The Book of Margary Kempe

Women, Pilgrims, Mysticism, and the Medieval Church
The Book

http://english.selu.edu/humanitiesonline/kempe/

- What is it?
  - Margery Kempe
  - Her scribes
  - Her revision
  - Salthows

- Who wrote it?
  - Carthusian monks
  - Excerpt, 1501 by Wynken de Worde
  - Trans. and ed.: Lynn Staley
'Liber Montis Gracie. This boke is of Mountegrace' on the vellum bifolium bound in at the front of the volume.
The Book of Margery Kempe

- Survives in one manuscript
- Staley’s transcript online
  - Middle English
- Book I, Part I (Prologue - Chap. 44)
  - “a sinful catif”
- Book I, Part II (Chap. 45 - Chap. 89)
- Book II

Margery’s explorations and encounters

- Explorations
  - physical, emotional, and spiritual
  - self-construction

- Encounters

- “Ex libris”
  - construction
  - purpose
  - effect and reception
  - meaning and significance
Politics, Church, and Saints

**Political power**
- Roman Empire to 312
  - Christianity illegal
  - Sporadic persecution
- Christian Rome, after 312
  - Christian Emperors
  - East and West
  - Germanic peoples & kingdoms
- Medieval Christian monarchies, from 12th C

**Religious developments**
- Apostles
- Early Christian Martyrs
- Rise of Celibacy
  - Holy widows, virgin saints
- Secular Clergy
  - bishops, priests
- Monasticism
  - monks, nuns, friars, canons
- The Virgin Mary
  - Spiritual Marriage
Female saints in the early Christian Church

- Martyrs
  - Dying and/or suffering for their Christian faith
  - Putting obligations to God before those to family
    -- Taking religious vows rather than marry
“...Perpetua,
nobly born, reared in a liberal manner, wedded honorably; having a father and mother and two brothers, one of them a catechumen likewise, and a son, a child at the breast; and she herself was about twenty-two years of age. What follows here shall she tell herself; the whole order of her martyrdom as she left it written with her own hand and in her own words.”

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp
“We were still under legal surveillance and my father was liked to vex me with his words and continually strove to hurt my faith because of his love: ‘Father, said I...I call myself nothing other than that which I am, a Christian.’ Then my father, angry with this word, came upon me to tear out my eyes; but he only vexed me, and he departed vanquished, he and the arguments of the devil....

After a few days we were taken into prison, and I was much afraid because I had never known such darkness. O bitter day! There was a great heat because of the press, there was cruel handling of the soldiers.”
Perpetua’s Visions

“And I went up, and I saw a very great space of garden, and in the midst a man sitting, white-headed, in shepherd's clothing, tall milking his sheep; and standing around in white were many thousands. And he raised his head and beheld me and said to me: ‘Welcome, child.’ And he cried to me, and from the curd he had from the milk he gave me as it were a morsel; and I took it with joined hands and ate it up; and all that stood around said, Amen.”
Hagiography

- Lives of Saints
  - Challenging authority, patriarchy
  - Yet constructed by patriarchal authority
Female religious role models

Challenge authority

- St. Perpetua, d. 203 AD
- St. Winifred, St. Ethelreda, d. 7th C
- St. Liutaberg, d. about 870
- St. Hildegard of Bingen, d. 1179
- St. Clare of Assisi, d. 1253
- St. Bridget, d. 1373
- Julian of Norwich, d. 1416
The literature of holy women

- Writings: visions and experiences
  - St. Perpetua, 3rd Century
    - [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp)
  - Hildegard of Bingen, 12th Century
    - [http://www.hildegard.org/](http://www.hildegard.org/)
Hildegard of Bingen

- 12th Century
- Theologian, poet, physician, abbess
In the Middle Ages -

Little chance at martyrdom
But women could become –

• Anchorites and nuns
  ◦ Celibate lives as brides of Christ
  ◦ Service
  ◦ Mysticism: visions and meditation
In the Middle Ages -

• Lay women:
  • Living a holy life
  • Endow religious institutions
  • Retire to monasteries
  • Worship and pray: devotional experiences
  • Spiritual marriages
Margery’s reading list

Chapter 62

- Hilton’s book
- Stimulus Amoris
- Incendium Amoris
- Bride’s book
Hilton’s book, *The Scale of Perfection*

First half 15th century, by Walter Hilton
Stimulus amoris, ascribed to St. Bonaventure

Harley 2254 f.1 British Library
Richard Rolle
of Hampole
Incendium Amoris
(The Fire of Love)

Harley 5977  f. 102
Richard Rolle of Hampole, Fragment from Book I, chapters 7-8, on parchment
England; 1st quarter of the 15th century
Richard Rolle, mid-14th C mystic and hermit wrote of his life as a record of spiritual growth addressed to a woman reader and devotional literature stressing affective piety
Bride’s book, 1375-1377
St. Bridget’s Revelations
St Bridget giving her rule to her order 1480-1500
The British Museum, London
The Crucifixion
with St Bridget
in Adoration

The British Museum, London

These prints derive from the Brigittine convent of Marienwater which was founded c.1434-40
Nicholas Love,  
*The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ.*

“… written …[so that] devout imaginations and likenesses stir simple souls to the love of God and desire of heavenly things… to imagine and think diverse words and deeds of him and others that we find not written so that it not be against the law [doctrines of faith], as St. Gregory and other doctors say, that holy writ may be expounded and understood in diverse ways.”

Staley, p.196
Mary d’ Oignies, 1177 -1213

- Founder of Beguines
- Female lay piety
- Book 1, c. 62
- Vita, by Jacques de Vitry
- The effusion of tears

Married at the age of fourteen to Jean de Nivelle, Mary convinced her husband to take a vow of chastity with her. Together, they nursed lepers. She did not live a cloistered life following an approved rule like a nun, but rather adopted a free form of devout life marked by strenuous asceticism and manual labour. Mary received many visions from God, experienced ecstasy and wept uncontrollably when meditating on the Passion of Christ. She did not eat meat, dressed in white clothes, and mortified her flesh in acts of penance. See Staley, p. 218.
The Poor Caitif; a moral treatise (f. 161r-161v) England; 2nd half of the 15th century

unknown author, severl other MS in 14thC
Margery’s experiential piety

- Physical experiences
- Spiritual and devotional experiences
- Physical expression of her emotional responses

What role do the senses play in Margery’s Book?
Pilgrimage

• Holy Places
  ◦ Jerusalem and environs
  ◦ Rome
  ◦ Santiago de Compostela
  ◦ Local shrines
    • St. Thomas Becket, Canterbury

• Holy Relics: saints and miracles
  • Walsingham
  • Aachen
  • Wilsnack
Medieval pilgrimage

"St Mary Magdalene and pilgrims
Paris-BNF FR ms 50, fol 342
(Speculum Historiale, 1463
Pilgrims in White on the Peasants Crusade
15th C ms. France
Bibliothèque Nationale
Going on Pilgrimage
Pilgrim badges

Examples of Pilgrim Badges of St Andrew, as worn in medieval times by thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe en route to the holy shrine of St Andrews in Fife. Badges, which had four stitching holes so that they could be sewn to hats or clothing, were worn to gain the Saint’s protection and as proof of pilgrimage.

Badge from St James de Compostela - 1375-1425.
People Margery encounters

- Julian of Norwich, 1342 – ca. 1416
  - Anchorite and visionary (Book 1, c.18)
    - “This is a Revelation of Love that Jesus Christ, our endless bliss, made in Sixteen Showings, or particular Revelations.”
    - [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/julian/revelations/](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/julian/revelations/)
- Bishop of Lincoln, Phillip Repingdon, 1345–1424
- Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arndel
Popular Religion in the Later Middle Ages

- Pilgrimage, near and far
- Cult of the Virgin Mary
- Suffering humanity of Christ
  - join spiritually in Christ’s passion
  - more extreme: Flagellants
- Urban fraternal guilds
  - Corpus Christi mystery plays, processions
- Anticlericalism
  - Black Death, 1348, recurrent
  - Papal schism, 1378-1415
Lollards

- Followers of **John Wycliffe** (1320-1384)
  - Doctor of Divinity, Oxford University
    - Advocated church reform
    - Vernacular Bible
    - Condemned church wealth
    - Pope is Antichrist
    - Rejected transubstantiation
    - Condemned as heretic 1401, 1415

- Lollards persecuted by English kings
  - Lancastrians, Henry IV, V, VI
Margery Kempe

- Born 1373, Lynn, Norfolk
- Father: John Burnham, merchant
  - Mayor, alderman
  - Corpus Christi guild
- Married 1393
  John Kempe
What does Margery’s *Book* reveal about her family, her marriage, and her husband?
What does Margery’s *Book* reveal about religious life and the Christian Church in Medieval Europe?
What does Margery’s Book reveal about medieval society?

Class, gender, education and literacy, the other?
What does Margery’s *Book* reveal about the rhythms of medieval life?
About Margery…

- Her life as a merchant’s daughter and wife
- Her illiteracy
- Her secret sin
- Her illness after her first child
- Her fourteen children
- Her own business career
- Her conversion and after
Margery as traveller

- Why?
- Where?
- What was it like?

The “perils of the sea”
Margery’s Pilgrimage to Jerusalem, 1413-15
Margery’s Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, 1417-18
Pilgrimages to N. Europe, 1433-34
Margery’s travels

Margery Kempe’s overseas journeys
Margery Kempe's main inland journeys (the ringed numbers show the order in which she describes them).
Who is Margary?
Which you find may depend on who you ARE – but as Arts One students, analyse the evidence in the text.

- The ambitious town business woman?
- The mentally ill hysterical woman?
- The mystic and visionary?
- The religious fanatic?
- The pilgrim addict?
- The heretic?
- The hypocritical seeker of attention?
- The rebel threatening the basis of order?
- The individual threatening community?
- The independent woman who challenges male authority?
- Or just an unruly wife?