







## THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

MARGERY KEMPE, born c. 1373 of well-to-do middle-class parentage in King's Lynn, in Norfolk, was married at twenty, had a vision of Christ in her madness following her first childbirth, and, after early failures as a businesswoman, saw visions and felt herself called to a spiritual life. At about the age of forty, when she had borne fourteen children, she persuaded her husband to join her in a mutual vow of chastity, and then embarked on an eventful life of pilgrimage in England, Europe and the Holy Land, visiting both great and humble religious figures of her day, ceaselessly seeking the counsel of mystics and recluses. Always a controversial figure, her devotion characteristically expressed itself in loud weeping and cries, which often divided priests, congregations and fellow pilgrims into friends or enemies, and she was several times in danger of being burnt at the stake as a heretic. Towards the end of her life she dictated in an account of her travels and visions her spiritual autobiography, and the discovery of a unique manuscript in 1934 has restored to English literature the earliest autobiography in English.

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# The Book of Margery Kempe

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, n Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published 1985

Reprinted with a revised bibliography 1994

Reprinted with revised Further Reading 2004

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Botte for I am a woman, schulde I therfore leve  
that I schulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of  
God?

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Dame Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*  
(The Shorter Version)

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible  
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,  
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves...  
By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse ...

Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*

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THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

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# Introduction

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## The Text of Margery Kempe's *Book*

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, the earliest surviving autobiographical writing in English, was lost for centuries until, in 1934, a fifteenth-century manuscript came to light, which had long been in the possession of an old Catholic family, the Butler-Bowdons.<sup>1</sup> In the late Middle Ages, however, the manuscript had been in the possession of the Carthusians of Mount Grace Priory, near Northallerton in Yorkshire, where it had been annotated by readers interested in mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> Yet although her *Book* had disappeared, the name of Margery Kempe had survived, because of the printing (c. 1501) by Wynkyn de Worde of a seven-page quarto pamphlet of extracts from the more devotional parts of the book, *A shorte treatyse contemplacyon taught by our lords Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the booke of Margerie kempe Lynn*. (A single copy of this pamphlet survives, in Cambridge University Library.) When Henry Pepwell came to reprint these extracts in a selection of mystical pieces in 1521, he described the authoress Margery Kempe as 'a devoute ancre' (i.e. anchoress, or recluse). When the *Book* was rediscovered this century it might thus have been expected to contain the writings of a religious recluse, perhaps another Julian of Norwich. In fact, the *Book* is quite different from Dame Julian's *Revelations* as Margery Kempe is from Julian herself. Of Margery's devotion no reader can be in doubt, but the turbulent life that she looks back on when dictating her book is far removed from the peace and the withdrawal from the world which are the experience of the recluse.

Margery could neither read nor write, as is indicated on a number of occasions in her *Book*. The story of how it came eventually to be written down is set out in the Proem and in chapter 89; her first attempt to dictate it (perhaps to the son who figures in Book II) resulted in a completely illegible text, and it is only with effort and time that she manages to get it rewritten by a priest and then adds the last ten chapters. In a work dictated to a priest many years after the events it describes, by a self-confessedly illiterate woman late in life, the texture of the written English and the overall organization of material may not be so entirely Margery's responsibility as it would have been had she been capable of putting pen to paper herself. Yet many modern readers, noticing the links between the vigour of the *Book's* style and the vigour of Margery's character, will sense that in her *Book* we hear recorded, however untidied, much of the accent of an authentic voice, the voice of a medieval Englishwoman.

unforgettable character, undeniable courage and unparalleled experience.

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## Margery's life and *Book*

Margery Kempe was born in the prosperous medieval port of King's Lynn in Norfolk (the called Bishop's Lynn) in about the year 1373 – she tells us that she was about sixty in a late chapter of her book datable to 1433 (Book II, chapter 5). She was the daughter of John Brunham, a burgess who held a number of honourable positions in the Lynn of his day. Some cutting remarks at her husband's expense reveal Margery's pride in her father and family, while extant archives record John Brunham as being five times Mayor of Lynn (in 1373, 1377, 1378, 1385 and 1391). He was one of the town's two members of parliament (in 1364, 1365, 1368, 1376, 1379–80, 1382–3 and 1384), an alderman of the influential Trinity Guild of the town, and coroner, justice of the peace and chamberlain at various times. At the age of twenty (i.e. in about 1393), Margery tells us she was married to John Kempe, whose family also appears in the Lynn records, although Margery's husband never seems to have cut a figure in Lynn comparable to that of her father, and she touches in her *Book* on her husband's concern with his debts.

Passing in silence over her childhood – which she never mentions other than in recalling how on several occasions she confessed the sins of her whole life from childhood to the present – Margery opens her *Book* with the madness and spiritual crisis that followed the birth of her first child. She is rescued from this by a vision of Christ, but does not take to heart the spiritual lesson of her illness, and only the collapse of her subsequent business ventures bows her pride. Intimations of paradise soon follow, and sexual relations with her husband now disgust her, but he insists on his rights. At this time some of what are to prove Margery's most persistent traits first appear – her frequent sobbing and weeping, and her continual thinking and talking of heaven. At this stage, too, she records how our Lord entered into conversation with her during her meditations – conversations that are to continue throughout the *Book* – and how in her contemplation she imagines herself present at the birth of both the Virgin and of Christ, and bustles about giving a helping hand with practical housewifery (chapters 6–7).

After these early episodes of her post-conversion experience, the *Book* records Margery's victory over her husband in her struggle to live a life of chastity, a victory which

formalized with a vow. In this our Lord lends her considerable assistance, sometimes terrifying her husband at his moments of desire, and later giving Margery the idea of a wily financial bargain when her husband threatens to resume his conjugal rights at the roadside, and they travel through the countryside on pilgrimage during a sultry June day (chapter 11). This memorable scene can be dated to what was approximately Margery's fortieth year when, after twenty years of marriage, she had borne her husband fourteen children, as she reveals later in the *Book*. Apart from the son who figures briefly in Book II, none of these children is ever mentioned by Margery, apart from briefly and generally in several prayers.

Margery now enters on a life of pilgrimage, and of travel to meet and converse with the spiritually minded. On these travels she meets with frequent criticism, detraction and even threats. At Canterbury she is chased by a crowd threatening to burn her as a Lollard (chapter 13), the first occurrence of an accusation that is to recur and bring many trials, despite Margery's evident orthodoxy in her devotion to the sacrament, frequent confession, fasting, pilgrimages and holy images, all of which were questioned in Lollard writings.<sup>3</sup> Throughout she speaks her mind and gives more than as good as she gets, with many a swift answer and many an apt retort to those ostensibly much better educated and more experienced than herself.

Margery visits and recalls her conversations with historically identifiable people, from the great and grand, like Archbishop Arundel and Bishop Repyngdon of Lincoln, to the less known female recluse in Norwich whom Margery refers to as 'Dame Jelyan', that same Julian of Norwich whose writings of her own revelations have secured her recognition nowadays as the greatest woman writer in English before the novelists.<sup>4</sup> She also has a series of encounters with spiritually inclined men of quite humble lives and local fame, whose support for Margery is not fleeting, and sustains her across years of difficulty: the nameless Dominican anchorite at Lynn, the saintly Richard of Caister at Norwich, the Carmelites Alan of Lynn and William Southfield, her confessor Robert Spryngolde, and another unnamed priest who reads mystical texts to her. Such local figures are the outward supports to Margery in a world perceived by her as largely critical and hostile, where she is inwardly sustained by confabulations with our Lord – spiritual speakings to her soul that reaffirm her intentions and her longings, and enable her to assume something of a prophetic role, albeit at the home level set by her personal horizons.

Margery's foreign pilgrimages certainly took her far beyond the horizons of Lynn – to the

Holy Land, Assisi and Rome, and Santiago de Compostela – yet few travellers can have had less to say about the experience of travelling as such than Margery.<sup>5</sup> She is not concerned with being a travel writer. We hear only of her immediate difficulties (especially the antipathy her fellow pilgrims have towards her) and of the visions and meditations experienced during her visits to the holy places.

To read in some of the surviving memoirs of late medieval travellers to the Holy Land<sup>6</sup> of all the fuss, the commotion, the claustrophobic crowding and lack of privacy or security of the pilgrim galleys sailing from Venice to Jaffa, to read of the tense and hurried tour under Moslem supervision of the Palestinian sites, quickly followed again by the trying return voyage to Venice, and then to remember that Margery Kempe describes almost nothing of what struck contemporary travellers as so memorably difficult and so nervously absorbing, is to register how utterly Margery's memory excludes almost everything but what she sees as the spiritually significant side of life.

She does, however, dwell upon her difficulties as a foreign pilgrim in Italy (chapters 30–42), but this is because of the way that her vocation as pilgrim is hampered by the difficulties of being a lone woman abroad, with little or no money, and no command of foreign languages. Predictably enough, the conspicuous behaviour of this woman dressed all in white, her weeping and crying out, attract criticism which, because she sees it as persecution endured for Christ's sake, becomes by its very repetitiousness not so much a threat as a cumulative confirmation of the tightness of her own path. And alongside all her detractors Margery finds friends and supporters among the clergy, the pious laity, and the humble folk.

It is not long after her return to Norfolk from Italy and the Holy Land that Margery is once more, this time sailing from Bristol for Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. But characteristically, Margery gives us no descriptive detail of her voyage and her stay at the great shrine of St James other than the barest recollection of how many days the round trip took. Rather more space is spent upon her difficulties at Bristol before sailing, difficulties which as ever seem inseparable from the character she is, difficulties which as ever tend to vindication in Margery's own eyes.

On returning home, her travels through England are complicated by a series of arrests and examinations as a heretic (chapters 46–54). At Leicester the Mayor shows great animosity against her as a suspected Lollard. While in custody, she thinks the Steward of Leicester

about to rape her. Her examination before the Abbot of Leicester, however, only reveals the orthodoxy of belief that she shows throughout her *Book*, and she is eventually able to leave. She proceeds to York, where she is again summoned to explain herself, this time before the Archbishop, who finds her orthodox, but orders her out of his diocese. When about to cross the Humber on her way south, she is again arrested as a Lollard and once again brought before the Archbishop, who soon lets her go, on condition that she proceeds to London to gain an authorizing letter from the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

The scene of Margery's *Book* now settles in Lynn and its environs, and is much occupied with the mixture of hostility and support that she receives on account of her weeping and crying. As ever, Margery recalls the cares of this world alongside her visions and her conversations with our Lord, which come more and more to dominate the latter chapters of the first book. In a series of Passion meditations Margery imagines herself present at the events of the first Easter from the betrayal of Christ through to the Resurrection (chapters 79–81), and not only present but actively involved as the busy and solicitous helper and handmaid of the Virgin. In these later chapters Margery's spiritual recollections leave behind the more chronologically presented narrative of external events in earlier chapters. After some further chapters of conversation with our Lord (84–88), Margery left off her *Book* dictated to her first scribe.

When the whole *Book* was re-written up to this point some years later, Margery took the opportunity to add ten further chapters (a second, if unequal, 'Book'), covering the most memorable events that befell her after the *Book* was first written. These chapters largely concern her remarkable and exhausting late travels, first accompanying her German daughter-in-law home by sea to Danzig in Prussia, and then her pilgrimages to Wilsnack and Aachen on her way home across Europe. Perhaps because Margery – by now older and infirm – could no longer take such travels as much in her stride as she had done when younger, she sketches much more here of the feeling of travelling, its moments of vulnerability, of terror and of *longueur*. Yet one theme which remains continuous with the earliest chapters is, of course, the constant and wearing difficulties presented by the attitude of other people, and the opportunities for self-vindication that these inevitably provided for Margery.

No rounded conclusion is offered – simply Margery's return home after her travels to Lynn, where she receives an understandably grumpy welcome from her confessor, whom she soon mollifies, with God's help. If we hanker for some kind of final vignette on which our

own imaginations can linger as we take leave of Margery, we have to construct such a scene rather against the grain of Margery's method, imagining her in old age, as she briefly says reconciled in her home town to her circle of sympathizers. In fact, Margery's dictation of her recollections ends here characteristically and authentically without any formally contrived or artistic sense of climax. She has simply ceased to speak.

## Margery's *Book* and its Background

'Bless us! How could a woman occupy one or two hours with the love of our Lord? I shall eat a thing till I find out what you can say of our Lord God in the space of an hour' (Richard of Caister in chapter 17)

As a woman who could not read or write, Margery finds visits to converse with sympathetic people especially important, and from many of these people she will have received the wisdom they themselves had gathered from reading contemporary spiritual writers. Because Margery herself could not read we should not under-estimate her access to the content of spiritual books. Indeed, in her consultation with Caister, she tells him how the Trinitarian sometimes spoke to her soul 'so excellently that she never heard any book, neither Hilton's book, nor Bride's book, nor *Stimulus Amoris*, nor *Incendium Amoris*, nor any other book that she ever heard read, that spoke so exaltedly of the love of God...' (chapter 17). And much later in her *Book*, when she tells how a young priest who came to Lynn was prepared to read to her, she again mentions the very same books: 'He read to her many a good book of high contemplation, and other books, such as the Bible with doctors' commentaries on it, St Bride's book, Hilton's book, Bonaventura's *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and others similar (chapter 58). Margery also tells how at her very first meeting with this priest and his mother the priest reads aloud from the Bible and moves her deeply, and how in later times she made him look up things for her in the scriptures and in the doctors.

Throughout her *Book* Margery shows her retentive memory working to recall or allude to various passages of scripture, and the repeated reference to these four books convey something of Margery's connections with contemporary devotion through the texts she heard read. By 'Hilton's book' Margery presumably means Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*,<sup>7</sup> a work of spiritual counsel distinguished not only by the great dignity and grace of Hilton

English style but also by his deep humanity and understanding of the difficulties of contemplative life. By referring to *Incendium Amoris* Margery shows she has heard something of perhaps the most characteristic and celebrated single work of the earlier fourteenth-century English mystic, Richard Rolle of Hampole (d. 1349).<sup>8</sup> The *Incendium Amoris* (*The Fire of Love*), written in Latin, offers a practical guide to the spiritual life, shot through with Rolle's autobiographical vividness and written very much from within the continuing experience of a fervent mystic. In hearing something of these very different masterpieces by two of the great fourteenth-century English mystics, Margery gained access to the mainstream of current mystical writing in England, while she also enjoyed lengthy conversations with Dame Julian of Norwich, as she recalls (chapter 18). Of the medieval English mystics it is thus only with the works of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that Margery unsurprisingly – shows no familiarity, for she is unlikely to have relished that astringent exposition of the *via negativa*, with its withering characterization of literal-minded contemplatives.<sup>9</sup> Margery's spiritual school is very different – a passage from one of her devotions (chapter 28) reveals Margery's familiarity with one of Richard Rolle's *Meditation on the Passion*,<sup>10</sup> where Christ's wounded body is likened to a dovecote, and underlining Margery's attachment to the tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life. Margery's religious sensibility is saturated in this kind of tender devotion to the manhood of Christ found among the works of St Anselm and embodied in the most influential *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.<sup>11</sup>

The *Stimulus Amoris* (which Margery mentions being read to her on several occasions) is also related to this tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life which so markedly colours Margery's visions. The *Stimulus Amoris*, which was often wrongly attributed to Bonaventura, is a composite devotional poem, comprising a series of meditations on the Passion followed by a treatise on the spiritual life and contemplation, and ending with some devout meditations. The second chapter, to which Margery particularly refers, deals with 'compassion for Christ's Passion'. Available in an English version, *The Prick of Love*, attributed in some manuscripts to Walter Hilton, the *Stimulus Amoris* is but one of the many instances of the availability in later medieval England of English translations of works of contemplative interest. The extent of Margery's association during her life with the inhabitants of what she calls 'Dewchlond' – i.e. the German-speaking lands together with the Low Countries – has often been noted, and a number of the works of the great medieval

Dutch and German mystics were known in England, as well as those from further afield. Margery's friend, the Carmelite Alan of Lynn, is known to have prepared indexes of both the *Stimulus Amoris* and the *Revelations* of St Bridget of Sweden, the other book that Margery mentions as being read to her by the priest.

St Bridget and 'St Bride's book', as Margery calls it, are mentioned in Margery's *Book* in ways that suggest how potent a model the Englishwoman found for herself in the life and revelations of the visionary Swedish saint. When (in chapter 20) Margery sees a marvel during mass, our Lord rather gratifyingly tells her, 'My daughter Bridget never saw me in this way ... just as I spoke to St Bridget, just so I speak to you, daughter, and I tell you truly that every word that is written in Bridget's book is true, and through you shall be recognized a truth indeed.'

St Bridget of Sweden (1303–73) was of noble birth, and connected with the royal house. She was married at thirteen, but persuaded her husband to remain chaste for two years. Eventually Bridget bore eight children, but was drawn increasingly to a strict religious life. She went to Santiago on pilgrimage with her husband in 1341, and on his death in 1344 devoted herself to the life of a visionary, pilgrim, and foundress of a new order of nuns. She dictated her revelations to her spiritual director. In 1349 Bridget left for Rome, where she stayed for the rest of her life, making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1371 at Christ's command. The cult of St Bridget in England in Margery's day was extensive; the influence of her life and of her visions and devotions was great,<sup>14</sup> and in this the Bridgettine house of Syon Abbey, visited by Margery in her *Book*, was most important.

For Margery Kempe the model provided by St Bridget must have been particularly powerful. St Bridget's social status was, of course, more exalted than Margery's relatively modest bourgeois life: she was of the highest birth, in middle age she struggled at the divine command to learn Latin, she was instructed to found a new order, to involve herself in great affairs, to denounce abuses. Yet the pattern of her life as a married mystic, the transition from wife to Bride of Christ, the sustainedly visionary experience of her life – all such things will have appealed to Margery in vindicating the potential of the female mystic.

But St Bridget, while an important example and influence, was by no means the only female visionary brought to Margery's attention by those who read to her, advised her, or discussed their own reading with her, as the events of chapters 62 and 68 suggest. In chapter 62 the priest who is himself writing down Margery's *Book* tells how his confidence in her was

badly shaken by the general impatience shown at her weeping and crying, until he was led to read the *Vita* of the *béguine* Mary of Oignies, whose saintly life was similarly characterized by the gift of uncontrollable tears. Both the *Stimulus Amoris* and Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* are also cited here in support of manifestations of mystical fervour, as is St Elizabeth of Hungary, while a little later one of Margery's learned friends repeats the selfsame incident as that recalled by Margery's scribe from the life of Mary of Oignies to support Margery's tears, suggesting how accessible to those in England interested in the spiritual life were the examples of continental female piety.

Mary of Oignies (d. 1213), born of wealthy parents at Nivelles in Brabant, was married off at fourteen, despite her wish for the religious life.<sup>15</sup> She persuaded her husband to live chastely, however, and they devoted themselves to nursing lepers at Willibrourx. She led a life of great austerity and holiness, and her fame drew so many visitors that she eventually retreated to live as a hermit in a cell next to the monastery at Oignies, where she died. She had visions and ecstasies, was especially devoted to the Passion of Christ and the sacraments, and had the gift of prophecy.<sup>16</sup>

Many features of Mary's experience are echoed in the life of Margery Kempe. Mary of Oignies privately mortifies her flesh beneath her clothes, and persuades her husband to live chaste. She weeps copiously at the thought of the Passion. She cannot behold a crucifix, or speak, or hear others speak, of the Passion without falling down in a swoon. If she tries to restrain her tears they only increase. She is asked by a priest to stop her weeping and sobbing in church. When confessing trivial sins she is so overcome with contrition that she has to crawl out like a woman in labour. She does not eat meat. She has the fellowship of blessed spirits who delight her ears with a marvellously sweet and merry melody. She wears a coat and mantle of white wool. She is told by the Holy Ghost that she will pass straight to paradise and spend no time in purgatory. Like Margery, she has a miraculous vision of the sacrament as it is held between the priest's hands at mass. Like Margery, she has at Candlemas a vision of the Presentation in the Temple. Like Margery, she is so 'drunk with charity' that she is sometimes unaware of the passing of time. And just as Margery tells a tale of a blossoming tree to illustrate the shortcomings of the clergy, so Mary of Oignies calls a newly ordained priest who sings his first mass in her presence 'a new tree now flowered, of which our Lord has ordained to me the first fruits ...' Even in this summary account of the holy life of Mary of Oignies the reader of *The Book of Margery Kempe* will find many echoes of Margery

experience.

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The *life* of Mary of Oignies in a Middle English version survives in a Bodleian Library manuscript<sup>17</sup> together with English translations of the lives of several other holy women, one of the works of Suso, and some material on the life of the great Italian mystic St Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) – a collection which in itself suggests the kind of reading that some of Margery’s advisers would draw upon. St Catherine’s writings were known and translated in later medieval England<sup>18</sup> and, like Margery, the Italian visionary saw herself as a bride in mystical marriage to the deity. The experiences and writings of other female mystics of the Middle Ages will often seem paralleled and echoed in Margery’s own book, and the example of such mystics as St Mechthild of Hackeborn<sup>19</sup> and Blessed Elisabeth of Schönau was known in England. The *Mirror of Simple Souls* of Marguerite Porete (burnt as a heretic in 1310) was translated from French into an English version,<sup>20</sup> and was also translated into Latin by the Mount Grace mystic, Richard Methley, whose own ecstasies were compared with Margery Kempe’s by the annotators of the manuscript of her *Book* at Mount Grace Priory.

It is also intriguing to recall the association between Margery’s experience and the experience of such other female mystics as Blessed Angela of Foligno and Blessed Dorothea of Montau, not because evidence survives that their lives were known in England, but because Margery on her pilgrimages actually visited the areas where these mystics had lived. Thus though there is no evidence that Margery had direct knowledge of the life of Angela of Foligno, at Assisi she visited the site of some of Angela’s experiences and could well have heard tell of the example of this remarkable local figure.

Blessed Angela of Foligno (c. 1249–1309) lived a worldly life as a well-to-do wife and mother up to the age of forty, but suddenly underwent a conversion, although initially she was ashamed to confess all her sins. Her family having all died, she was able to devote herself to a life of poverty and penitence. She wept ceaselessly, cried aloud when she heard the name of God, and fell into a fever upon seeing a picture of Christ’s Passion. It was difficult for her not to talk of God. She thought of herself as drinking the blood from Christ’s side, and wanted, for love of Christ, to suffer the vilest death and humiliation. She was subject to fits of screaming which astonished everybody, and people said she was troubled by devils. She was so ashamed that she wondered whether this was indeed true. She had ecstasies and visions, and was ardently devoted to the crucified Christ. Her Franciscan confessor acted as her secretary and wrote down what she dictated.<sup>21</sup>

Margery's visit to Danzig late in life makes especially interesting the parallels between her experience and that of the Prussian visionary and ecstatic, Dorothea of Montau, who spent her married life in Danzig and whose cult would have been strong there at the time of Margery's visit.

Blessed Dorothea of Montau (1347–94), who describes herself as illiterate, was married sixteen to an older man and bore him nine children, all but one of whom died young. From 1378 she experienced ecstasies. She was badly treated by her husband, although a mutual vow of chastity eventually followed, and Dorothea was allowed weekly communion. She went on pilgrimage to Aachen with her husband, and to Rome on her own. She could find no one in Danzig who understood her inner life and pilgrimage offered her the opportunity to seek out spiritual counsellors. After her husband's death in 1390 Dorothea became a recluse at Marienwerder Cathedral, under the direction of the pious John of Marienwerder, who wrote accounts of her visions and her life. A decisive influence on Dorothea's life was the example of St Bridget, whose relics were carried through Danzig on their return from Rome to Sweden in 1374. And, like Margery Kempe, this middle-class married woman who struggled to lead a religious life tells how she experienced a kind of spiritual drunkenness and was also noted for her frequent and sustained holy tears.<sup>22</sup>

Both Angela's weeping and shrieking, and her intensity of feeling, and the life of the married Dorothea and her gift of tears, offer parallels with the experience of Margery Kempe whose own life was made so persistently difficult by her gift of loud and frequent tears. It is essential to retrieve some sense of the spiritual value and desirability that was accorded to the gift of such tears in those days. Their spiritual value was confirmed to Margery – in a discussion of her understandably recurrent concern with discerning authentic tokens of the Holy Ghost – by no less an authority on the contemplative life than Julian of Norwich ('When God visits a creature with tears of contrition, devotion or compassion, he may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in his soul,' chapter 18). It is this sense of the value of holy tears that lies behind Margery's exchange with the Archbishop of York, to whose rough question 'Why do you weep so, woman?' she replies firmly, 'Sir, you shall wish some day that you had wept as sorely as I.'

## Reading Margery's life

‘And therefore she would not for all this world say otherwise than as she felt...’ (chapter 61)

In these dictated recollections of a woman who could not read or write it is human speech itself which continually catches and sharpens the attention and offers a clue to reading Margery’s life. Margery’s *Book* was not, after all, set down to answer the expectations of later readers of autobiography.<sup>23</sup> Margery would probably not have believed that human experience was worth recording for its own sake. The Proem makes clear that this life is being recalled because of God’s wonderful dealings with Margery, to God’s glory rather than Margery’s. The perceiving of pattern in one’s life, which has determined the art of most modern autobiographers, is thus undertaken by Margery from a rather different vantage point. Indeed, by later standards of autobiography, the presentation of pattern and progression may seem disconcertingly absent or elusive. There is little concern with chronology and with noting the passing of time, little sense of ageing and of the changing phases of life. The presentation of the subject’s relationships with her chief friends is mostly rather interrupted. Touches of local colour and realistic detail come vividly and spasmodically before the reader’s eyes, yet observation of the outward world – often significantly hazy and offhand anyway – was very far from what Margery would have seen to be her purpose, as a woman gifted with revelations. In spite of this we cannot claim Margery’s *Book* to be the autobiography of a great mystic – the quality of her mystical experience prevents this – but it remains one of the most immediate ‘Lives’ of the period.

For Margery, the form of her writing was predominantly directed by the strong continuity of purpose that she saw in her own life. By comparison with the recollected revelations of the great mystics, Margery’s *Book* is almost too autobiographical, too concerned with the mundane difficulties and obstacles that confronted Margery in life. Her record of those visionary experiences which were to her own mind most extraordinary – particularly her conversations with our Lord – are often among the least individual and lively parts of her work in both style and content, while other parts of her text may seem individual at the expense of authentic spiritual understanding.

Margery may be observed consistently handling the figurative language of traditional spiritual literature – particularly the nuptial imagery of mystical union with God – with an endearingly earthbound awkwardness. In following the conventional imagery of the mystical marriage-bed, the wedding, the body of the spouse, Margery’s realizing imagination produces an unnerving directness and concreteness, as when God informs her: ‘You may boldly, when

you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband ... You can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head and my feet as sweetly as you want' (chapter 36). It is characteristic of Margery that she will take over the mystical tradition of applying metaphors of sense perception to the mystic's experience of God and apply them with such concrete force as to risk losing the spiritual in the vigour of the real (although she is noticeably careful – perhaps because of challenges to her orthodoxy – to mention how God speaks 'to her mind', 'in her soul', and so forth). Yet Margery's limitations as a would-be mystic are balanced by her strengths as a strikingly individual and vivid talker and rememberer, as is shown by the way she recalls how she experienced some tokens of the Holy Ghost in chapter 36: the rushing wind and the dove of the Holy Spirit are apprehended by Margery Kempe as the sound of a pair of bellows and the song of a robin redbreast 'that often sang very merrily in her right ear'.

In the end we must accept the *Book* as it is, a unique survival which it is pointless to think less of – by measuring it against other works and genres – when the writing seems to have so much in it of the life it seeks to present. It would be misleading to take the *Book* as if it were the transcript of conversations in which a medieval Englishwoman remembers her life. The writing has clearly been much more edited and shaped than this – edited by the bookmaker's concerns of the scribe, and shaped and focused by that spiritualizing lens through which Margery looks back at her experience.

Yet there remain indications that we are dealing with an incompletely edited transcript: the lack of shaping in the material presented and the limitations of the spiritual life that is portrayed. There is no sense of a perceived development and interpretation which might mark a more contrivedly presented autobiography. There is also striking openness, as when Margery includes the early story of her sexual temptation in chapter 4, with its anti-climactic conclusion when she falls prey to her own will and is then rebuffed by the man who has tempted her. There seems a comparable honesty in her account of such an incident as that in which her fellow travellers desperately try to avoid her when crossing from Calais home to England ('What the cause was, she never knew' – II, chapter 8). For although Margery understandably remembers her successes along with her failures, she seems immune to embarrassment, and is perhaps without the kind of self-consciousness which would have led her to re-write her experiences in a way that blurred over the awkward corners and sharp edges of her own personality, and only left the rough surfaces and bloody-mindedness of others.

The continuity of the *Book* lies in Margery's own will and, as something of a prophet in her time, the local structure of her writing is often determined by the recollection of a sequence of events which proved her foresight. As an illiterate person, the role of human speech seems central to Margery's remembering of past events, and happily central to her dictated account of that past. Her sensitivity to the spoken word is displayed in her feeling that she is being crucified by the cruel words of others. Challenged to justify herself continually placed in the position of being tested, Margery must also speak out clearly for herself. So it is natural that she should compose and shape written 'scenes' through the interchange of remembered speech and the climax of some successful riposte. The degree to which Margery represents scenes from years before in direct-speech exchanges may make some modern readers suspect some subsequent 'improvement' in the writing of her history. There is certainly a likelihood of this, although the powers of the unbookish mind to remember scenes in terms of spoken exchanges can often still be remarked. If we imagine ourselves with Margery's 'unlettered' awareness, her ability 'to answer every clerk' is clearly a reflection of the favour shown her and of her extraordinary vocation. In this light it is understandable that Margery would long preserve in memory her exchanges with the monk whose sins she reveals to him (chapter 12), or her trouncing of her detractors at Canterbury (chapter 13). In both cases she takes on the established and advantaged; it would be natural for her to husband in her memory the spoken 'text' of these triumphs. Clear in her mind that she should not rush into writing – indeed she almost left it too late – she was, possibly from her earliest experience, committing to the record of a kind of inner memory-book the challenges and exchanges which would one day, she felt, be outwardly set down in her *Book* and in the meantime would serve to sustain her conviction in her often lonely and isolated spiritual pilgrimage.

It is in direct speech that Margery seems to recall some of the most pointed and independent moments of her long-past experience. (Indeed, the frustrations of not being able to speak, or to understand speech, on her foreign travels are so extreme for Margery as to be the subject of miraculous relief.) To the mild but cautious Bishop of Lincoln Margery records her grand answer that she will indeed visit the Archbishop, but not for the reason he suggests (chapter 15); she recalls the words with which she boldly rebukes Archbishop Arundel for the misconduct of his household (chapter 16). The accuracy of Margery's memory, where this can

be cross-checked with recorded events, is impressively good, while 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 records Julian as saying rings true in content, and even in style, with Julian's own writing. Since it seems unlikely that Margery would know anything of Julian's written work, her memory of this conversation is at once a precious witness to the wholeness of vision, life and counsel in Dame Julian, and a witness to the quality of Margery's own power to recollect what was said to her both on this and, by implication, on other occasions.

When Margery returns to England after her travels her trials and difficulties with authority are naturally occasions that Margery recalls in terms of the testing questions put to her and her answers to them. She is always good at catching the edge in other people's voices, and although it was not her purpose to provide character-sketches of the people she encounters, her modern readers will feel they know something, none the less, of a person like Archbishop Bowet, because Margery's account allows him to speak in his own, splendidly testy, words.

In fact, there are far too many memorable moments in the *Book* to recall here, where the vividness of the speech brings alive the presence of those around Margery, or highlights her own relation to them. There are the comments of neighbours ('Why do you talk so of the joy that is in heaven? ... You haven't been there any more than we have,' chapter 3). There is the apparently reasonable comfort offered by a priest for her shriekings ('Woman, Jesus is long since dead,' chapter 60), which enables Margery to rise to the magnificent retort: 'Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so, I think, it ought to be to you and to all Christian people.'

Indeed, it is the kindly-meant advice of menfolk as Margery is taken under arrest toward Beverley ('Woman, give up this life that you lead, and go and spin, and card wool, as other women do, and do not suffer so much shame and so much unhappiness ...') which leads Margery to spurn such counsel in terms that reveal her idea of her vocation: 'I do not suffer as much sorrow as I would do for our Lord's love, for I only suffer cutting words, and our merciful Lord Christ Jesus ... suffered hard strokes, bitter scourgings, and shameful death at the last...' (chapter 53). As her extraordinarily heightened and suggestible imagination shows Margery is able throughout her *Book* to step into the life of Christ and out again. Those constantly recollected scenes of his life, reinforced in her mind's eye by her visits to the Ho

Places, form a kind of extra life concurrent with her own and which she sees suffused  
superimposed, simultaneous, with the world of ordinary streets and rooms, humble mother  
and their children. As a woman both entangled in the world and beckoned out of it, at one  
time nursing her senile and incontinent husband, at another called to contemplation, the  
extraordinary strains and variousness of Margery's life as she remembers it give her text the  
unevenness of living, and mean that her Book's very weaknesses prove its strengths, as  
work of human memory and the life of the self.

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In rendering Margery Kempe's *Book* from Middle English the present translation aims to give  
a readable text for the modern reader, while remaining as close as possible to the form of the  
original. In the translation, the syntactical pattern of Margery's text has been kept as far as  
possible: her sentences are often long and rather loosely connected, and some of her most  
recurrent forms of connection and transition are simply effected by 'and' and 'then', which  
are mostly retained here. But some of Margery's characteristic diction – such terms as  
'boisterous' or 'dalliance' – have had to be changed in the present text, because of the  
altered associations for the modern reader. The translation is based upon the unique  
manuscript, now British Library Additional MS 61823, as edited by Sanford Brown Meech and  
Hope Emily Allen (Early English Text Society, O.S. 212, 1940), with the kind permission of  
the Early English Text Society.

## Suggested Chronology of the Life of Margery Kempe

- c. 1373 Margery born.
- c. 1393 Marriage of Margery to John Kempe.
- 1413 Summer. Margery's interview with Philip Repyngdon, Bishop of Lincoln (chapter 15).
- 1413 Summer or autumn. Margery's interview with Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury (chapter 16).
- 1413 Death (before 16 October) of Margery's father, John Brunham.
- 1413 Autumn? Margery leaves Lynn for the Holy Land.

- 1414 1 August. Margery visits the chapel of the Portiuncula in Assisi (chapter 31).
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- 1414 7 October. Margery visits the chapel of St Bridget in Rome (chapter 39).
- 1414 9 November. Margery's mystical marriage to the Godhead in the Apostle Church in Rome (chapter 35).
- 1415 After Easter, Margery leaves Rome (chapter 42).
- 1415 21 May or earlier? Margery arrives in Norwich (chapter 43).
- 1417 About 7 July. Margery embarks at Bristol for Santiago (chapter 46).
- 1417 Early August. Margery returns to Bristol from Santiago (chapter 46).
- 1417 August-September. Margery's trial and detention at Leicester (chapters 46–9).
- 1417 Margery visits York, and London (chapters 50–55).
- 1421 23 January. The great fire at Lynn (chapter 67).
- c. 1431 Margery's son and husband die (II, chapter 2).
- 1433 2 April? Margery embarks at Ipswich (II, chapter 3).
- 1433 10–13 April? Margery in Norway (II, chapter 3).
- 1433 April-May. Margery's sojourn in Danzig (II, chapter 4).
- 1433 10–24 July. Exhibition of the four holy relics at Aachen (II, chapter 7).
- 1434 29 July? Margery arrives at Syon Abbey (II, chapter 10).
- 1436 23 July. Priest begins to revise Margery's Book I (Proem).
- 1438 28 April. Priest begins to write Book II (II, chapter 1).
- 1438 13 April. Admission of one Margery Kempe to the Guild of the Trinity at Lynn further mentioned, 22 May 1439.

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