1971

The case of Margery Kempe

Mary Marshall Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses

Recommended Citation
THE CASE OF MARGERY KEMPE

Thesis
for
Dr. Frances Underhill
and
Dr. Frances Gregory

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Westhampton College
Mary Marshall Taylor
1971
THE CASE OF MARGERY KEMPE

There are few today who would consider Margery Kempe as an individual displaying characteristics of a normal, well-adjusted person. As a woman and representative of her era, Margery is atypical. In W. A. Pantin's words: "Margery was of course abnormal in several ways, but she was an abnormal specimen of what was a large and familiar class of devout lay people..."\(^1\) one whose spiritual experiences were realized in the fifteenth century, but who is a fourteenth-century product.\(^2\) As a mystic, David Knowles evaluates her as "the less highly respectable Margery Kempe."\(^3\) Among her townsmen her identity is not especially clear, for while a few are regarding her as a saint, the majority are finding her hypocritical and a nuisance.\(^4\)

On the positive side, although unable to read and write herself, Margery dictated an autobiography which is accurate in conveying her own thoughts and of revealing the woman Margery Kempe. The Book of Margery Kempe is valued as being the oldest known manuscript of its type.\(^5\) It has religious merit, gives an informative account of life in the middle ages, and is of literary value in
providing insight into the modes of expression common at that time.6

Living a long and full life, Margery Kempe is "colorful" person. Anyone reading her autobiography, however, will immediately discern that she leans toward the eccentric side. She considers it her duty to improve the morals and spiritual life of those around her, and in so doing, makes a nuisance of herself.7

Born in Lynn, a seacoast town about seventy-five miles north of London, in 1373, she was the daughter of John Brunham, mayor of Lynn. Unlike most girls of her class, she did not learn how to read and write. Her education included learning proper etiquette and how to manage a household. She married John Kempe, a burgess in 1393. Other than coming from a devout family, there is little indication of the extreme direction she will take in later years, for at this present stage of her life, she proved to be vain and ambitious:8 "She would not leave her pride or pompous array, which she had used beforetime, either for her husband or for any other man's counsel."9

The birth of her first child seems to have provoked the first evidence of a change. It was a difficult birth, and one which had its effects psychologically:

Anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side, and his sharp reproving of her on the other side, this creature10 went out of her mind and was wondrously vexed and laboured with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days.11
Christ intervened, however, and Margery recovered. For the time being, this incident left no apparent affects, but this seed was planted and would germinate later.

To support her extravagances, she turned to trade, trying her hand first at brewing which failed after four years and then as a miller. The second project proved to be even more disastrous and collapsed within a year. Following these two unsuccessful endeavors, the townfolk were inclined to believe that she was either cursed or that Christ wished her to abandon all aspects of the material world and follow in his path. Margery, reflecting upon the earlier incident at the birth of her child, decided that it must be this second explanation which was the seat of her business failures.\(^{12}\)

More indications towards a mystic trend begin to reveal themselves. Lying in bed one night, Margery is convinced that she hears heavenly music. It has such a great emotional impact upon her, that each additional time she hears it, she bursts into tears and speaks of heaven. She insists that this experience is a sign that she should refrain from sex.\(^{13}\) She speaks to her husband: "'I may not deny you my body, but the love of my heart and my affections are withdrawn from all earthly creatures, and set only in God.'"\(^{14}\)

She continues:

He would have his will and she obeyed, with great weeping and sorrowing that she might not live chaste. And oftentimes this creature counselled her husband to live chaste, and said that they often, she knew well, had dis-
pleased God by their inordinate love, and the great delectation they each had in using the other, and now it was good that they should, by the common will and consent of them both, punish and chastise themselves wilfully by abstaining from the lust of their bodies...

Margery Kempe's new discoveries about herself soon manifested themselves outside her home. Constantly moralizing to both friends and strangers, she became quite unpopular. After the incident of hearing heavenly music, she could not restrain herself from expounding upon it in the company of friends. Often she would say:

'It is full merry in Heaven.'

...And they that knew her behaviour beforetime, and now heard her speaking so much of the bliss of Heaven, said to her:

'Why speak ye so of the mirth that is in Heaven? Ye know it not, and ye have not been there, any more than we.'

She enjoyed preaching of her sins and others, but the bellowing noises which accompanied were annoying and succeeded in further promoting the avoidance of her friends. She seemed to take great pride in her cryings, and the loudness of them was of significance, for the more volume produced, the more important they were. Several times she went a little too far and in one instance, a preaching friar asked her to leave and forbade her to join them in the future:

The good friar went forth to say the sermon and preached full holily and devoutly, and spoke much of Our Lord's Passion, so that the said creature could no longer bear it. She kept herself from crying as long as she might, and then at last she burst out with a great cry,
and cried wondrous sore...

...Then said the good friar:'I would this woman were out of the church; she annoyeth the people.'

Most concluded she was trying to draw attention to herself and their antagonism was strengthened by her constant reminders to them that she was one of the special few chosen by God. The more humiliation she received and the more difficult her situation became, the closer she felt to God. The opposition which came from others corresponded to the situation of a martyr and only drove her on still more. Her actions were far from normal, and many were afraid of her. In 1401, in Lynn, a priest was publicly burned as a heretic, and this event was a major factor in drawing the public away from her. Margery, fully aware of the situation, took note of the danger, wishing that she could receive a sign which would indicate to all that she was chosen by God.

It was not long before she began experiencing more visions, both of the birth of Saint John and of Jesus. The visions, overwhelming and profoundly authentic to her, seem somewhat farfetched to the reader, and further bring out the eccentric quality of her character. One will readily note that she does seem stuck on herself. It is almost as if she is making herself the heroine. This in itself is a little daring:

Then went the creature forth with Our Lady to Bethlehem and purchased her shelter every night.
with great reverence, and Our Lady was received with glad cheer. Also she begged for Our Lady fair white cloths and kerchiefs to swathe her Son in, when He was born; and when Jesus was born, she provided bedding for Our Lady to lie in with her Blessed Son. Later she begged meat for Our Lady and her Blessed Child, and she swathed Him with bitter tears of compassion, having mind of the sharp death He would suffer for love of sinful men. 20

Margery does not linger long in relating of her early years of marriage. The autobiography suddenly skips about fifteen years and the reader finds that after twenty years of marriage and fourteen children, the author is obsessed with the notion of remaining chaste. In a vision which is an answer to her prayers, the Lord promises to quell her husband's lust. Moreover, a few chapters later, Margery and John Kempe make vows of chastity before the Bishop of Lincoln. This decision seems to satisfy both, and husband and wife part in good terms.

This creature thanked God, greatly rejoicing that she had her desire, praying her husband that they should say three Paternosters in worship of the Trinity for the great grace that He had granted them. And so they did, kneeling under a cross, and afterwards they ate and drank together in great gladness of spirit. 21

Margery Kompe was just one among a growing number of women "saints" of the fourteenth century. This trend was typical of the devotional movement of the age. 22 There was a growing disillusionment among the people due to increasing corruption within the church as seen in the sale of indulgences, in the nonastaries where the original ideas
of the monks had become debased, and the institution was now being used to better their living comfort, and in the convents which were dumping grounds for left over women. Values proved to be of a materialistic nature. This atmosphere undoubtedly provides an explanation as to why the Christian mystic movement, where the stress lay in the individual and his spiritual needs, became so popular.23

Mysticism in religion is responsible toward helping to initiate free thought in this area, for until this movement, details of the faith were reserved for the hierarchy of the church, and the population went through the mechanics of faith, lacking understanding and failing to grasp in depth the theological significance behind much of the ritual.24

Margery never attains the sainthood she aspired for during her lifetime, but today there are some who place her in the category of a mystic. What is Christian mysticism? Stated simply, it is a personal religious experience proving to be very intense in nature, where the person seeks to reach communion with God, direct or spiritual, through contemplation. The word mysticism is understood by some people as the special knowledge of God. There are several characteristics of this understanding or knowledge of God. In the first place, and individual who undergoes a mystical awakening gains a more profound consciousness of God than he has been aware of in his
former spiritual life. A second aspect is the nourishment for the soul idea where the spiritual needs are fulfilled. Thirdly, during the whole experience, one is unable to communicate with others, though the experience can be put into words in a meaningful way after it is over. There are three stages in mysticism, but one must experience an awakening or call of God beforehand. The first stage is purgation whereby the individual tries to rid the soul of obstacles which block the soul’s communication with God. The illumination stage follows whereby those things external (outer world) fade out, and the mind comes under the complete will of God. Contemplation is the third and ultimate stage. The soul rests in the presence of God. It is the highest state, one of ecstasy and joy.

As an additional point of research, it is interesting to note what psychologists have to say on the subject of Christian mystics. Although psychologists have attempted to analyze the behavioral tendencies of the mystics, one should not rely too heavily on their answers as a sole explanation for the behavior of the mystics. Each person labelled "mystic" is an individual and should be considered as one. Furthermore, the theories are just hypotheses; the research and study of this approach, however, is fascinating, especially if one is interested in trying to understand a personality such
as Margery Kempe and those individuals similar to her.

James H. Leuba, in his book *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, asks the question "What do the Christian Mystics want?"\(^2^7\) A surface answer and a convenient one is that they want God. The inward motivation behind their tendencies of action are due to basic needs which are vital to the individual for what we consider normal behavior, but which the mystics have not obtained.\(^2^8\)

Essential needs, explains Leuba, which the mystics are trying to have fulfilled are:

1. The tendencies to self affirmation and the need for self-esteem.

2. The tendencies to cherish, to devote oneself to something or somebody. These tendencies come to their most perfect expression in the parents' relations with the utterly dependent child but, strange as it may seem, they appear even in man's relations with God.

3. The needs for affection and moral support.

4. The need for peace, for single-mindedness or unity, both in passivity and in action.

5. "Organic" needs or needs for sensuous satisfaction (especially in connexion with the sex-life). If the mystics profess disdain for the body and its pleasures, it is not because they are indifferent to sensuous delight as such, but because they see some incompatibility between the pleasures of the flesh and the soul's welfare....\(^2^9\)

It is the last need which explains Margery's obsession with chastity and the delight she feels when she and her husband take vows of chastity.
Education, particularly in religious aspects, enters into the picture as well as the frame of mind or natural disposition of the individual. Two concepts which one finds stressed particularly in monasticism are the idea of surrendering one's self to the will of God, and chastity. In pursuing both, the individual is assured of salvation. Since the church also emphasized these two ideals, it is natural that they had an impact on the lives of the people, especially those with extremely religious convictions.

The influence of the two principles was such that they served a potent force in Medieval Christianity. Since Margery grew up in this atmosphere, her autobiography reveals evidence of the strong roots of influence which the church had on the people of the time. A conversation with God conveys an attempt at rationalizing her own state of marriage:

'Yea, daughter, trow thou right well that I love wives also, and specially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will, and do their business to please Me as thou dost; for though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy that the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet, daughter, I love thee as well as any maiden in the world....

Another element of significance found in mystics is that of fear which manifests itself in a concern at displeasing God. It is detectable at the beginning of their religious experiences where they turn away from
the path they have been following and decide to amen their ways. The reader perceives evidences of fear in Margery's autobiography. After she has tried her hand at brewing and running a mill, and when both have failed, she presumes that the Lord wishes her to turn away from a materialistic life and follow him:

Then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, thought they were the scourges of Our Lord that would chastise her for her sin. Then she asked God's mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetness, and the desire that she had for the worship of the world, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life as shall be told hereafter.

The mystics felt that they were not necessarily denying themselves, for they had so much more to gain with a good friendly relationship with God. They gratefully and happily suffered anything just to sense God's love for them.

This is evident in Margery's book:

The creature said unto her Lord Christ Jesus:

'Ah! Blissful Lord, I would I knew where-in I might best love Thee and please Thee, and that my love were as sweet to Thee, as methinketh, Thy love is unto me.'

Then Our Sweet Lord Jesus Christ, answering His creature, said:

'Daughter, if thou knew how sweet thy love is unto Me, thou shouldst never do another thing but love Me with all thy heart. And therefore believe well, daughter, that My love is not so sweet to thee, as thy love is to Me. Daughter, thou knowest not how much I love thee, for it may not be known in this world how much it is, nor be felt as it is, for thou wouldest fail and burst and never endure it, for the joy thou wouldst feel.'
Julian of Norwich and Saint Birgitta of Sweden are two mystics whom Margery mentions in her autobiography and who had an influence in Margery's thought. In fact, many of Margery's experiences correspond with similar incidents of Julian and Saint Birgitta whose works Margery was familiar. This leads Albert C. Baugh, in his *Literary History of England* to state, "She appears to have been quite susceptible to the power of suggestion...".

The year 1342 may not have been significant to the villagers of Norwich, and they may never have been aware of the importance of the birth of Julian of Norwich, author of *Revelations of Divine Love*. Although long a devout woman, Julian's first mystical experiences appear when she is convalescing from a severe illness. The "shewings", Julian's term for her experiences, have a great impact upon her, for she describes them with a vividness which is amazing considering that she dictated them twenty years later.

In her *Revelations*, she speaks of a desire of three things—to experience a vision of the passion of Christ so that she may undergo the same pangs as His mother suffered, to endure a severe illness in which she would be subjected to much suffering and therefore be purified, and thirdly, she wishes for three wounds corresponding to her regret at being sinful, of sharing Christ's suffering, and of her desire for God.
She was an extremely optimistic person, and the love of God for mankind was the central point of her faith. She did not preach down to people like Margery, and for this reason, she was more popular with the people than the former. She saw a bright side to life not only for herself but for others as well. Consider the closing words of her book: "Wouldst thou with thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Wit it well: Love was his meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed he thee? Love. Wherefore shewed it he? For love."

Margery's interest lies in promoting herself and proving to others that she is special since she has visions from God. This is a self-centered attitude that is not found in Julian's Revelations, for Julian is certain that the shewings do not set her apart as being holier than others:

Because of the shewing I am not good, but only if I love God the better.... I am certain there are full many who never had shewing nor sight but of the common teaching of Holy Church, and who love God better than I. For a soul that only fasteneth itself on to God with very trust...it is most worship that it may do to him, as to my sight.

The situation may have been easier for Margery if she had followed the anchorite tradition. As it was, she was regarded as a nuisance in her day. If she had lived in a cell, the outside world could have come and talked with her, thus eliminating some of the overbearing quality of her nature for which she was known.
on the other hand, was an anchoress, living apart from the world in a cell at St. Julian's church located in Carrow. At one window of the cell she received visitors. Through the other she heard mass and could have communion. Margery records in her autobiography that she went to visit Julian whom she must have been impressed with, for she writes:

Then she was bidden by Our Lord to go to an anchoress in the same city, named Dame Jelyan, and so she did, and showed her the grace that God put into her soul, of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion, compassion with holy meditation and high contemplation, and full many holy speeches and dalliance that Our Lord spake to her soul; and many wonderful revelations, which she shewed to the anchoress to find out if there were any deceit in them, for the anchoress was expert in such things, and good counsel could give. 45

Considering her cloistered life, Julian achieved remarkable understanding of God. David Knowles is impressed with the depth she pondered on her faith. 46 He wrote in The English Mystical Tradition:

Julian of Norwich is, in qualities of mind and heart, one of the most remarkable—perhaps the most remarkable—English woman of her age. Her mind can wrestle with the deepest mysteries of theology and life, and has absorbed (or discovered for itself) much of the abstruse technical phraseology of the schools... 47

In the fifteenth century, Saint Bergitta of Sweden was one of the most respected and admired saints of Europe. She was born in Finstad in 1303. At the early age of seven she experienced visions of Mary, Jesus, or an angel who would talk with her. An event which had a lasting effect
on her stemmed from a sermon on Christ's passion which she heard when she was ten. That night in a vision she saw Christ just after he was crucified. The effect was so moving that she could not restrain from crying. Birgitta placed much emphasis on the passion throughout her book, for it proves to be a recurring theme.

Bot that is veraly to be called deth when pe sowle, departed from the body, lyuyth in deth everlastyng. Per is mony that takyth noo kepe of thynges to come desyris to dye in cristen deth. Bot what is cristen deth, bot for to dye as I dyed, innocently, wyllfully, and pacyentely?...Nay, bot per- for I and my chosen suffered herde passyon to shewe in worde and in exsamplr that the way to heuyn is herd, and that it shulde besyly be hadde in mynde how mych nede the wyked haue to be clensede seth the innocentes & chosen suffered so sharpe thynges.

Birgitta, like Margery was married and had children, and then began to have second thoughts about the situation. Birgitta's father, however, arranged a political marriage much against her wishes. Evidently, Birgitta had doubts on the subject beforehand.

Similar to Margery, are the visions where Birgitta appears to rationalize over whether God loves her despite the fact that she has been married. The passage below lacks the eccentric quality which Margery's autobiography conveys.

Here thou, saith the modre of God to seint Birgitte, that prayest God with all thyne herte that the children may please God. True- ly, such prayer is pleayng to God. For there is no modre that loueth my son aboue all thynges and askith the same to hir children, but pat
am anone redy to helpe hir to be effect of hir askyng. There is also no widowe pat stably pray-eth after the helpe of God to stonde in widowe-hood to be worship of God vn-to hir deth, but that anone I am redy to fulfille hir willewith hir... There is also no virgyn that desireth to kepe hir maydenhode to Got vn-to hir deth, but at I am redy to defende hir and to comforte hir...52

Birgitta wished to see the church reformed and worked toward this goal. Her greatest accomplishment was in founding the Birgittine Order. The rigidity of the order reflects her disgust at the present lax state of many nunneries.53

Saint Birgitta proved to be competition for Margery, who was bent on surpassing her both in religious aspects, and fame. Saint Birgitta, on the other hand, never tried to prove herself pious and saintly.54 She was popular among the people and respected by all as is evident from this excerpt from Margery's autobiography:

...Then the maiden said that her lady, Saint Bridget, was kind and meek to every creature and that she had a laughing face....

Also the good man where this creature was at host, told her that he knew her himself, but he little thought that she had been as holy a woman as she was, for she was ever homely and kind to all creatures that would speak to her.55

As an opposite extreme, Margery thought highly of herself and showed it. She always looked at the pessimistic side of things and was constantly rebuking her friends for their shortcomings. It was little wonder that Saint Birgitta attracted a larger following.56
As a contrast with Hargery, Julian and Birgitta, it is interesting to examine the type of women entering the convents during this period. They consisted of a small proportion in comparison with the entire female population. Mostly from the upper classes, they came to the nunneries with the demeanor, tastes, and bearing of their backgrounds. Little concerned with instruction, they usually conversed with one another during the sermons. Interested in keeping up with the fashions, they designed new styles for the habits. Many brought their pets with them. ¹⁷

The convents, as mentioned earlier, were often used as dumping grounds for the women of the upper classes. The social structure of the time which offered only the choices of marriage or of entering the convent must be blamed somewhat. Among the lower classes, if a girl did not get married, she helped work in the fields or inside the home. If her father was a tradesman, she learned the trade to help support herself. ¹⁸

The nunneries required some measure of education of the girls before they admitted them, and members of the lower classes, unlike those of the upper classes, lacked the funds or opportunity to give their daughters an education. ¹⁹

Although many women entered the convent for the reasons stated above, most women entered for other reasons. Some desired to enter on their own accord with religious
motives, therefore making it a vocation. Others entered because they did not have the opportunity or wished not to marry. After their husbands died, many widows entered the convents. Occasionally, women left their husbands to become nuns, but they could be admitted only with their husbands' consent. The nunneries did not encourage this move because the state of married women was not as "pure" as that of the other nuns.

The question now raised concerning Margery Kempe is, can she in her own right claim the classification of a mystic? W. A. Pantin in his book The English Church in the Fourteenth Century puts her in the category of a devout laywoman. An important aspect of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is the growing number of devout laymen. There was more religious material available to the population as a whole, thus, encouraging both an understanding of and participation among the literate laymen in the church.

As mentioned earlier, Margery was never exposed to formal education, but evidently her home environment was the source of the religious atmosphere. Common and normal of the devout layman was the awe and reverence he held to Christ, particularly the Passion. However farfetched it may appear, here is an excerpt from Margery's book which will serve as an example.
And anon she saw them take up the cross with Our Lord's Body hanging ther-on, and make great noise and great cries, and lift it up from the earth a certain distance, and then let the Cross fall down into the mortise. Then Our Lord's Body shook, and shuttered, and all the joints of that Blissful Body burst and went assunder, and His precious wounds ran down with rivers of blood on every side; and so she had even more cause of more weeping and sorrowing.

The fact that Margery went on a number of pilgrimages, and her fondness of sermons, is also typical of the devout lay movement of this era.

Margery leans toward the abnormal side. There is a fine line in distinguishing between normal and abnormal behavior when studying the devout lay movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but it does not take a reader with a knowledge and familiarity of this movement to discern the eccentricities of Margery Kempe.

David Knowles believes that to include Margery among the list of English mystics is improper. He believes that her spiritual knowledge is limited and questions the validity of her mystical experiences.

Unquestionably, Margery is self-righteous, overbearing, and lacking in refinement, yet there is no doubt of the sincerity of her convictions. She spares no details that a more inhibited person might not have disclosed. The case of Margery Kempe, therefore, remains an invaluable glimpse into the everyday life and thoughts of the people of her time.
FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid.


8 Kempe, p. 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Margery's reference to herself.

11 Kempe, p. 1.

12 Collis, pp. 15-16.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

14 Kempe, p. 6

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., pp. 5-6


18 Kempe, p. 136.

19 Collis, pp. 18-19.
20 Kempe, p. 20.
21 Ibid., p. 18.
25 Knowles, pp. 2-3.
26 Baugh, p. 225.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., pp. 116-17.
30 Ibid., p. 117.
31 Ibid.
32 Kempe, pp. 39-40.
33 Leuba, p. 118.
34 Kempe, p. 5.
35 Leuba, p. 120.
36 Kempe, p. 144.
37 Baugh, p. 231.
38 Deen, pp. 333-334.
39 Knowles, p. 121.
40 Ibid.
42 Knowles, p. 126.
43 Ibid.
44. Kempe, p. xix.
45. Ibid., p. 33.
46. Knowles, p. 129.
47. Ibid., p. 135.
49. Ibid., p. 11.
50. Collis, p. 139.
51. Birgitta, p. xxiv.
52. Ibid., pp. 99-100.
53. Collis, p. 139.
54. Ibid., p. 142.
55. Kempe, p. 82.
56. Collis, p. 140.
58. Ibid., p. 5.
59. Ibid., pp. 13-14.
60. Ibid., p. 29.
61. Ibid., p. 40.
63. Ibid., p. 255.
64. Kempe, p. 176.
65. Pantin, p. 259.
66. Knowles, p. 149.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Butler-Bowdon. New York, 1944. Lt. Col. W. Butler-Bowdon had a manuscript in his possession, and in 1934 it was identified by Miss Hope Emily Allen as a complete copy of Margery's book. It has value in being the oldest known autobiography in English.


Secondary Sources


