

Women and Medieval Travels: *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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For a long time, it was believed that the people of the Middle Ages did not travel too much due to various reasons, but the great variety of travel-connected writings seems to contradict this belief and to suggest that there were many medieval men and women who set on longer or shorter journeys for different purposes. The aim of our paper is to present such a travel writing, more precisely, an account of one of the most popular types of medieval journeys: the pilgrimage. *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1436) describes the various pilgrimages to holy places in England and Germany, to Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostella undertaken by a medieval middle-class English woman in the first part of the 15th century. The *Book* may not satisfy the curiosity of a modern tourist because it provides little information about the places seen by the protagonist, but it traces the deep personal transformation of a simple woman in search of faith. This travel book/ autobiography/ treatise also greatly contributes to a more complete understanding of the life of medieval woman, of the distribution of roles in a gender-divided society, of the negotiations regarding authority and freedom and ultimately, of a woman's difficult passage towards independence and self-assertion.

Keywords: travel writing; pilgrimage; patriarchy; gender; the Middle Ages; mystical writer; Margery Kempe.

The medieval society did not encourage the mobility of its individuals to the same extent as the modern period does. Class restrictions, economic impediments, difficulties implied by longer trips, wars or other military conflicts, piracy, etc. were just a few of the problems that made travel challenging. Many medieval individuals never left their home towns and the wide world, for them, was populated by real people as well as by dangerous fantastic creatures. On the other hand, though, we should not fall into the trap of believing the idea of a static medieval society and more nuances are needed for a better understanding of the medieval man and of his reasons to leave his home. Thus, recent research has shown that, despite many difficulties and hindrances, various groups of people did move in space for purposes such as: war and crusade, pilgrimage and other religious journeys, trade, political and diplomatic affairs, etc. The proof of this mobility is given by a great number of writings such as: letters, reports, memoirs of places seen and unseen, maps and map legends, compendia of knowledge (Brummett, 2009: 1), clearly suggesting not only that at least some medieval people travelled longer or shorter distances, but also that there was an audience for such writings, revealing an interest in finding out more about exotic places and their inhabitants, about individual exploits or group adventures.

One of the problems that underlie the lack of critical approaches on medieval travel writings is that they were rarely seen as such, being subdued to other genres, and there are at least two important reasons for that: first, the interest in travel writing as a distinct genre is fairly new¹, and,

¹ In the "Introduction" to the 2002 *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, the editors, Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, start by admitting that the study of travel writing "has recently emerged as a key theme for the humanities and social sciences" (1). Carl Thompson also begins his approach to travel writing with the

second, the idea of travel in the medieval period was totally different from our modern perspective. Tourism did not exist at a time when people travelled for very specific purposes and exploration, pleasure and curiosity had little relevance for the medieval traveller. Instead, the researcher needs to be sensitive to the distinctions between the medieval traveller and the modern tourist and to the coexistence between the real and the fantastic, the sacred and the profane in the medieval mind. An overview of the different types of travel writings produced in the Middle Ages reveals an interesting mixture of real and fantastic elements that do not fit our modern understanding of what travelling should imply. Carl Thompson, for instance, points to the fact that, though there was an abundance of travel accounts in the Middle Ages, very few of them were first-person narratives, the majority being compendia of information from classical authorities, contemporary reports, second-hand details and stories from intermediaries, resulting in “a curious blend of the factual and the fabulous, as they combine plausible descriptions of foreign peoples and places with accounts of monstrous or miraculous beings that are clearly projections of European fears and fantasies, such as winged centaurs, dog-headed men and Amazons” (2011: 38). This perspective highlights the very special world in which the medieval people lived and their efforts to understand it, to identify their place in it, to integrate their religious beliefs, to cope with their fears and to overcome their weaknesses. As a result, most of these travel accounts fail in satisfying the curiosity of the reader as they give little reliable information on the places seen and reveal more about individual quests, spiritual journeys, or personal transformations. Stemming from the idea that life itself is a journey, real journeys are coupled with spiritual quests, with adventures meant to prove one’s worth, or with trials and tribulations in search for redemption. William H. Sherman identifies two main types of travels specific to the Middle Ages: pilgrimage and war, considering that “the pilgrimage was the dominant medieval framework for long-distance, non-utilitarian travel”, while “the chivalric quest was the other major paradigm inherited from medieval travel writers, and it sometimes overlapped with the spiritual quest of the pilgrims” (2002: 23).

The pilgrimage was one of the few types of spatial movements undergone by large groups of people, accepted and even validated by the medieval authorities and, “by the later Middle Ages something akin to a tourist industry had emerged, catering for pilgrims visiting Rome and the Holy Land, and to many local sites of religious significance” (Thompson, 2011: 38). The pilgrimage, however, is more than a simple journey, as it blends the real with the unreal, the profane with the sacred, carrying the pilgrims towards real places, but making them experience visions and revelations as they pass the threshold of the sacred space in their search for healing or salvation. In other words, the pilgrimage, as a “form of travel with the stated intention of appreciating, experiencing, and conveying sacred space” (Brummett, 2009: 2), is, at the same time, a physical journey to a known place of pilgrimage and a spiritual journey into a space invested with sacred values. At the end of this journey, the successful pilgrim passes, through a final ritual, into a different form of existence, the sacred, in which he hopes to find spiritual benefits (the salvation of the soul) and physical benefits (healing the body) (Sot, 2002: 605). What differentiates the pilgrimage from the modern view on travel, therefore, is the combination between a real journey and a quest meant to produce, at its end, a renewal or reinvention of the self; and like all quests, it involves the obstacles, hardships and tests that are meant to bring about the penance for past sins and a renovation of faith.

assertion: “travel writing is currently a flourishing and highly popular literary genre” (2011: 1). These studies and many others, however, mostly refer to the period starting with the 15th century, the writings about the famous travels of the Ancient World and of the Middle Ages being rarely included in the genre of travel writing, because “few of these texts conform closely to our notion of travel book” (Thompson, 2011: 37). It was only in the later Middle Ages, with the writings of Marco Polo and John Mandeville, that we can speak, the researchers argue, of travel writing proper, because these texts “mark the beginnings of a new impulse in the late Middle Ages which would transform the traditional paradigms of pilgrimage and crusade into new forms attentive to observed experience and curiosity towards other lifeways” (Hulme; Youngs, 2002: 3).

A long-neglected but very important place in these journeys is occupied by women. Their presence in pilgrimages has long been dismissed by various authors, but it has gained critical attention in the recent years. Nowadays, contemporary research highlights the importance of the female presence in the medieval pilgrimages and their crucial impact in our understanding not only of the medieval pilgrimages as such, but also of other important aspects of the Middle Ages, such as authority, institutions, gender roles and writing. Thus, though many women² undertook pilgrimages or set forth on various journey, “the majority of medieval women were expected to remain enclosed within certain physical spaces most of the time” (Craig, 2009: 2), hence the smaller number of texts belonging to women or describing women’s journeys in comparison to those written by men. Added to that, there is also the important issue of authority, since women were not credited to have the same authority as men and hence, their writings were not believed to provide reliable information. This is the reason why many of the women’s stories are not rendered directly, but through a mediating male scribe whose presence validated the woman’s account.

Other critics try to explain the lack of distinction between male and female pilgrims by asserting that, due to its religious purpose as well as to the difficulty of the journey, the pilgrimage created a sort of camaraderie among the pilgrims that tended to obscure the differences, such as those of class or gender. This belief was supported by a variety of proofs suggesting that both men and women pilgrims had the same legal rights, the same clothes, the same rights of protection from bishops, abbots and other clergymen (Craig, 2009: 138-9). However, more recent studies that paid special attention to the female presence during these pilgrimages suggests the contrary, namely, that

issues of gender (or of class) did not vanish, or even mute themselves, when a woman took up the scrip and staff and headed for Jerusalem. Instead, the stressful conditions of long-distance travel and cultural displacement replayed and even amplified the social divisions amongst pilgrims, who clung fiercely to their previous identities. In that context, women, who could not as easily find justification for devotional pilgrimage in the caregiving aspect of their quotidian role as they did for miraculous pilgrimage, endured a strong, negative reaction to their presence. (Craig, 2009: 140)

Lacking religious authority, women were more easily accepted in miraculous pilgrimages, namely those involving miraculous healing of the body (their children’s or husbands’, or their own, to make them apt to be wives and mothers, suggesting that women were further confined to the traditional, domestic role of caretaker) and less welcomed in devotional pilgrimages to holy places, where their role was less clear, overstepping the male-pilgrims’ role. Moreover, there are suggestions that “male pilgrims, hostile towards women’s participation, only tolerated women *at the price of their silence and invisibility*” (Craig, 2009: 152). Thus, Craig goes on commenting: “whether a woman experienced misogynist resistance, camaraderie and support, or a reaffirmation of her traditional roles as a woman depended both upon the circumstances of her pilgrimage and upon her success in simultaneously performing the roles of woman and of pilgrim to the satisfaction of multiple audiences with conflicting agendas” (Craig, 2009: 4-5).

Margery Kempe’s presence in these late medieval pilgrimages that resulted in an account of her experiences is a clear proof of the ambiguity regarding the roles of women in society and in religion, the amount of authority or freedom allowed to them, as well as the willingness of some women to challenge these limitations. On the one hand, Margery Kempe’s *Book* is still one of the

² Leigh Ann Craig dwells on the importance of the female presence in Christian pilgrimages from the earliest times (2009: “Introduction”). Susan Signe Morrison (2000: “Introduction”) also focuses on the significant presence of women in the medieval pilgrimages and the long neglect of their particular experiences and she points out the importance of treating them as a separate group and not together with the male pilgrims.

most famous sources on women pilgrims (Morrison, 2000: 70). On the other hand, Margery Kempe is not the typical woman assuming socially prescribed norms and conforming to the rules. Leigh Anne Craig refers to her ambiguous reception, noticing that “Margery Kempe stood out not because she went on pilgrimage, but because she took an unusual stance in defending her choice: rather than modesty and silence, she justified her travels by means of a public display of the authority lent to her by her visionary experience. She thereby incited a wide array of emphatic responses, from belief in her proto-sanctity to accusations of madness” (2009: 263). Nowadays, Margery Kempe is included in the group of English Medieval mystics, with the provision that her inclusion has been rather controversial and that it is only with the critical re-evaluation of her work in the mid-20th century that her place among the other important English mystics is secured (Watson, 1999: 539)³. The result of such controversies is that *The Book of Margery Kempe* lies at the crossroad of genres, being a pilgrimage account, and hence, a *travel book*, because it describes her religious journeys to holy places in England, Rome, Jerusalem and Germany, spanning over many years of her life, an *autobiography*, actually the first autobiography to be composed in English (Larrington, 1995: 35) and a *medieval treatise* in which Margery Kempe “teaches its readers strategies for managing the emotional, and ultimately spiritual, damage brought on by feelings of uncertainty, unworthiness, and despair” (Krug, 2009: 218), suggesting that she envisioned her text as a material to be used.

The complexity of these critical approaches suggests the importance of the *Book* on various levels: an understanding of the religious life in the 15th century, a unique account of the emotional life of a medieval woman, an insight into the private and public life of women in the late Middle Ages. Though we are aware of the richness of possibilities of analysis this text offers, we will approach it from the perspective of travel writings as it describes a typical medieval journey: the pilgrimage. We insist on the fact that, though this form of travelling was very common in the period, with clearly marked routes and rules and resulting in a great number of travel and religious accounts, this particular document is special as it is one of the few such texts composed by a woman and it reveals interesting facts about women on pilgrimages and about the manner in which authority and prescribed gender roles operate in a special situation. So, “Margery Kempe’s text is more suggestive about the state of the medieval pilgrimage and woman’s place in it beyond the level of how one goes on a pilgrimage” (Morrison, 2000: 71). Thus, the text is both a real journey, with its rules and difficulties, and a spiritual journey through which she tries to understand the visions she repeatedly has and to master her emotional reactions. From this perspective, the places she visits receive a sacred dimension and are “felt” rather than “seen” or “explored” as Margery minutely depicts her reactions and her passage towards the full acceptance of her visions and her social role as a visionary.

A great importance is attached to what this simple, middle-class, medieval woman does, namely walk the dangerous line between the traditional feminine roles (those of wife, mother, caretaker) and the masculine roles defined by authority and freedom of movement or decision (regarding her involvement in business and later in the religious life of the community, as councillor on religious matters). She is not openly rebellious because the religious role of a pilgrim was acceptable at the time both for men and for women, even though it entailed the women’s presence in the public sphere. The involvement in religious activities was one of the few public spaces in which the presence of a woman, traditionally associated with domesticity, was tolerated

³ Nicholas Watson refers to a rather heterogeneous group of writers: “the Middle English Mystics” or “the fourteenth century English mystics” whose works span between 1330 and 1440, in which he includes Margery Kempe together with Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2008: 539). However, he admits the difficulties of considering them together, the great differences among them, the controversies regarding this selection, especially in the case of Margery Kempe, and the suggestions of including other names in the group. All these considered, he concludes that “the canon (...) has undergone no modifications since the eruption of Kempe on to the scene half a century ago” (Watson, 2008: 539).

and Margery Kempe takes advantage of this possibility: “although never fully integrated into the male sphere of activity, the marginal status this occupancy could afford [them] her could allow for a level of participation and acceptance in both spheres, tenuous though it might be” (Herbert McAvoy, 2004: 2). The advantage for the modern readers is that they have the opportunity to gain a meaningful insight into the life, thoughts and emotions of medieval women just because one woman, Margery Kempe, dared to be different and defy many of the rules of her world.

The Book of Margery Kempe was composed in the 1430s⁴ (Krug, 2009: 218) and depicts the life and voyages of Margery Kempe, whose work came into the attention of the critics in the 1930’s, when the manuscript was discovered in a private library (Bale, 2015: ix). Margery Kempe was born around 1373 in Lynn, a town in East Anglia, a rich port, close to London and Norwich (where, at the time, lived another famous medieval mystic, the anchoress Julian of Norwich) and at the crossroad of various trade routes that connected it to important commercial centres in Europe (mainly in the Netherlands and Germany). She belonged to a rich and influential family of merchants and, during her life, she managed, though unsuccessfully, her own businesses (a brewery and a mill). She had fourteen children and, after twenty years of marriage, she made a vow of chastity consecrated by the Bishop of Lincoln and started a life as a pilgrim. First, she visited different places in England where she sought for proof that her visions of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and other saints were real and not devilish delusions. Then she went to Jerusalem and Rome, afterwards to Santiago de Compostella, and, around the age of sixty, she set off on another pilgrimage to Germany, to Wilsnack and Aachen.

She had the first vision after the birth of her first child when she fell seriously ill and depressed and confessed that she was burdened by a sin. Her confessor reprimanded her for having hidden that particular sin (which is not revealed to us), but Jesus appeared to her and told her that He knew everything and loved her nevertheless. From that moment onward she had numerous other visions, mainly of Jesus, who required various things from her, such as to give up eating meat, to go to different holy places, to take a vow of chastity and who promises His support in times of trouble. The passage towards acceptance of her calling, as described in her *Book*, is not easy; her own failures and doubts (she is a woman who loves life, good food, rich clothes, who speaks freely about her sexual desires) being doubled by other peoples’ aggressive attitudes towards her visions and her emotional outbursts and fits of crying (this being the way in which the visions became manifest), by their disbelief and threats with imprisonment and even death (burning) and by accusations of falsity and heresy.

Though referred to as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the text is composed by Margery, but not written down by her. She had two scribes who are mentioned in her text (her son and a priest). It is not known whether she was illiterate⁵ or not, but it is obvious from her words that she knew the Bible and the important religious writings of her time. This distance from the self as writer and the self as believer/pilgrim is enhanced by the fact that the *Book* is written in the third person, Margery referring to herself as the “creature,” creating a distance between the real, middle-class, wealthy women named Margery Kempe, and the pilgrim, a humble creature of God, whose earthly existence, that of a wealthy, married, middle-class woman, is gradually effaced, being re-

⁴ On 23 July, 1436, the priest begins to write Book 1 (Bale, 2015: xliii).

⁵ As Anthony Bale notices, we should be careful in hurrying to consider Kempe illiterate for the simple reason that she used scribes to convey her experiences in writing. Even though only the women of the upper classes were highly educated, the women of Kempe’s class were familiar with religious texts that were probably read to them or they memorized. Some could even read and write (xiv-xv). In fact, “the boundaries between what we now call literacy and illiteracy were not clearly drawn” (Bale, 2015: xv). Kim M. Phillips also argues that our modern understanding of literacy and illiteracy today is totally different from the medieval understanding of these terms. She also points to the fact that using a scribe was a common practice even for literate women because it gave their texts more validity or authority than if they had written them themselves (2004: 21). In the light of these comments, it seems less important to find out whether Kempe was literate or not and more important to highlight the fact that she closely controlled the manner in which her text is written.

placed by a holy life in the service of God.

A crucial aspect in understanding the medieval idea about travel is expressed, by Margery Kempe, in the *Book*. Thus, far from being a personal choice stemming from curiosity or spirit of adventure, Kempe's pilgrimage is seen as a mission given by Jesus Christ to His "creature": "Thys creatur was sent of owyr Lord to divers placys of relygyon" (I, 12: 582)⁶ in order to prove to herself if her visions are truthful or deceitful. She also mentions that it was God who put the desire to see these places into her heart (I, 15). Later on, just before the last pilgrimage to Germany to accompany her daughter-in-law, she confesses that she dislikes travelling by sea, but that she would be willing to go only if God requires it of her (II, 2), clearly suggesting that her journeys are necessary steps in her connection to the divinity and in her spiritual transformation. This also explains why there are so few details about the places she sees and so much information about the various difficulties of the journey, seen as necessary steps required by God.

As a result of this calling, Margery Kempe's pilgrimages trace her profound transformations which require her to assume a gradual visibility in the public space with all the dangers that it entails. So, she needs to learn how to carefully handle people's attitudes toward her in order to become accepted as a religious woman and a prophet. On the other hand, Margery also has to cope with a deep personal transformation, from a middle-class woman to a "creature" of God who is forced to free herself of earthly possessions and desires and dedicate her whole existence to God. During these transformations, Margery Kempe gradually detaches herself from the woman's traditional roles (wife, mother, caretaker) only to re-assume them in a new, religious context (wife of God and mother to all those who need her and believe in her).

These transformations come with great challenges and dangers. The moment that she decides to step outside the comfort zone of her class and gender (daughter and, later, wife of wealthy men, businesswoman, matron of the house, mother), Margery Kempe becomes the target of marginalization, disbelief and even violence. One of the reasons for those negative attitudes is her sudden visibility in the public sphere. Women, as wives and mothers, are typically the angels of the house, the caretakers and protectors of the family, but they are less visible⁷ in the public sphere. Visibility is considered a transgression of the norms and punished. As far as her middle-class status is concerned, Kempe's transgression consists in refusing to behave as expected of her and the disregard and even violence of the others begin the moment that she starts fasting, she gives up her rich clothes, she is too generous, to the despair of her servants who fear that she became incapable of efficiently running her household, or she has disturbing fits of crying in public. Ready to accept God's calling, Margery Kempe shows the negative impact of women's choice of overstepping the acceptable lines in a gender-divided society, in contrast to the positive response to women who comply with these roles.

In this light, pilgrimage is not a transgression in itself, because it was an accepted cultural practice for men and for women and it is not her choice to go on pilgrimages that makes her "visible" and hence unacceptable. What the others dislike are her religious practices. Though many proofs of doubt and attempts at her marginalization are clear at the beginning of her religious calling, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and then to Rome is the true test that marks her transformation and that highlights society's violent response to any disturbance. For instance, from the beginning of her journey, Margery is continuously marginalized and punished by her companions because of her refusal to keep silent and conform. What deeply disturbs them is the fact

⁶ For references or quotes from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, we provide the number of the book, the chapter and, where there is a direct quote, the line from Lynn Staley's edition (1996). A translation from Anthony Bale's edition (2015) will be provided in a footnote with reference to the author and to the page: "This creature was sent by our Lord to various religious places" (Kempe, 27).

⁷ We cannot speak of complete invisibility in the public sphere because medieval women of Kempe's class often had access to the family's business or, if widowed, managed businesses of their own. A very famous literary example is G. Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Kempe tells, in the *Book*, of the failure of her two businesses, a brewery and a mill, which she sets up despite her husband's disapproval.

that her practices are different from theirs: she has fits of crying, she constantly speaks about God, she refuses to eat meat or drink wine. Clearly upsetting is also her emotional response to the visions consisting in heavy, physically exhausting crying and roaring (I, 28). People's reactions to her are among the most various: from astonishment to violence: "For summe seyde it was a wikkyd spiryt vexid hir; sum seyde it was a sekene; sum seyde sche had dronkyn to mech wyn; sum bannyd hir; sum wisshe sche had ben in the havyn; sum wolde sche had ben in the se in a bot-tumles boyt; and so ich man as hym thowte"⁸ (I, 28, 1599-1602). The types of punishment from the people with whom she travelled were various: they rebuked and chided her, they deserted her in Constance (I, 27) and kept her maid so that she would be forced to travel alone, they forbid her to eat with them and locked her bedding (I, 28), they refused to help her climb Mount Quarantine and to give her water and they tried to prevent her from going to the Jordan River (I, 28).

Though any pilgrim who might have behaved awkwardly could have faced similar forms of marginalization and aggression, at a closer look it becomes clear that much of this violence is accentuated by the fact that our protagonist is a woman. One of the elements to support this idea is the threat of letting her travel alone. Being a woman, she was expected to travel with her husband (as she did, for a while, in England), with her maidservant or with other people. Thus, one form of punishment is to let her travel alone and to take her money. God's help is providential in all these episodes as Margery always finds meeker and more generous companions who believe her visions and help her. Later on, according to the same rule, she is convinced by her confessor to accompany her daughter-in-law to Germany as it was not fit for a young woman to travel alone through a country where she was not known (II, 2). One of dangers of solitude is the sexual abuse from other pilgrims, a danger pointed out to her by Richard, a hunchback who refuses to accompany her, saying that:

"I wot wel thi cuntremen han forsakyn the, and therfor it wer hard to me to ledyn the. For thy cuntremen han bothyn bowys and arwys, wyth the which thei myth defendyn bothyn the and hemself, and I have no wepyn save a cloke ful of clowtys. And yet I drede me that myn enmys schul robbyn me and peraventur takyn the away fro me and defowlyn thy body, and therfor I dar not ledyn the, for I wold not for an hundryd pownd that thu haddyst a vylany in my cumpany"⁹ (I, 30, 1779-1785).

Margery becomes acceptable to the other pilgrims only when she falls back to the roles expected of her as a woman: when she keeps silent, when she prays and confesses according to the rules established by the Church. The transformation becomes more visible when she starts fulfilling the role of "mother" for those who accept her visions and trust her as a religious councillor. The first one who calls her "mother" is a young priest who looks for her and asks for her guidance (I, 40). Gradually, her religious authority increases and her image as "mother", caretaker and councillor is accepted by more and more people. Thus, Margery has to learn how to make herself accepted without compromising her religious creed and she does this by fulfilling roles that are expected of her, but on her own terms. Isabel Davis aptly explains this transformation asserting that:

In the passage from real woman to a spiritual existence, Margery gradually leaves her roles as mother and wife as she deserts her home and takes the vow of chastity. (...) Kempe represents her protagonist as shy and reluctant in order that her unique access to God is shown to be a gift rather than something acquisitively

⁸ "Because some people said that it was a wicked spirit that vexed her; some said it was a sickness; some said she had drunk too much wine; some cursed her; some wished that she were thrown in the harbour; some wished that she were put out to sea in a boat; and so on each people as he or she thought" (Kempe, 65).

⁹ "I know full well that your compatriots have forsaken you, and therefore it would be hard for me to guide you. For your compatriots have both bows and arrows, with which they might defend both you and themselves, and I have no weapon except a cloak full of clouts. And so I fear that my enemies should rob me and perhaps take you away from me and rape you, and therefore I dare not escort you, as I would not, for a hundred pounds, have you suffer some indignity in my company" (Kempe, 71).

sought and greedily taken. Margery is initially infantilized only to be restored to female adulthood, first as spousal match and then as mother to God himself. Moving sequentially from bride, to wife to mother, Margery attains greater authority by progressing through a figurative life cycle which mirrors that which most secular medieval women have experienced.” (Davis, 2004: 42)

Thus, accepting a feminine role is not a failure in Margery’s attempts to assert her authority. On the contrary, she seems to have found the most efficient way (we should never forget that from beginning to end Margery Kempe remains a very practical-minded woman) to negotiate her freedom and to impose her religious authority. Thus, though rebellious and gradually gaining authority, Margery does not break the social boundaries of her genre and operates within the culturally sanctioned ideology. Isabel Davis points to the episode in which Margery is accused of preaching, at which she replies: “I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I use but comownycacyon and good wordys, and that wil I do whil I leve”¹⁰ (I, 52, 2975-2977) and argues that “Margery’s challenges to the church and its personnel are matched and balanced by her deference to their authority” (2004: 49), suggesting the fact that she does not want to assume roles that only men fulfil (that of priest and preacher) and she defers to their authority and listens to their council. Her objective is only to expose, on God’s guidance and command, the unworthy and sinful among them.

Her authority is also suggested by her independence. If, at the beginning, Margery Kempe submits to the public custom of travelling in a company in which she is actually ill-treated, she later accepts God’s urge to travel alone or in a very small company up to the point when she becomes a sort of leader, praying to God to let the ship sail safely across the Channel, through the storm (I, 43). Her authority is even more evident when people start giving her money to pray for them (I, 53) and so, she undertakes the second pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella with the money she received from believers (I, 44).

Margery Kempe’s religious authority is never a generally accepted reality, though, and she constantly needs to defend herself from accusations of falsity and heresy and face dangers of marginalization, mockery and even death. What is important to note is the confidence in herself and in God which was weak at the beginning and unfailing in the end. In spite of dangers and accusations, Margery Kempe remains firm in her religious faith, as well as in her duty to listen to God’s command and teach the others. She does not keep silent and she does not fail God in spite of people’s wrongs.

Margery Kempe’s *Book* is an important source of information on medieval pilgrimages, but it becomes more important as it presents a woman’s spiritual journey in search of faith, or grace, on the one hand, but also of independence and self-fulfilment, on the other. It is thus an account of medieval customs and rules in a gender-divided society, but it also traces any human private search for salvation, knowledge, independence. Margery courageously fought against the prejudiced and unbelieving society, but she also fought with herself, eliminating her desires, giving up her comforts and trusting her visions that led her towards a more difficult and yet more rewarding path.

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¹⁰ “I don’t preach, sir, I enter no pulpit. I use only discussion and good words and I’ll do so as long as I live” (Kempe, 115).

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