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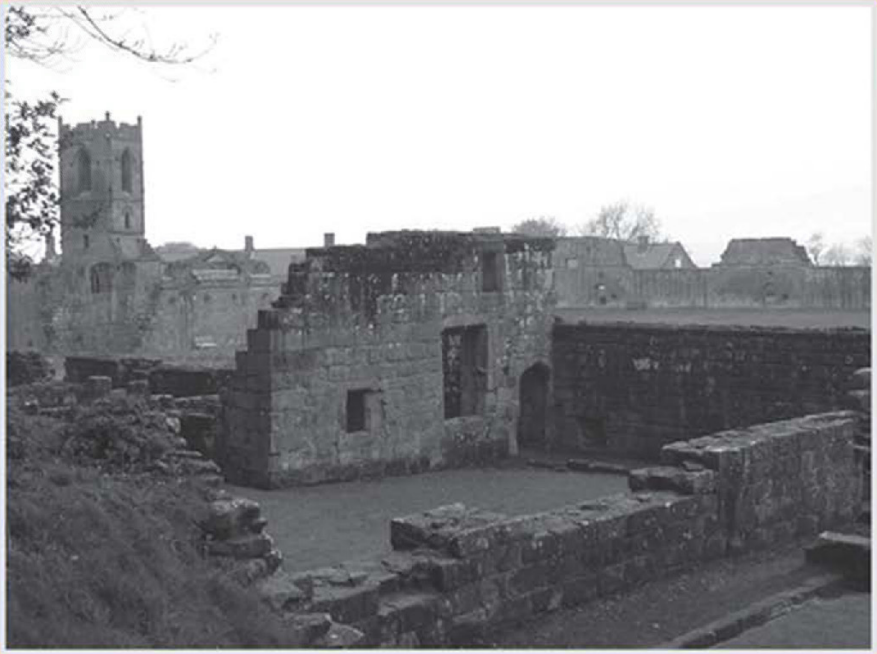

# PERILOUS PASSAGES

## *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1534-1934

Julie A. Chappell

# THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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# PERILOUS PASSAGES

## *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*, 1534–1934

*Julie A. Chappell*

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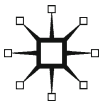



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*For William Henry Jones, Jr.*

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# PROYM

In 1501, early modern readers of the second generation of printed books read extracts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* in a small booklet printed by Wynkyn de Worde, *Here begynneth a shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of lynn*.[1] De Worde's readers would be drawn into his "shorte treatyse" not gently but with a graphic revelation about Margery Kempe: "She desyred many tymes that her hede myght be smyten of with an axe vpon a blocke for the loue of our lorde Ihesu."[2] De Worde's extracts as a whole focused primarily on Christ's words to Margery Kempe, his teachings to move her to "holy drede of our lorde Ihesu & in knowlege of her owne freylte."[3] As George Keiser has asserted, the early English printed tracts by de Worde were "responding to the pressure of the marketplace" and perhaps, as Keiser acknowledged in de Worde's case, to "his own pious inclinations."[4] Wynkyn de Worde's connections with Lady Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York with their "commitment to devotional piety" as well as clerical patronage from the Carthusians and other religious in the London area would certainly have influenced de Worde's printing choices. Keiser also remarks that paring Kempe's *Book* down in the way that de Worde did "seemed a reasonable way to satisfy an audience for whom [Kempe's] name, like Rolle's, had a certain *cachet*."[5] Twenty years later, another London printer, Henry Pepwell, would reprint de Worde with only some verbal and spelling variants in the extracts but with a significant addition to the title. Pepwell enclosed Margery Kempe, making her "Margerie kempe ancresse." The early sixteenth-century readership would soon be faced with real-life examples of the martyr-like pose of Margery Kempe's devotion as de Worde presented it in his

opening extract with Pepwell's later alteration of the title reinforcing that image. Nearly 500 years later, other extracts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* would make quite a different impression on late twentieth-century readers. Like their sixteenth-century counterparts, however, these readers would also be dealing with a "Frankentext," a pastiche of the parts of a woman as defined by her late medieval world, fashioning a woman who never existed exactly as the extracts created her.[6]

In 1991, in a fervently secular age, my own students reacted incredulously and quite vocally to what they considered the ravings of a mad woman after reading the translated extracts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* included in the 1986 edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature.* This anthology offered selections from Kempe's chapters on the birth of her first child with the subsequent, critical first vision, Kempe's business failures and her pride, her vow of chastity confirmed by her husband, Kempe's pilgrim's journey to Jerusalem, and her interrogation by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The previous year, another Norton anthology focusing exclusively on women's writing in English had provided three chapters from Kempe's *Book* that carried one title, "On Female Celibacy."[7] The extracts chosen by the editors of both anthologies created a most extraordinary late medieval woman, Margery Kempe, a being for whom this postmodern audience could largely feel neither empathy nor sympathy.

Like many other teacher-scholars after 1986, I had used the fifth edition *NAEL*'s brief, generalized essay to Kempe and her world as my students' introduction to the extracts in that volume. The *NAEL* editors' first extract was entitled "The Birth of Her First Child and Her First Vision." The medieval drama of that first event providing "solas and comfort" to medieval readers became postmodern melodrama out of context.[8] Late twentieth-century students and teachers reading this first event did so without the scribe's guiding "proym" or the rest of the *Book*, without the context provided by the priest/amanuensis asserting that he wrote the "proym to expressyn mor openly þan doth þe next folwyng" (5/30–32). Clearly, he meant his "proym" to guide the reader through the coming encounter with Margery Kempe. The other four extracts from the *Book*

offered in this edition of the *NAEL* may have been intended to be representative of the complex narrative of the life of Margery Kempe but instead amounted to a serving of only the most egregious examples of what they considered Kempe's "highly emotional style of religious expression" out of time and place without benefit of an in-depth overview of Kempe's place in late medieval spirituality.[9] Kempe's decision to make the first "moment" of her *Book* the genesis of her first vision is critical to our understanding of her intention for the *Book* as a whole. But this moment extracted out of the context of the priest's guiding proym along with Kempe's careful, but seemingly random, ordering of other dramatic events in her life leaves the reader with a distorted notion of Margery Kempe. The extracts selected for these late twentieth-century editions directed a reader to earthly considerations of a more "scientific" age—prolonged postpartum psychosis, self-aggrandizement, self-fashioning—rather than to an understanding of divine mercy and favor through bodily tortures, mystical revelations, and spiritual elevation sent by God as these would have been comprehended by a late medieval reader of the whole *Book*. Though I could give my students a wider medieval context for Kempe, I found that I could not provide this as fully as needed in the confines of a survey course. Teaching Margery Kempe and her *Book* under these limitations and the concomitant responses of students reacting in isolation from the whole of Kempe's narrative resolved me to break those restraints.

After a number of years of reading and teaching only such extracts in translation, I decided to put Margery Kempe back into the context of the whole beginning with a rereading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in its native garb, the Middle English of the first half of the fifteenth century. Consequently, in 1999 my investigations commenced by revisiting woman's place in late medieval culture. For the next four years, my more thorough study of Margery Kempe's *Book* and her world concentrated on this medieval woman in search of control over her own life through a unique spiritual refashioning as mystic and visionary rather than under the constraints of being medieval woman loosed upon a myopic patriarchal world.[10] What follows is a retrospective of my own journey over these years along the