

“THEI STODYN UPON STOYLS FOR TO BEHELDYN HIR”:
MARGERY KEMPE AND THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Margery Kempe's behaviour as performance. I begin by cataloguing the different modes of physical and verbal theatre which Margery's text presents as evidence of her authority. I then explore the aspects of performance implied by the audience responses recorded in the text. Tracing the shift from performance to performativity, I discuss how Margery's theatrical self-presentation challenged conceptions of fixed gender and identity, revealing the source and impact of Margery's power in the audience/actor relationship. I conclude by demonstrating the potential reach of her performances and by identifying the ways in which her detractors attempted to contain her influence.

Willingly or not, Margery Kempe was a performer. *The book of Margery Kempe* translates Margery's spectacle into comprehensible modes of performance which established her divine authority and justified her right to adopt public roles that ranged from martyr to preacher. Her book also records her audiences' reactions, and these responses show that Margery's audiences were aware of her behaviour as performance, one which threatened her society's assumptions of natural gender and fixed identity. The negative responses in particular suggest that it was this power of performance to create and adapt identity and the possibility that identity itself was a performance that caused many of Margery's witnesses to fear and reject her. Margery's performances did give her the freedom

¹ *The book of Margery Kempe*, l. 2695 (ed. Staley 1996). All further citations are from this edition, and are by line number. My thanks to the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper at the 37th International Congress on Medieval Studies (Western Michigan University, 2 May 2002). Thanks also to Stephen Partridge, Garrett Epp, and Lesley Peterson for their helpful comments and discussions during the development of this paper.

to redefine and direct her own life, but they also threatened those around her to the extent that many people attacked her in attempts to undermine and contain her potential influence. Margery did have a power over her audience, but it was the power of fear rather than that of divine authority.

Performance is a public exchange of actions, an exchange that occurs in and with the body. Because of medieval gender constructions, any public action on Margery's part accentuated performance. Her "femaleness" would have emphasized her bodyliness, and her behaviour brought further attention to her actions in public. However, *The book of Margery Kempe* also represents Margery's actions in terms of theatrical performance.² Her physical performances invoked both the spectacle of punishment and the spectacle of drama, and her verbal theatre took the form of teaching and preaching, practices forbidden to women.

Margery enacted three types of physical theatre: the theatre of martyrdom, mimetic theatre, and didactic theatre. In "Margery Kempe: Spectacle and spiritual governance", Joel Fredell (1996) points out how Margery's behaviour is performance in terms of the theatre of visionary martyrdom.³ For Fredell, Margery's focus on her own physical performance – specifically her tears and convulsions – emphasizes "the public witness which determines socially-constructed ideas of spiritual governance" (1996: 139).⁴ In other words, Margery's public and physical suffering gave her the authority to tell her own story.

This type of performance takes advantage of a fascination with public punishment. In his study of late medieval punishment and theatre, Seth Lerer (1996) indicates a blurring of the lines between the two. Lerer describes the sentence for a cutpurse – having one's ear nailed to a post and then being given a knife with which to cut the ear off – and suggests that this event would be a sort of public entertainment. Certainly the public aspect is important. Watching the

² As with any performance, it is impossible to recapture the performance itself, or even to judge whether Margery was conscious of her actions as performance at any given moment (although her attention to her audiences and her attempts to limit her behaviour at certain times suggests that she often was aware of the impact she had). Similarly, it is difficult for us to know how much of Margery's text is a faithful recording of her memories, how reliable those memories might be, and how much they are shaped by her amanuenses, if these scribes existed at all (Staley 1994: 36). Nevertheless, whether the elements of coherent performance were a part of Margery's original intentions or were created either in Margery's act of remembering or in her scribe's interpretation of reported events according to familiar tropes, Margery's actions exhibit theatrical qualities in the final record of her life.

³ Fredell's work is inspirational, but he minimizes the impact of gender by implying a direct transfer from male to female mystical traditions and reading Margery's body as "male-inflected" (1996: 138-139, 144). Margery's gender, however, would be one of the first things her audiences would notice, and so it becomes an important aspect of her behaviour as performance.

⁴ Fredell doesn't mention Margery's frequent illnesses or the incident when she was struck by a stone and plank falling from the church ceiling, but I think these also witness her martyrdom.

criminal's public marking or execution allows a cathartic, communal acknowledgement and construction of the criminal as Other. Martyr and crucifixion plays work along the same lines, only they prevent catharsis by making the audience culpable. For example, the York *Crucifixion* play invokes civic justice through the soldiers' attitude towards their job. The audience may not wish to participate, but they are put in the same position as when watching public punishment. The stage prevents the audience from moving against the players, but Christ's final speech is directed at the audience, making it clear that he is being sacrificed for their sake, that they are in some way responsible for his suffering. His wounds become a physical sign for that sacrifice, in the same way that a torn ear would signify a criminal.

Margery's weeping and roaring also served to mark her as Other, although whether Margery tended to the criminal or the martyr was open to question. Some people saw Margery's suffering as punishment, while the text privileges those who saw it as a sign of martyrdom. Thus the incident where Margery survives falling masonry (485-504) was interpreted as a "tokyn of wreth and venjawns" by some, but the text names Alan of Lynn, a Carmelite Friar, who "inquired of this creature alle the forme of this processe" and weighed the stone and plank which had fallen on her before declaring her survival a miracle. When there is no external authority to confirm the "correct" interpretation, the text's own assumed authority confirms the proper interpretation for the reader.⁵ The "incorrect" responses, however, are also an important part of Margery's performance of martyrdom. Judith Butler (1997: 163) suggests that "the word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation". In this case, the text uses the "schame, despite, and reprefe" (1894) which Margery suffers as evidence of her martyred status, which in turn increases her spiritual authority over those who despised her.

Margery was also "marked" by her mode of dress which served as the costume of her theatrical martyrdom. On one occasion her fellow pilgrims cut her gown short and forced her to wear a sackcloth garment (1430-1432), but this treatment, as a sign of martyrdom, only increased her popularity. More generally, Margery's voluntary adoption of white clothing was a public symbol of her sacrificed sexual life. Significantly, this mark often caused her further suffering, as might a criminal's mark, because her mode of dress attracted attention from the authorities. In Leicester, the mayor believed Margery's white clothing symbolized her intent to steal away the town wives (2728) and, in York, the Arch-

⁵ In *Margery Kempe's dissenting fictions* (1994: 31-36), Lynn Staley discusses the (potentially fictional) male scribe who stands in for the sceptical reader and lends authority to Margery's text.

bishop imprisoned her because she wore white but was not a virgin (2923-2925). Her symbol of martyrdom in these cases allowed her to be martyred yet again, further reinforcing the authority she gained through martyrdom.

Margery's second mode of performance was mimetic and historical, representing Christ's life by her own example. When Margery suffered derision, Christ made it clear that her attackers were deriding him as well. Margery herself noted the substitution: "I suffir but schrewyd wordys, and owr merciful Lord Crist Jhesu, worshepyd be hys name, suffyrd hard strokys, bittyr scorgyngys, and schamful deth at the last for me and for al mankynde, blyssed mot he be. And therfor it is ryth nowt that I suffir in regarde to that he suffyrd" (3060-3064).⁶

When Margery went on pilgrimage, she mimicked Christ more directly. She preached to her countrymen on the journey but was rejected, while strangers were quickly converted to her cause (mirroring Christ's rejection by the Jews and acceptance elsewhere). On the boat to Jerusalem, one of her traveling companions stole her sheet (1543-1547), invoking the soldiers' theft of Christ's garment at the crucifixion. She rode into Jerusalem on an ass and walked the stations of the cross as Christ did. At Calvary she convulsed, "spredying hir armys abroad" (sic 1573) and "roryng" (1579) for the first time, as though she were being crucified.⁷ After returning home from pilgrimage, Margery also asked Christ's forgiveness for those who slandered her, invoking Christ's phrase of "Fadyr, forgeve hem; thei wite not what thei don" (2521). Margery's association with Christ strengthened her position as a martyr, but it also reinforced her performance as a mystic, as one who has special knowledge. In this case, the knowledge was partly physical – knowledge that any pilgrim to Jerusalem could gain by mimicking Christ's path – but it was also mystical in that Margery saw the events of the passion as she re-enacted them.

Significantly, Margery's mimetic performance can only be coherently understood at a temporal distance and must be translated by her text. While Margery had audiences during her pilgrimage, it was rarely the same audience, and so it is only in the text that her experience takes on a coherent narrative.⁸ Moreover, as Denis Renevey (2000: 208) suggests, Margery frequently failed "to provide a

⁶ Staley (1994: 66) similarly compares the derision Margery suffers to reenactments of Christ's passion and martyrs' persecutions.

⁷ Sarah Beckwith (1986: 50) notes this moment as the point when Margery's identification with Christ becomes mimesis. Ellen Ross (1993: 47) also sees Margery's behaviour as imitation, more specifically as a way of understanding through experience.

⁸ However, Margery likely made use of this narrative before she recorded it in her book. When she returns to England from her first continental pilgrimage, she gets money from other pilgrims because she "telde hem good talys" (2404). It is not a far stretch to imagine that she told them tales of her journey and that the motif of Christ's passion was a part of her story.

coherent bodily translation" of her mystical and devotional experiences.⁹ Fredell (1996: 143) also makes the point that "[i]n most cases the reader, like Margery's immediate audience, watches the fit with no clear idea of the vision she might be having. Her fits and tears end up functioning as a spectacular stand-in, a representation for the visions the text does not supply when the fits are described". Her book, however, does explain the general nature of Margery's actions and content of her visions. Readers have enough information to understand her performance, but that information was not available to her original audience. As a spectacle, Margery drew attention, but she rarely provided an authorial guide as to how her performance should be understood.

This substitution of spectacle for interpretation resulted in Margery's third type of theatre, a didactic theatre which represented Christ's power and presence to the people who saw her spectacle. Christ compared his presence in Margery to an earthquake, made to inspire fear in the ungodly. Her roaring was "to makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace" (4334-4335) that Christ gave her. Christ also named Margery's tears as a "tokyn that [he] wil that [his] modrys sorwe be knowyn by [Margery] that men and women myth have the mor compassyon of hir sorwe" (4335-4337). This didactic mode of performance also gave Margery the authority to speak prophetically, since she was speaking for Christ and not for herself.

This authority of prophetic speech is related to Margery's verbal theatre, which she often claimed was inspired by the Holy Ghost. Margery insisted that she did not preach, at least "in no pulpytt", but she admitted to "comownycacyon and good wordys" (2976), which amounted to the masculine domain of teaching. Her book records several times when she rebuked religious authorities for allowing their servants to swear and wear fashionable clothing. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for example, accepted her correction "[f]ul benyngly and mekely" (845), while the Bishop of Worcester's men, who were initially offended by her rebuke, "held hem wel plesyd wyth hyr dalyawns, thankyd be God, er than sche left" (2568-2569). Many people came to Margery outright for her for spiritual guidance, such as the sceptical worldly monk whom Margery converted and guided to repentance (582-619). Another man "was so drawyn be the good wordys that God put in hir to sey of contricyon and compunccyon" (2536-2537) that he, too, was overcome with weeping for his sins. Even negative reactions make reference to Margery's insistence on teach-

⁹ Renevey says Margery is unable to provide this translation. However, while Margery frequently claimed she could not express what she had seen, at other times she actively refused to interpret. Both responses could reinforce Margery's authority, since the ineffability of some visions would confirm Margery's special status as mystic, while her refusal to communicate with certain people would declare Margery's belief that those people had no authority over her.

ing. Her traveling companions on pilgrimage complained that she spoke too much about spiritual matters, and at one point, they cast her out because she “rehersyd a text of a Gospel” (1522). While her physical suffering was meant to provide an example for her audience on Christ’s behalf, she also assumed an active role as teacher for those who would listen.

Margery may not have entered the pulpit, but she did preach. She gained authority to do so through her physical performance, but she maintained her right through her performances in court. Her trial before the Archbishop of York is particularly revealing. The Archbishop was known for his hostility toward Lollards, and he decided that Margery was a “fals heretyke” (2925) even before examining her in the articles of faith.¹⁰ Although she was fettered and she “tremelyd and whakyd” (2929), she acquitted herself with regard to the articles and she grew bold in the face of the Archbishop’s inability to prove her a heretic. She rebuked the Archbishop for being a “wikkyd man” (2951-2952) and refused his injunction to leave the diocese. The Archbishop then commanded Margery to swear that she would “ne techyn ne chalengyn the pepil” (2964), but again Margery refused his injunction directly: “Nay, syr, I schal not sweryn ... for I schal spekyn of God ...” (2964-2965). She went further, citing scripture to prove her right to speak about scripture. Finally she repeated an anti-clerical tale, which the Archbishop “likyd wel ... and comendyd” (3009). What began as a trial for Lollardy ended with a sermon which confirmed Margery’s right to preach or, in other words, to perform in public.

From physical to verbal theatre, the text interprets Margery’s performances as demonstrating and increasing her authority. Certainly Margery attained this authority to the extent that she could follow the life she chose: she traveled extensively, negotiated sexual freedom from her husband, spoke with many important figures of her time, and composed her own book. Nevertheless, her frequently negative reception and recurrent persecution suggests that, while Margery’s performances did have power, it was not the divine authority that her book communicates. A close look at her reception shows that her audience was most frequently disturbed by Margery’s performance of gender, or, more specifically, by her actions which revealed that gender is a performance, or that it is performative.¹¹ As Judith Butler (1990 [1999]: 187) puts it, “... gender is an ‘act’

¹⁰ The Archbishop is specified in *The book of Margery Kempe* as “Henry Bowet, Archbishop of York from 1407 to 1423, known for his antipathy to Lollards” (Staley 1996: 123n).

¹¹ Performativity describes the generally unconscious performance of gender through the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990 [1999]: 179, italics in original). These acts succeed in creating the gender identities which they perform – in other words, are successfully performative – because they “cite” normative ideals of gender. They are also compulsory: “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 1990 [1999]: 178). Performativity relies on its being an unconscious process, one that ‘naturalizes’ and ‘normalizes’ the gender identities it constructs.

... that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmic status”. Margery’s performance of gender was ultimately more powerful and more immediately threatening than an assertion of spiritual authority, because “[t]he loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Butler 1990 [1999]: 187). The negative audience reactions and subsequent attacks recorded in Margery’s book suggest that it was this destabilization of gender norms and the social roles dependent on them which threatened Margery’s audience. Fredell (1996: 138) suggests a similar point when he acknowledges Margery “is in danger ... in part for transgressing gender roles”, but Margery did more than simply transgress. The audiences’ reactions to her spectacle suggest that her behaviour powerfully subverted the idea of natural gender and fixed identity, and that this subversion was attractive to at least some of her audience. It was because of this power that her attackers had to repeatedly abject her into pre-defined categories, even when these accusations proved untenable.

Initial responses and attacks against Margery focused on her “hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’” (Butler 1990 [1999]: 187), such as her weeping and her white clothes, and on her failure to perform her gender properly, as when she was outspoken and independent. While women were often associated with emotion, the most common response to Margery’s weeping and roaring was the accusation of feigning and hypocrisy. People thought that she “mygth wepyn and levyn whan she wold, and therfor many men seyde sche was a fals ypocryte and wept for the world for socowr and for wordly good” (296-298). On two separate occasions (1946-1954, 4745-4764), Margery’s priests administered the sacrament to her in empty churches in order “to prevyn whethyr [her cries] wer the gyfte of God, as sche seyde, er ellys hir owyn feynyng by ypocrysy” (1948-1949).¹² These priests believed in Margery because her cries were louder than ever, but others, like the famed preacher whose own performances Margery’s cries disturbed, refused to accept that Margery could not control her tears and convulsions.¹³ Like others, this preacher was willing to believe that she could not control her cries only on the condition that she admit they were the result of illness (3564-3568). Later, when God took away her cries so she could attend church again, the people were confirmed in their belief of her as a hypo-

¹² Of course, this test is paradoxical, since the priests themselves formed an audience for Margery.

¹³ Susan Signe Morrison mentions Margery’s challenge to and subversion of the preacher’s “culturally sanctioned public speech” (2000: 136) in her discussion of Margery as both spectator and spectacle.

crite. Margery's hyperbolic representation suggested the possibility that gender is an act.

Margery's white clothing was even more disruptive in its challenge to the normative conception of the ideal woman as virgin. The clothing signified (or performed) virginity, but Margery was clearly not a virgin anatomically. Instead she claimed to be a spiritual virgin: God 'reinstated' her virginity saying, "forasmech as thu art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so schalt thu dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes" (1198-1200). Margery herself recognized the challenge her clothing presented to the normative order, fearing that if she was "arayd on other maner than other chast women don" (734), she would be slandered. Again, the attention her detractors gave to her clothes, which in the text is interpreted as a sign of her martyrdom, reveals a discomfort that virginity could be so easily assumed and performed. In Rome, for example, she was made to stop wearing white as a gesture of obedience, and the town wives mocked her inconsistency (1971-1972). Similarly, a certain priest slandered her "for sche weryd white clothyng mor than other dedyn which wer holyar and bettyr than evyr was sche as hym thowt" (1962-1963). Some comments also reveal a suspicion that her clothing was a disguise. In one episode a priest challenged her saying, "Thu wolf, what is this cloth that thu hast on?" (2831), invoking a metaphor of disguise, while both the Mayor of Leicester and the Archbishop of York assumed that Margery's adoption of white clothing when she was not a virgin signaled dissident behaviour. If Margery could so easily re-assume her status as virgin (at least in the eyes of the God) then she revealed the arbitrary nature of social structures which demeaned sexually active women, and which used sexuality as a reason for considering women lesser beings.

A particularly revealing episode with regard to gender occurs in Chapter 53. When Margery was being escorted through Hessele to a trial in Beverly, the women of the town "cam rennyng owt of her howsys wyth her rokkys" (3054) to call for her burning. The small but symbolic detail of the "rokkys", meaning distaffs, creates a contrast between the townswomen who fulfilled gender expectations and Margery's destabilizing behaviour. Three lines later, the text makes this explicit. On the road to Beverly, they met "many tymes" with men who entreated Margery to "forsake this lyfe that thu hast, and go spyne and carde as other women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo" (3056-3058). The request draws more attention to the gender Margery failed to perform correctly than to her potential heresy. The implication is that her audience found her easy manipulation of gender the more disturbing of the two.

There is evidence that Margery's audience reacted so strongly to her destabilizing performance of gender precisely because it was powerful and convincing. Margery is shown as affecting all classes, or at least of being suspected

of being able to affect all classes. On pilgrimage, her fellow travelers took away her servant so that the girl "schuld no strumpet be in hyr cumpany" (1421-1422). The Mayor of Leicester felt that the townswoman would follow her because she wore white, and in Beverly, when she preached out of the window of her temporary prison, the women in the audience "wept sor and seyde wyth gret hevynes of her hertys, 'Alas, woman, why schalt thu be brent'" (3083-3084). In her second trial before the Archbishop of York, a friar accused her of advising Lady Greystoke to forsake her husband (3150). While Margery claimed to have moved no such matter, her correspondence with this particular noblewoman indicates the potential reach of her power, and the nature of the accusation focuses on Margery's threat to accepted gendered behaviour.¹⁴ Margery's popularity with and influence on women of all classes stood as a potential threat to patriarchal social structures.

At the end of her second examination before him, the Archbishop of York remarked ironically, "I leve ther was nevyr woman in Inghond so ferd wyththal as sche is and hath ben" (3168-3169). The threat Margery posed required that she be contained and her power undermined. Her detractors did this most frequently by attempting to contain her within abject identities, even when there was little or no evidence to support their accusations. With equal frequency, Margery was accused of sexual illicitness, illness or madness (particularly demonic possession), and heresy. The Mayor of Leicester's accusation that Margery was "a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl" (2625-2626) shows how these labels were often combined in an attempt to contain Margery's power.¹⁵ Margery was accused of adultery and of bearing and disposing of an illegitimate child while on pilgrimage. When Margery traveled with her husband, she was accused of breaking her vow of chastity. When she traveled without him, she was accused of disobedience and lechery. Accusations of illness and madness also pervade the text, provided as reasons for her tears and convulsions as well as her outspokenness. When she was commanded by her confessor to wear black again, for example, another priest gloated over her enforced obedience (1973-1984). When she rebuked him in turn, he accused her of having a devil within her, and she challenged him to drive it away. The priest's inability to prove the existence of such a devil or exorcise it from her reveals the extent to which the accusation was a failed attempt to control and contain Margery. Similarly, Margery faced repeated accusations of heresy and threats of legal action that became increasingly absurd. She was, for example, arrested or detained

¹⁴ This particular incident also suggests a threat to class identity. See Ashley (1998) for a discussion of the way that Margery renegotiates class identity.

¹⁵ As Ruth Shklar (1995: 281-282) points out, charges of sexual perversion and religious corruption often went together.

three times after her first trial before the Archbishop of York even though she was simply trying to return home and despite her ability to clear herself of all charges each time.

Margery used performance to shape her identity and cast herself as martyr, mystic, and preacher. However, where Margery wanted people only to recognize the new identities she performed, her attackers often focused on the mechanism of change itself, on the way that performance can adapt and even form identity. Margery challenged “the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 1990 [1999]: 187), performing her gender in ways that threatened to undermine normative social structures. Accepting Margery’s performed identities would have meant acknowledging that gender and the social roles based on gender are arbitrary and flexible. Instead, her attackers attempted to disrupt her potential influence by re-casting her as abject, as the fallen, heretical madwoman without legitimate access to power. Yet there is a certain power in being the threat that must be contained. Ironically, by attacking Margery, her audience both acknowledged her performances and gave strength to her re-working of gender, revealing that she did have power over them, after all.

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