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9 Margery Kempe: Madwoman or Mystic – A Narrative Approach to the Representation of Madness and Mysticism in Medieval England

ALISON TORN

Introduction

Historically, the boundaries between madness and mysticism have been characterised by fluidity. However, since the emergence of psychiatry in the 1800s, attempts have been made to place a firm distinction between the two experiences. In our increasingly Western, secularised society, experiences of mysticism have become marginalised outside of their religious context and in some cases, pathologised within the classificatory systems that construct mental illness. In this paper, I want to examine this contested boundary by discussing my analysis of a medieval woman's experience of both madness and mysticism. I shall argue that rather than this text being interpreted as an early narrative of madness, it is primarily an attempted hagiography, that is a narrative of a saint's life.

Margery Kempe

The Book of Margery Kempe tells the story of one woman's spiritual journey in Medieval England over a twenty-five year period, describing her quest to establish spiritual authority as a result of her personal conversations with Jesus and God (Staley, 2001). Whilst the text is written in the third person, it is generally acknowledged to be the first autobiography written in the English language.¹ It is also recognised as being the first autobiographical account of

¹ As the text is written in the third person, this analysis separates Margery the subject from Kempe the author. Separating subject from author in this instance enables the identification of the differing voices of Margery Kempe, as well as highlighting the rhetorical strategies used.

madness (Staley, 2001; Porter, 1987). The narrative begins around 1393, with the self-acknowledged onset of madness, which pre-empts for Margery, a spiritual crisis. This episode of madness is barely dealt with, taking up just two pages of a two hundred page book. Throughout the remainder of the Book, Kempe describes not only conversations with Jesus, Mary, God and other religious figures, but also visitations, with the aforementioned figures appearing to Margery and also Margery herself, participating in biblical scenes such as the birth and crucifixion of Christ. Her religious fervour leads to prolonged public demonstrations of loud wailing, sobbing and writhing, much to the irritation of both commoners and clerics. Kempe's story relates not only Margery's struggle to achieve some form of divine spirituality, but also her polarised reception within society. Some, most notably religious authority figures, revered Margery as a holy mystic, whilst others, mainly commoners, rejected and slandered her as a devil worshiper. Whilst some authors have construed Margery's religious visitations as part of her madness, I want to make a thematic distinction between these two experiences, as I believe, as Margery herself did, that they are inherently different.

Madness

She has the devil within her, and may God restore her to her right mind.

(Anon in Neaman, 1975: 31)

Kempe begins Margery's story with her as a young married woman of around twenty, experiencing an episode of self-confessed madness, following the birth of her first child. During this episode Margery is assailed by physical illness and madness in the form of the voice of the devil and demonic visions, resulting in isolation from her community by physical restraint. In accordance with the heroic trajectory, Margery is saved by the vision and voice of Jesus, who restores her reason, allowing Margery to secure her freedom. In the following extract, Kempe describes Margery's madness and its effect upon her:

And anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderfully vexed and labored [sic] with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some odd days. And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths, all inflamed with burning flames of fire as if they should have swallowed her in, sometimes menacing her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling and hailing her both night and day during the foresaid time. And also the devils cried upon her with great threats and bade her that she should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, his mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all her good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self; she spoke many

a reproving word and many a harsh word; she knew no virtues or goodness; she desired all wickedness; just as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have killed herself many a time because of her stirrings and have been damned with them in hell. And as a witness thereof she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life afterward. And also she tore the skin on her body against her heart grievously with her nails, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have none, save she was bound and kept with strength both day and night so that she might not have her will. (Staley, 2001: 7)

This episode is harrowing for Margery. As Kempe the author, she is recalling it at a distance of some forty years, and indeed she informs the reader that she is writing from a different temporal and interior space (“And in this time she saw, *as she thought*, devils open their mouths”), thus distancing her present, narrating, reasoned self with her past unreasoned self. Yet the duration and intensity of Margery’s experiences is described in such a way that makes it very present to the reader. Kempe uses metaphors of attack to describe her besiegement by the devils, which were “menacing ...threatening ... pulling her ...hailing her...cried upon her with great threats” so that later she describes that “men thought she should never have escaped or lived” (ibid. 8). This powerful use of metaphor illustrates how Margery felt ontologically attacked and under siege by demonic visions, to the point that her very being is threatened (“she would have killed herself many times”). She bites herself so hard that she leaves a permanent physical symbol, a stigmata almost, of her madness. The second metaphor Kempe uses in relation to her madness is spatial and is closely related to her dichotomous struggle between good and evil. Margery “had a thing *in her conscience*...which she so long *concealed*...the devil said *in her mind*... the dread she had of damnation *on the one side* and his sharp reproving *on that other side*, this creature went *out of her mind*” (Staley, 2001: 6-8). These spatial metaphors locate the devil/evil internal to Margery until she goes “out of her mind”,² the voice of the Devil pushes Margery into madness.

In Kempe’s description, whilst the manifestation of madness is embodied (slandering, biting, tearing), it is also construed as a disembodied phenomenon, as someone can be so far out of themselves to be almost beyond reach. In contrast, non-madness is related internally to reason, as she later describes her recovery; “The creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as ever she was before” (Staley, 2001: 8). Three hundred years before the Enlightenment, lay people were constructing madness as a break from reason and rationality a distinction that can be traced back to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. According to Augustine’s writings, inwards lay truth, God and reason, all of which had superior status for:

² The Greek origins of the word ‘paranoia’ literally mean beside one’s self.

without reason, we determine what of our sensible experience is really trustworthy. What judges must be higher, so reason is king. Nothing is superior to reason in human nature. (Taylor, 1989: 133)

This relationship between reason, God and order, and its distinction from madness, evil and disorder is clearly evident in Kempe's writings, and, as I will illustrate later, Kempe makes it clear to the reader that true mystical experiences cannot take place without the exercise of reason.

During Margery's madness Kempe projects Margery as the victim, whilst after her restoration she presents her as the passive victor, humble and meek as in the cultural tradition of Christianity. The restoration to reason also transforms Kempe's voice to that of spiritual authority, whereby Kempe anticipates future responses to her experience. The reader of the text becomes the subject of her spiritual authority, her congregation. This relationship between Kempe and the reader highlights the primary function of the narrative; it serves as a spiritual lesson, a sermon almost, that is resonant of Christ's temptation by the Devil in the wilderness. Kempe constructs Margery's madness as the first of her many tests of sainthood. When madness is perceived in this way, there is no medical cure, rather the cure is spiritual, with the soul and therefore reason being restored by a spiritual physician (Jesus). Towards the end of this narrative episode, Kempe shifts her dialogical position for the first time, from that of narrator to that of preacher; "When men think he is far from them, so he is full near by his grace"³ (Staley, 2001: 8). When Kempe speaks in the text through the voices of religion, she aligns herself through ventriloquation with this authoritative discourse, thus projecting Margery as a spiritual heroine. By using this narrative strategy, Kempe transforms Margery from both the victim of a demonic struggle and her ordinary existence as a medieval wife and mother.

Mysticism

Whilst Kempe acknowledges Margery's madness in the narrative discussed above, henceforth in the book, any unusual spiritual experiences come to be understood within a spiritually orthodox paradigm. It is this boundary between madness and spiritual passion that is so poignantly reflected in Margery's story. Some of the central academically contested scenes in the book are Margery's sensory experiences and Kempe's description of her presence at Biblical events. They are contested as, from a modern perspective, they

³ It has to be acknowledged however, that this quote may have been the scribe's voice interjecting in Kempe's narrative.

illustrate the boundary between spirituality and madness. In the extract below, Kempe describes Christ's crucifixion with Margery herself as a witness. This narrative is full of rich detailed description and Kempe, through her writing, imaginatively transports the reader to a scene of violence, pain and sorrow:

And then she saw the Jews with great violence rend from our Lord's precious Body a cloth of silk, which had cleaved and hardened with his precious blood so completely and straightly to our Lord's body that it drew away all the hide and all the skin from his blessed body and renewed his precious wounds and made the blood to run down all about on every side. Then that precious body appeared to her sight as raw, as a thing that was newly flayed out of the skin, full piteous and rueful to behold....Then she saw with her ghostly eye how the Jews fastened ropes on the other hand, for the sinews and veins were so shrunken with pain that it might not come to the hole that they had marked for it, and drew thereon to make it meet with the hole. (Staley, 2001: 140)

From a modern perspective, these mystical and visionary descriptions are extraordinary in their detail. When Kempe describes how the sinews and veins in Christ's body shrunk from the pain, she is giving us an embodied description. When I read this, I can feel my own body recoil in anticipation of that pain. Kempe not only imaginatively transports the reader, she signifies to the reader how Margery uses her imagination and her religious zealotry to transport herself as a witness to the crucifixion. Kempe makes clear to the reader that she understands these experiences are as a consequence of Margery's spiritual devotion. For example:

And sometimes while crying right fervently *she thought she saw our Lord Jesus Christ as verily in her soul with her ghostly eye as she had seen before the crucifix with her bodily eye.* (ibid.: 137, emphasis added)

Here we see Kempe distinguishing between the bodily eye whose vision is in response to external stimulus, and her ghostly or spiritual eye whose vision is internally directed in response to her inner spirituality. Thus Kempe in the Augustinian tradition, locates God, truth, and as I shall argue later reason, internally. In the extract detailing the crucifixion, Kempe begins by stating how she "saw in her contemplation our Lord Jesus Christ bound to a pillar" (ibid.). Later "she went forth in contemplation through the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to the place where he was nailed to the cross" (Staley, 2001: 140). Interspersed throughout the text are the phrases "and so she thought". Kempe uses these narrative devices to inform the reader that she understands Margery is not physically witnessing these biblical events, qualifying that she sees such images "with her ghostly eye" (her spiritual eye). Kempe is not oblivious to how Margery's experiences and behaviour appear to both the reader and others present at Margery's imaginings. Halfway through the crucifixion extract,

Margery is transported back to her physical spatio-temporal context; “And then she wept and cried passingly sore so that many of the people in the church wondered on her body” (ibid. 141). She later shows Margery’s awareness thinking that she “ran all about the place as if she had been a mad woman, crying and roaring” (ibid.). This distinction between spiritual passion and madness is reiterated later as “the said creature thought that she ran ever to and fro as if she had been a woman without reason” (Staley, 2001: 142). Kempe’s awareness of the similarities between spiritual ecstasy and madness is seen not only in the use of metaphor, but also in the language (‘crying and roaring’), descriptive actions also used to describe another woman’s madness Margery attended. These narrative linkages tell the reader that there is similarity in the two experiences, but crucially, Kempe uses metaphor as a linguistic device to distinguish them. Kempe describes Margery’s actions as if she were mad. What Kempe is clearly saying here is “I have reason, I am not mad, and I know that I am not mad because I acted as if I were mad”. Kempe knows the difference between religious fervour and madness and communicates this through metaphor. By distinguishing between her zealous behaviour and madness, Kempe informs the reader that she, as the narrator, is not insane and perhaps she knows this difference precisely because she has experienced madness. As William James echoed centuries later:

Mysticism...is essentially private and individualistic....It allows that its results are mysteries and enigmas, declines to justify them rationally, and on occasion is willing that they should even pass for paradoxical and absurd.

(James, 1982: 430-2)

It is a precarious position to take, but by using madness as a metaphor for her spiritual ecstasies, Kempe pre-empts any accusations of madness by others.

One of the key sections in Kempe’s narrative used as evidence of her madness details her unusual/heightened sensory experiences. These occur in response to her marriage to God.⁴ What follows is Kempe’s description of Margery’s response to this act. The extract below highlights some of the key descriptions of this rich, embodied, phenomenological account:

Sometimes she felt sweet smells with her nose; it was sweeter, she thought, than ever was any sweet earthly thing that she smelled before...Sometimes she heard with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she might not well hear what a man said to her in that time unless he spoke the louder. These sounds and melodies had she heard nearly every day for the term of twenty-five years...She

⁴ Like other holy women who were brides of God, Kempe wore a wedding ring made at divine command inscribed with the words ‘Jesus est Amor Meus’, thus signifying her marriage to the Godhead. This ring, together with the white clothing Margery sometimes wore, was normally associated with pious widowhood.

saw with her bodily eye many white things flying all about her on every side, as thick in a manner as motes in the sun; they were right delicate and comfortable, and the brighter that the sun shone ...Also our Lord gave her another token, which endured about sixteen years, and it increased ever more and more, and that was a flame of fire wonderfully hot and delectable and right comfortable, not wasting but ever increasing of flame, for, though the weather was never so cold, she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart, and verily as a man should feel the material fire if he put his hand or his finger therein. (Staley, 2001: 64-5)

What can we make of this experience? Some writers have interpreted Margery's experience from a modern, psychiatric perspective. For example, Craun in a 2005 paper in the journal *Psychiatric Services* boldly claims on the basis of Kempe's description of post childbirth madness and the sensory extract above that:

Kempe was psychotic for much of her adult life....Kempe continued to have psychotic symptoms throughout the remainder of her life...[her] account provides the modern reader with a unique opportunity to hear the voice of a woman with serious mental illness who lived 600 years ago. (Craun, 2005: 656)

Claridge, Pryor and Watkins in an analysis that focuses on Margery's behaviour in relation to her rejection by others, place a scientific interpretation on the events of her life. Applying a psychiatric assessment tool that measures psychotic illness over a prolonged period of time to Kempe's narrative (the Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia – Lifetime Version (SADS-L)), the authors conclude that:

Given this mixture of affective and schizophrenic features a modern psychiatric diagnosis for Margery Kempe would most likely be 'schizoaffective psychosis', precipitated in the first instance by childbirth. (Claridge et al., 1990: 69)

Other authors have interpreted Margery's experiences in a more contextual framework, positioning them in the medieval cyclical construction of melancholia and mania (Freeman, Bogard, Sholomskas, 1990). Having read Margery's story, I cannot deny that her experiences are comprehensible within this paradigm. Transferring her experience to modern times, if I, as a psychiatric nurse, saw someone stating Kempe's beliefs and experiences, s/he would most probably be within the psychiatric system. Less sympathetically, others have derided Kempe's narrative as 'terrible hysteria', 'neuroticism', and Margery herself as 'a hysteric, if not an epileptic', 'a sufferer from morbid self-engrossment' and 'quite mad – an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend' (see Aers, 2001: 256-64 for fuller discussion of these critiques). In a damning modernist critique, Drucker, who describes Kempe as 'religious hysteric', condemns her visions as 'occasionally repellent and frequently silly',

invalidating both Margery's experience and Kempe's narrative (Drucker, 1972: 2916). When I initially read, re-read and read again this extract, I struggled to explain it. After a three hour struggle, I wrote one sentence; "Madness I understand, this I do not". Why do I struggle to understand this and similar episodes in Margery's life? It is because my twentieth century psychiatry trained head tells me this should be madness, indeed others tell me this is madness. It is, like modern day descriptions of similar experiences, not metaphorical. Kempe describes, in this extract and elsewhere, what could be construed as classic psychotic symptoms; visions, auditory, olfactory and tactile hallucinations, grandiose delusions, self-neglect (Margery's penances of fasting, being inadequately clothed), social withdrawal (from her family and friends), and feelings of passivity and control. Yet it does not feel like madness. Why not? What Kempe describes to us is a truly embodied spiritual experience. Kempe has no doubt about this, and it is this unshakeable belief that communicates itself down the centuries through the text.

However, the question remains as to how Kempe manages to convey the phenomenological intensity of Margery's experience twenty or more years after the event? First, Kempe is an expert storyteller, and it is likely that she retold such narratives as discussed here on many occasions to many people, clergy and fellow pilgrims, through oral testimony and public performance. Second, central to the orthodox liturgy, is the conception that devotional words uttered are expressed through the senses (Good, 2001: 35). Extreme emotion which, in modern times, is viewed as a sign of mental instability, was a fundamental feature of spirituality, conveying both the seriousness and truth of the religious experience⁵ (Hodgkin, 2007: 90). Kempe's book also has a strong Latin provenance. The priests who conversed and read to Margery would most likely have read from contemporary Latin texts of the day. For example, Kempe refers to the work of the Yorkshire hermit Richard Rolle, whose writings were extremely popular and it is the stylistic influence of Rolle that is particularly prevalent in the extracts discussed above, both in the imagery used and the employment of mystical idioms (Lochrie, 2001: 250-3). Kempe's use of analogy to convey the reality of Margery's sensory experiences and the embodied, phenomenological way in which she describes Margery's mystical experiences is clearly reflective of Rolle's three-fold distinction in the stages of mystical ascent; *calor*, *dolor* and *canor*, translated as fire, sweetness and song (ibid.). In particular, Kempe's references to heavenly smells is a sensation that she could only have been familiar with through contact with Rolle's works. Such olfactory experiences or 'heavenly smells' were found more widely in medieval continental mysticism, but in England are exclusive to Kempe and Rolle (ibid.).

⁵ Such intense spirituality as described by Kempe, was not repositioned within a medical framework until the 1650's (see Hodgkin, 2007: 95)

With this knowledge, when we return to Kempe's text, we can listen to Margery's voice within a framework more akin to medieval England than the twentieth century West. Margery's sensory experiences are not without cultural and historical provenance, rather she draws upon a range of mystical sources grounded in religious and cultural traditions known throughout medieval Europe. Kempe's embodied descriptions cease to be tactile or olfactory hallucinations or grandiose ideas (marriage to God), but become experiences that result from spiritual passion. As Porter argues "it would serve no purpose to label such exercise of spiritual discipline as a psychiatric disorder" (Porter, 1988: 44). As argued earlier, religiosity was sanity, whereas madness amounted to a refusal to accept the truth that was God. Furthermore, Margery's experiences are intelligible not only in terms of religious traditions, but also in her terms of her career; Kempe construes Margery as a holy mystic, and the narration of her story is an attempt (albeit failed) to promote Margery to sainthood.

Bringing this paper to a close, I want to ask the question, what makes one person's experience mystical and another's schizophrenic? First, it is important to note that the distinction between being identified as a religious mystic/prophet or a schizophrenic is dependent not only on cultural context, but also outcome and overall function (Buckley, 1981). Margery was seen in certain quarters as being a divine mystic, an inspiration to others, she was at worst judged a heretic and more sympathetically, a nuisance, but she was rarely perceived as the mad woman who needed isolation and restraint following the birth of her first child. Similarly, there are numerous twentieth century examples of individuals who had religious/spiritual visions and beliefs who were not diagnosed with schizophrenia; Doris Stokes and David Icke for example. These modern examples illustrate that public/societal function has some part in how an individual is constructed. My point is, the unusual phenomena experienced by people such as Margery, Stokes and Icke is culture bound, placing doubt on the diagnostic usefulness of religious based visions and hallucinations.

I want to conclude by briefly addressing the function of Kempe's narrative in relation to my argument that Margery was fundamentally mystical, rather than mad. Through the narration of Margery's experiences, we hear a diversity of voices, through which the reader gains insights into medieval constructions of, and reactions to, unusual experiences. The reader also hears Kempe's own voice, which is not one of a detached and passive observer, but one who is conscious of Margery's position and constructs the narrative to reinforce her religious standing. Throughout the book, Kempe constructs Margery as both a visionary subject and martyred object, which has a four-fold effect. First, it legitimates and validates Margery's position in the community as a holy person. Second, her text provides a model to other married women of the day on how to progress to holiness. Third, it provides a record of Margery's

mystical experiences for future readers. Finally, the narrative substantiates Margery's claim for sainthood. By writing Margery's life as a hagiography (a narrative of a saint's life), Kempe is directing her narrative to a specific addressee, one of high-ranking authority who can confer religious status on Margery's experiences and life. To the broader reading audience, Kempe is reliant on them to recognise this specific genre, together with its purpose. Whilst there is an implicit assumption that readers will be conversant with other spiritual texts, Kempe also directs the reader towards these through citing them. From a modern perspective, it is important to identify the literary roots and social and historical contexts of Kempe's book in order not to misconstrue the central religious scenes as madness. Kempe's self confessed episode of madness takes up one per cent of her story. What contemporary theorists, particularly those like myself with their professional roots in psychiatry, need to realise is that Kempe's book is a pre-Enlightenment narrative, where the boundaries between madness and religious experiences were drawn very differently to modern times. Her story could not be told in the same way today, but that does not mean that we should not listen to it and hear her voice.

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