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## Passion through Slander: Saintliness, Deviance, and Suffering by Speech in The Book of Margery Kempe

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Passion through  
Slander: Saintliness,  
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*The Book of Margery  
Kempe*

Connor Yeck

In an age of religious devotion and determined purity of faith, the role of the mystic or seer is undoubtedly a precarious one. Such voices, in their capacity as “transmitters” of a divine message or vision, invite a host of reactions from any encounter—scorn, reverence, hatred, adoration, confusion, or disgust. Given Margery Kempe’s stunningly emotive form of worship seen throughout her titular text, it’s no surprise then that she quickly becomes a figure held in contempt. While we come to witness episodes of kindness and charity by those who recognize Margery as an individual in touch with the divine, one of the most common narrative threads is a reoccurrence of public derision. During bouts of near-violent sobbing, or merely on her arrival in some new locale, *The Book of Margery Kempe* frames our “creature” as navigating a daily space filled with malicious speech and hostile interpersonal relations. These vary from fellow worshippers who may simply stare or “grutchyn” (grumble) as Margery loudly weeps beside them in a church, to those who outright accuse her of heresy and being under the sway of some devilish force. Through such force, we can witness how the unique mechanics of accusatory speech (slander, slur, rumor, rebuke) take on new and interesting dimensions. Furthermore, we gain insight into the evolving oral cultures of fourteenth and fifteenth England and their manifestations in Margery’s life. Such transgressions of speech—words both uttered by and about Margery—become a foundation for her own perceived suffering. She must make her way through a populace often deaf to her believed purpose and who doubt her claims to an impossibly intimate bond of faith. Here is her earthly torment and the ultimate struggle of devotion beyond which Christ promises she will have “noon other purgatory” (Kempe, Bk. I, 1168).<sup>28</sup> Perhaps most striking, thought, is the

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<sup>28</sup> The text used in this analysis is the slightly modernized 1996 TEAMS Middle English Text Series publication of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Passages are

realization that through these trials Margery is seen to inhabit a role that mirrors the virgin martyrs of early legend, and that *The Book* therefore treads the line of hagiography in its own peculiar way. Within her historical context, Margery is an unwavering embodiment of the persecution, piety, and sparring with malicious powers we expect of saint narratives. This embodiment, however, when presented in the late medieval era, is cause for additional degrees of upheaval. In her choice of actions, Margery comes to represent a confluence of “sacred past and social present” (Sanok, 116). She is a revelatory voice among those who would attack her practices, and like the virgin martyrs, will not only suffer such hostilities, but directly engage them in defense of an unwavering faith.

### **Sins of the Tongue: Deviant Speech and Spoken Dangers**

The consistent mentioning of slander and rumor in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as well as the weight assigned to personal communication, warrants an initial exploration into such terms and their perception in England’s late medieval oral culture. This is especially useful when considering the diminished severity such terms might carry in our own modern reading. By way of Christian tradition, it’s not without good reason to wager that malicious forms of speech would be met with visible disapproval, and hold the occasional attention of sermons or religious lessons (honesty and falsehood simply being pillared issues of morality). On further reading, however, it’s clear that the day and age in which Margery experienced her tribulations was exceptionally aware of verbal trespasses, and contained forces that were actively drawing attention to the spiritual threat of spoken dangers. This fascination with “sins of the tongue” is said to be partially rooted in renewed thirteenth and fourteenth century efforts to tackle numerous issues of faith

cited by line, and when appropriate, with additional distinctions (i.e., Bk. I, Bk. II for specific books within the larger work).

among the Church's flock. This took the shape of an expected "mandatory" knowledge of various key Christian tenets after the Fourth Lateran (1215) and Lambeth Councils (1281), and included the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Twelve Articles of Faith, and the Seven Chief Virtues and Rewards. Outside of a reinvigorated mindfulness toward the piety expected to guide daily life, a primary goal of this undertaking was likewise to "regulate the tongues of Christian laity" (Mongan, 28-29). Speech, then, as the base fabric of community, social structure, worship, and communication, is understood to be a crucial yet previously underestimated factor when considering public integrity. During this time, there was also a growing body of pastoral literature, which found a welcome home in an intensified focus on "deviant speech." Edwin Craun offers an extensive survey of such works, and particularly highlights the appearance of numerous French and English instructional texts, including Peyraut's *Summa de vitiis*, d'Orlean's *Somme le roi*, de Bourbon's *Tractatus de diversis materiis predicabilibus*, as well as John of Wales' *De lingua* and *Communiloquium* ("Lies, Slander, and Obscenity," 14-24). Of note is the fact that these authors belonged to either Franciscan or Dominican orders, and that this should be understood as a direct reflection of an increased emphasis on the "catechetical and evangelical speech of preaching and confession" (21) whose aim was "to move the laity (and, sometimes, other priests) to contrition" (14). Just as Margery travels as a divinely inspired voice among the common people of England, so is there a renewed importance placed on the role of local clergy, and the direct influence they should hold over their parish and worshippers.

Considering the degree of verbal hostility Margery encounters in her travels, and the numerous phrases used against her—slander, falsehood, or wicked words—an assumption that the Church's effort to control deviant speech was done in sweeping generality would not be ill-conceived. That is, simply

considering the endless complexities of speech, there would be certain generalized verbal acts that were obviously ill-meaning, and should be avoided, reported, and chastised in everyday affairs. While an overall shunning *is* perceived, the immediate historical context of Margery's day is soon learned to be a community that was stunningly invested in the minutiae of deviant speech. Perhaps in consideration of transforming such speech into a more fearsome form of wrongdoing (and one which would demand greater vigilance on the part of common Christians), we find that deviant speech is continually organized into lesser and higher orders of sin as we would expect other grave offences to be. This, Sandy Bardsley offers, has the application of legitimizing the clergy's response to deviant speech, in that "priests needed something of a taxonomy of sins, locating each in relation to others in a hierarchy of evil" (146). Therefore, we are treated to a deluge of possible trespasses, including boasting, hypocrisy, flattery, cursing, insult, quarrelling, murmur, loquacity, base talk, lying, rumor, blunt threats, chiding, rebellion, and silence, which, through exploratory texts, are all given the phylogenetic treatment of sets, and subsets (Craun, "Lies, Slander, and Obscenity" 15-20). In late medieval England itself, there emerged several new classifications to reflect societal shifts, giving us terms such as "jangler" (those who spoke too much, and usually on poor occasions) "backbiter" (those who spread rumors or falsehoods), "praters" (those who boasted, or were excessive), and those who practiced "barratry," or a wasting of a court's time with frivolous cases (Bardsley, 149). These developments, coupled with an outright religious awakening to sinful speech, gives one line of credence to *The Book's* large focus on Margery's verbal suffering. Here is an age where deviant speech as a serious offense is said to at last leave the confines of church and government, and experience a proliferation among "authors of treatises, poetry, ballads, and plays, and by manuscript illustrators, wood and stone carvers, and painters of church walls and windows" (147).

It is an era of perceived instruction on the follies of speech, and reflects what Craun cites as Peyraut's reasoning behind his *Summa de vitiis*, that "vices ought to be shunned with the greatest effort and attentiveness, but they are not to be shunned unless first known" ("Lies, Slander, and Obscenity" 15). In turn, deviant speech and suffering by ill-spoken words becomes a formative interaction of Margery's as she navigates the greater world. It is a way for her to visualize the faults of her day and age, and glimpse both the heights and depths of human response to her emotive ways of worship—anger or kindness; skepticism or attack. And, perhaps most interesting, we're given "firsthand" entry into the world of a mystic who might defy exact religious categorization. We witness the reaction Margery demands from those around her, and just as crucial, we see how these episodes aid in the construction of a narrative journey based on suffering, piety, and the image of female Christian legends.

### **Slander, Gossip, and Margery as Public Figure**

At times, *The Book of Margery Kempe* might provide a sense of repetition to its reader. Beyond the major punctuating points of her life—pilgrimages, public trials, and spiritual dialogues and visions—we come to expect several occurring details in the body of the text. Margery will meditate on, or witness some religious affair, and, being moved, will begin to cry, a near-violent process of "swemful teerys" (Kempe, Bk. I, 1181-1182) and "sor wepyng and [boisterous] sobbyng" (2527), often ending in physical collapse so she had "fel down and wrestyd wyth hir body and mad wondyrful cher and contenawns" (906-907). Alongside this behavior, Margery also embodies the vocal presence of a semi-preacher, and is further burdened with a Christ-ordered directive to wear white clothing—a move that "[expressed] her divine spouse's wish to distinguish her" and that invited general scorn by those she encountered (Erler,17). These interactions, while continuous, offer their own variety of

interpretations as to what exactly is said of Margery, and how the text engages such commentary. Take for instance the shift to naming various harmful accusations as "slander" in later sections. Within the first pages of *The Book*, we witness Margery suffer far more earthly struggles in the form a failing brewery. Naturally, the town has begun its talk, and we're told that "Anoon as it was noysed...that ther wold neythyr man ne best don servyse to the seyd creatur [and that] sum seyd [one thing]; and sum seyd another" (Kempe, Bk. I, 231-234). While these rumors are not directly linked to the concept of slander, those in the following passages that criticize Margery's newfound piety *are*, the reader being flatly told "sche [was] slawnderyd and reprevyd of mech pepul for sche kept so streyt a levynge" (276-277). This distinction represents a nuance of late medieval speech; that there is a gulf between what we would classify as rumor or gossip, and forms of talk that are simply "uncharitable reproof...[moving] from active fault-finding to assaulting [one's] reputation" (Craun, "Fama and Pastoral Constraints," 194). The role of slander is unique in *The Book* as our narrative is internally oriented; that is, we can witness the unorthodox actions of Margery, her evolving spirituality, and her internal rationale all within a reader's context. This is obviously lacking among the general populace of outsiders who see Margery as a bizarre figure inhabiting a role perceived as either harmful or harmless, depending on the circumstance. And here lies the major rhetorical strength of *The Book*, and Margery's place as sufferer. The judicial and religious culture of late medieval England is understood to have been well agreed on the severity attached to defamation, of which VanGinhoven notes "Margery, as well as the wider fifteenth-century English public, was...certainly acquainted with... its legal and communal implications" (22). Seeing as Margery does not explicitly put forth efforts to "clear her name" in a legal sense, we might hold her tribulation as essentially being twofold. First, she will suffer the insults of commoners

who cannot understand her actions on earth; she actively reimagines her entire life to mirror a pious ideal, and is misunderstood or despised at every turn. And second, this process is seen to unfold within a greater society *supposedly* focused on combating false speech, and has structures in place to preserve the reputation of its inhabitants; yet all the while, Margery suffers endless fabrications, and witnesses her respectability erode over time with false claims. This gauntlet is part of the narrative structure that will help place Margery in line with various saintly figures, and fashion her trials considering earlier tests of faith. As previously noted, specific instances of verbal conflict are ubiquitous in *The Book*, and their examination does much to add to our understanding of Margery's place in a struggle perceived to go far beyond the "talk of the town."

If the host of falsehoods uttered about Margery were ever to be proven true, we would be forced to commend her capabilities as a prolific sinner. Olga Mongan catalogues the wealth of lies spread throughout *The Book*, and the list speaks greatly of the numerous spaces Margery was seen to inhabit (or, would be diminished by mere association with). Therefore, by text's end, she has effectively been accused of being:

a hypocrite...a heretic ...a false prophet...a Jewess...a well-known lollard...a strumpet...a daughter and a spy of Sir John Oldcastle...a mother of an illegitimate child...a woman who cannot keep her vow of chastity...an agitator who is bent on the destruction of other people's matrimonial bonds...and a wife who surreptitiously engages in sexual dalliances with her husband in the woods. (33)

Such insults are unique in their variety, but also their individual context. Margery becomes an obvious distraction to those around her as she begins her meditative weeping, and the annoyance of other worshippers, while constant, is often overshadowed by particularly

memorable run-ins with certain figures, or larger communities. Take for instance Margery's initial encounter with a group of monks in Canterbury. We're told she is "gretly despysed and reprevyd" (Kempe, Bk. I, 621) by local religious figures for her crying, so much so that an elder monk eventually offers "'I wold thow wer cloyd in an hows of ston that ther schuld no man speke wyth the'" (629-630). Later in this exchange, we come to a major thread of Margery's perceived indecency, as a second, younger monk comments, "'Eythyr thow hast the Holy Gost or ellys thow hast a devyl wythin the, for that thu spekest her to us it is Holy Wrytte, and that hast thu not of thiself.'" (632-633). Directly mirroring these monks, the Steward of Leicester is likewise most concerned with the origin of Margery's speech, narrowing her possible replies to either "of God er of the devyl (2660). In her life, Margery is subject to constant doubt and verbal assault on two rather expected fronts—the spiritual, as well as the earthly. Uncommon religious knowledge is seen to be of paramount concern, especially given the immediate historical culture of late medieval England; and adding to this, Margery herself appears at first glance (and by rumor) to be a self-styled preacher, a profession at the time only permitted by church license. In moments of accusation, then, we find Margery attributing her persona—her commentary, admonition, and textually based wisdom—to some higher power. This naturally adds an additional layer to Margery's understood suffering. In relaying these "mystical utterances" through everyday life, she is fashioned "not as [their] originator...but as their transmitter" (Mongan, 34). Like any prophetess or mystic of old, she is without fault, and is merely the human vessel offering these higher teachings. Ignorance or unwillingness to accept such is therefore not a refusal of Margery, but of God; a God who laments that Man "wyl not levyn my wordys [or] knowe my vysitacyon" (Kempe, Bk. I, 1104-1105). Likewise, any direct insult on the human speaker is magnified, insomuch that "thei that despysen the... despysen me.... [for]

I am in the, and thow in me” (513-514). Beyond her position as a “voice” of some other being—good, or evil—Margery simultaneously draws comparisons to various dissenting movements of the day. Lollardy appears as a key underlying community, whose emphasis on “lay readership of scripture and preaching” (Gertz-Robinson, 28) would not appear far removed from Margery’s movements in the public eye. While terms such as “heretic” and “Lollard” contain their own evolutions of historical meaning, at their core, they remained “attributable to the general sense...[of] the social ‘other’” (VanGinhoven, 26) during Margery’s immediate era. This, then, when considering the multitude of terms and great scrutiny applied to Margery, helps create a sort of holistic image. By understanding her first as a mystic, we must recognize her place as an outsider within a larger context. With every falsehood applied, we see a distancing of Margery from some accepted normality. In her emotional demonstrations of worship, her ability to engage other critical (usually male) speakers, and her ever-changing lifestyle, she is inherently misunderstood as some “other.” She is cause for refusal, examination, and naturally in some cases, reverence.

### **Believers and Accusers: Impressions of Runaway Rumor**

Controversial figures such as Margery will of course generate much in the way of visibility and discussion in local societies. Margery herself is seen to be quite well-traveled, and in turn, *The Book* gives us additional insight into the presence of rumor among medieval communities that are physically separated; that is, the perceptions of Margery in distant towns or villages she might not frequent. Naturally, word-of-mouth and firsthand communication come to be major factors in establishing any credible public persona, and for a mystic or religious outsider, this is doubly so. In her life’s movements, we witness Margery’s struggle to not just maintain an acceptable personal image, but to ensure the integrity of herself as a divinely guided “voice.” Through this, we view a at times crestfallen

figure who sees the terrible damage malicious speech is capable of, and the peculiarities of legitimization. Take for example the incident of Margery being struck, without serious injury, by falling wood and stonework in the church of St. Margaret. We’re told that God intended this to be a miraculous event, and that “yyf the pepyl wyl not levyn this, I schal werkyn meche mor” (Kempe, Bk. I, 494-495). Rather than remain centered on this Divine action, however, the narrative focus shifts to a far earthlier matter in the form of the White Friar Master Alan. Truly believing Margery’s survival to have been a miracle, and wishing to prove it as such, he undertakes an empirical examination of the incident (weighing the offending stone and wood) before declaring the “Lord was heyly to be magnyfied for the preservyng of this creatur” (500-501). He then goes even further, directly entering the public conversation surrounding Margery. Among the community, he champions this apparent miracle, even though “mech pepyl wold not levyn it, [and] rathyr levyd it was a tokyn of wreth and venjawns” (501-503). This occasion of split reaction (Margery being a figure deserving of either a blessing or curse) is emblematic of the divided opinion surrounding her every action. She is a figure who, beyond petty rumors, is somehow assuredly in the sights of greater powers, thereby forcing us to view her “adversities as a God-given call” or “manifest punishment...for something culpable” (Craun, “Fama and Pastoral Constraints,” 194). While the anecdote of Master Alan does not appear to create widespread legitimization of Margery as a devout figure, it does partially reveal the framework surrounding any such progress. Given the previously noted internality of Margery’s narrative, the unknowing public (and perhaps ourselves as readers) require secondary voices; that is, beyond the guiding presence of both Christ and God within Margery’s soul, we benefit from ulterior recognition of such divinity. This may be as simple as an interjection, such as that of the man who during Margery’s arrest in Leicester offers that

“Forsothe...in Boston this woman is holdyn a holy woman and a blissed woman.”(Kempe, Bk. I, 2639-2640). Or, more dramatically, a public exchange, as when a friar in Lynn denounces a crowd’s harassment of Margery during a Lenten sermon, commanding, “Frendys, beth stille, ye wote ful lityl what sche felyth,” (3958-3959). And likewise, we’re given the passing detail that some of those who despised Margery’s weeping would ask for her to do so on their deathbed: a final recognition of spiritual importance that was otherwise mocked in day to day affairs (4906-4907).

These supportive voices, while often scarce, function at times to demonstrate a certain guardianship of Margery through her tribulations. We’re told how she occasionally encounters “good maystyschep” (3949-3950), or patronage, and is promised by God that “I have frendys in every cuntré and schal make my frendys to comfort the” (2166-2167). One of the more striking instances of this is a priest who, at the urging of his mother, approaches Margery and comes to read her a wealth of theological texts over several years. This experience—essentially helping cement Margery’s understanding of religious philosophy—is said to be a fulfilment of an earlier prayer for exactly such (3389-3400). One additional consideration for these acts of kindness is their occurrence in relation to foreign strangers. In viewing her many travels, it’s soon discovered that Margery is not to be a sought-after companion for any extended journey. After witnessing her behavior, there are those who declare they will simply not go on with her for any sum of money (1784-1785), or purposely walk at a quickened pace so she might fall behind (Bk. II, 324). Beyond this, though, we find Margery receiving some gestures of charity in those lands where she is not known and is alienated by her tongue and origin. We glimpse Saracens and friars who offer aid “whan hir cuntremen wolde not knowyn hir (Bk. I, 1723-1724), and other pilgrims in the Holy Land who provide food, drink, and rest. In Rome, she encounters similarly brief moments of generosity, causing

her to “[thank] owr Lord that sche was so cheryd and cherished” (2184-2185). These moments, when considered alongside Margery’s experiences in her homeland, might be partially indicative of the ways information and rumor are spread in distinct communities. To pilgrims and wanderers, Margery is a fleeting interaction, a figure whose spiritual qualities are seen, if not understood, and so she is treated with kindness if only for the sake of others being unsure exactly of the position she inhabits. As would then be expected, we find the most visible networks of preconceived falsehoods existing in and around the locality of her own England. Here is an entrenched system of rumor and speech that is centered on Margery’s presence as a controversial figure, and ranges far and wide ahead of her immediate person. Here then above all we can view Margery through the eyes of observers, and find the negative images that have come to comprise her reputation.

As with any public figure, especially those determined to be controversial, there exist two distinct spheres of personal identity. For Margery, these are the firsthand interactions she might immediately control or at least take part in, and then those created narratives that go beyond her and lack any possible attempts at influence. On numerous occasions, we see how these malicious narratives cost Margery certain relations, and quickly become their own breed of suffering. We witness the internal struggle of individuals caught between “believing” in either of Margery’s two competing identities, such as the anchorite at Lynn who tells her she had “herd mych evyl langage of yow syth ye went owr” and was “sor cownsel to leve yow and no mor to medyl wyth yow” (856-857). While in this case such rumors are resisted, other interactions are terminated before they might ever begin, solely on what has been heard second hand. These, perhaps most hurtful of all, are individuals who had previously admired Margery, but with distance and time, have their opinions altered. For instance, there is the anchorite monk of Norwich, who “befortyme

had lovyd this creatur [very much]” but due to the “evyl langage that he herd of hir he turnyd al agens hir” (2416-2417), particularly for the rumor that she’d given birth while on pilgrimage. Similarly, the anchoress at York, who Margery had “lovyd...wel” prior to visiting Jerusalem, “wolde not receyven hir, for sche had herd telde so mech evyl [about her]” (2807-2811). In both instances, Margery’s prolonged absence provides fertile ground in which falsehood might take hold and then spread unopposed. Such refusals are not merely insulting, but are sometimes cause for physical hardships, such as the Englishwoman in Aachen, who, despite Margery’s understanding that she would be a traveling partner, tells her flatly “I wyl not medelyn wyth the” (Bk. II, 474-475), leaving her alone in a foreign city. A similar situation unfolds as Margery encounters the hermit Reginald near the end of the text and begs to be led back to Lynn. We learn Reginald suffered abuse after he had escorted Margery at the start of her journey (disobeying her confessor), and that “I was blamyd for yowr defawte (649).

One of the most memorable instances of malicious speech, rumor, and the power of public perception is that of the traveling friar at Lynn. Given his reputation of being a “holy man and a good prechour” (Bk. I, 3507), Margery is seen to be extremely invested in hearing his sermon; and, knowing full well how she would react, the friar is warned beforehand that a woman will most likely begin to cry. When this occurs, the friar is irritated by Margery and asks that she be removed, even after a “worshepful doctowr of divinité” (3550) and a “bachelor of lawe” (3553) argue in favor of her spirituality. The friar, ignoring such claims, reveals that he is “trustyng mech in the favowr of the pepil” (3562-3563), and refuses to see her tears as sent from God. While Margery keeps herself from the friar’s sermons, we learn that her public presence is firmly in place. The friar continues to speak poorly of Margery in a roundabout manner, so that those in the crowd who believed in her were “hevy and sorweful...[and] desiryng that thei had not

a herd hym” (3600-3601), and would come to distance themselves from her for a time. Margery, as a targetable figure—an outsider, a stranger—is once more given scrutiny in the public forum. What she stands for (or is believed to stand for) far outweighs her immediate presence, so that the friar is said to “alwey...in hys sermown have a parte ageyn hir, whethyr sche wer ther er not” (3647-3648). In this moment, the friar is a sort of polarization of the legitimacy that Margery’s narrative often seeks. Like those few figures who understand the divinely inspired actions of a mystic, voices like that of the friar work to solidify otherwise scattered criticisms, such as how in attacking Margery, he appears to energize certain elements of the crowd who through their own negative speech seemed “mor bolde, for hem thowt that her opinyon was wel strengthyd er ellys fortified” (3537-3539). This secondary layer of criticism is a core element of the cycle at hand: rumors and lies that, once spoken, can only be worsened and never controlled. This is a primary concern of Margery, who quite early in the text understands that those who speak poorly of her “had no knowlch of hir maner of governawns” (994-995) and instead derive their abuse from the “jangelyng of other personys” (995) and the “pervertyng...of trewth” (996). Such an endless march of abuse comes to form the basic structure of any spiritual struggle. Coupled with key moments of trial rhetoric and revelatory dialogue within the Margery’s own soul, we at last begin to understand her perceived role as mystic, as well as willing sufferer.

### **Suffering, Saintliness and Margery-As-Martyr**

Within the anecdote of the friar at Lynn, we receive a stark summation of Margery’s earthly trials: “Thus was sche slawnderyd, [eaten], and [gnawed] of the pepil for the grace that God wrowt in hir of contricyon, of devocyon, and of compassyon, [through] the gyft of wech gracys sche wept, sobbyd, and cryd” (3650-3653). This imagery, provided during Margery’s life as mystic,

closely mirrors the words spoken by Christ at its beginning: “Thow schalt ben [eaten] and [gnawed] of the pepul of the world as any [rat gnaws] the stokfysch” (382-384). Margery is diminished, violated, and wholly at the mercy of those who would speak ill of her. The viciousness of foul language is clear, and given the era’s focus on deviant speech, we as readers are invited to view it with equal severity. Such harassment might as well be physically inflicted on a pious figure, and in a way, recalls medieval warnings against the act of cursing, as it was believed in some circles to have “[torn] at the body of Christ” (Gill, 138). Margery’s suffering is predestined, and plays a nonnegotiable role in her narrative. And, as we might expect, this suffering is understood as pleasing to God, who explains the “thyng that I lofe best thei lofe not, and that is schamys, despitys, scornys, and reprevys of the pepil” (Kempe, 3747-3748). Through these experiences, Margery undergoes her own prolonged Passion, or comparable test, and in one shape or another, commits to a form of *imitatio*. This might be of Christ himself, who, in declaring that “I schuld be newe crucified in...schrewyd wordys” (1989) creates debate on Margery’s understanding of her relationship to Christ, and reveals how on one front, “slander allows Margery to appropriate Christ’s voice, to become Christ herself, and...[substitute] his body with her own” (Mongan, 52). This willingness to suffer is furthered by an earlier mentioned refusal to combat defamatory speech in any legal context. In other words, Margery’s experience of “actionable defamations yet refusing to seek any public recompense for them [is] a primary method of establishing her public ‘martyrdom by slander.’” (VanGinhoven, 38). These considerations also simply place Margery within a higher tier of assumed piety and religious devotion. She is acting out her own defining Christian narrative, and throughout the text, this nearness to the spiritual is amplified with every anecdote. One noticeable trend is, just as Margery’s speech is derived from God (and questioned as being that, or its

opposite), those who speak against her are effectively mouthpieces as well. We’re told of those who had “forsokyn hir, and ful falsly...accusyd hir [through] temptacyon of the devyl of thyngys that sche was nevyr gylty in” (Kempe, Bk. I, 741-742) and how such evil words “wer fowndyn of [him, father of lies] and born forth of hys membrys, [who were] fals [and envious] pepil” (Bk. II, 557-560). The presence of the Devil or some demonic force acting behind speech places Margery at the center of spiritual conflict, and makes all irregular speech simply that much more damning. Susan Phillips draws attention to such imagery in her consideration of medieval views on what was known as “idle speech.” Categorized as the presumably innocent act of speaking during sermon, Phillips claims that such speech was not truly idle, but rather “full of cost, full of harm, full of danger, [and] full of vanity” (65), as it represented a rampant distraction, “hindering the common profit by preventing other parishioners from receiving the word of God” (63). Additionally, there is the notion that speech is an unalterable part of one’s life-record, and will be considered during any spiritual judgment. This partly mirrors God’s promise to Margery that, when those who mocked her pass from the world, he will reveal, “Lo, I ordeynd hir to wepyn for hir synnes, and ye had hir in gret despite, but hir charité wolde nevyr [cease] for yow” (Kempe, Bk. I, 3757-3758). In this area, Philips considers several narratives focused on demons whose sole tasks were supposedly to “collect” sinful speech—either “words skipped by clerics” or “lay verbal transgressions” (71). In any case, speech is once more held to its highest standard; it is a measure of purity as well as corruption. Margery’s experience, then, again goes far beyond her perseverance while the subject of rumor. She is exposed, attacked, and perseveres in service of her personal faith. And, as Gail Gibson succinctly offers, “if martyrdom by sword was not available to qualify her for sainthood, martyrdom by slander was, and Margery’s *Book* seems quite

conscious of the validating implications of such suffering” (47).

A final consideration in Margery’s tribulations is the question of sainthood itself. While *The Book* clearly links her to Christ, much conversation has been devoted to a likewise *imitatio* of the virgin martyr archetype. This analysis yields much in the way of attempting to grasp Margery’s framing of herself in her own historical and societal context. Legendary figures such as Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret, and the Apostles are referenced in the text, and help establish a passing congruency between Margery and those who have previously suffered for the faith. Considering the narrative arc of virgin martyr stories, as well as Gibson’s commentary, we find that while Margery is threatened with physical violence (burning), and does find herself impoverished and imprisoned, she is spared the bodily torture so prominent in earlier tales. This violence is subsequently transmuted into the more-than-prominent verbal assault she encounters through daily life. In regard to speech Margery is seen by some to inhabit the role of the female martyr most clearly through her participation in trials. These occasions are significant in the tales of virgin martyrs and offered a framework that highlighted a sole female figure denying male authority and proving her devotion surrounded by a pagan “other.” Throughout *The Book*, Margery takes part in two particularly noteworthy trials in Canterbury and York. These instances allow Margery true moments of public rebellion, and, just as important, they are a regimented medium by which she is able to offer her thoughts without the clamor of a common crowd. Some have pointed to Margery’s presence in these trials as striking moments of subverting religious structures, especially when focused on her appearance as a “female preacher.” For instance, Margery plainly denies preaching on the technicality that she has no pulpit, yet immediately afterward, launches into “recognizable sermon rhetoric such as scriptural quotation and exemplum, effectively undermining her claim” (Gertz-Robinson, 31). She exists both within and

without established constraints and at times redirects the very narrative of her own trial—telling the parable of the bear and the pear tree, or critiquing the clergy’s fine clothes—so that before it is realized, an initial interrogation has become “an open forum for a laywoman’s spirituality” (Sanok, 124). This shift in power holds true to the conventions of trials of legendary Christian women, who, through a brilliance of dialogue, undermine pagan worldviews. This inhabitation of a historically distant image further blurs our understanding of Margery as a late medieval figure. She is understood to offer an entirely unique committal to the role of female mystic, especially when compared to her contemporaries. The medieval occupation of mystic or holy woman possessed its own set of expectations—living as an anchoress or equally cloistered figure devoted to contemplation—and reflects the era’s understanding of female spirituality. Osborn Bokenham for instance, who is believed to have written commissioned texts within a decade of Margery’s *Book*, explored the myth of Mary Magdalene, suggesting in his rendition of the tale that women should “seek the grace that Mary Magdalene enjoys, not by imitating her extravagant weeping or her itinerant preaching nor even her embracing a life of chastity, but through the far more socially acceptable practice of devotional reading” (Sanok, 130). Margery, of course, exhibits all these emotive qualities, therefore breaking any accepted traditions. This refusal in a way would explain the public upheaval and attack Margery suffers, and while most research would attach all seriousness to *The Book*’s narrative, some have pointed to its inherent, stubborn humor. Larsen and Curnow offer that in reading Margery’s story, we must recognize the righteousness and improbability of her task of attempting to mirror early Christian sainthoods several centuries removed. We’re told that “Margery reads with no sense of the boundary between her own late-medieval context and that of the early Christian literary narratives” (288), and that humor primarily “emerges from

[her] adherence to a mechanized hagiographic script...regardless of the ever-changing demands” (285). From this analysis, we find Margery to be a somewhat unanchored figure, exploring both past and present, and ignoring the gulf between the “ethical paradigm of traditional legends and late medieval expectations for laywomen’s religious and social practice” (Sanok, 123). In her own eyes, then, regardless of public perception, scrutiny, or the doubting of her purpose, Margery is not merely mimicking the role of an early Christian martyr—she is legitimately attempting to possess this station in all its assumed hardships and peculiarities.

### Conclusion

*The Book of Margery Kempe* presents a world rife with the potentiality of language. Gossip, rumor, slander, defamation, accusation, and idle speech all play crucial roles in not only lay society, but in greater debates of personal and collective faith. In this context, Margery’s appearance as a traveling mystic—one so visible, as well as wholly vocal—creates a framework by which language becomes a method of hagiographic suffering. At every stage of her journey, the holy woman plays out a struggle between competing forces: maintaining herself as a vessel of the divine while being met with scorn, disgrace, and shame; and seeing herself as a figure in a spiritual conflict played out in the very minds and mouths of those around her. She defies expectations of female spirituality and religious agency and in considering images of early Christian martyrdom appropriates such narratives as a framing device through which we see her own late medieval reality. Margery comes to be a figure who might often appear to “[slip] from the historical and geographical place she inhabits”(Sanok, 132), and such an observation could not be closer to the truth. In the end, her text explores (and condemns) the oral culture of her time, yet explores a far deeper past. In doing so, we find our world will always have much to say about the appearance of “outsiders,” and that such speech, when

reconsidered, might have its own defining role to play.

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