The Book of Margery Kempe
An Initial Analysis

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An excerpt from *The Book of Margery Kempe*

On one occasion, when this creature was at Canterbury in the church amongst the monks, she was greatly despised and reproved because she wept so much—both by the monks and priests, and by secular men nearly all day, both morning and afternoon—and so much so that her husband went away from her as if he had not known her, and left her alone among them, choose how she might, for no further comfort did she have from him that day.

So an old monk, who had been treasurer to the Queen when he was in secular clothes, a powerful man and greatly reared by many people, took her by the hand saying to her, "What can you say of God?"

"Sir," she said, "I will both speak of him and hear of him" repeating to the monk a story from scripture.

The monk said, "I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you.

"Ah, sir," she said, "you should support God's servants, and you are the first that hold against them—our Lord amend you." (Windeatt 62-63)

Among texts from the Middle Ages that have survived to our own time, the collection of stories, reminiscences and prayers known as *The Book of Margery Kempe* is unique. The idiosyncratic record of a woman's life, it is considered to be the earliest autobiography written in English. Neither strictly secular nor formally doctrinaire, it presents instead a record of personal religious experience. The special nature of this document compounds the problems that face historians, as they try to cull meanings from a work long removed from its original context. What follows is a brief attempt to answer the questions about Margery's book that must, in the long run, be asked about any piece of historical data. What kind of artifact is it? How does it serve as a source of direct historical information? What might it tell us indirectly? Finally (assuming the need to do so), in what category might we place this object? Tackling these questions serves not so much to fully analyze the text, as to provide an example of the process through which historical artifacts are scanned for their possible significance.

The Book as a Document

The Book of Margery Kempe was produced in England during the first half of the fifteenth century. Apparently it was begun around 1432, with final additions begun around 1438. The time was a difficult one for England, which

had recently been defeated in a definitive way for its claims to the French throne.

Margery lived in King's Lynn, a rather wealthy port town. This was not a secluded part of the country, as we might expect given her almost complete lack of reaction to city life, nor was it a major religious center. Margery seems to have been what we might now consider "upper middle class."

The role of authorship is a complicated one to pinpoint in the case of this text. Certainly, the book was dictated by Margery, daughter of a man who had held, at various times, positions including mayor, alderman, Member of Parliament, and coroner. Yet she herself was illiterate, making necessary the dictation of her story. Her first scribe she identifies only as "a man": no occupation is indicated, so we might assume that he was not a cleric. He was an Englishman, but had been living in Germany for some time. His writing turned out to be virtually illegible, apparently owing to a lack of command of either English or German. It is suggested that this scribe may have been Margery's son (Windeatt 9); it is difficult to imagine the grandson of so prominent a citizen being so poorly skilled.

The first draft was finally transcribed (or translated, depending upon which language it was in) by a man Margery tells us is a cleric. He is English as well, and apparently well acquainted with Margery. Significantly, this scribe was assisted in some way by "special grace"—his ability to decipher the original text was impeded until, we are told, he received the help of God. This fact implies the existence, though unseen, of a fourth "author," God. In any case, both the cleric and God agreed that the proper language in which to record Margery's book was English, not the standard Latin. Throughout, Margery is referred to in the third person, as "she," "this creature."

The purpose of the *Book* is dependent upon its audience, and for both of these we have two different, though related, notions. Margery tells us that her book is intended to be a comfort and source of solace (Windeatt 33). The audience is, presumably, fellow English Christians. But later we learn that the reason she agreed to tell her story was that "our Lord . . . commanded and charged her that she should have written down her feelings and revelations, and her form of living, so that His goodness might be known to all the world" (Windeatt 35). God's intention is to have Margery act as an evangelist to the world. As always, Margery's ambitions are more limited until she is prodded by divine revelation.

The Book as Historical Source

What the *Book* tells us directly is a question of what Margery intends to tell us of her time. Clearly, her intention is not to convey historical information,

except perhaps as a kind of social history of one woman. Margery's history is defined as "how did I as an individual fit into the social fabric of my time." Or, to turn it around, she may have been offering us a critique of her society's morality. With Margery at the moral center, how does society fare in comparison? Here the question is, "how did my society treat me as an individual?"

The kinds of historical information that Margery chooses to relate to us are, accordingly, mainly of two kinds: information on how a religious life was conducted by an individual, and how her community (or communities) reacted to her. These are the only kinds of "history" that Margery seems compelled to relate. Incidentally, though still with some purpose, she gives us some insight into the politics within religious communities, and all along the way treats us to first hand accounts of her interactions with others.

First among these kinds of information is the religious behavior of Margery, a middle class woman of her time. We are given to understand, in great detail, her basic beliefs, though they are largely an affirmation of orthodox doctrine. We learn the forms of prayer that she uses in communion with her God. We are also given a detailed account of this woman's devotion to her Church as an institution. She tells us how often she attends Church and the importance, significance, and frequency of her observance of the rituals of her religion. We are also told about her pilgrimages. Specifically, she conveys what these journeys meant to her, and what she believed they meant to her peers and, interestingly, to God. As a case study of an individual, Margery gives us a wealth of information.

Most significantly for her, we are also given a detailed account of an individual's behavior *outside* the norm of her day. We are told of her weeping and crying fits (her gifts from God, she tells us) and in general her emotional involvement with her faith: her practice of abstinence, her desire for—and method of procuring—a life of chastity, and a lot of information about the importance of dress for her observance of her faith.

The information we get concerning her society's reaction to her actions is, it seems, only vital in a black and white way: either she is accepted or she is rejected. As a historical source, this side of the story lacks richness. It gives only a kind of barometric reading of the pressures she endured. We learn that the clergy, generally speaking, is accepting of her behavior. The laity, again in a general way, is disposed unfavorably toward her. Those within her country—indeed, within her religion—seem less at ease with her than those outside her native borders and her faith.

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Another, her conversation with the Archbishop, is evidence of the corruption within one community (72-73). These stories are, in a way, more explicitly "historical", but each is intended to relate to Margery.

Perhaps the most colorful and unique kind of information Margery gives us is the wealth of direct discourse with every segment of her community, from the famous mystic Dame Julian of Norwich to poor beggars in the streets of Jerusalem. Margery's amazing social mobility makes all the more puzzling—and frustrating—the lack of information on politics, domestic life, and popular culture. These things are as opaque to us as if there were no secular existence at the time. This is the filter through which we have to analyze what Margery does tell us.

The Book as Indirect Historical Source

A great deal of Margery's book is valuable for what it says despite itself. Most basically, the manner of its writing tells us that, even for a woman of relatively high social standing, education was not a given.

The conditions of marriage are put into some focus in Margery's descriptions of her negotiations with her husband to secure a vow of chastity. Clearly, the relationship is not one in which power is shared by both partners equally *in all things*, yet we find that each has their own domain in which they exercise control. Margery refers to sex as "paying the debt of matrimony" (Windeatt 46), and admits to her husband, "I may not deny you my body." Yet as part of her bargain to achieve his vow, she uses "her" money (Windeatt 60). Apparently a man owned his wife's body, but not her property.

We know that veneration of the Virgin was an important part of devotion at the time. Margery goes to great lengths throughout the book to show that she is orthodox—and this is achieved, in part, by relating the life story of the Virgin in as great a detail as possible, investing the Nativity, Adoration and Flight with greatest significance as episodes in the life of Mary (Windeatt 52-54).

We may infer that the English language was gaining in popularity as a language for written materials, as no attempt is made, apparently, to put the *Book* into Latin, even thought the final scribe is a cleric. Similarly, nationalism as an emerging trend is a recurring—though not explicit—theme in the *Book*. As with most things in Margery's world, however, it is not a simple matter. God is seen as protecting Englishmen, as in Margery's ocean travels, but at the same time Englishmen are singled out for special criticism. Especially in the Holy Land, Margery finds fellow Englishmen worthy of admonishing: "And she found all people good and gentle to her, except her own countrymen" (Windeatt 111). And again, when a German confessor

understands her speech by miraculous means: "So blessed may God be, who made a foreigner to understand her when her own countrymen had abandoned her" (Windeatt 135).

This may be a sign that nationalism—so much a topic, as the burning, for instance, of Joan of Arc a few years earlier would suggest—may have been in conflict with certain religious sentiments at the time, and not wholeheartedly supported by and propped up by the Church. Margery may have seen herself as a necessary corrective.

Perhaps an insight into the role of imagery in English devotion of the day is gained by the story of the icon Margery sees in the Holy Land. Margery makes little or no mention of imagery in her description of devotions in England. She is strangely moved by a woman in Jerusalem with an image of Christ, which she and others adorn lovingly with "skirts," then "she thanked God because she saw each of these creatures have as great faith in what she saw with her bodily eye as she had seen before her inward eye (Windeatt 113).

Was Margery unaccustomed to seeing images worshipped? It seems so, which tells us something about the use of images in England at the time. Then again, this is not so surprising in a country that seemed to reject Margery based mainly on her outward behavior.

The Book as Specimen of a Genre

Margery's book is often taken to be an early autobiography. This is problematic. To begin with, an autobiography is a difficult genre to define in hard terms; it takes many forms. By definition, the form is decided by the author, inasmuch as a life will be laid out according to those aspects of experience that the individual finds most defining. This is a way of saying that autobiography is among the most selective of forms. Exactly which aspects of a life must be included to deserve the title is nearly impossible to say.

The *Book* certainly *may* be seen as autobiography. Janet Mueller sees Margery's purpose as largely an attempt to achieve the kind of identity that makes autobiography possible. According to Mueller, Margery's tears, once she is assured that they are truly a sign of grace, become a symbol of confidence to her (Windeatt 109). This gives Margery both ". . . the self-awareness and self-realization demonstrated in compiling an autobiography" (Mueller 29). To conclude that Margery had attained a sufficient degree of self-awareness to write a life story, however, does not necessarily mean that her writing *is* autobiographical, simply that it *could* have been.

If we do accept this classification, it is with full acceptance that Margery pushes the limits (not that they existed for her) of selectivity in autobiogra-

phy. What she tells us of her life is greatly outweighed by the questions that remain in our minds.

So great are the questions, in fact, that we may reject the category because of them. It is not only the extreme selectivity of detail, but also a general lack of chronological cohesiveness. For instance, in the course of reading the *Book*, we are not only shifted from one time frame to another, but also instructed to read the text out of order. One is reminded of reading a commentary, and encountering a reference to the related text. It is almost an exercise.

Related to this time issue—and dependent upon it—is the issue of narrativity. The *Book* rarely sustains a story longer than necessary for Margery to need, and receive, divine help of some kind. As Verena Neuburger puts it, "rather than the narrative of a life, [it] is the record of a struggle" (Neuburger 57).

The question, then, of whether the *Book* is typical of the genre almost defies answering. In a way, owing to its date, the question is inappropriate, as no precedent existed; what a "typical" fifteenth century autobiography would be is hard to say. Perhaps we have it here. The biographies of the time, lives of Saints for instance, would probably compare closely with Margery's book, being very selective in detail and definite in their educational purpose.

Another genre to which the *Book* might be assigned, however, is that of mystical writings, though they are not much easier to define. In general, the genre may be seen to strive toward "affective piety": the goal being to affect the emotions of the reader, rather than instruct (Atkinson 155). The author of such a work is less a teacher or scholar than an example, a person who inhabits a state that the reader, presumably, also wishes to attain. T.W. Coleman says, "the mystic is one who, availing himself of every point of contact, cultivates communion with God" (Coleman 13). The difficulty or perhaps the whole point of the genre's existence is that this experience is, in part, not expressible. It may in fact be "wholly incommunicable, save as a bare statement" (Knowles 3).

Margery's book fulfills the function of mystical writing in at least one way: while other medieval texts (and modern ones as well) were generally concerned with establishing legitimacy based on authorship, mystical texts seek to authorize what was originally oral (from the voice of God) within a written text, This argument by Karma Lochrie is summarized by her: "The mystic is required to verify the source of this utterance—that it comes from God rather than the devil" (Lochrie 98). Nothing better defines Margery's entire struggle.

There are, nonetheless, reasons not to find Margery's book "typical" of the genre. It was apparently not held as such prior to its rediscovery in 1934.

Wynkyn de Worde's 1501 pamphlet, containing excerpts from the *Book*, shows interest not in the mystical aspect of the work, but in the ascetic teachings it offers (Thornton 7-8). Comparison with others in the English pastoral tradition, such as Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle, has left many commentators finding a distinct difference. Thornton seems to charge Margery with a lack of intellectual vigor, being simply too passive to be a true mystic: ". . . she shows it to us from the inside—from, as it were, the receiving end" (Thornton 13). David Knowles puts it more bluntly. Margery's writings, particularly her visions and locutions, . . . give something of the same impression as do a series of banal conversations in an otherwise well written novel of adventure" (Knowles 144). Neither an attack on Margery's tone, nor on the sophistication of her writing style, however, really argues against the *functionality* of her work as mystical—only against its effectiveness for a modern reader.

The problems encountered in this last consideration—deciding into what category a particular historical artifact fits—make clear the need for deliberate and careful analysis *before* conclusions are drawn. There is a long distance between an artifact from the past and a "typical" artifact from the past, and as Margery's book illustrates, in the final analysis, every object is particular and individual.

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