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Preaching Mysticism from the Margins: A Queer Analysis of Margery Kempe

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of the European Middle Ages presents an explicitly gendered and social homogeneity, but this is not to say that there were not figures who defied communal expectations. Drawing on scholarly research surrounding gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages, I argue that we can and should examine these deviating figures through both a historical and contemporary understanding of the term “queer,” with consideration to the multitude of identities the term encompasses. This paper pays particular attention to the narrative of 15th-century Christian mystic Margery Kempe. *The Book of Margery Kempe* traces her journey as a mystic and prophet and the discord between her and several people and institutions. By applying a broad understanding of queerness to Kempe’s character, we see how Kempe’s identity as “this creature” becomes both the cause of her social exile and a tool to legitimize herself.

The term “queer,” as we know it today, can be misconstrued as solely a sexual marker, one which is synonymous to homosexual. This is inaccurate, however. Queer is a term that encompasses a spectrum of significance with regards to sexual and social roles. It allows for flexibility in personal identification and sexual desire. Historically, the word queer was adopted into people’s vernacular as early as the 16th century with the denotation of something “strange, odd, peculiar, [or] eccentric,” the same definition found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* today (“Queer,” 2018). Since before the 16th century, sexuality was publicly homogeneous. Any person exhibiting some sort of identity or behavior outside of the gender binary was socially ostracized. In terms of sexual identity, anything other than heterosexual relations for the sake of procreation was considered a sin (Zeikowitz, 2002, p. 67). If we look at queer as something that is strange and unconventional, anything that falls outside of the norm of the Middle Ages, presents, by definition, as queer. In this paper, I discuss this unconventional behavior that unsettles the homogeneity in Medieval literature, particularly in the case of Margery Kempe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Living in the 15th century, Kempe exemplifies behavior that does not always correspond to her gender identity—marking her with a

“queerness,” or a sort of eccentricity. This causes trouble for Kempe, as she is outright casted off by many of the communities she comes in contact with. Although the term queer does not get linked to sexuality until much later, I also explore the sexual side of queer identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the language surrounding the characters that encapsulate this identity. I propose that we, as readers, can interpret medieval figures as queer both through a historical lens and a contemporary lens. More specifically, Kempe embraces queer qualities that are communally rejected and subverts this rejection by using her queerness as a tool of empowerment.

The communities around Kempe loathed her, particularly the men. Among the multitude of possible reasons, one stands out: Kempe enters and inhabits many male-dominated roles and expectations.

While much of this behavior comes after she begins her endeavor to become a holy woman, Kempe exhibits a social dissidence from the beginning of the narrative. When Kempe initially proclaims her exclusive service to God, she decides that she will change neither her demeanor nor her social conduct. Readers are first introduced to Kempe as a garish figure, one with “gold pipes on her head” and cloaks “laid with divers colors between the dags” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p.8). She is aware of the rumor mill that surrounds her and the fraternal disdain toward her, yet Kempe refuses to “leave her pride nor her pompous array” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 8). She is ostracized right from the start, as women of this time were expected to dress in a subdued manner and manifest “passivity” especially in the presence of men. This is part of what dictates their “social approval” (Seale, 2018, para.1).

Kempe’s pastoral calling—to step into a role of male authority—adds to her non-normative, queer expression, as well. When Kempe, executing God’s will, orders a poor and sick man by the name of Richard to “lead [her] to Rome” in exchange for a reward, he refuses, replying “no, damsel. I know well your countrymen have forsaken you, and therefore it would be hard for me to lead you” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 56). Although her reliance on a man reinforces her expected gender role, Richard’s response sheds light on the condemnation Kempe receives for her eccentric ambitions. Scholar Lynn Staley compares Margery Kempe to Julian of Norwich, a Christian anchoress, claiming that Kempe’s invasion and self-proclamation as spiritual prophet was sinful, and those actions would have her “suspected of heresy, possibly of treason” (Staley, n.d./2001, p. xi). Women were not entitled to any sort of autonomy or privilege at this time, and to assert herself as a religious prophet stepped far outside her expected social role. This echoes the claim made by scholars Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant (2018), that “men were conquerors, women were conquered” (para. 6), in sexual, religious, and economic senses.

Staley’s translation selects language that echoes into Kempe’s pilgrimages. Once she embarks, Kempe’s pilgrimages include her preaching the gospel and advising individuals in the communities on the way. However, much of her preaching is perceived as soapbox lecturing, which leads to outside resistance and vilification. When Kempe

arrives in Bristol, the community loathes her so much that they “scorned her and despised her, banned her and cursed her, said much evil of her, slandered her, and accused her of saying things which she never said” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 78). When she goes to the Archbishop’s chapel in York, the men there do not believe in Margery’s visions, and they call her “lollard” and “heretic,” swearing “many a horrible oath that she should be burnt” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 91). The men in the chapel also refuse to help her, as they have heard ill information regarding Margery, many declaring her a “right wicked woman,” as they doubt her Christian faith (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 92). As she arrives in Hessele, she receives no support for her gospel. Upon arrival, a friar insists that she be imprisoned immediately for her ‘hoax’ (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 95). Kempe is told that she is “the greatest Lollard in all this country” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 95). She is then ushered through a crowd of people to the Duke of Bedford, and while walking, is assaulted with insults and threats from both men and women alike. The women “came running out of their houses,” screaming, “burn this false heretic” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 95). Her preaching the word of God, as a woman, is far from expected social behavior at this time, causing her reputational decay. Reinforcing queerness or anti-normative behavior, the men in Beverly tell her, “Damsel, forsake this life that you have, and go spin and card as other women do, and suffer not so much shame and so much woe” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 96).

Kempe’s social performance is not her only queer trait; neither is it the only thing that causes trouble for her. In a few cases, bold as she is, she believes she has the liberty to behave discourteously. When she comes across a group of bishop’s men, she asks them who they are. They simply respond, “the bishop’s men,” and Kempe, without any imposition or reason, says, “Nay, forsoothe, you are more like the devil’s men,” and the men become extremely angry with her (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 80). In another instance, Kempe is about to be jailed, and a steward demands that “You shall tell me whether you have this speech from God or from the devil, or else you shall go to prison” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 83). Kempe responds, expressing her unwavering love for God, claiming she would not mind the prospect of jail. This exchange is repeated for several lines, until the steward calls her, again, a “right wicked woman” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 83). Perhaps this is not rude through a contemporary reading, but the steward is stunned by Kempe’s speaking at all, and he hears her speech as “boldness,” which angers him (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 83). In a time where women’s voices are intensely restricted, Kempe’s sometimes-snide commentary is considered “dangerous and destabilizing” (Corcoran, 2018, para. 10). This, in turn, sets Margery apart from “normal” behavior, thus queering her.

Within a sexual realm, Kempe’s assumed heterosexual identity may be one of the few expressions that denote her social sameness. However, her endeavor to become a saint, a symbolic “bride of Christ,” separates her from that marker of social homogeneity and begins a chain of queer or eccentric expression. The autobiography begins with Kempe as a married mother of fourteen children; her husband is described as a “worshipful burgess” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 6). Kempe fulfills the 15th-century normative roles for women: married, a mother, a caretaker, and a domestic servant. Once Kempe

has a child, she is attacked by violent sickness and feels haunted by the devil. This leads her to abandon her role as wife and mother and bind herself to God, and God only. John Kempe, her husband, poses a hypothetical question to Margery when he asks,

If there came a man with a sword and would smite off my head unless I should common naturally with you as I have done before, tell me the truth from your conscience... Would you suffer my head to be smote off or else suffer me to meddle with you again, as I did at one time? (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 18)

Kempe admits almost immediately that she would much rather her husband to be murdered than to have sex with him and “turn again to [their] uncleanness” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 18). Her desire for a newly-chaste marriage sets her apart from her contemporaries, as women who were married were *expected* to be objects of sexual pleasure and reproduction. Her refusal have a sexual relationship with her husband imposes a threat to “conjugal debt, that is, the notion that both husband and wife had a duty to perform sexually at the request of their mate,” similar to a transaction (Makowski, 1977, p. 1). He reminds her several times that she must pay off this debt to him before embarking on her pilgrimage.

In her published piece, “Her Body is the Temple of the Holy Ghost: Why Margery Kempe is a Better ‘Virgin,’” writer Katharine Beaulieu (2017) suggests that Margery’s attempt at renewed chastity, despite her no longer being a virgin, “undermines... constructions of virginity” (p. 90), which also marks her as an eccentric figure through a spiritual and sexual lens. Beaulieu (2017) claims that vaginal tissue represented virgin status at this time, and “could not be regained once damaged” (p. 90). Once women’s virginity was tainted, there was “little [they] could do to reclaim that virginity and be seen as whole and clean in the eyes of the Church and the Lord” (p. 90). In this way, Kempe blazes an abnormal—or queer—path to chastity and to becoming a well-known religious figure.

While gendered power dynamics seem wholly against her, Margery Kempe weaponizes her queerness in a male autocracy, and, in some respects, uses her demeanor for self-empowerment. An example of something that could indicate her inferior position is that Kempe’s name is rarely mentioned in the book. In place of her name, the word “creature” is used throughout, a term that can have a degrading connotation when used to replace a person’s name. In her introduction, Lynn Staley (2001) offers the interpretation that Kempe *knew* that if her name was written on the pages, she would not have been taken seriously (p. xi). Instead of a marker of inferiority, the use of the word “creature” becomes a source of empowerment for Kempe. It is, like Staley (2001) suggests, what ultimately gives her the “safety of distance,” and allows her to “set herself up as a figure of spiritual authority” (p. xi). Staley (2001) defines “creature” as a word that “signif[ies] humankind’s necessary relationship to God, the creator” (p. xxi). In spite of the many community members that condemn her, the narrative ex-

emphasizes the handful of individuals who do believe in her spiritual ranking, those who buy into “the creature’s” grace and proclamation of faith. Also, the word “creature” is genderless, without masculine or feminine undertones. So, while Kempe does exhibit queer behavior by attempting to access male-dominated spaces and roles, she herself does not want to be masculine. In this way, having a whole landscape of people refer to her as a creature is a source of empowerment.

Through her queer social and sexual identity, Margery Kempe also finds empowerment through her faith. During such a religiously-governed time period, a strong connection with God was deemed especially powerful. Kempe often has conversations with God, in which He advises her on what to do to achieve sainthood, and she offers her unwavering support and love for Him. Early on in the book, Kempe describes,

This creature thought it was full merry to be reprov'd for God's love. It was to her great solace and comfort when she was chided and scolded for the love of Jesus for reprov'ing of sin... She imagined to herself what death she might die for Christ's sake. (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 23)

At one point, she envisions God nailed on the cross, and is so emotionally moved, she “cried she and wept without measure so that she might not restrain herself” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 52). Kempe’s loud, emotional crying and weeping displays her true love of God. Kempe cries for an extended amount of time, even after leaving this sight, that “she was so full of holy thoughts and meditations and holy contemplations” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 53). As a testament of her reverence toward Him, “Our Lord Jesus Christ dallied to her soul that she could never express them afterward, so high and holy they were” (Kempe, n.d./2001, p. 53). Although Kempe’s relationship with God is often doubted and condemned by surrounding society, God’s love and intimacy make Kempe feel empowered.

Kempe serves as a monumental figure of her time. Although the medieval period seems far removed from contemporary culture, it is important to note the freedoms and restrictions on perceptions and language surrounding identity that women like Kempe faced and how they continue to impact people today. Despite the limited language available to the people of Kempe’s time, does this mean that, we, as readers, should avoid exploring the possibilities of who Kempe might have been? Today, too, there is a struggle to categorize people in terms of the language we have and understand. We may not know precisely what Kempe would have wanted, but viewing her narrative through a queer lens opens up interpretations, and it allows for more understanding than her community members offered her.

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