

From I Am to I Do:
Gaining Power through Marginalization in *the Book of Margery Kempe*
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From secret sins to mystical marriages, *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers insight into one woman's empowerment through her quest for God. Working within the bounds of Roman Catholicism, she deconstructs the contemporary medieval view of an angry, vengeful God, reconstructing it into an image of the perfect soul mate and spiritual husband. She makes this transformation as she submerges herself into various forms of lay piety and mysticism. The more she pushes the boundaries, the more she marginalizes herself within her society and, ironically, the more empowered her rhetoric becomes.

On first reading *The Book*, one may be tempted to suspect Kempe more of "hysterical exhibitionism" and heresy than saintliness (Knowles 143). Her boisterous weeping, intimate conversations with the Lord, and emphasis on physical sensations seem directly opposed to modern views of spirituality. Indeed her "alleged spiritual communications" do lack a certain depth, which is present within the higher mystical tradition (Knowles 143). However, all her ecstatic experiences can be classed within acknowledged, contemporary forms of devotion within Roman Catholicism even as they push the boundaries of acceptability.

Kempe is working within an established tradition. Both lay piety and mysticism became increasingly popular from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. There was a "steady growth in the power and depth of religious feelings" in the people (George 22, 23). Members of both the clergy and laity sought God. Some wished to placate God, others desired a personal relationship

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with God, a relationship of necessity within the accepted boundaries established by the institutional church yet not entirely mediated through the priesthood.

Within this context, various forms of devotional piety developed and were used by both the clergy and laity in their quests for spiritual growth (Fahlbusch 528). Kempe herself utilizes many of them: devotion to Mary, contemplation of the humanity of Christ, the meditative practice of *imaginatio* (Yoshikawa 7), pilgrimage, certain forms of asceticism, and an increased partaking of the sacrament of communion. During the course of her *Book*, Kempe describes her involvement with each of these practices in detail, indicating the intentionality of her spiritual quest. Yet, even as the church approved and encouraged these practices within Roman Catholicism, she carries them to extremes, which bring her into the scrutiny of those around her. Some accept the truth of her piety while others do not. Either way, she becomes marginalized as outside the norm, and it is through this marginalization that she develops her own voice. The more reputation for saintliness she acquires, the more her voice becomes empowered.

Her inventive rhetoric extends into mysticism. In its traditional, medieval form, Catholic mysticism is defined in terms of “a union with God which [is] so intimate that nothing [can] intervene” (Aumann 14). This union is strengthened through the renunciation of self and complete submission to the divine will (Aumann 148); It is also “a loving knowledge of God which is born in a personal encounter with the divine”; thus it is both an experience and a process of “being drawn into God” (Welch 694). Each mystic’s experience is different, yet it may include such phenomena as visions, dreams, signs, prophetic insights, and ecstatic states. The latter include, among many others, the gift of tears and of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Kempe claims to experience all of these, and through them, she becomes marginalized

even more. Her ecstatic weeping is particularly controversial. Some believe that truly saintly people weep silently, with grace and dignity; thus they believed Kempe's boisterous wails to be demonically inspired (Kempe 77). Others believed she suffered from a form of epilepsy because of the way she contorted her body and turned pale (77). They spit "at her in horror of the sickness, and some scorned her and said that she howled like a dog and banned her and cursed her and said that she did much harm among the people" (77). It is important to note that Kempe herself is the one relating these rejections and comparing them to the rejections which Christ received thereby using them to increase her reputation for saintliness and empower her voice still further. Through relating these stories, Kempe is intentionally positioning herself as a mystic.

Several times in her *Book*, she mentions various writings by other mystics. Being illiterate herself, she must rely on others to read them to her. The titles include Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love* as well as St. Bridget's *Liber revelationum celectium* and the *Stimulus amoris*, a fourteenth century mystical text falsely attributed to St. Bonaventure (Kempe 30, 106). She also records a whole chapter on her visit to Julian of Norwich to seek the guidance of a well-known and admired anchorite and mystic (31-40). Here, once again, Kempe is attempting to place herself within the accepted mystical tradition in order to authenticate her experiences and empower her own voice.

Her quest for union with the Divine takes on a personal intimacy when she relates that Christ declares His love for her and with a startling twist desires her to wed His Godhead (63-4, 66). Kempe herself claims not to know quite how to respond to this turn of events: "Then the creature kept silent in her soul and answered not thereto, for she was full sore afraid of the Godhead, and she had no knowledge of the dalliance of the Godhead, for all her love and her

affection was set on the manhood of Christ” (63). Up to this point, Kempe’s reconstruction of her image of God has been based on the popular piety of her time, on her ability to visualize Christ’s humanity, and on her gift of tears, sharing in the agony of His suffering. Now, she is re-envisioning the Godhead and her relationship with Him. Instead of fearing God like so many other people in her day, Kempe begins to imagine Him as the lover of her soul. By the end of the chapter, she constructs an image of being ceremonially wedded to God Almighty. Claiming to be the wife of the God which so many feared, empowers her voice even as it further marginalizes her.

In the next chapter, she takes this empowerment yet another step forward. According to Kempe, God gives her permission when she is in her bed to take Him boldly “as her wedded husband....Take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you will” (66). In this way, Kempe is envisioning physically the mystic desire for intimate union with God. Her reconstruction of God has a sensual, passionate edge, which may make some modern readers uneasy. Indeed, it may push the boundaries; nevertheless, it is still in keeping with the traditional imagery of the Church as the bride of Christ. *The Song of Songs* which Christians have interpreted as an allegory of Christ’s love for the Church, depicts their relationship through the use of very sensuous imagery. The bride proclaims at the beginning of the first chapter, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine” (1:2). Later she describes her beloved in terms of an intimate embrace: “A bundle of myrrh is my well beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts” (1:3). Kempe’s appropriation of this imagery places her within the category of the spiritual espousal, which many knew in the Middle Ages (Atkinson 47-48; Riehle 53-107).

To reach this truly intimate level of union with God, a mystic has had to renounce self and submit entirely to His will. Indeed, Kempe tries to present herself as having fulfilled these requirements, and in doing so, she has marginalized herself. In the eyes of those around her, she no longer fits the norm for a woman of the merchant class. In their eyes, she is now a heretic, a lunatic, or a saint. Of course, her dictation of *The Book* is an attempt to prove the latter, for if she can persuade others to accept that her behavior is indicative of her sanctity, then her marginalization has resulted in her empowerment.

In addition, she has deconstructed the dominant medieval view of God as fearful and full of wrath and has reconstructed her image of Him into that of a loving husband. While at first she concentrates her love and attention solely on the manhood of Christ, her reconstruction of her own perception of God eventually also includes Christ's divinity. When she accepts this revelation, the once frightening Godhead becomes instead her loving, spiritual spouse. By doing so, she takes the ineffable and makes Him her own, gaining, in the process, a certain level of imagined power over God Himself. As His spiritual wife, she now believes she may claim to at least a portion of His authority. Thus, working within the bounds of lay piety and mysticism, she has to some extent succeeded in her attempt to transform and empower herself through her quest for God, and Kempe can say with many levels of meaning, "Jesus is my love."

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