

# ENG 101

Women's Auto/Biographies from the 3rd Century to the 21st

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## Researched Analysis

Given the nature of autobiographies, the author has the freedom and intention to shape the narrative to present a deliberate image of themselves to the reader, whether intentionally or subconsciously. As Ellen M. Ross explains, autobiographies are “works of self-interpretation... a set of carefully chosen images creating a comprehensive way of seeing and conceiving the world” (Ross 528). ‘The Book of Margery Kempe’ is no exception. Margery Kempe utilizes her power as the author to give herself authority, demonstrated through the deliberate language she uses, rhetorical choices she makes, and content that she discusses. Hwanhee Park argues that the main purpose of the book was to present Margery’s life as exemplary, with the aim of turning people to a more devout way of life (Park 2). This is achieved through her self-described superiority, use of her voice as an extension of Christ’s, view of herself as a messenger of Christ to carry on his purpose, and dramatic and distinctive actions to separate herself from the other people of the world.

Margery often portrays herself as righteous and superior compared to others. In Chapter 23, she follows a list of examples of her good works by noting, “these are written to show the homely intimacy and goodness of our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, and not to commend this creature” (Kempe 90). While on a surface level, this seems like a humble deflection of praise, it could also be interpreted as a concealed attempt to introduce the idea of commending herself to the reader, while pretending to dismiss it to appear modest. Not only does Kempe describe herself as above others, she also controls the story to defend herself in situations where others criticize her. She often uses critical language to attack those who rebuke her. In Chapter 16, she tells the reader that the Archbishop’s clerks “swore many great oaths and spoke many thoughtless words” (Kempe 71). Although these are well educated, sophisticated, literate men, Kempe describes them as foolish and careless. She acts as if she holds God’s authority to judge them, saying “they would be damned” (Kempe 71) as if she is better than them. In another example, she describes a woman who spoke “very maliciously” (Kempe 71). Rather than arguing with the woman, Kempe “stood still and did not answer” (Kempe 72). Although outwardly it appears as though Margery is the mature, bigger person, Margery may be attempting to indirectly give the impression that she is a better person in comparison. Kempe makes subtle, indirect rhetorical choices to place herself above others and control the narrative to give herself authority.

By using her voice as an extension of Jesus Christ’s, Margery Kempe gives herself authority in the words that she speaks and the perceived power behind them. Barbara Zimbalist agrees that “Margery’s directly quoted speech emerges as an imitation and extension of Christ’s visionary voice” (Zimbalist 2). She argues that Kempe blurs the distinction between her words and the words of God that she imitates. In doing so, Margery’s voice becomes God’s voice, and consequently, Margery’s words are given same authority as God’s. The nature of this book means that all the words written are through Margery Kempe, therefore, “to hear Christ’s speech in the Book is to hear it through the voice of Margery Kempe” (Zimbalist 4). This can be seen in Chapter 10, where Jesus tells Kempe, “I am in you, and you in me. And they that hear you, they hear the voice of God” (Kempe 57). This has further implications, as Christ’s speech can be manipulated to serve Margery’s intentions. She uses her access to Christ’s voice to give her own voice authority. For example, Christ tells her, “if he will give up his sin and do as you advise, then such grace as you promise him I will confirm for love of you” (Kempe 57). Kempe claims that God will bless anyone who follows her advice out of his love for her. She uses this to demonstrate her authority, showing that people should follow what she says because her words hold the power and support of God. It also shows God’s love for her through his willingness to support what she tells others to do. She legitimizes her claims through examples of validation from God. In Chapter 23, she precedes a list of good deeds with “Christ said to her spirit” (Kempe 88). This is followed by instances where the Lord spoke to her, and descriptions of how these commands were met. Kempe proves her authority by giving examples of how the words that she speaks on behalf of Christ are fulfilled, demonstrating how her speech can be conflated with God’s speech.

Given her access to God’s voice, Margery Kempe expands her authority by presenting herself as a messenger of Christ, sent by God to deliver the word of God to her community. Ross argues that “the Book conveys Kempe’s chosenness by Christ and the turbulent events of her work of calling the world to repentance and recognition of a merciful and loving God” (Ross 531). This can be seen in Chapter 13, where the Lord repeatedly calls her “a chosen soul without beginning in my sight” (Kempe 65). Her chosenness is exhibited through the trials that she faces and her responses to them. In Chapter 22, Christ tells her, “I have tested you by many tribulations, many great griefs and many grievous sicknesses, so that you have been anointed for death, and entirely through my grace you have escaped” (Kempe 87). To Margery, her suffering is proof of her chosenness, as God has selected her to experience these misfortunes to test her commitment to him. She sees her troubles as testimony to her willingness to serve God and present Christ to the world. In Chapter 78, Christ tells her, “I have ordained you to be a mirror amongst them, to have great sorrow, so that they should take example from you” (Kempe 226). This links to her depiction of herself as an exemplary model, intending for the people at the time as well as the readers to see her as a “devotional example... in order to render its protagonist authoritative” (Park 1). As Park argues, the book’s main purpose is instructional, to inspire and assist readers in achieving a more devout lifestyle. Therefore, it is necessary to present Margery’s as a messenger of Christ, having unique insight from Christ in order to establish her authority as a figure whose example should be followed above others.

Margery expresses her unrelenting passion for Christ through the dramatic, emotional acts she undertakes, as well as the experiences and words that she speaks in his name. The most prominent example of this throughout the book is her continuous weeping. She justifies it with Christ’s encouragement and approval, “so that my name might be magnified in them; and for the holy tears and weeping that you have wept for them, praying and desiring that if any prayer might bring them to grace or Christian belief, that I should hear your prayer for them” (Kempe 245). Kempe believes her weeping is an expression of her love for God, as well as a tool to convert others to Christianity. Again, she uses language and narrative to defend her holiness and spirituality in Chapter 15 when others “spoke against this creature because she wept so grievously, and said she was a false hypocrite” by arguing that her critics “spoke through the enticing of our spiritual enemy” (Kempe 68). She automatically assumes that their words are an attack from the devil against her holiness rather than any fault of her own. Furthermore, in regards to her weeping, the Archbishop “did not find fault at all, but approved her manner of life” (Kempe 72), externally confirming God’s favor in her. In addition, Margery’s visions are presented as another example of the experiences that she has that confirm her authority. She demonstrates her role in God’s work by placing herself in biblical stories, often in an important or superior position. Park argues that “Margery establishes herself as a figure who transmits divine knowledge” (Park 4). This can be seen when she declares to the Virgin Mary in a vision that “you shall be the mother of God.” (Kempe, 53). This echoes the same words that the angel predicted to the Virgin Mary in the Bible. By imitating the language of the Bible through her own spoken word, Kempe imitates the authority seen in the Bible. Linking to her role as a singular, chosen messenger of Christ, Kempe also sees herself as unique. Christ repeatedly calls her “a love unlike any other” (Kempe 87) and “a singular lover of God” (Kempe 88), promising her a “singular grace in heaven” (Kempe 87). This explains why Kempe feels the need to act differently to separate herself from the common sinners of the world and establish herself as more holy in her opinion. From this contrast, others are supposed to recognize that there is something distinctive about Kempe through the words and actions that she carries out for her faith. Kempe uses her experiences and actions as proof of her chosenness by God to spread Christianity by physical and spoken example.

Not only does Margery attempt to convert the people of her time to Christianity, for example through her physical actions of weeping and praying, but she also intends for the reader of the book to follow her devotional model. Hence, she aims to prove her authority so the reader will listen and follow her words. She describes herself as a righteous and superior individual to place herself above others, as well as above the reader. By showing how she is superior to others, including the reader, this encourages the reader to regard what she has to say as prevailing word. Her conflation of her voice with Christ’s gives her words the same power as God’s, leading the reader to listen to her words with the same reverence. In addition, by portraying herself as a messenger of Christ, Kempe shows the reader how God has singularly given her authority. Her dramatic actions and the nature of her visions single herself from the rest of the world, whom she considers to be sinners and in need of salvation. Kempe demonstrates her uniqueness in order to prove to the reader that her example should be followed. Furthermore, her unusual way of life suggests to the reader that they need to take action to change their life to be more devout by contrast with Margery’s excessive display of her faith. By portraying her authority through her rhetorical choices and constructed narrative, Margery Kempe gives herself authority in order to achieve her ultimate goal, to strengthen the faith of the reader, continuing on from her lifetime purpose of converting others to Christianity.