

# Margery Kempe's Stigmatized Identity

Michelle R. Heeter

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, the earliest known autobiography in English, was dictated by an illiterate fifteenth-century wife and mother. In her book, Margery Kempe describes her mystical religious experiences, her "sinfulness" and penance, and the journeys she took to holy places. Furthermore, she details the persecution she suffered when her contemporaries suspected her of heresy, accused her of violating the female code of behavior, or were threatened by the sheer oddity of the things she did.

Much of Margery's behavior would probably seem as unusual today as it did in the fifteenth century, if not more so. Before her mystical experiences, Margery seems to have been an unusually ambitious woman who sought to distinguish herself in business ventures and by dressing in a showy manner. After a year of madness caused by guilt over an unspecified sin, Margery experienced, or believed she experienced, visions in which she spoke to God and He instructed her. Margery also had the "gift" of tears, fits of crying caused by a mention of the Crucifixion. In Margery's case, these episodes often happened in church, and were loud enough to annoy the congregation. Though she was married, Margery often anguished over her loss of virginity. After she had born fourteen children, she convinced her husband that they should live chastely, and wore the white clothes considered appropriate only for virgins. If we believe her account, she performed a few miracles by healing the sick.

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Margery's *Book*. After the rediscovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in 1940,

criticism of Margery often dismissed the woman as a hysteric and the work as an inferior example of mysticism. Many of the extremely negative appraisals of Margery's work seemed to mirror the rejection that Margery suffered in her own lifetime: certain critics disliked Margery's *Book* because the book, and Margery, were odd by both medieval and twentieth-century standards. Other early reviews of the work were more positive, but, as John C. Hirsch points out, some uncritically celebrated Margery's piety. Sheila Delaney's 1975 article marked, or perhaps instigated, a resurgence of interest in Margery Kempe. Delaney's Marxist and feminist analysis prompted other scholars to apply specialized critical approaches to the work.

As Jonathan Kamholtz and Robin Sheets have remarked, medieval examples of female self-presentation are rare, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* is valuable for that reason. Karma Lochrie terms Margery a "marginal" woman whose illiteracy and unorthodox behavior relegated her to the fringes of society, and identifies ways in which Margery claims authority as a mystic and an author. Most marginal people, especially in a hierarchical society, do not resist the low value assigned to them. Margery, however, did resist, and her inability to accept her marginality, I will argue, invited her contemporaries to stigmatize her in a variety of ways. As Ann S. Haskell points out, "the single most important requirement for the conduct of a medieval woman of any social stratum was subordination" (Haskell, 459). When Margery refused to subordinate herself, she was branded a heretic, Lollard, bad wife, madwoman, accused of wickedness, insincerity, and false piety. In this essay, I will discuss strategies of self-presentation demonstrated by Margery in her book, particularly as they illuminate Margery's identity as a marginal, stigmatized individual.

A stigmatized person is one "disqualified from full social acceptance,"

someone who must constantly struggle to adjust to his tenuous social identity (Goffman, back cover). A person may be stigmatized by a physical deformity or tribal stigma (Goffman, 4), but Margery is stigmatized primarily due to what her contemporaries viewed as character faults.

Margery demonstrates many different adaptive mechanisms to the stigmata placed upon her, but her adaptive strategies seem to fall into two main categories: those she uses during her visionary experiences, and those she demonstrates in her encounters with other people. In her experiences with other mortals, Margery often finds herself in arguments with those who disapprove of her behavior. Margery seems to have been skilled at verbally defending herself against charges of impiety. On those occasions when a witty retort did not end the argument in her favor, she welcomed abuse as a means of personal salvation. One of the most famous episodes in Margery's *Book*, and one often cited as an example of the strictures placed on medieval women describes Margery's defiance of a monk who condemned her for speaking in church. Inside a Canterbury church, Margery is asked what she knows of God, and she tells an unspecified Bible story. The monk replies, "I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone so that no man could speak with you" (63). The monk, in wishing her imprisoned or confined and unvoiced as an anchoress, attacks both her mental and physical liberty. Margery deflects this criticism by presenting herself as God's servant, adding "our Lord amend you" as a further rebuke. After showing proper respect by asking the monk's permission to tell a "tale," Margery introduces anecdotal evidence to justify her position. She tells of a man who, as part of a penance, paid people to rebuke him. "And one day he came amongst many great men, such as are here now, God save you all, and stood amongst them as I now stand amongst you, they despising him as you do me, the man all the while laughing and smiling and having good sport at their words." The man

thanks these men for abusing him, because he can obtain remission for his sins without laying out any silver. Like the man in the parable, Margery finds an advantage in being stigmatized as a sinner and persecuted for it. Furthermore, she sets up a situation in which it was virtually impossible for her opponents to win an argument with her.

As Anthony Ryle notes, Margery's attitude toward those who rebuked her was relatively inflexible (Windeatt, 301), and her determination was further reinforced rather than weakened by attacks like those of the Canterbury monk. By refusing to accept condemnation for her unusual behavior and modify it accordingly, Margery resisted reintegration into the community. The question of integration or non-integration, conformity or non-conformity, is interesting also in regard to Margery's status as a sinner. The medieval sinner, according to Mary Flowers Braswell, loses his individuality once he repents for his sin, once more becoming part of a harmonious group. "In correcting his 'special personal defects,' the sinner is directed, in effect, to divest himself of his ingenuity, to become humble and passive, to forsake his own private, egotistical battle. His individual personality is 'reintegrated' into a *type*" (Braswell, 22). Margery resisted any sort of integration that would require her to surrender her individuality, or her private agenda. Whether Margery was "sinful" is perhaps a matter of opinion, but it becomes clearer why Margery continued to be stigmatized even when she was not doing anything wrong, as when she refused to eat meat with the other pilgrims. To the medieval mind, non-conformity may have invited the suspicion of a lack of contrition for one's sins.

Though Margery vigorously resisted censure, she was acutely, perhaps overly, aware of her own sinful nature and her need to repent. After the birth of her first child, she suffered a mental breakdown caused by guilt over an unspecified sin. During most of her life, she regularly went

to confession and did bodily penance. When she dictated her *Book*, she humbly referred to herself as “this creature.” Though she was stigmatized by various earthly communities, she seems to have suffered more because of a stigma that only she recognized : her loss of virginity. In the twenty-second chapter, Margery, during a session of contemplation, is distressed about her lack of virginity, regarding it as a gift she could have given to the Lord and the loss of it as something that excludes her from a special place in heaven. “‘Ah Lord, maidens are now dancing merrily in heaven. Shall I not do so?’” This appeal says much about Margery’s sense of stigma. Margery did not really internalize the stigmata placed on her by her contemporaries, because she did not regard herself as part of a community of mortals. Her community, rather, were the saints in heaven, and it was by heavenly standards by which she judged her own worth.

In her conversations with God, Margery seems to be searching for certain labels or identities that signify those roles of which she is deprived on earth. She has estranged herself from her roles as wife and mother, and is unable to be a nun or anchoress. Margery’s visions reveal her sense of herself as an anomaly, a set of contradictions. As Margaret Wade Labarge points out, Margery did not fit into any of the “convenient pigeonholes” that the fifteenth century had for women (Labarge, 141). Perhaps for this reason, Margery preoccupied herself with labels, categories, and states of relative perfection, then invented reassurance for herself that these distinctions did not prevent God from loving her as much as anyone else. Chapters twenty-one to twenty-three describe Margery as someone who does not belong with other mortals, but doesn’t either fit in with the virgin handmaids of the Lord. In these visions, Margery seems to construct her identity by comparing herself with other saints. “My daughter Bridget never saw me this way,” God tells her. He

promises her the same grace as St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Barbara, and St. Paul. While this may seem a silly bit of saintly competitiveness, Margery, dislocated in an earthly frame of reference, needs to see a place for herself in some sort of hierarchy. Ultimately, she transforms earthly oddity into heavenly singularity. God tells her, "I have told you before that you are a singular lover of God, and therefore you shall have a singular love in heaven, a singular reward and a singular honor" (Wind-eatt, 88). She becomes God's own "beloved darling," His "blessed spouse," as she has been His daughter and His lover. Though she is no longer a virgin, God knows her to be a virgin in her soul and will treat her as a holy maiden in Heaven. Not only does Margery envision a niche for herself in Heaven, she composes a self of female roles that usually exclude each other, a paradox much like God being the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The most extended example of Margery's visionary discourse is the address to God that ends her *Book*. In it, Margery shows her characteristic mixture of humility and grandiosity. If the devil were to offer her understanding of God's secrets, she would refuse rather than displease God by knowing too much. She gains the glory of refusing this enormous temptation without having actually withstood it. This scenario is unusual not because of its unlikeliness, or its vanity; Margery also has visions in which she assists at the birth of Christ. It is striking rather, because it is a parallel between Margery and Eve, whom Satan tempted with godly knowledge. In this vision, Margery confronts the stigma carried by all medieval Christian women: daughters of Eve, responsible for the expulsion from Paradise. Margery does not acknowledge this parallel; nevertheless, she attempts to present herself as the antithesis of woman as disobedient and redeemed only through fertility. In rejecting identification with Eve, Margery moves beyond making excuses for her individual

### Margery Kempe's Stigmatized Identity

behavior, and attempts to dismantle a stereotype that stigmatized all women.

In both the earthly and the visionary sections of her *Book*, Margery responded to the stigmata placed on her by, at least in some ways, agreeing with them. Margery presented herself as set apart from other people, someone who was as extreme in sinfulness as she was specially favored by God. Margery's constant insistence on her uniqueness may reasonably be interpreted as egotism, but too often has been an excuse to dismiss Margery and her *Book*. An abnormal sense of her own worth and importance was necessary to Margery's survival. Margery's basic rights—freedom from childbearing, the rights to travel, speak publicly, and worship as she pleased, faced significant threats from her contemporaries. Her sense of difference, inflated though it may have been, was not in fact maladaptive or pathological, but a strong, protective response to extreme threats on her liberty.

### Works Cited

- Braswell, Mary Flowers. *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages*. Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1983.
- Delaney, Sheila. "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *The Minnesota Review*. Fall (1975): 104–15.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1963.
- Haskell, Ann S. "The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth Century England." *Viator*. 4 (1973): 459–71.
- Hirsch, John C. "Margery Kempe." *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*. Ed. A.S.G. Edwards. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984. 109–16.
- Kamholtz, Jonathan Z., and Robin Sheets. "Women Writers and the Survey of

Margery Kempe's Stigmatized Identity

- English Literature: A Proposal and Annotated Bibliography for Teachers." *College English*. 46 (1984): 278-300.
- Labarge, Margaret Wade. *Women in Medieval Life*. London : Hamish Hamilton, 1986.
- Lochrie, Karma. "The Book of Margery Kempe: The Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority." *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. 16 (1986):33-55.
- Windeatt, Barry, Ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985.



## 要 約

# Margery Kempe に着せられた「烙印」

ミッシェル・ヒーター

*The Book of Margery Kempe* は、英語で書かれた最初の自伝として、中世の女性の自己紹介の稀有な例として、さらに中世の社会状況の記録として、最近その評価が高まってきている。また、Margery の *Book* は、時代および場所において厳しく規定されていた女性のいかなる役割にも、自らをあてはめることを拒否した女性の、魅力ある弁明でもある。しかしながら、Margery は聖職者や教会の権威に従おうとしなかったために、その当時の人々からさまざまな汚名を着せられることになった。彼女はそれらの汚名に対し、場合に応じていろいろな手法を用いて自己弁護を試みているが、それらは次の二つに大別できよう。一つは、幻視体験の際に用いたもの、もう一つは、他の人々との対決の際に用いたものである。また、Margery は狂人、異端者、不従順な妻というレッテルを貼りつけようとする人々の企てには激しく抵抗したが、同時に慣習にとらわれない生き方を貫く権利を主張することで、社会に再統合されることを拒んだ。その幻視体験の中で、Margery は自らを非常に罪深き者と表現しながらも、神が天国の聖人たちの世界における彼女の地位と、その聖人たちの中での彼女の独自性を認めて下さることを繰り返し主張する。このように、Margery は地上のいかなる枠組みからも解き放たれることで、地上での風変わりさを天上における非凡さに変形してしまうのである。Margery が繰り返し強調するその独自性というものは単なるエゴイズムとして退けられてきたが、個人の自由に対する攻撃への当然な反応であり、彼女がその風変わりな生き方を貫くために必要な防衛手段として解釈することが可能であろう。