both on her pilgrimages, because the other pilgrims disliked her because of it, and in church, because she disturbed everyone and prevented them from listening to the sermons. She often justified her weeping by citing examples from other saints' lives and works, saints who perceived tears as an accepted sign of religious devotion. She explained in an entire chapter (chapter 77) the reason for which God gave her this burdensome gift:

sumtyme I geve the gret cryis and roryngys for to makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace that I putte in the into a tokyn that I wil that my modrys sorwe be knowyn by the that men and women myth have the mor compassyon of hir sorwe that sche suffyrd for me.

Her insistence on wearing white clothes was also opposed by some priests, who considered them inappropriate because she was not a virgin. Her *homely intimacy* (chapters 23, 31, etc.) with Christ, both in her personal discussions and in the sensual images she evoked was specific to most female mystics, who saw themselves as the brides of Christ and longed to touch Him, and worship His body. The sexual inference is there as Margery used the word "dalliance" to describe her relation with Christ, a term denoting both spiritual conversation and sexual union in Middle English (Dinshaw, 234).

It was also common for many mystics (female and male) to insist on perceiving God or the divine with the physical senses. Margery also mentioned such wonderful sensorial experiences in chapter 35,

hearing divine melodies or seeing angels. It is from this sensorial perspective that we have to understand Richard Rolle of Hampole's reference to *the fire of love*, which warms up the Christian's heart. Margery herself felt *the fire of love* several times burning in her heart (chapter 28).

Another characteristic of her mystic self was the fact that sometimes she could foretell the future. Foretelling refers to important natural events like an earthquake (chapter 20) or the plague (chapter 24) or to more personal issues. She answered the questions of the priest who wrote her *Book* for her (chapter 24) or even replied to those who wanted to test her (chapters 71, 78).

Margery was a woman who refused to have a family life. She did not feel close to any of her children, and even from the first time giving birth did not bring any satisfaction, but anxiety and nervous breakdown. Being pregnant made her unhappy, firstly because she would have to look after the baby (and Jesus Christ told her in her mind that the baby would be looked after: *Owir Lord seyð, "Dowtyr, drede the not, I schal ordeyn for an kepar."* (chapter 21), and secondly because her pregnancy was the result of sexual relations which she loathed, since she perceived them as something that separated her from God.

The religious relationship was more important for Margery than the blood relationship. Those who she addressed with the appellative "good son" or "good man" were Christians who took care of her, like Thomas Marchale, whom she repeatedly called "son" (chapters 40, 45, 49).

The liminal existence

Margery Kempe seemed always at the threshold of different social and religious positions, striving to construct her own composite identity from different pieces of acknowledged roles.⁶ I do not agree with Caroline's position that:

There are dozen of occasions on which we might say, Margery strains desperately for liminality, strains for transition in status, for conversion, for escape from her normal role as "married woman" into the role two hundred years old at least, of the *mulier sancta* (Walker Bynum, 40).

I consider that she did not strain for the accepted role of the *mulier sancta* because she did not want to be a mystic recluse or part of a monastic congregation. She did not even try to join the beguine movement, although her life might have some elements in common with theirs. Her choice of being outside the established religious vocations is unique, because, as Andre Vauchez said:

In Medieval time, more than in other historical periods, the wish to lead an intense spiritual life is inseparable from adopting a certain form of religious life, generally defined by a rule having itself a sanctifying value (Vauchez, 135).

She had powerful mystic experiences, but could not lead a solitary existence (as a recluse) since she needed people to talk to. She did not feel like going to a nunnery, a place where her freedom would be restraint. She did not dedicate her life to nursing the sick or to other social work like the beguines. So hers was indeed a liminal existence, because she made no effort to fit into any of the established roles, but rather adopted an original position of her own that would allow her to assume a religious and mystic life more completely.

One can identify some elements that characterise and define her existence as being at the threshold between two stages. One she had left behind, namely the ordinary existence of a housewife, and the other

⁶ I have to acknowledge the fact that my understanding of liminality is indebted to Victor Turner's theory, who expanded the term so that it does not refer only to *the processual form of the transitional rites of passage in which he [Van Gennep] first identified it*. (Turner 2) Liminality is perceived as "*a transformative dimension of the social*", which is not a simple social transition, but rather a transcending to a higher reality, an expectation which is specific to *cultures ideologically dominated by...salvation religions* (Turner 3). On the other hand I do not feel the need to present the theory because I consider it unnecessary for the understanding of Margery's character, exploits and accomplishments.

one she had not achieved yet. This unstructured reality, in which she did not obey certain definite social rules, and had the opportunity to travel extensively and could listen to religious leaders and instructors, is the life she chose for herself.

There are several layers of liminality when analyzing her existence. Not only was her religious identity unique, but her social status was also liminal, because unlike other mystics she was neither unmarried, nor a widow. At first she journeyed with her husband on her pilgrimages, but later on she went with a group of pilgrims and she had problems being accepted. She was aware that she needed male assistance in her journeys and she had to beg or pay for it, or both.

Although she was reproved by many people and often accused of being a lollard, Margery Kempe had friends in important religious positions and she was also known to bishops (the bishop of Worcester invited her to dinner, chapter 45) and those who had not heard about her before meeting her would definitely have remembered her. So, because of her unique religious vocation she was both in the company of high rank people, and close to low rank, poor ones, transgressing thus the social hierarchy, being situated at the threshold of social classes.

Another instance of liminality is related to her numerous pilgrimages. She felt that she was moved in her soul to go to visit certain places to increase her spiritual health: *Sone aftyr this creatur was mevyd in hir sowle to go vysyten certeyn places for gostly helth* (chapter 10). The major purpose of the pilgrimage was *to enter a sacred space where the divine power chose to reveal itself through miracles* (Vauchez, 136). Her journeys also point to her spiritual restlessness, which had not found a defined, satisfactory identity. On the one hand her pilgrimages, although guided by God, do not result in a miraculous revelation or transformation, but the ending is a safe and happy homecoming. On the other hand she did feel enriched by her journeys because she felt closer to God since she walked in the places He had walked or where His saints had lived.

Margery's last journey in Book II seems to be slightly different from her other pilgrimages. Unlike the other two major journeys, the first to Jerusalem and Rome and the second to Santiago de Compostela, this one is not prepared in advance and her decision to leave England takes her friends by surprise. We can witness here a complete surrender to God's will. It is thus in this way, in terms of surrender to God's will, that we can interpret her evolution. Her weeping was not so violent anymore, but not because she could control it, but because God wanted it to be like this. She gained more courage and she was more and more admired for her insight, but it was only because the Holy Spirit taught her what to say.

She did gain knowledge and towards the end of her book, and we can see that she was far more certain of her instruction than at the beginning, but she did not step over the threshold into a significantly new existence, but rather became more comfortable in her liminal existence, which she could not and would not control.

Her Book is a perfect record of her feeling and expectations. She was dedicated to following God's purpose and she completely and cheerfully wanted to obey His will, while her expectations only referred to reaching Heaven, as she stated repeatedly. Her tribulations and misfortunes were only mentioned because she gave them a spiritual significance, namely her suffering was a penance for her sins, and endured with the declared purpose of being brought closer to Jesus Christ.

The real mystic way implies the *abolition of identity, of that clear-cut separation, that "me, my, mine", which makes man a finite and isolated thing* (Underhill, 127). From this perspective her whole existence was endowed with liminality, since she was trying to transcend of any confining identity in order to fill herself with God's will and presence, and to prepare herself for heaven. Heaven was the place where her identity would be reconstructed and completely established. Until then she deliberately chose to be in a "no man's land" in between established patterns of life, no longer a wife and a mother, but not yet fulfilled as a person until her union with God in heaven. She did not strive to "construct a mystic self" or in other words a clear social position or role within the conventional rules, nor did she want to create an original position for herself, but rather she tried to empty her self and to open herself to God, His love, His will, His presence. "The aim that the mystic intends to achieve is the conscious union with the living absolute" (Underhill 129). In the case of the Christian mystics, Margery Kempe included, "the living

absolute” is Jesus Christ. Margery Kempe might have had some ecstatic experiences, but she did not feel the complete union with God which was to be attained in the next level of her existence.

Her work itself is in a liminal position. It is at the threshold between a hagiography and an autobiography, yet it cannot be either. The Book seems very odd if we categorise it as a real autobiography: there is no clear sequence of events, realistic details are rather sporadic and it is incomplete since only matters that she perceived as spiritually important are recorded. Yet, it is not a hagiography because, although she used the phrase “this creature” to describe herself, the tone is too personal and direct. It is clear from the text that she believed herself superior to other human beings, in the love and grace God bestowed on her. Yet, all these feelings do not resonate with a humble, saintly figure, so the Book cannot fit into the description of a hagiographical work.

We can only save The Book of Margery Kempe from its ambiguous, even marginal, position by arguing that since Margery Kempe herself wanted to define her inner world, her self, or by extrapolating, her ego, only through her mystic experiences, then the Book is an autobiography or a “memoir” (based on the selective memory of the author) of the mystic self, the only part of her self (personality) that is of interest to the author. The autobiography of her mystic self starts with her first mystic experience and thus her life prior to it was unimportant, irrelevant and therefore inexistent.

Even if her spiritual visions are not considered valid from a religious point of view, and she is by no means a candidate for canonization by the Catholic Church, one cannot fail to see the literary importance of Margery’s work, since she was the “only one member of the medieval public [who] has had the industry, self-confidence and will-power to describe for us the everyday life and vicissitudes of a mayor’s extraordinary daughter” (Collis 258).

The power of Margery Kempe’s *Book* lies in its multiple readings. It is not only a memoir of her mystical experiences, but also a record of her hopes and misfortunes. It succeeds in portraying instances of medieval life, especially recording the practical obstacles encountered by a woman going on pilgrimage alone.

Margery’s aim in life was to be united with God, and she prepared for that moment her entire life. When she recorded her memories she wrote them according to the patterns of hagiographies which were known to her, trying to explain herself and her actions to others, remembering and analysing her existence. By preserving her unique liminal position, and evolving slowly on a spiritual path, Margery Kempe creates a mystic identity, or self, for herself.

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