

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY – Postclassical Period

Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe was born in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn), a small but busy seaport at the mouth of the River Ouse on the east coast, about half way between London, in the south, and York, in the north, probably in 1373. Her father was John Brunham, a prosperous merchant who also served as mayor and a member of Parliament. At age 20, she married John Kempe, also a merchant. Despite her social status, she like other women of her time never learned to write. As a result, she had to dictate her story to amanuenses, speaking at different times to different ones, which makes it hard to follow. There are no dates, and the chronology is often uncertain. What is also unusual, compared to other autobiographies, is that the complete manuscript, which was copied by another scribe at a later date, after her death, was not found until 1934, in the library of a family living in Pleasington Hall, an estate in Lancashire. But since then it has been widely praised for its unusual insight into medieval English life and religion. It also is a story with which many modern feminists identify. She had 14 children, had difficulty reconciling her and her husband's sexual desire with her religious calling to celibacy, tried to establish careers as a brewer and a miller, and was occasionally arrested and imprisoned for what was believed to be her religious fanaticism and other unusual behavior. She also traveled widely--in England, Europe, and to Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

For all its interest and striking modernity, however, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as the manuscript was called, is not an easy read. Margery Kempe spoke in Middle English, the language of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose dates, 1343-1400, make him a fairly close contemporary. Thus, though we read it in translation, the grammar and word order are unfamiliar, and the vocabulary is often mystifying. There are archaic words like "grutching" (complaining and accusing) and "housesled" (to serve the eucharist to). There are also common words whose meaning have changed. To Kempe "dalliance" and "dally," for example, did not mean sexual play or to loaf and delay, but intimate and informal talk. For other words the reader should consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). Another problem for some readers is that Margery is repeatedly referred to a simply "this creature," which seems like an excessively humble name for such an amazing person.

It is useful, therefore, to know some of the book's historic context, especially in regards to religion and gender roles.

Margery Kempe lived over a century before the Reformation. England was a Catholic country and the church was hierarchical. Nevertheless, there were some portents of change. John Wycliffe (1328-84), a professor at Oxford, had translated the New Testament into English, believing that its stories and teachings should be available to ordinary people rather than only scholars and priests. He also believed that priests should be poor and associate with common people, like the disciples and early Christians. His followers were called "Lollards," a name derived from the Dutch word for mutterers and mumblers, and thus heretics. Kempe is often accused of "Lollardy," but denies it. She seems to have been proud of her social status and, after all, she could not read Latin or English. But it is understandable that her repeated weeping and crying and belief in her personal visitations from Jesus, Mary, and the "ghostly father" were easily associated with the Lollards' mumblings and radical views.

The sexual stereotypes of Kempe's time were a mixture of Biblical teachings and medical lore. Women, it was believed, were less rational than men and more moved by their emotions and sexual desire. An illustration is Chaucer's lusty Wife of Bath, in his *Canterbury Tales*, who has had five husbands and says that a woman's secret goal is to dominate men. They dominate by attracting men physically and then procuring their sperm as a source of greater reason and strength. Consequently, men must control women and women must obey their fathers and husbands and their priests. St. Paul's rule that women should not preach was universally accepted. It was common belief that women were to

submit to their husbands sexually, and yet also a religious teaching that chastity was morally superior – a contradiction that underlies Margery’s conflicts with her husband John. At first she says that “the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather...have eaten or drunk the ooze and muck of the gutter than consent to any fleshly communing, save only for obedience.” (p. 31) But eventually she wishes that they take vows of chastity, and John eventually agrees, as he also does to her wish that they fast on Fridays.

The authority that Margery Kempe has for her resistance to her husband and her departure from the social and religious values of her time come directly from her visits from Jesus, Mary, and God. As early as chapter 8, Mary appears to her as she is praying and says, “Daughter, blessed may thou be, thy seat is made in heaven, before my Son’s knee, and Whom thou wilt have with thee.” (p. 42) Such visitations and “dalliance” occur again and again, throughout the *Book*, until they seem commonplace, even though each was also miraculous. The basis of most of the conflicts in her life is that many of Margery’s contemporaries did not believe her. Thus one of the purposes of the *Book* is to relate the other events that prove her sincerity by showing how divine powers have instructed her, protected her, or intervened in her behalf. In chapter 9, for example, we are told that “on the Wednesday in Easter week, after her husband would have had knowledge of her, as he was wont before,...she said: ‘Jesus Christ, help me,’ and he had no power to touch her at that time in that way, nor ever after with any fleshly knowledge.” In the next two paragraphs is the story of how at another time she was at Mass and heard “a great noise, and a dreadful” and was afraid that people would say “God should take vengeance on her.” But she knelt down, “praying Our Lord Jesus Christ for grace and mercy.” A three-pound stone and a six-pound beam end land on her head and back, and she fears she will die. She cries, “Jesus, mercy!” and the pain is gone.

Such miracles occur over and over. They are compelling stories and are told to prove her divine authority. They are also the condensed essence of her autobiography: a story of conflicts between a devout woman and her society that justifies her behavior and survival in these conflicts, and therefore testifies to the power of Christ, the Virgin, and the Holy Father.

Questions and Subjects for Further Study:

1. Describe three more incidents, from the beginning, middle, and end of the *Book*, which illustrate “this creature’s” devotion and prove the divine guidance and protection that she receives for her devotion.
2. Why does the person who wrote Margery Kempe’s life, presumably from her dictation, always refer to her as “this creature.” Is it ironic? Was it at her request? Is it falsely humble?
3. In Ch. 30 Christ promises to “bring thee in safety to Rome and home again into England without any villainy to thy body, if thou wilt be glad in white clothes, and wear the as I said to thee whilst thou wert in England.” Why does Christ ask this and what are the effects, good or bad?