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The Book of Margery Kempe



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The Book of
MARGERY KEMPE

(c. 1373 - c. 1440)



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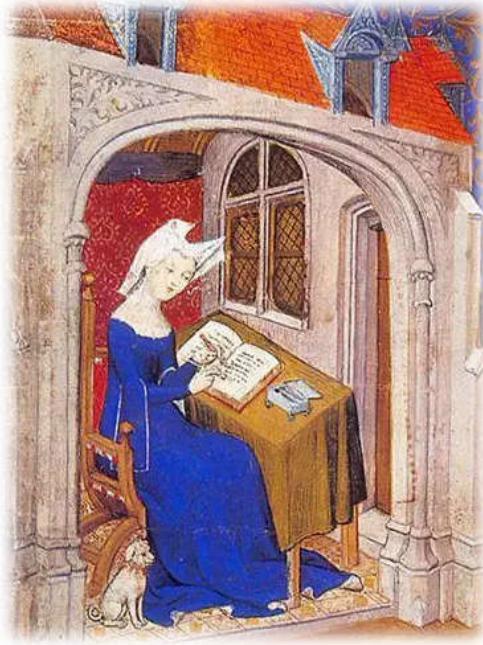
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Medieval Library

MARGERY KEMPE



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The Book of Margery Kempe



Map of King's Lynn defences by Wenceslas Hollar, 1650 — Margery Kempe was born in c. 1373 in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn), Norfolk.



King's Lynn today

Brief Introduction: Margery Kempe



Regarded by some as the author of the first autobiography in the English language, Margery Kempe was born Margery Burnham in c. 1373 in Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn), Norfolk. Her father, John Brunham, was a merchant that had become mayor of the town and a Member of Parliament. No records remain of any formal education she may have received. As an adult, a priest read to her "works of religious devotion" in English, suggesting that she was unable to read by herself, although she appears to have learned various texts by heart. At around twenty years of age, she married John Kempe, who became a town official close to that time. Margery and John had at least fourteen children.

Margery Kempe was an orthodox Catholic and, like other medieval mystics, believed that she was summoned to a "greater intimacy with Christ" as a result of multiple visions and experiences she had as an adult. After the birth of her first child, she endured a period of crisis for nearly eight months, which may have been an episode of postpartum psychosis. During her illness, Kempe claimed to have envisioned numerous devils and demons attacking her and commanding her to "forsake her faith, her family, and her friends". She also had a vision of Christ in the form of a man that asked her, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?" Kempe affirms that she had visitations and conversations with Jesus, Mary, God and several other religious figures; she even claimed to have had visions of being an active participant during the birth and crucifixion of Christ. These visions and hallucinations physically affected her bodily senses, causing her to hear sounds and smell unknown odours.

Although Kempe never joined a religious order, she carried out "her life of devotion, prayer, and tears in public". Her public displays of loud wailing, sobbing, and writhing frightened and annoyed both clergy and laypeople. At one point, she was imprisoned by the clergy and town officials and threatened with the possibility of rape; however, she does not record being sexually assaulted. Finally, during the 1420's she dictated her book, vividly illustrating her visions, mystical and religious experiences, as well as her "temptations to lechery, her travels, and her trial for heresy".

Kempe was tried for heresy on multiple occasions, but never convicted; she mentions with pride her ability to deny the accusations that she faced. Possible reasons for her arrests include her preaching (then forbidden to women), her wearing of all white as a married woman (i.e. impersonating a nun), and her apparent belief that she could pray for the souls of those in purgatory and tell whether or not someone was damned, in a manner similar to the concept of the intercession of saints. During an inquiry into heresy she was thought to be possessed by a devil for quoting the scripture, and she was reminded of the prohibition against female preachers in *1 Timothy*.

Throughout her life, she was moved to visit holy shrines so that she could better understand God's message. Her early pilgrimages were undertaken in the company of her husband. She travelled to shrines across England, often seeking validation for her visions and experiences. We know that she visited Julian of Norwich in 1413 to seek her guidance and reassurance. Julian confirmed that Kempe's visions came from God and that her tears are physical evidence of the Holy Spirit in her soul. She then went on to travel abroad, making long journeys to the Holy Land, Assisi, Rome and

Santiago. After the death of her husband and son, she accompanied her daughter-in-law back to Prussia. She then travelled on to Danzig and Aachen, before finally returning to Syon Abbey, on the bank of the River Thames in the county of Middlesex.

In 1438, the year her book was completed, a “Margueria Kempe”, who may well have been the author, was admitted to the Trinity Guild of Lynn. This was one of the few merchant guilds that survived into the late middle ages with its political authority intact. Its members formed the dominant element in town government and can be considered as synonymous with the governing group of the town. It is unknown when or where after this date Kempe died.

Nearly everything that is known about her life comes from her spiritual autobiography. In the preface to the book, she describes how she employed as a scribe an Englishman who had lived in Germany, but he died before the work was complete and what he had written was unintelligible to others. This may possibly have been John Kempe, her eldest son. She then persuaded a local priest, who may have been her confessor Robert Springold, to begin rewriting on 23 July 1436, and on 28 April 1438 he started work on an additional section covering the years 1431 to 1434.

The Book of Margery Kempe is divided into two parts. The first part in many ways follows the format of similar devotional texts of the period, particularly those written by women mystics and visionaries. Through various experiences, childbirth, madness and her first vision of Christ, Kempe narrates her spiritual journey that leads to her travels in England and abroad. The second part resembles more of a travel journal, describing the death of her husband and son, before narrating her journey back to England.

The manuscript was copied, probably shortly before 1450, by someone that signed himself *Salthows* on the bottom portion of the final page. This scribe has been identified as the Norwich monk Richard Salthouse. The manuscript contains annotations by four hands. The first page of the manuscript contains the rubric “Liber Montis Gracie. This boke is of Mountegrace,” confirming that some of the annotations are the work of monks associated with the important Carthusian priory of Mount Grace in Yorkshire. Although the four readers largely concerned themselves with correcting mistakes or emending the manuscript for clarity, there are also remarks about the text’s substance and images that reflect Kempe’s themes and images. A recipe, added to the final folio of the manuscript by a late fourteenth or early fifteenth century reader, possibly at the cathedral priory in Norwich, provides more evidence of its readership; the recipe is believed to be for medicinal sweets, or digestives, called ‘dragges’.

The Book was essentially lost for centuries, being known only from excerpts published by Wynkyn de Worde in around 1501, and by Henry Pepwell in 1521. However, in 1934 a manuscript, now held in the British Library — the sole surviving manuscript — was discovered in the private library of the Butler-Bowdon family, and it was analysed by the noted American medievalist Hope Emily Allen. It has since been reprinted and translated in numerous editions.

Kempe’s significance chiefly lies in the autobiographical nature of her work, which offers an insightful window into the life of a middle-class woman in the middle ages. The text is a carefully constructed spiritual and social commentary, which some commentators have suggested was written as fiction to explore the aspects of the society in which Kempe lived in a credible manner. This theory may be supported by the way she speaks of herself as ‘this creature’ throughout the text. Regardless of her original intentions, it is certainly the story of an eventful life, charting her experiences

as a medieval wife, mother, businesswoman, pilgrim and visionary. She recounts in vibrant, unembarrassed detail the madness that followed the birth of the first of her fourteen children, the failure of her brewery business, her dramatic call to spiritual life, her vow of chastity and pilgrimages to Europe and the Holy Land. *The Book of Margery Kempe* presents a unique portrait of a woman of remarkable character, incredible bravery and pious belief.

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Opening page of 'The Book of Margery Kempe', c. 1440



St. Margaret's Church, King's Lynn, now known as King's Lynn Minster, was Kempe's parish church.



The interior of the church. Here, Kempe spent many hours in prayer and contemplation.



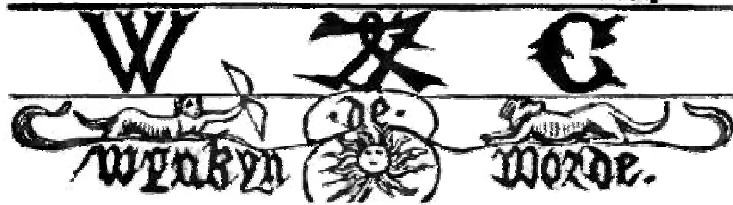
King's Lynn Guild Hall. The building was commissioned to replace an earlier guildhall that had been destroyed in a fire on 23 January 1421.



Nineteenth century depiction of Julian of Norwich (c. 1343-c. 1416), an anchoress of the Middle Ages. Her writings, now known as 'Revelations of Divine Love', are the earliest surviving English language works by a woman, although it is possible that some anonymous works may have had female authors. In 1413 Margery Kempe visited Julian at her cell in Norwich.



1493



Portrait and printer's mark of Wynkyn de Worde, a printer and publisher in London known for his work with William Caxton. He was the first to publish Kempe's book as a pamphlet in 1501

Line by Line Text



When viewing this line-by-line text on an eReader, it is recommended to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines to display correctly, as in the original manuscript.

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