

FEMALE AGENCY AND SPIRITUAL SELF-FASHIONING IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the emergence of female authorship in narrative in the Middle English period. It examines the construction of female agency and spiritual authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a narrative written at a time when men dominated the literary field. As of now, the author has one of the longest works of prose in English. The narrative speaks to the heart of the medieval period. It is one of the most important texts in articulating the concerns, hopes, and negotiations of a laywoman in the socio-religious realm. A key focus of the research is the construction and use of narrative devices such as the third person, emotional expression, and vivid descriptions of interactions with the Divine, which shape and articulate a spiritual self-identity that both resists and creates space within the socio-ecclesial systems of medieval society. The description of the clerics, the pilgrims, and the wife of the court, decrees, and the mids, medieval female religiosity, especially the conflicts of the system. In conclusion, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a unique example of a self-representing account by a woman in Middle English literature, as well as one of the earliest accounts demonstrating women's ability to create, shape, and transform discourses in literature and spirituality. This research is highly relevant to ongoing discussions of the role of women in authorship and the sacred in premodern Europe.

Keywords

Middle English literary works, depiction of women, women's spirituality, self-biographical expression, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes Margery Kempe's book using the concepts of female agency and self-fashioning. Female agency in medieval studies is the ability of women to work within the parameters of a patriarchal system to carve out spaces of authority for themselves within restrictive religious and social orders. Judith Butler's concept of performativity can help us understand how identity is constructed through repeated bodily and linguistic acts (Butler, 1990). Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt's self-fashioning theory can help us understand how the construction of the public self is possible through the performance of narratives and the negotiation of the realm of culture (Greenblatt, 1980). In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, spiritual identity is not static but is continuously constructed through crying, speaking, devotional acts, and visions. There are specific aspects of women's voices in medieval literature. They are vital to the culture's imagination. However, in many cases, they are neglected and excluded from the structures of writing and the institutions that kept records for the period. Within the scope of Middle English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is another vital and unique example in which a laywoman's life, conflicts, and devotional practices are recorded in detail. The document is a fine example of the text considered the first English autobiography. It allows for the interpretation of a medieval woman expressing her self-governance and the authority it manifests through narratives, emotions, and imagination (Staley, 1994). In this paper, the portrayal of women is examined, and the construction of Margery Kempe's design for female agency in and against the socio-religious impositions of 15th-century England is presented. Margery's narrative lies on the borderline of intimacy and interference. As a married woman, mother, and mystic, her being is multifaceted and puzzling. Her strong emotional devotion and crying, coupled with her visionary episodes, were a departure from the norms expected of a woman of her time and ignited both vicious backlash and admiration from her contemporaries (Gibson, 1989). These reactions pointed to the very narrow expectations of spiritual leadership that medieval women could navigate. However, unlike most other medieval women, Kempe was outspoken in her criticism of medieval society, especially the silence of the patriarchal religious world. She was illiterate and dictated her writings to male scribes (Atkinson, 1991). Present-day scholars point out that Kempe's self-representation is certainly not submissive, and doing cut-and-paste from male holiness is not her style either. Rather, she emphasizes, and, in our open criticism of medieval society, medieval women's spiritual authority, which she expresses through her tears as a devotional practice, rather than as a work of art used to buttress her credibility. These tears are devout, and she presents them as a divine endorsement when her credibility is questioned, especially by male religious leaders. The absence of patriarchal religious endorsement for personal revelations helps medieval women mystics to live out the spirituality most medieval women were barred from (Beckwith, 1993). *The Book of Margery Kempe* touches on the difficult process a woman must undergo to fulfill a public religious vocation. Margery's pilgrimages and numerous interactions with members

of the clergy reflect her desire to be part of the religious communities of her time, even though such communities were primarily male. The challenges she faced, such as accusations of heresy, examinations, and public ridicule, highlight the dangerous position of medieval women who dared to claim interpretative and visionary power. Still, these circumstances continued to demonstrate her immense devotion to performing, preserving, and legitimizing her spiritual life. This paper analyzes how the text constructs and presents Margery Kempe's identity, contributing to broader debates about gender and authorship, as well as the negotiation of power and control in Middle English Literature. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is presented as a notable literary piece as it stands out for being a (to the author's knowledge) medieval text in which a woman writes (or is believed to write) her own life narrative, as well as demonstrating the means by which women of that time were able to claim agency, sanctity, and selfhood. Hence, the study of Margery Kempe is crucial for understanding the sophisticated ways in which medieval women navigated and sometimes subverted the numerous cultural structures that defined and controlled their depiction in society.

2. THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

The portrayal of women in medieval English literature reflects a cultural cross-section of the religious, societal, and artistic paradigms of the medieval imagination. The representation of women in literature as saints and sinners, queens and wives, mystics and lovers, and as allegorical devices reflects the ingrained structural oppression of women in the medieval 社会 and how female characters and authors navigated the system. The chapter focuses on the depiction of women in medieval English prose, romance, hagiography, and Chaucerian narrative. It discusses the portrayal of women in these literary forms in terms of the cultural idealization and societal constraints they face, as well as the agency, critique, and self-representation afforded to them in the literature.

Medieval writings, especially religious literature, were a major factor in forming ideas about the place of women in society. Women were analyzed and categorized as either Mary or Eve, with women either virtuous and pure or evil and corrupting. The lives of female saints, such as St. Cecilia and St. Margaret, were hagiographized, and their spirits were said to transcend the world's limits. They were models of virtue and holiness because, through a miraculous and enduring strength, they were able to suffer and die in such a way that they maintained the religious standard of obedience and virtue. The idealized accounts of these lives and the female religious identities were empowering. Through their visions and suffering, hagiographical women saints, as much as they were submissive to the divine, had a great deal of agency.

Women's roles further complicated the interpretation of mystical texts and visionary writing. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, published in the fifteenth century, is the first example of a laywoman claiming a spiritual voice during a time when women were barred from this form of expression in a literary culture dominated by men. Although not written by Kempe herself,

as she was not a scribe, the text emphasizes the feminine prerogatives of emotional expression, inner self-control, and the ability to defy the skepticism of male spiritual authorities (McAvoy, 2004). Some researchers have suggested that Kempe was self-consciously practicing what was known as 'affective piety' (characterized by excessive crying and visionary ecstasy) to balance the visionary's public persona with the subversion of the social order by claiming a voice (Lochrie, 1991; Beckwith, 1993). The text is one of the first attempts by a medieval Englishwoman to portray her life, giving her a prominent place in the expression of women's literacy and spirituality, as well as authorship. Secular chronicles exclude women from them, or from the revisions narrating those chronicles, but still illustrate their roles in ways that are almost sympathetic, or, in the most extreme cases, champion their roles as nobles. Romance is still an ugly demonization of the literature from the chivalric age. Romance narratives celebrate women as ethereal and literally fantastic, as in the case of Guinevere and Isolde, embodying desires that motivate an entire collection of aggressive masculinities to embark on quests. Isolde, as a medieval character archetype, Guinevere (also Enide), narrates a culture in which the leader of the chivalric games is a woman. The noble, active women in these narratives remain noble to the very extreme of total abstinence from all maneuvering over their destinies, as in being noble (Cooper, 2004). Romance also actively participates in the demonizing of women through the institution of virtue. Romance demonizes virtue as an extreme form of active and total absence of agency: women are to strive to achieve virtue, avoid all assertion of their destinies, and abandon maneuvering, all as the medieval romances move to illustrate women. To illustrate women through the institution of virtue as a total absence of agency, and to demonize virtue through a noble un-acting, is not to illustrate the women as un-posed and portrayed. These women hold important roles in the society depicted, yet society symbolically places them on the sidelines (Brewer, 1992). These women will still be placed on the sidelines of their iconography, bearing traits that will not be depicted, but will be depicted in the iconography of the women. The result artistically demonstrates society's iconography, placing women on the sidelines of that iconography to bear traits that will not be depicted, as was the case in medieval society. Even though these portrayals of women are iconographically noble, they also align with a society that is still very much medieval.

Chaucer is among the first to write about medieval women in an advanced way. In the *Canterbury Tales*, we find women like the defiantly rebellious Wife of Bath and the extremely virtuous Griselda, all of whom showcase the various tensions present. Wife of Bath especially critiques the "little marriage manuals" that people get ordained to write the marriage pamphlets, arguing that she is in control of her own sexuality, and that she has the right to control how she uses her authority over scripture (Dinshaw, 1989). Wife of Bath critiques all the men in the room by completely disregarding the prescribed submissive role. In contrast to the Wife of Bath is the character of Griselda. In *The Clerk's Tale*, she epitomizes patient suffering and resigned loss. In this way, her over-the-top suffering is an expression of a timidity that the era's narrative defines as perfect (Hansen, 1992). In Wife of Bath and

Griselda, Chaucer gives his readers a reason to think about the scripts that tell women how to behave. Within this broader literary and religious tradition, *The Book of Margery Kempe* emerges as a distinctive text that transforms female spirituality into a form of narrative authority and public self-representation.

Beckwith further argues that the incorporation of Kempe's physical body into her performances of spirituality subverts the normative gender structures of the religion and the patriarchy by providing permission for the physical manifestation of spirituality by women (Beckwith, 1993). This reading is so crucial because she shows that Kempe can reclaim culturally feminine traits and transform them into a position of power. In this way, physical manifestations of emotion, often seen as a weakness and thus a negative trait when associated with women, become a representation of God's closeness in the text. Kempe does not eliminate femininity but recasts it as a spiritual strength.

Kempe's visions are also tools of self-construction and femininity. In many parts of the text, she describes having visions of Christ, the Virgin, and many other saints. Through these visions, she can establish direct access to God and, in essence, bypass the masculine authority line. McAvoy (2004) suggests that in the context of the medieval Church, the embodiment of the mystical was the only way to gain the right to communicate the sacred. This is important because Kempe's visions are not simply descriptions of mystical phenomena but claims to an alternative source of authority that lies beyond clerical structures.

One of the most important and powerful of these episodes is the one that follows the psychological breakdown Kempe suffered due to childbirth. In this episode, she describes that Christ came to her, "most seemly" and "most beauteous", and asked, "Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, and I forsook never thee?" (Kempe, 1978, p. 14). Prior to this moment, she had no foundations upon which to establish her spirituality, and this moment comes to replace the need for religious fathers to validate her spirituality. Rather than seeking the validation of the Churches of her time, she derived her spirituality from Christ himself. So, in this way, her vision serves as a strategy to place her spirituality in a domain where she holds the authority to do so, and this is outside the domain of the church and patriarchy.

Kempe's experiences show us her involvement with the sacred. She actively participates in moments of the Bible, and her spiritual engagement with Mary and Christ fosters a closeness that separates sacred history from her personal experiences. Lochrie (1991) states that Kempe's visions enable a laywoman to interpret sacred texts, thereby overturning the gender hierarchies of her time. This idea is especially important, since Kempe marks a shift from passive observation to an active role in spirituality. Subsequently, her visions serve to create a new role for her within traditionally male-dominated religious texts.

From these narratives, we can also derive that female spirituality was viewed as socially dangerous, even in medieval times, which is evident from the many charges of heresy, disorder, and demonic possession that Kempe faced for her public displays of spirituality. Bennett (1996) shows that, in these times, the public display of spirituality by females was associated with social disorder, as it was viewed as an authoritative and masculine trait. This

helps us understand why Kempe's public displays of religiousness were met with contempt by both the clerics and the community members.

Kempe's encounter with the Archbishop of York illustrates an early example of female agency exercised through assertive speech in the public domain. Upon receiving one of her famous orders that she 'be not speak of God publicly,' Kempe remarkably declares that her God-speech will not cease while she continues to exist (Kempe, 1978, p. 188). As such, it is a significant episode in the development of a female speech act, as it occurs during Kempe's challenge of a silencing disorder while signaling her knowledge of the prescribed parameters of her acceptable public discourse. While simultaneously submitting herself to the will of the church and operating under the presumption of consent, she makes it clear she is speaking in the "communication and good words" sense of the speech act. Dinshaw (1989) interprets this behavior as indirect resistance to embedded patriarchal structures, undertaken by medieval women through socially approved forms of speech and public behavior. As such, through the display of rhetorical obedience to a command of the church, described by Kempe as an act of speech and subsequent divine authority challenge, Kempe's rhetorical strategy illustrates this.

In the context of Kempe's life experiences, marriage and sexuality shape the expression of her agency and self-empowerment. Within medieval Christian doctrines, marriage essentially comprised a Christian woman's subordination and sexual obligation. However, Kempe's desire for marital chastity takes precedence over the contractual obligations arising from the marriage vow, over the expectations of chastity, and over the obligations of marital duty: "her love and affections are [now] not with all the worldly creatures, ... [they] are with God" (Kempe, 1978, p. 31). This is a significant transformation of medieval Christian women's teachings and a recommendation that women prioritize spiritual rather than patriarchal priorities.

Lochrie (1991) states that, due to Kempe's withdrawal from the matrimonial sexual relationship, the condition of women in medieval society, as well as the notions of the medieval feudal social order and expectations, are subverted. Thus, in Lochrie's reading of medieval society, the agency of Kempe's marital chastity emerged from the medieval Christian religious sphere and would remain entirely within the domain of Christian devotion, under the control of the Christian husband and church.

Atkinson (1991) asserts that Kempe's empowerment is revealed in her ability to transform her husband's marital responsibilities with her husband's consent. While her ability to transform, with her husband's explicit consent, the nature of the marital responsibilities is of utmost importance, her ability to keep the chastity vow points to the continuation of the spiritual and empowering structures of late medieval society.

Physical devotion marks the importance of spiritual performance in the narrative. The author connects the crying, trembling, fasting, and ecstatic bodily responses to performative spirituality. In the quoted 1987 work by Bynum, it is stated that medieval women expressed authority in religion through physical suffering resulting from institutionalized theology. This

meant women could not express intellectual authority in religion. In this context, Kempe's body was a tool for devotion and a strategy for textual engagement. Through bodily performance, she created self-legitimacy in a society that restricted women's participation in formal theological matters. Another equally important work is McNamer's on affective devotion. It gives insight into how emotional suffering and intensity also became part of a valid spiritual practice in late medieval Christianity (McNamer, 2010). In this context, Krymp's tears and physical suffering became part of a larger devotional contract. It shows there are no non-canonical behaviors. By making bodily performance a public spectacle, she created a spiritual practice in which the performance had to be both visible and recognized to be valid. Through bodily performance, she created a holy authority figure.

The Book of Margery Kempe shows how medieval women's spirituality created spaces for performative agency. Third-person narrative, tears, visions, theatrical acts, and public oratory allow Kempe to negotiate her position and take control of patriarchal systems. Instead of passing on ideals of docility and submission, the book shows how feminine emotionality, humility, and devotion can also be acts of resistance and validation. For this reason, the book shows how medieval women exercised spiritual agency in a patriarchal world through strategically chosen and recognized feminine cultural elements.

3. THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

The Book of Margery Kempe builds a model of active female spirituality as a performance of agency within a patriarchal religious framework, rather than passive spirituality. The text refuses to record mystical experiences. Instead, it reconfigures the mechanisms of spiritual authority as emotional expressions, visions, bodily suffering, and public speech. It reconfigures the acts of self-making, socially accepted feminine behavior, and Kempe's defiance and nimbleness. Kempe's narrative defiance stands for the challenges faced by medieval women. However, it continues to respect the boundaries of the orthodox medieval Christian acts of piety.

Kempe builds spiritual authority primarily through third-person self-reference. Instead of opting for the first-person pronoun "I," Kempe frequently refers to herself as "this creature." While doing so may seem to be a contract with medieval humility, it builds a strategic distance within a medieval spirituality framework of control and self-reference. However, it becomes self-referential within a medieval spirituality framework of subjective control. Many medieval women, as Beckwith (1993) argues, had to navigate a similar construct of humility while being viewed with suspicion for their directness in language. This construct is particularly useful, as Kempe builds her third-person self-reference within her spirituality of the exceptional. The performance becomes her spiritual authority.

Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning explains this narrative strategy. Greenblatt (1980) argues that, through self-fashioning, individuals actively construct their identity by

performing and negotiating the existing structures of a particular cultural order. In this case, Kempe's narrative illustrates the construction of her spiritual identity in the public domain through formal adherence to medieval ideals of feminine propriety and modesty. Though Kempe's text does not offer self-praise, it centers on her visions, tears, pilgrimages, and encounters with the divine. This text privileges her experiences, and thus, her narrative voice becomes the authority. This, therefore, makes her the authority, and the third-person narrative becomes her voice. This serves as a strategy for Kempe to both conform to and resist the patriarchal order.

In the medieval period, the idea was that acting with extreme emotions, for example, crying, doing so as a display of grief and sorrow, was recognized as a form of spirituality and devotion, and in this case, Kempe's tears were more of a display of spirituality as opposed to being just an emotional reaction. Bynum (1987) argues that in the Middle Ages, excessive emotionalism and bodily suffering were recognized by the medieval church as an active spirituality and devotion, and as a spirituality perceived as female. This observation is important because it indicates that Kempe's tears are a form of spirituality and devotion, rather than mere emotional dysregulation, and that they are situated within female spiritual systems that legitimized her public role as a devotee.

Kempe almost exclusively depicts crying as a regulated public 'spiritual performance'. Her crying is loud and dominant during church services, pilgrimages, and large public speaking events. Thus, Kempe's crying becomes a demonstrative gesture of her closeness to God. In McNamer's (2010) explanation of the late medieval piety, devout believers would 'physically and emotionally' engage with God by suffering. Kempe cries in response to God's command, but much like the contemporary worship of her time, she engages her audience by declaring public 'spiritual' authority. As such, her crying is evidence of her spiritually valid, God-given mystical visions.

More interesting is the spirituality of her crying when it is considered alongside Butler's (1990) understanding of performativity. Where Butler establishes her thinking, identity, or selfhood as a 'performative' fabric created by the spoken or unspoken acts of the individual, Kempe's tears enact the same fluidity in selfhood. The repeated and recognizable performance of tears serves to construct Kempe's identity as a holy woman. Crying for Kempe is not a passive act of losing control and expressing emotion, but rather a fluid, ongoing performance and a reinforced form of public authority. The evocation of tears, even in the face of public ridicule or the derivation of Kempe's authenticity, is interpreted as evidence of God's favor. This crying performance creates the construct of legitimate emotion in a religion that is dominated by patriarchal authority, and which perceives women's emotions as linked to weaknesses and irrationality.

4. CONCLUSION

The depiction of women in medieval English literature shows many contradictions. In different literary styles such as medieval romance, hagiography, and autobiography, women are represented both in domination and in marginalization. In Addition, women in medieval literature are controlled by patriarchal doxas and at the same time can overrule them through the practices of speech, devotion, and self-fashioning. In medieval literature, female characters like the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's tales can defy ruling clerics and assert their right to interpret literary works, while other visionary writers like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe gain the desired authority through culturally recognized and accepted feminine piety. Furthermore, medieval literature employs literature and exempla to illustrate society's nervous perception of women and feminine/exemplary piety, and it also shows that the ideal/rective social structure of the spiritual realm is fully in women's hands. In the final analysis of medieval English literature, the social structure of the time once again illustrated that the literature to be researched is shaped by it. Because of these differing representations, scholars can appreciate and understand the dynamics of gender, power, and cultural creation in the Middle Ages and the roles of women—from the silence of male pen authors to their own voices in the public sphere—as integral to the creativity and scholarship of English literature in the Middle Ages.

The Book of Margery Kempe offers a significant reinterpretation of women's position in the Middle Ages. Margery is neither a nun nor an anchoress. She is a wife and mother who has direct claims to a relationship with Jesus Christ. She possesses sexual autonomy, refrains from fulfilling the obligations of a spouse, interprets scriptures, disputes with the male religious leaders, and engages in an active religion within the body that defies the conventional order of society. Instead of abiding by the docility, taciturnity, and submissiveness inculcated in the society of the Middle Ages as befitting a woman, Kempe integrates these qualities into structures of religious strength. She employs the socially acceptable feminine traits of emotionality, unassuming service, and submissiveness, and unfashions these into definitive structures of authority. Her narrative of her own life is an interesting interweaving of gender, the spirit, and authorship, unearthing the astounding constraints on women in the Middle Ages and the amazing ingenuity of women to push beyond them. In addressing her self-silencing by voicing it, through mechanisms of dictation, endurance, and deep religious conviction, Kempe provides us with the most vivid and robust characterization of a woman in the Middle Ages.

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