

The Book of Margery Kempe- Medieval Mysticism and Sanity

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The Book Margery Kempe tells the story of medieval mystic Margery Kempe's transformation from sinner to saint by her own recollections, beginning at the time of the birth of her first of 14 children. Kempe (ca. 1373-1438) tells of being troubled by an unnamed sin, tortured by the devil, and being locked away, with her hands bound for fear she would injure herself; for greater than six months, when she had her first visionary experience of Jesus dressed in purple silk by her bedside. Kempe relates:

Our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, ever to be trusted, worshipped be his name, never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature, who had forsaken him, in likeness of man, most seemly, most beautiful, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, said to her these words: "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I forsook never you?"
(8)

After this experience however, Kempe's life was not immediately transformed to one of a devout woman; it would be with great effort, and many more visions, that her life was changed to the life of a saintly being.

The Book, discovered in 1934, has been referred to as the first autobiographical book written in English. The telling of her story alone is a rare feat of an illiterate woman in a

dominated bourgeois world, a testament to Kempe's tenacity. The book details her spiritual journey through a life that was anything but ordinary fraught with business failures, the difficult pregnancy and birth of her first child, bearing thirteen subsequent children while desiring chaste living, enduring temptation, struggling with lustful urges, and a difficult marriage to a demanding husband. Through her seeking of divine guidance she was able to tour Europe and take pilgrimages to far away countries such as Rome, Jerusalem, and Germany; another remarkable feat for a woman in medieval society.

Since the discovery of her *Book* the validity of her visionary experiences has been called scrutinized by those within the literary and medical communities. Indeed there were many individuals when *The Book* was written, including her very own scribe, who have questioned Kempe's sanity. Kempe claimed herself to be an unusual woman who was prone to visionary experiences of divine nature that were often accompanied by loud lamenting, crying, and shaking and self-inflicted punishment. By admission these antics were off-putting to many and at times even disturbing to those closest to her. But is *The Book of Margery Kempe* a tale of madness?

It is unfair to judge all medieval mystics as hysterics. Margery Kempe through her persistence and use of scribes has given a first-hand account of life as a mystic in the early 15th century. In "A Reappraisal of Medieval Mysticism & Hysteria," Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey explain:

[Mysticism]...reflected a shift in religious sentiments from the more intellectualized Platonic notion of God held in the early Middle Ages, to a more personalized and emotional identification with humanity of the suffering Jesus in the later Middle Ages.

The religious ideal shifted, as Europe became materially wealthier, to a return to a primitive apostolic church with the virtues of voluntary poverty and self-denial and to the possibility of union with God during the present life rather than in heaven after death. (85)

In order to judge the validity of Margery Kempe's experience we cannot use our current social structure and teaching but instead must refer to the belief system in place at the time the experiences took place. In Kempe's era "the passion for God both inspired and drove some individuals to do things that most would not do, but this in itself, is not necessarily evidence of mental illness" (Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey 84). Medieval mysticism must be judged in context and not using modern Western standards. The desire for a close relationship with the divine was not only encouraged during medieval times, but is still a desire of many individuals today. The validity of Kempe's mystical experiences must be examined using cause and effect versus content and delivery. Kempe is able to overcome the oppression of being a woman living in medieval times and transform herself into something better. Because of this, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is unquestionably an account of a gifted creature of God, not a raving lunatic.

Some physiologist's and others within the medical community are of the opinion that medieval mystics such as Kempe suffered from a form of delusional mental illness. The term hysterical or hysteria has been given to mystics, because their behaviors do not fall within our perception of ordinary experience as Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey detail:

Within some medical circles, that perceived ... exceptional individuals [mystics] as God-driven persons for whom moderate asceticism and routine prayer proved unsatisfactory

to fulfill their passion to subdue the demands of the flesh and their discomfort with embodied existence in general, and for whom the desire for an intense personal encounter with God could not be contained within ordinary bounds of experience. (84)

In addition to the medical critics, some mental health experts assert that Kempe may have suffered from severe post-partum depression because her visions began after a very difficult pregnancy and birth. “The term hysteria 100 years ago merged gynecological with neurological constructs, as the concept shifted from hysterical symptom to hysterical character” (Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey 89). The timing of her first visionary experience is the only evidence necessary to reach this diagnosis. However, even those within literary circles have conjectured that Kempe may have suffered from depression which manifested into a physiologic need for divine guidance. “When the *Book* was first discovered, it was taken as a sort of written diary, narrated by a possibly hysterical, certainly emotional, woman to a male scribe” (Staley ix). Some critics of Kempe have even gone as far as calling her a self-destructive personality, due to the fact she often wore a haircloth under clothing as Delaney illustrates:

[Kempe] internalizes the special oppression of women through self-inflicted punishment: Not only is she continually obsessed with a desire to die, but she practices fasting, waking, and other forms of ascetism, and also wears a hair shirt under her clothes every day for several years. (89)

The Book does give the strong impression that Kempe was not happy within her marriage, although the author never states she did not love her spouse. All of Kempe’s critics can agree that her marriage to John Kempe was not ideal and could have been a source for

depression. Delaney puts it this way “Plainly, the absence of intimacy and communication seems as awful to Kempe as it does to us” (90). The Kempe marriage was less than ideal for both parties, and eventually led to them living in separate households.

Prior to researching this work and medieval religion I had agreed with some of the insanity theories that critics have proposed, and had inferred that Kempe’s struggles with valuables, money, self-control were most likely a common problem for many women of her class. I still concede that Kempe’s mystical visions do not fall within “ordinary bounds of experience” (Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey 84). After all depression, loss of possessions and unhappy marriages are common to the times we live in and have caused far lesser emotional beings to become hysterical. However, I have since re-evaluated the insanity label I gave to Kempe and all other mystics. In conducting my research, I have discovered other explanations for Kempe’s seemingly crazy behaviors, which make them seem far less crazy.

The mystical visions of Kempe can be explained as candid accounts of changing events if looked at with a medieval mindset. In order to do that we must first examine Kempe’s motivation rooted in her deep religious belief system common to medieval times, and we must explore the roles of women during the early 15th century. When we understand the religion being practiced and the roles women played in society during medieval times, we realize that Kempe developed a brilliant way for a woman living in oppression to become something far greater than herself, whether or not she intended to do so. Margery Kempe was able to transcend her mundane life of wife and mother into a saintly life full of love and adventure. Therefore, to be able to examine *The Book of Margery Kempe* we must have a clear

understanding of the social development of the time in which it was created. We cannot use our own modern experience as our guide, as our experience is not similar to Kempe's.

First, consider the religious beliefs and practices present during Kempe's lifetime. Early middle ages England was ruled by Roman Catholicism. Christianity was the only recognized religion. It was widely taught and believed that all sins would be cured or punished by God. In "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism McGinn states:

The growth of autobiographical accounts of visionary experiences of Christ in that century [13th] hinted at the visionary explosion of the later middle ages, especially among women. Even more important was the stress given by the major teacher of the era, Bernard of Clairvaux, to the need for personal experience as criterion almost equivalent to biblical text. (197)

This teaching allowed women like Kempe to take a more authoritative role within religion than had previously been allowed. Another "profound teacher of the time was Meister Eckhart, who insisted God could be found, directly and decisively, anywhere by anyone" (McGinn 199).

Church teachings in the later middle ages shifted from being purely priestly to encouraging all members (including women) to seek experiences with God. There was a significant increase in mystical experiences reported especially by women in the early 15th century. Church authorities and Kempe were also aware of and influenced by another female saint Birgitta of Sweden whose *Revelations* encouraged a devout pure lifestyle (Atkinson 226). Church sermons that supported Kempe's desire to live a life of pureness and virtue were commonly preached by clergy of her day, and pure living would not have been an unusual goal. It was a common belief

that the spiritual living by women could be obtained only by a chaste virgin, because woman's nature was commonly viewed as the weaker sex prone to lustful activities. Many women pursued chaste living to bring them closer to God. Kempe's spiritual enthusiasm and antics are what made her different from other women in early medieval times, not her pursuit of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Given the strong influence of Christian values presented, I believe Kempe was not an individual suffering from mental illness; rather, she was a troubled woman who had a strong desire to pursue a closer relationship with God encouraged by common beliefs of the time.

Interestingly Kempe's relationship with God doesn't seem to be the disturbing element of her claims it is the validity of the mystical visionary element which caused her to cry and shake loudly in public that is commonly scrutinized both by those who knew her and by those who have read her *Book*. Our modern belief system and our inability to have the same experiences give us cause to suspect the honest intent of mystics, no matter how quiet or loudly they receive their visions. It is not just medieval mysticism that has been wrongly judged. It is all mysticism, modern and medieval. Our modern Western standards and teachings support that a mystical experience is not valid unless it is received in private and not made a public spectacle. We are taught to suspect the spiritual encounters of others because we cannot see, touch, or smell them with our own senses. I would agree with Kroll, Bachrach and Carey however, when they state, "In modern society, there are persons who perform outstanding feats intellectually, creatively and physically whom we would not want to call abnormal...The tendency to label mystics as hysterics is but one piece of the tendency by psychiatry to suspect

very strong religious beliefs and practices as neurotic” (96). We must have faith that deep spiritual encounters are possible for some exceptional individuals.

Some within the medical community are taking a closer look, as these excerpts from Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey’s article in *Mental Health Religion & Culture* suggest:

There are several character constructs that appear related to the capacity to enter into an altered state of consciousness and which are probably integral components of those individuals who form the ranks of the mystic and heroic ascetics... absorption, hypnotizability, thin/thick boundaries and transcendence. (92)

[Absorption] is the capacity to become focused upon a narrowed field of imagery or thought and to block out of awareness most of the mental activity or clutter which ordinarily preoccupy us. Hypnotizability, ...is a general measure of the susceptibility of a subject to follow suggestions. (92-93)

Thick and thin boundaries refer to the ease or difficulty with which one shifts between states of consciousness and one’s awareness of realms and meanings of reality other than the concrete world in front of us. (93)

...Based partially on the literature of mysticism, self-transcendence is viewed as a basic character trait that refers generally to an awareness of being and integral part of a unitive...the constructs of absorption, hypnotizability, and self-transcendence describe in modern terminology some core psychological traits that can be applied in a

meaningful and productive way to the types of persons, medieval and modern, who have mystical experiences. (93)

In view of this, there is some medical evidence to support mysticism as a gift, versus a symptom of hysteria. I believe Kempe was blessed with the gifts of “absorption, hypnotizability, and transcendence” (Kroll, Bachrach, and Carey 93). She possessed the character traits essential to cross mental barriers in pursuit of a closer relationship with the divine.

Additionally, it is important to understand the constraints of a medieval woman in the bourgeois society of Lynn, England during the early 15th century. Kempe’s religious fervor may have been a way for her to regain control of her self-worth within a bourgeois society. Kempe was part of a capitalistic society in which women were seen as property. Delaney tells us “Like any medieval woman, Margery is born the property of her father; on her marriage this right is transferred to her husband” (88). Kempe’s husband John had marital rights to her body, with or without her permission. Margery gave birth to fourteen children before she was able to convince John to agree to chaste living. John Kempe, however, was not a bad man; he afforded her many rights and freedoms with regard to travel, business enterprises, and personal finance. Although, it was not unusual for a woman of her status to be part of her husband’s financial affairs. It was unusual for a woman to be granted so many leniencies. In Medieval urban society and particularly in Lynn there was “A huge weight of authority in past discourse, enforced the precept that it was proper, in the normal course of affairs, for women to be subordinate and obedient to men” (Goodman 58). This authority allowed for the beating of a disobedient wife if needed. While Kempe struggled with matrimonial duties and desire, she

shared her struggles enthusiastically in public without fear of John Kempe further suggesting she was not suffering from a form of depression as depression often limits the ability of an individual to be enthusiastic. Indeed Kempe had many things “to be thankful for” (Goodman 61).

She also enjoyed a type of medieval celebrity status while she “dramatically enacted her religious enthusiasm in the world; she dressed all in white, wore a ring that was engraved Jesus Christ is my love, and frequently wept and fasted” (Gilbert and Grubar 21). Her activities may have even been influenced by others, or reported to others considering “In the merchant-trading communities of northeastern England, [Lynn is one], with their close ties to the continent, reports of holy lives and miraculous happenings were circulated along with reports of storms at sea or political unrest abroad” (Atkinson 226). I imagine that her desires to be someone of more importance, travel the world, and have an intimate relationship with God were all realized through her religious fervor.

Critics of Kempe that disqualify the mystical qualities of her visions fail to realize the significance of the altering events that happened to Kempe as a direct result of her courtship with Jesus Christ. Kempe’s entire life was transformed by her ability to pursue her love of Jesus. In a way she went from ordinary housewife to celebrity. She overcame great oppositional odds without wavering in her belief of the validity of her visions. Kempe’s *Book* depicts an exact example of one who was lost but now is found, a fundamental Christian belief still preached in the churches of today. Kempe contends it was the desire of Jesus that she recount her story as inspiration for others like her. There are modern books lining Christian bookstore shelves today

that tell miraculous stories, in which authors claim the same inspirational calling. The tendency of some psychologist's to label mystic individuals as crazy fails to account for the teachings of similar events taught and widely accepted by members of the Christian community then and now. The telling of her tale is an accomplishment to which Kempe gives all of the credit to her savior Jesus Christ in hopes that it will inspire others. Who are we to discredit the truthfulness of her claim? Only the Lord himself could be certain of the truth. Her unwavering belief in her visionary experiences as being valid and her seeming inability to stop them, even at the risk of being burned at the stake, I believe should give some testament to the truthfulness of her claims. Gilbert and Grubar tells us that:

Kempe traveled throughout England and went on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Germany, and in the Baltic. Not dedicated to the vow of silence, she reproved even the highest church officials for what she considered their moral lapses and preached to people wherever she went. Whether or not her audience deemed her saintly or heretic, she displayed courage and zeal. (21)

Hardly the acts of a fraud or hysterical mind, she was risking severe punishment and death to stand behind her claims.

Kempe herself was able to convince many people including her own spouse, John Kempe, that her claims of mystical visions were "Nevertheless, her husband, ever having tenderness and compassion for her, commanded they should deliver her the keys" (Staley, The Book 8). That is the keys to the room she was being held captive in during her self-proclaimed bout of madness, prior to her mystical experiences. I believe the keys did more than free her

from captivity. The keys unlocked her soul from torment and opened a door to a different way of life that would have been unattainable without a close and loving relationship with the divine.

Kempe is no more hysterical than any other deeply religious individual. Her visions were a divine gift that allowed her the ability to overcome hardship and turmoil. Kroll, Bachrach and Carey explains how we might consider individuals a gift of affective mysticism in the following passage:

The deeply religious person lives and acts assuming the closely parallel existence of transcendental realm that can and does interact with the physical and material world upon which our ordinary notions of causality and experience are based. If we make judgments about mentality and behavior if we make judgements about the mentality and behavior of the former applying criteria based upon the latter, then most religious persons will be seen to have some psychopathology. (94)

Therefore we must judge mystics, both modern and medieval, in context. We must take into account the Christian belief system and social hierarchy that was in place at the time the story or vision was produced. Then the only way to prove the validity of the mystic's claim is to look at the results of the experiences versus the content of the experience, a cause and effect method. McGinn explains that "the mystical element within Christianity involves a form of immediate encounter with God whose essential purpose is to convey a loving knowledge (however negative, or apophatic) that transforms the mystic's consciousness and whole way of life" (214-215). I believe that Kempe's autobiography details just this sort of mystical experience, and her life was changed and in her persistence to have her story written others' lives have been changed as well. She was not hysterical. She was gifted. Kempe was a devout woman who successfully sought a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, firm in her beliefs which she continues to share.

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