

*The Alleged Illiteracy of Margery Kempe:
A Reconsideration of the Evidence*

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Margery Kempe's illiteracy is taken for granted by most scholars of medieval and women's literature. For instance, Clarissa Atkinson calls it "a most unusual autobiography, not least because the author could not read or write" (18). Barry Windeatt, Margery's modern translator, calls her "a self-confessedly illiterate woman late in life . . . [who is] a medieval Englishwoman of unforgettable character, undeniable courage and unparalleled experience" (10). The critical literature contains many instances of what might be called the "plucky illiterate" school of Kempe criticism, which celebrates the achievements of a woman who by modern critical standards should not have been able to compose her own text. Each of these references is a triumph for the writer who created this fiction: Margery Kempe herself. A careful review of the evidence will reflect that Margery nowhere tells us directly that she is illiterate, and in fact indicates on a number of occasions otherwise. The illiterate Margery Kempe, as the evidence shows, is a creation of our own desires, not of historical fact.

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Let us begin with what we know of the education of laywomen in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England, when Margery, the daughter of a well-to-do burgess of Lynn, would have been indoctrinated into the world of pious literacy. The outlines of such education have been well defined by scholars like Nicholas Orme, Joan Ferrante, Carol Meale and others, who detail women's training in vernacular reading—a literacy sophisticated enough to allow them to read aloud pious works to each other in domestic or social gatherings. This degree of literacy also gave them the ability to read basic correspondence, to keep business records, and probably to compose their own correspondence, though they might have it

copied by a male secretary. Evidence of these abilities is seen in May in *The Merchant's Tale* conducting her clandestine correspondence in the privy, or among the women of the Paston family writing confidential letters to their kinfolk "in hast by candellyght" (Davis no. 446), and in a host of other instances. What this kind of literacy did *not* afford women, however, was the ability to read Latin—and here the confusion in translation of technical terms has led us to make some very misleading deductions. If a person was described in Middle English as being *lewed* or *unlettryd*, those terms are usually translated in Modern English as "illiterate"—and based on our modern assumptions that illiteracy means "unable to read and write," we assume that these *lewed* and *unlettryd* people could not decipher or compose texts of any kind. But as the work of Malcolm Parkes and others has shown, these terms in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Middle English refer most frequently to the inability to read and write Latin texts, the province of the *lernyd* and *lettryd*. They rarely mean illiteracy in the modern sense, the inability to create and decode written language. While later in the fifteenth century these terms sometimes came to mean illiteracy in French, it is rare to find them meaning total illiteracy in Middle English. That condition is usually described as being unable "to konne on boke." Thus, when a Middle English author describes him—or herself as being *lewed*, the reference is most often to exclusion from the world of Latin *textuality*, the province of *lernyd clerkes*, rather than to an inability to read or write in any language.

Recent scholarship has shown that the extent of English lay literacy in the fifteenth century was considerably greater than earlier scholars believed. John B. Friedman's *Northern English Books, Owners, and Makers in the Late Middle Ages* devotes considerable space to detailing women's roles in commissioning, purchasing, and bequeathing books. He contends that

... not only did a much higher proportion of women in northern England in the late Middle Ages own books, but, equally importantly, women mentioned books in their wills in ways that suggest they read them, or took strong aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction from contemplating the images in them privately or displaying them to others.... While an aesthetic response to a book is not, of course, a sign that the person can read it, it is

evidence that women focused on books as a specific kind of female possession that was portable, private, could easily be taken out and examined at will as a respite from domestic cares and turmoil, and whose pages could be the occasion for contemplative and meditative . . . activity." (21)

Such value for books is also echoed by David N. Bell in *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*, which details the wide variety of texts and manuscripts encountered by fifteenth-century English nuns, many of whom were daughters of the bourgeoisie.

In Margery Kempe's *East Anglia*, a daughter of a "worcheþful man," especially if she was involved in any way in the family business, was probably literate in the vernacular. Douglas Gray reminds us how common such literacy was in Kempe's time and place in his discussion of popular religion, calling texts such as Kempe mentions examples of "the official media":

The official media, which clearly were of considerable importance, employed, firstly, the word: through books, which were not the exclusive property of the literate minority, since they could be (as the *Book* shows) read aloud to others, or paraphrased. (8)

Eamon Duffy has recently described Kempe's native East Anglia as "possibly the most religiously privileged part of early fifteenth-century England," where "a common and extremely rich religious culture for the laity and secular clergy had emerged by the fifteenth century" (63). It is this secular clergy, indeed, who encourage Kempe to compose her book:

these worthy & worsheþful clerkys . . . bodn hyr þat sche schuld don hem wryten & makyn a booke of hyr felyngys & hir reuelacyons. Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys, & sche wold not consentyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in hir sowle þat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone. (3)¹

Her refusal is predicated not on her illiteracy, however, but on her need to meditate further on her experiences, and to consider how

best to present them. For reasons I will discuss later, this took her twenty years.

Why, then, if vernacular literacy was common among women of Kempe's social standing, does she never mention her own literacy, but frequently mention her reliance on male clerical readers and scribes? Several reasons must be considered.

First is pure advantage and social standing. Like the Paston ladies, Kempe saw the use of male scribes as something appropriate to her reputation and *worship*. Wealthy merchant women employed scribes: Margaret Paston used twenty-nine separate secretaries that we can identify to write both personal and business letters. This practice took place in even the most intimate circumstances: her kinswoman, Margery Brews Paston, had a secretary copy out her love letters to her husband, then added her own personal message and signature at the foot. Less wealthy women, such as the Pastons' kinswoman Elizabeth Clere or Joan Kettrych, the impoverished abbess of Denny, picked up their own pens. Like the wealthier women, Margery could afford secretaries and hired them at need. However, when it comes time to persuade her son and reluctant daughter-in-law to visit her in England, Kempe writes for herself. In Book II, chapter 2, Kempe writes letters to her son in the Low Countries, assuring him it is safe to bring his (apparently) reluctant bride to England: "þan wrot sche lettyrs to hym, seying þat whedyr he come be londe er be watyr he schulde come in safte be þe grace of God" (224).

Kempe employed amanuenses for other reasons. These male scribes had training in language and rhetorical forms that she lacked, but sometimes wanted to use. For instance, in the fragmentary episode with a widow concerning who better follows the advice of their shared confessor (45), she hires not a clerk but a full-fledged master of divinity to write a letter full of legalistic "clawsys," which delineate a kind of restraining order between Margery and the widow:

A maystyr of dyuynite wrot a lettyr at þe request of þis creatur & sent to þe wedow wyth pese clawsys þat folwyn. On clause was þat þe wedow xuld neuyr han þe grace þat þis creatur had. A-noþer was þow þis creatur com neuyr in hir howse it plesyd God ryt wel. (45)

Kempe's aim in having the letter written for her was apparently to add the weight of "whereases" and other Latinate contract language to her own arguments for her moral superiority, not simply because she lacked the skill to compose the letters herself.

Kempe's Latin knowledge came, as did most laypersons' in the Middle Ages, from "comownyng in Scriptur whech sche lernyd in sermownys & be comownyng wyth clerkys" (29). Since such familiarity with Latinate texts was frowned upon for laypersons, any time she retells a version of scripture, especially among strangers, she takes care to assure her audience that she learned her material from authorized sources. For instance, at the famous dinner party in Rome where she is able to make herself understood by a visiting German priest, "sche telde in hyr owyn langage in Englysch a story of Holy Writte whech sche had lernyd of clerkys whil sche was at hom in Ingland, for schewolde spekyn of no vanyte ne of no fantasijs" (97). She also makes clear that she properly seeks guidance in understanding texts more commonly read by clerks. The young priest to whom Margery gives patronage chooses mostly Latin material to read for her: the Bible with "doctowyrs þer-vp-on," the life of Bridget, Bonaventure, *Stimulus Amoris*, and *Incendium Amoris* (it is never specified if these are the Middle English or Latin versions, though we know her confessors worked on the Latin versions of these texts). Margery rightly complains about her "defawte of redyng" such books (143); Latin literacy is not her specialty. Quite obviously, however, she enjoys the young priest's tutelage, and rather self-righteously notes that the priest is also a beneficiary: her reading program "cawsed hym to lokyn meche good scriptur & many a good doctowr whech he wolde not a lokyd at þat tyme had sche ne be" (143). "Lokyn" and "had sche ne be" are phrases difficult to translate; Windeatt settles for "look up" and "had it not been for her" (182). However, it is also possible to construe this language as "he would have not reflected on [these authors], had she not been doing so." The character Margery's thirst for Latinate learning, rather than her spiritual director's, apparently drives the choice of texts.

Kempe, of course, never steers away from a fight; she seems ready to face any challenge presented to her. Why then does she continually

stress that her knowledge of books comes through priests, monks, vicars, and other orthodox spiritual directors, as if shielding herself behind their authority? The answer lies, I believe, in the dark side of early fifteenth-century East Anglian piety: Lollard hunting. It has been amply demonstrated by Claire Cross, Margaret Aston, and others that not only women, but any lay people who asserted any kind of spiritual knowledge or who professed to understand Scripture or clerical learning might well find their orthodoxy being called into official question. Kempe constantly represents herself as a victim of such inquisitions, and she needs to do so, for the towns she visits are almost a Where's Where of sites of anti-Lollard inquisition in East Anglia and beyond. Leicester, for instance, is an instructive case. When the lustful Steward of Leicester confronts Margery in prison, he "spak Latyn vn-to hir, many prestys stondyng a-bowtyn to here what sche xulde say & oþer pepyl also" (112–13). Kempe as author and Margery as character are placed in a dangerous position; to admit to Latin knowledge is to pretend to the knowledge of the *lernyd*, a language forbidden to middle-class laywomen on pain of accusation of heresy. Clearly recognizing the trap these potential witnesses or accusers present, Margery replies to the Steward, "Spekyth Englysch, yf ȝow lyketh, for I vndyrstonde not what ȝe sey" (113).

When the Steward accuses her of lying about her faith, she challenges him to examine her in English; she will answer through God's grace. Under vernacular interrogation she triumphs, satisfying all those who listen without giving her enemies reason to accuse her of heretical knowledge or beliefs. A few days later, she will testify in church before the liturgical and secular authorities of Leicester that her beliefs in transubstantiation and communion, two fertile grounds for Lollard heresy (see Hudson, esp. ch. 9), are perfectly orthodox. Women in Leicester were subject to such examination for most of Kempe's adult life; both a merchant's wife named Alice Dexter and an anchoress named Maud or Matilda who lived at St. Peter's Church, Leicester, were examined there on similar grounds in 1389 by Archbishop Courtenay, convicted of heterodoxy, and severely punished (Cross 360). Similar inquisitions into lay orthodoxy continued in Leicester for the next quarter-century.

Margery's beliefs are certified as orthodox in Leicester; yet shortly thereafter, she finds herself under interrogation before the

assembled clergy of York, which also saw its share of Lollard persecutions in the first two decades of the fifteenth century (Aston). Before the Archbishop of York, we see Kempe thinking quickly on her feet; as the Archbishop examines her on the Articles of Faith, "God ȝaf hir grace to awryen wel & trewly & redily wyth-owtyn any gret stody so þat he myth not blamyn hir" (125). Too much "stody" would indicate evasion or attempts to recast her position into orthodox language; but through grace (or through forethought and rehearsal) Margery is able to come up with the language that indicates she is no heretic. The de-emphasis of "stody," too, shows Margery's ability to quote Matthew 10. 19–20, which she will later cite as evidence that the Holy Ghost, not any book learning, informs her testimony.

Even knowledge of basic books of religious instruction in the vernacular could sometimes be suspect, and Margery takes great care whenever she discusses specific texts, such as Hilton or the works of Rolle, pseudo-Bonaventure, and others, to reaffirm that her exposure to such texts comes from authorized sources: primarily from her confessors and friends Richard Caister and Alan of Lynn, but also from other learned preachers, monks, and priests. The very full accounts presented by Cross and others make clear that in East Anglia, in the early fifteenth century, a layperson (and especially a lay woman) had to be very careful about how she represented her religious knowledge. Margery's caution is prudent in her historical circumstances.

Margery's penchant for public testimony, for correction of what she perceives to be errant clergy, and for offering spiritual guidance makes her enemies suspect her of public preaching: a capital offence for any layperson, and a particular target for Lollard hunters. Margaret Deansley has identified a number of the women so suspected (357–58; 364; 367–79), and an anonymous homilist writing in Cambridge UL MSI.i.3.8 in the first quarter of the fifteenth century complained about the untrained men and women and the laypeople who in ignorance ("ydiote") write and teach the gospels (fol. 149r). In York, a "gret clerke" attempts to accuse Margery of preaching, and she takes great pains to establish that she does not pretend to the pulpit: "Sche, awryeng þerto, seyde, 'I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I vse but comownycacyon & good wordys, & þat wil I do whil I leue'" (126). She follows this by giving an example of her "comownycacyon," retelling the exemplum of

the priest and the pear tree, which the Archbishop of York grudgingly commends as "a good tale" (127).

Margery's performance pleases many of her clerical supporters, who rejoice that the Lord had given a woman "not lettryd witte & wisdom to awry so many lernyd men wytyn velani or blame" (128). Here the contrast is clearly between the *lernyd*, Latinate, church-educated clerics who are authorized to preach, and the *not lettryd*, vernacularly-literate Margery, whose education comes from her own reading and the preaching she hears, not from any formal training in preaching or exegesis. Had she been a *lernyd* woman, one who could be described as a "great reasoner in Scripture," she might be adjudged guilty of Lollardy and possibly sentenced to death. However, when clerks complain that their many years of official schooling do not permit them to discuss religion with as much complexity as she can, she evasively defends her "cunnyng" by saying that it comes from the Holy Ghost—and that the Holy Ghost supports those who do not "stody," again quoting Matthew 10:

'Stody not what ȝe schal sey, for it schal not be ȝowr spiryt þat schal spekyn in ȝow, but it schal be þe spiryt of þe Holy Gost.' And thus owr Lord ȝaf hir grace to answer hem, worschepyd mote he be. (135)

This is not to say that Margery could not explicate Latin scriptures in the best clerical fashion. Shortly after her York trial, when a friendly cleric asks her to expound upon the Latin text "*Crescite & multiplicamini*" (121), she is able to respond easily and correctly to his *quaestio*. Margery knew some Latin, as probably did most church-going Christians; she is able to "seyn hir Mateyns" (216) as well. Clearly, she also knew when to keep that knowledge to herself. Her continual emphasis on her "not lettryd" condition, and her careful distinction between her "holy communication" and authorized preaching and teaching, indicate that she is aware of the precariousness of the public role she has adopted. If she spoke too well or too publicly, if she claimed too much authority for her visions and her interpretations, she would be subject to the public inquisitions, chastisements, and even burnings that women Lollards suffered. Her experience taught her how real this risk was; she was accused of Lollardy in Canterbury (28) and arrested as a Lollard while crossing the river Humber toward

Lincoln (135). Anti-Lollard persecutions continued through the twenty years of silence during which Margery meditated on her experiences; can it be coincidental that she finally undertakes the composition of her book in the 1430s, when there came a lull in anti-Lollard persecutions?

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The chief evidence remaining of Kempe's illiteracy is that she chose to use not one, but several male amanuenses to record her book. Matters of social standing aside, there are many reasons why Kempe may have used such employees. Lynn Staley provides one provocative suggestion in *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*:

The scribe, who plays a major role in the text, shields Kempe from authorities even as he authorizes the text she provides. That text is explicitly presented as Margery's life, memorialized, and then transcribed by one whose ability to read and write enables him to serve the will of God manifested through Margery, the holy woman. The *Book's* fiction demands that its protagonist be illiterate. (147)

This may be over-reading; it requires that we envision the *Book* as fiction in a very modern sense, and that we discount Kempe's motives. The notion of the scribe as the shield of orthodoxy, however, is a very valid one: Margery cannot be accused of heresy if she does not take up a pen. And the scribe/narrator, who emphasizes the amount of prayer and meditation it takes for him to decode a previous scribe's version of Kempe's *Book*, argues for divine assistance in his work, thus saving himself from similar charges.

Scribes also play a major role in the vitae of the female mystics whose *Lives* Kempe read and discussed with her spiritual directors for more than twenty years: St. Bridget, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and Marie d'Oignies, in a tradition that reaches back at least to Hildegard of Bingen. Like the spiritual heroines in so many of these *Lives*, Margery must struggle at great length with not one but several scribes to persuade her amanuenses that her life is worth recording. The image of the unlearned woman wrestling with male clerical opposition to ensure the recording and validation of her

experiences is a stock ingredient of the female autohagiographical tradition in which Margery is composing. Presenting herself as a simple soul, with no interference from clerical training, Margery is able to construct a picture of herself that best suits her authorial intent: to give spiritual guidance and comfort, without bringing more difficulties upon the author.

Curiously, the verb Kempe uses in the end of *Liber I* to describe her work on the book is “wretyn,” and it is possible that one or more scribes may have been revising and making fair copy out of Kempe’s own holograph drafts. The long-suffering scribe Salthows apologizes to his readers in the second book for possible misspellings of German names: “Yf þe names of þe placys be not ryth wretyn, late no man merueylyn, for sche stodyid more a-bowte contemplacyon þan þe namys of þe placys, and he þat wrot hem had neuyr seyn hem, & þerfor haue hym excusyd” (233). Is Salthows confused by an earlier, “Dewtsch” scribe’s spellings? We might suppose that a native German could spell German place-names. But if Salthows is working from Margery’s notes, then quite conceivably the misspellings are the work of her hands.

Margery also has strong rhetorical reasons for asserting her humble, unlearned status, which are rooted in the *humilitas* *topos*, a form of *captivitate benevolentiae* that served as a means of gaining the audience’s goodwill and establishing the ethos of the author as a modest and trustworthy reporter of facts. Both male and female authors use this strategy; Chaucer’s pose of the inept poet is one of the most famous examples. When male authors use the device, modern critics have tended to read it as an instance of irony. When female authors use it, however (for instance, when Julian of Norwich describes herself in the opening of the Long Version of the *Showings* as a “symple creature vnlettynde” and as “a womann, leued, febille, and freylle” in Chapter 6), critics tend to take the humble pose as a statement of historic fact. Ironic, but in a different way: by constructing themselves as *lewed*, female authors protected themselves and appropriated the authorial leeway to critique the lives and moral practices of their contemporaries. Margery’s use of male scribes is strongly supported by generic and rhetorical convention; it alone does not constitute evidence that she was illiterate.

Margery, then, never claims total illiteracy, but only exclusion from Latin literacy—and this may be as much pretense for her own protection and self-promotion as it is the truth. But as I argued at the outset, Margery’s illiteracy is one of the most cherished myths of medieval literary criticism. This says as much about us as it does about her. When the *Book* first came to light in the era of New Criticism, it became fashionable to dismiss Margery’s erratic behavior and uncomfortably fervent piety as the ravings of a hysterical woman—that’s the picture most of us first encountered, as in the (in)famous passage from Albert C. Baugh’s *Literary History of England*: “Each reader will form his own opinion of Margery’s neurotic temperament and of the extent to which her eccentricities and hysterical outbursts were the result of genuine religious feeling” (231). This notion is perpetuated even as late as Gilbert and Gubar’s first edition of the *Norton Anthology of Writings by Women*.

The advent of new historicist, feminist, and especially cultural history studies have forced us to take a more serious look at Margery, not as an out-of-control religious fanatic, but as a woman whose apparently genuine piety combined with a true sense of theater in a way that was as apparently uncomfortable for her contemporaries as it is for us. To dismiss Margery as illiterate means that we can still assume she is inconsequential, marginal, atypical—hence, important only as a historical oddity, the first named woman autobiographer in English. If we take Margery as literate, if we assume that her poses and her stratagems are politically, rhetorically, and consciously enacted, then we must take seriously the kind of faith she demonstrates, and we must deal with it seriously and respectfully. This is hard for many of us, raised in a largely secular environment, to carry off; we are not comfortable with women who have conversations with Christ about their sex life. Reconsidering Margery’s illiteracy means reconsidering her message. Margery speaks, literally, in another language, that of late medieval charismatic piety. Her contemporaries attempted to dismiss her and failed; our attempts to dismiss her, by misinterpreting the evidence of her literacy, deserve no better fate.

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NOTES

- 1 All quotations are taken from the Sanford Brown Meech & Hope Emily Allen edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Modern English translations are taken from Barry Windeatt.

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