

MARGERY KEMPE

A Study in Urban Spirituality

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MARGERY KEMPE WAS BORN about 1373 in the busy port of Bishop's Lynn, now King's Lynn, in Norfolk. She was one of the most extraordinary women this country has ever produced. A daughter of John Brunham, the mayor of Lynn, she was married at the age of about twenty to John Kempe, a burgher of the town, and was to give birth to fourteen children during the first twenty years or so of marriage.

At the age of about forty, Margery underwent conversion, dedicating her life to prayer and experiencing visions and divine locutions. In her later years she dictated her autobiography to a priest; and it shows that, although she was apparently illiterate, she was acquainted with several works of mysticism, among them the *Revelations of St Bridget*. The experiences of this Swedish saint played powerfully with Margery's imagination. Like Margery, Bridget had been married and had many children; and, like Bridget, Margery began to have visions of Jesus, to experience spiritual longings, and to feel a growing repugnance for intercourse with her husband. As she explained to him: 'I may not deny you my body, but all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone'.¹ A figure notably resembling Chaucer's Wyf of Bathe in her pride and her love of fine clothes emerges from the earlier pages of Margery's book. At first she would not relinquish 'her pride or her showy manner of dressing', but at length she wanted to wear only a white garment like that of a religious.²

¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 46.

² *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 43, and see 67.

Margery Kempe's conversion was part of a spiritual trend which had characterized the region where she lived since the middle of the previous century. Both in East Anglia and further north in Yorkshire, increasing numbers of anchorites and mystical writers were appearing, such as Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich, to name three of the most outstanding. Recluses inhabited lonely cells in isolated areas such as the caves at Saltfleet and the woods at Doncaster.³ There were also anchorites living in cells attached to religious houses in York, Norwich and Bishop's Lynn—including Margery's own confessor, who resided at the Preaching Friars there—or in cells next to churches, as Julian of Norwich did.

Kempe is unique in being the first English mystical author of her age who was neither a religious nor a recluse, but someone who lived a full bourgeois life in a town and who, in addition, travelled to a great number of other towns and cities both in England and abroad. Not for her 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue': her vocation approximates much more to that of Milton's 'true wayfaring Christian'.⁴ I would like to focus here on the way Margery Kempe flourished not in a rural but in a town environment, concentrating especially on what we might call the 'urban dimension' of her spirituality, and on the advantages and disadvantages of her bourgeois surroundings for the life of devotion that she increasingly longed to lead.

Bishop's Lynn

Sir, I am from Lynn in Norfolk, the daughter of a good man of the same Lynn, who has been five times mayor of that worshipful borough, and also an alderman for many years; and I have a good man, also a burges of the said town of Lynn, for my husband.⁵

Thus Margery addressed the hostile mayor of Leicester when she was arrested for heresy there on her way back to Lynn from Santiago some time in 1416–17. She might have added that her father had been a

³ See J. Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1988), 65

⁴ John Milton, *Areopagitica* [1644], in *Selected Essays of Education, Areopagitica, the Commonwealth*, (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2005), 70.

⁵ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 149.



The Guildhall, King's Lynn

member of parliament six times and her brother already once.⁶ At the time of Margery's birth, Bishop's Lynn was a prosperous town and one of the most important English ports for trade with Holland, Germany and the Baltic. It also had a thriving fishing industry, among whose most important catches was the stockfish, which God, in a homely image, used as a symbol of Margery's obedience: 'Daughter, you are obedient to my will, and cleave as fast to me as the skin of the stockfish sticks to a man's hand when it is boiled'.⁷

Trade, and an oligarchy based on trade, dominated the civic life of Lynn. The prestigious Trinity Guild of Merchants, to which Margery was admitted late in life in 1438, controlled access to the highest civic offices and its members figured consistently as aldermen and mayors. The rich citizens of the town lived well and indulged in many of the exotic luxuries which came into their port from abroad. Merchants' wives and daughters vied with each other in the richness of their dress. Margery was, at first, no exception.

⁶ He was an MP again in 1417, perhaps shortly after this incident.

⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 127.

As Mayor Brunham's daughter she, no doubt, had a very comfortable childhood in one of the large stone merchants' houses of the town; but nowhere in her book does she mention her childhood. Despite the fact that most young women from households such as hers would, by the late fourteenth century, have learnt to read and write, Margery was apparently illiterate and, despite her obvious intelligence and good understanding, does not seem to have tried to remedy the shortcoming.

As a young wife, after her recovery from what was probably post-natal depression, Margery took up the trade of brewing 'out of pure covetousness and in order to maintain her pride'.⁸ Having failed as a brewer, and having begged John Kempe's pardon for her headstrong behaviour, she then applied herself to milling. She attributed the ensuing collapse of this business also—which seemed to her inexplicable, if not supernatural—to God's disfavour.

Many of the following years were spent travelling around England, and then on pilgrimage abroad, but Lynn was always her base. Even when, much later, the populace turned against her and she was 'slandered, and eaten and gnawed by people's talk',⁹ she refused to leave the town: 'For here in this town I have sinned. Therefore it is fitting that I suffer sorrow in this town because of it.'¹⁰ Later on in her life, Margery and her husband lived apart to affirm the fact that they had made a vow of chastity, but they both continued to live in Lynn, where she eventually nursed him through his final broken years.¹¹

Margery went to other towns, such as Norwich, specifically in search of spiritual help and direction, and she sought out Dame Julian of Norwich, listening at length to her advice. The primary purpose of her visit here seems to have been in obedience to the divine injunction to visit a certain White Friar, William Southfield. Margery also had a regular confessor in that town—the vicar of St Stephen's—which suggests that she visited Norwich often.¹²

⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 44.

⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 193.

¹⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 193.

¹¹ See *The Book of Margery Kempe*, chapter 76.

¹² This is the cleric who, on his first meeting with Margery, lifted up his hands in amazement and said, with engaging humour, that he would not eat a thing until he had found out what a woman could say about God to occupy one or two hours.

Religious Life in Town

One of the great advantages of living in a town for a person with Margery Kempe's spiritual aspirations was the easy availability of churches, clerics and sermons, and the abundant possibility of spiritual counselling and advice—all of which she freely used. In addition we find clear evidence in her *Book* of the influence exercised on her spiritual understanding by the religious ceremonies of town life, and by the mystery plays which she must have followed intently since they centred on the life of the Lord whom she so loved. Her long, highly dramatized account of Christ's passion in chapters 78 to 81 of her *Book* reveals many details and verbal echoes from the mystery plays that Margery saw at Lynn and elsewhere.

We know that she was in York for Corpus Christi on 22 June 1413, when she and her husband almost certainly saw the York Cycle of plays performed. In the York crucifixion play the soldiers stretch Christ's arm to fit the nail-holes they have made in the cross-beam because 'it fails a foot or more'; then, making a great noise and fuss, they bounce the cross heavily into 'this mortise here'.¹³ Both these details find their place in Margery's passion account: she saw how Christ's sinews were so shrunk that his hand 'would not reach the hole they had drilled for it—and they pulled on it to make it reach the hole'.¹⁴ She also noted how the soldiers lifted the cross with Christ's body on it: 'they lifted it up from the earth a certain distance, and then let it fall into the mortise'.¹⁵ In the Towneley play of the scourging, Mary offers to carry her son's cross, as she also does in Margery's account.

Such close parallels show how deeply the mystery plays seen by Margery in her own and other towns heightened her understanding of, and response to, the passion. They throw a strong light, too, on the immediacy that such representations had for those who witnessed them—an immediacy clearly reflected in Margery's meditations.

Because she was a town-dweller, Margery had ample opportunity for daily Mass, as well as for long hours of prayer before the altars of various churches. Lynn offered her, not only the great Benedictine

¹³ *The York Plays*, edited by Richard Beadle (London: Edwin Arnold, 1982), 318 and 321.

¹⁴ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 233.

¹⁵ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 233.

church of St Margaret and its chapel-of-ease, St Nicholas, but also the churches and chapels of the orders of Friars and of monastic houses, which we know she frequented. Examples of her prayers may be quoted from chapter 23 of her *Book* where she speaks of herself thus:

... as this creature once lay in the choir at her prayers, a priest came to her and asked her to pray for a woman who lay at the point of death. As this creature prayed for her our Lord said to her, 'Daughter, it is very necessary to pray for her, because she has been a wicked woman and she shall die'.¹⁶

In chapter 3 we are told: 'she rose at two or three of the clock and went to church, and was there at her prayers until midday and also the whole afternoon'.¹⁷



High Altar, All Saints' church, King's Lynn

Confession was available to her whenever she wished, as were spiritual conversations and the chance of seeking continual assurance about the genuineness of her special vocation. This was something that Margery clearly needed; the early days of her religious conversion were haunted by scrupulosity: 'She was sometimes shriven two or three times on the same day especially of that sin which she had so long concealed and covered up'.¹⁸ Time and again, like some Ancient Mariner, Margery feels compelled to go on telling her story:

¹⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 89.

¹⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 47.

¹⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 47.

This creature revealed her manner of life to many a worthy clerk, to honoured doctors of divinity, both religious men and others of secular habit.¹⁹

Nevertheless,

... the anchorite of the Preaching Friars in Lynn—who was her principal confessor ... took the responsibility on his own soul that her feelings were good and sure, and that there was no deception in them.²⁰

It is also thanks to the fact that she lived in a town with a plentiful supply of chantry priests that Margery was able to hire a young priest to 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.²¹

Since she was illiterate, her faith had to come by hearing: where better than in a town could it be nourished?

Sermons, too, were frequent and easily available to all in town—except, perhaps, to Margery at times when her weeping²² became too antisocial and disruptive. We know how much she longed to hear good preaching from her grief when a certain great preaching friar who was visiting Lynn felt compelled to ban her from his sermons, even speaking against her, though without naming her:

But she was not excluded from any other cleric's preaching, but only from the good friar's ... notwithstanding that in the meantime there preached many worthy doctors and other worthy clerks, both religious and secular, at whose sermons she cried very loudly and sobbed very violently many times and often.²³

¹⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 79.

²⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 79.

²¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 182.

²² One of the more disturbing characteristics of Margery's piety was her propensity to burst into loud weeping and sobbing, which she found it impossible to control.

²³ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 190.

Town processions on Corpus Christi and Palm Sunday, the holding of lighted candles at the parish Mass on Candlemas Day: all these occasions called forth hysterical weeping and sobbing that were a stumbling-block to her fellow Christians and caused her to be shunned and despised.

Encounters with Authority

***So much
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Margery's relations with the ecclesiastical and civic authorities of the towns she visited were often stormy; more than once she was either imprisoned or threatened with imprisonment. She posed a great problem for these authorities because so much in her conduct gave rise to the suspicion of heresy. She was popularly denounced as a Lollard on several occasions and many citizens, in her own and other towns, clamoured for her to be burnt. In Canterbury some monks cried after her 'Thou shalt be burnt, false Lollard' and a little later many townsfolk called out 'Take and burn her'.²⁴ These were not idle threats, and Margery was right to feel fear. Her detailed knowledge of the Bible and her outspokenness to bishops were enough to condemn her in an age when the response to suspicion of heresy was unreasoning and fanatical. Her reception and experiences in York may be taken as typical. Trouble began in the Minster while she was praying there. A priest plucked at the collar of the white gown which signalled her status as a vowess, growling: 'You wolf, what is this cloth that you have on?'²⁵ He swore at her and she rebuked him for his language.

She said, 'Sir, you should keep the commandments of God, and not swear negligently as you do' After he had wrangled with her for a long time, he slipped away before she noticed, so that she did not know where he went.²⁶

Later she was summoned to appear in the chapterhouse, where she was questioned closely to elicit any potentially heretical beliefs. Margery's faith, however, was informed and orthodox—which is, no

²⁴ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 64.

²⁵ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 158. The incident has an amusing side, as 'Children of the monastery going past said to the priest, "Sir, it is wool"'.
²⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 158.

doubt, what many times saved her from the stake. The doctors of divinity could not disconcert her, but they ordered that she be imprisoned before appearing before the Archbishop of York, Henry Bowet, at his palace at Cawood. As always, there were people who supported and befriended Margery; and now her friends preserved her from prison by answering for her appearance before the Archbishop at the appointed time.

At Cawood Margery was terrified, hiding her hands beneath her cloak to conceal her trembling. Despite her fear she answered the Archbishop with some boldness, rebuking him as a wicked man and telling him that he would not get to heaven if he did not change his ways. Clearly abashed by her sincerity, Archbishop Bowet asked her to swear that she would not 'teach people or call them to account in my diocese'.²⁷ This she would not promise, declaring that she would speak of God and rebuke those who used oaths wherever she might be. She held that the gospel gave her permission to speak of God. Anxious to see the back of her, the Archbishop arranged a safe conduct for her to the Humber, but at Hessle she was arrested by servants of the Duke of Bedford, brother of Henry V, whom her behaviour had previously managed to upset. One can sympathize with Bowet's dismay when, next day, she was brought before him in the chapterhouse at Beverley: 'What, woman, have you come again? I would gladly be rid of you.'²⁸

Other bishops, however, treated her well, though all were somewhat wary of her. The Bishop of Worcester received her for her father's sake; Philip of Repyngdon, Bishop of Lincoln, welcomed her warmly and listened to what she had to tell him. When he sent her on to see Archbishop Arundel of Canterbury, she boldly suggested that the Archbishop should correct members of his household whose oaths outraged her.

In the most meek and kindly way he allowed her to say what was on her mind and gave her a handsome answer, she supposing that things would then be better. And so their conversation continued until stars appeared in the sky.²⁹

²⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 163.

²⁸ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 170.

²⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 72.

Urban Spirituality

What does all this add to our understanding of Margery's spirituality? In the first instance it shows us that her orthodoxy was continually challenged but that, growing in confidence as she matured spiritually, Margery was equal to meeting this challenge, despite her fears, because she knew and faithfully subscribed in its entirety to the Catholic faith that she professed. Her moral courage, too, is evident in her refusal to compromise and win a quiet life for herself by minding her own business and letting others go their own way to perdition. Courage is also apparent in the way that, despite her deep respect for the priesthood, she would stand up to any cleric whom she deemed dishonest or insincere in his vocation, be he priest or bishop.

As we read *The Book of Margery Kempe* we are continually aware of the populous town background to her life, full of people to criticize, discuss and misunderstand her, to shout at her and humiliate her. In Lynn it was 'noised about ... that neither man nor beast would serve the said creature'.³⁰ Many people thought that she was a hypocrite who could weep and leave off weeping at will. She found this hostile public opinion difficult to bear. Yet its effect on her spiritual life was that she learnt, like St Francis of Assisi, to rejoice in calumny and criticism, even to be grateful for it. When, as a result of her singularity and rejection of worldliness, she lost many former friends, 'all the while she thanked God for everything, desiring nothing but mercy and forgiveness of sins'.³¹

We might consider that she had brought all this hostility on herself, but Margery made a virtue of the sufferings that her oddness brought on her and learnt humility thereby. No anchoress in her cell, no nun in her convent, could be as liable as the town-dwelling Margery to such wide and continuous disapproval. Yet she was loved and admired as well—many people in many towns were her supporters. When in dire need, she was never left entirely without help. In her later days in Lynn her prayers were sought for the sick and needy as if she were already a saint—an impression that she, perhaps unconsciously, reinforced by kissing women lepers in the streets.

³⁰ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 45.

³¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 48.

The fact that, throughout her story, Margery seemed to be known by repute in all the English towns she visited reminds us how comparatively small the population was—both of the towns and of the whole country. Gossip travelled easily, and her fame, or rather her notoriety, preceded her. It was impossible for her presence in a town to pass without notice because of the singularity of her behaviour and the way she confronted people, stirring up conflict like a sort of middle-aged, would-be Britomart.

All this is enough to emphasize how integrally the character of Margery's spiritual life was bound up with an urban way of life. In contrast to anchorites and nuns, she was a woman of means, whose economic resources were derived from the trade of a wealthy bourgeois family. She was able to launch her own economic enterprises; to bargain with her husband about living in chastity; and even to exercise a certain limited freedom in a community governed by male authority, both civil and ecclesiastical. Many have fled the town to find Christ in the 'wilderness'; not so Margery, whose bustling, robust spirituality needed no further retreat from the world than the silence of a chapel in her parish church of St Margaret. Perhaps, ultimately, it is this aspect of her life that explains why her writings lack a real depth of mystical experience. Her visions, locutions and teachings are far from being new, deep insights revealed to her supernaturally; rather they are her own subconscious reworking of the great wealth of religious instruction and preaching which came to her, mainly in Lynn, but also in the other towns she visited in the course of her wanderings. Her moral courage and her unwavering devotion to Christ give her a much stronger claim than her mystical experiences to be regarded as a candidate for sanctity.

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