

From *The Book of Margery Kempe*: The Trials and Triumphs of a Homeward Journey

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Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438), the author—not the writer—of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, lived—when she was not traveling to the Holy Land or Assisi, the Shrine of St. James at Compostela, the Chapel of St. Bridget in Rome, or to Norway, Danzig, or Aachen—in the prosperous East Anglian town of Lynn.¹ She was the daughter of John Burnham, who, she did not hesitate to say when required to identify herself, was five times mayor of Lynn; the wife of John Kempe, a respected burgess; and the mother of fourteen children. Her adversaries saw Margery Kempe as a heretic, a Lollard, and hence a danger to the social order. She saw herself, if not as a potential saint, at least as a servant of God who lived a life comparable to that of St. Bridget of Sweden.

Richard D. Altick tells the story of how *The Book of Margery Kempe* came to be made accessible to readers of our time (1960:298-300). As he presents it, the twentieth-century discovery of Margery Kempe's story of her own life seems to have been almost inevitable. Altick begins by tracing the first part of the *Book* to be set in print to an eight-page leaflet called *A Shorte Treatyse of Contemplacyon . . . Taken Out of the Boke of Margerie Kempe of Lynn*. This small part of Margery's life history was published by Wynkyn de Worde in about 1501 and reprinted in a collection of religious treatises in 1521. Then in 1910, almost four centuries later, Professor Edmund Carter published *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*, a collection that contained some of Margery's reflections. This publication came at a time of growing interest in mysticism and the contributions of women to the literature of religious experience. And then, in 1934 Colonel William Erdeswick Ignatius Butler-

¹ For a chronological table of the events of Kempe's life, see Meech and Allen 1940/1979:xlviii-li.

Bowdon, in whose family a manuscript had been “from time immemorial,”² took that manuscript to the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington for identification. There, Altick’s story continues, the librarian “consulted three of the best authorities on medieval devotional literature” (299). They could identify neither the book nor its author, but Evelyn Underhill, one of the three authorities, suggested that the American scholar Hope Emily Allen, who was doing research as a recipient of a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies in London at the time, be consulted. Having read Carter’s 1910 reprint, Allen knew immediately that Butler-Bowdon’s manuscript was the “Book of Margery Kempe.” The book was subsequently published, first in modernized form and then, in 1940, edited by Professor Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, as number 212 of the Early English Text Society series.³

The story of how the book came to be *written* does not communicate a comparable sense of inevitability. Margery herself seems never to have learned to write. This does not necessarily mean that she was “illiterate” in the sense in which we use the word today.⁴ It was not unusual, Josephine K. Tarvers points out in “The Alleged Illiteracy of Margery Kempe” (1996), for women of Margery Kempe’s social class to be able to read pious works aloud to each other and keep business records, to read basic correspondence, and “probably to compose their own correspondence.” Tarvers presents the possibility that Margery employed scribes not because she was totally illiterate, but because she felt a need for their training in “the language and rhetorical forms that she lacked” (113-14).

Margery Kempe felt a strong sense of obligation to share her revelations, but did not begin to engage in the process of recording them

² Staley (1996:10) notes that the Butler-Bowdon family had possessed the manuscript since at least the mid-eighteenth century, and that before this time the book belonged to the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace in Yorkshire.

³ Lynn Staley’s Middle English edition was published in 1996, and Barry Windeatt’s Middle English text for *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which will be the source for quoted passages here, followed in 2000.

⁴ For expression of a long-held understanding that Margery Kempe dictated the words of her Book to a scribe because she was “illiterate,” that is, because she could neither read nor write, see Atkinson 1983:18. The antonymic pair “literate-illiterate,” however, does not necessarily constitute an either-or, or “cut opposition,” to call upon a term introduced by C. K. Ogden (1932:58-59). The two terms may instead represent opposite poles of a continuum of literacy and thus become part of a system of “scale” oppositions.

until twenty years after her first one. In *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (1994), Lynn Staley considers the possibility that the twenty-year delay between the time of that revelation and the time she began to dictate her book to her first scribe was related to the intensity with which people suspected of Lollardy were persecuted during the intervening years. Staley also observes that twenty years after the time of Lollard activity, Kempe shows "her sensitivity to the tone of the debate about literacy" (146). The ability to read was thought to be shared by heretics, so, Staley points out, it was in Margery's best interest to be shielded by claims that she could not read texts that had to do with the religious belief herself, but that "a priest, a licensed member of the church, read such material to her" (136), and she concludes that Margery's scribe, "who plays a major role in the text, shields Margery from authorities even as he authorizes the text she provides" (147).

In any case, placing aside the question of her supposed illiteracy and the possible advantage of *illiteracy* at a time when the ability to read and write could place a woman in danger of persecution as a heretic, we turn now to Margery's own "Proem" to her *Book*, and to the story of her difficulty in finding a scribe who could transform her oral history of her own life into readable written form.

Here Margery tells how her first scribe, an Englishman by birth who had been living with his wife and child in the Netherlands, returned to England "wyth hys wife and hys goodys and dwellyd wyth the forseyd creatur tyl he had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for the tym that thei wer togydder" (47).⁵ This man died after one year.

The second scribe, a priest Margery thought well of, finds the language of the first to be "neither good Englysch ne Dewch" and his handwriting so bad that it is hardly legible. He nevertheless promises Margery that *if* he can read it he will copy out what the first scribe has written. This same priest, because "there [was] so evel spekyng of this creatur and of hir wepyng" is afraid to speak with her very often, but he advises her to consult with a man who, since he had often "ben conversawnt" with the first scribe, might be more able to read his writing. It turns out, however, that the man who *could* read the letters the first scribe had earlier sent from abroad cannot read his record of what Margery has told

⁵ Staley (1994:79) notes the consistency with which Margery avoids the use of first person pronouns by referring to herself as "this creature," citing as a single exception her account of the Bishop of Lincoln's response to her husband John's statement of readiness to take a vow of married chastity. This usage, it should perhaps be noted, is also followed in the translations of *The Book* by W. Butler-Bowdon (1944) and B. A. Windeatt (1985), but not in John Skinner's 1998 translation.

him. Finally, after a four-year delay, the well-thought-of priest remembers his promise and attempts to begin his long delayed rewriting task—only to find that, though his vision is adequate for other activities, he is now unable to see well enough to read the letters he has just written or even to mend his pen. And spectacles do not help.

Clearly, this is not a simple physical problem. Margery explains that the priest's "enmy had envye at hys gode dede and wold lett him yf he mygth" (50). The devil is envious and will prevent the priest from doing his work if he can, but Margery promises the priest the support of her prayers when he needs them to get into heaven. He at last takes up his task as scribe in Anno domini 1436, apparently able both to write and to read what he has written.

The result, as B. A. Windeatt writes in the introduction to his 1985 translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is that "in these dictated recollections . . . it is human speech itself which continually catches and sharpens the attention" (22). In addition, John F. Skinner, the *Book's* most recent translator, speaking of the oral quality of the trial scenes to be considered here, says that it enables us to know "that it is Margery speaking directly onto the page" (1998:5).

Margery Kempe does not use the autobiographical "I" in the basic narrative structure of the story of her life and travels. She does, however, use the first person singular nominative pronoun to represent her own speech in the trial and pre-trial exchanges included in chapters 46 through 54 of her *Book*, the part of her story to which I will give attention here. And it is this use of "I" by a woman who otherwise refers to herself as "she" or "this creature" that makes it possible to focus on her skillful dramatization of her own encounters with representatives of secular and religious authority who attempt to hinder her homeward journey, and to do so from a critical perspective provided by twentieth-century speech act theory.

In this paper I will be reading a fifteenth-century text in terms of a theory introduced by John L. Austin in a series of lectures delivered in 1955.⁶ My justification for reading from this perspective is Mary Louise Pratt's recognition of the "enormous advantages" of talking about literature in terms of "unspoken, culturally-shared knowledge of rules, conventions, and expectations" (1977:86). Defendants in fifteenth-century (as in

⁶ Austin's lectures were published as *How To Do Things with Words* (1962). Reference will also be made to contributions to speech act theory by John R. Searle (1969), Paul Grice (1989), Frank Parker and Kathryn Riley (1994), Diane Blakemore (1992), and William P. Alston (2000).

twentieth-century) trials were expected to answer questions, not to ask them. They were, moreover, expected to follow established conventions as they answered specific questions. Certain answers were expected of individuals attempting to defend themselves against charges of heresy, and, as we shall see in the Leicester trial of chapter 48, Margery Kempe was perfectly capable of providing satisfactory word-for-word answers. It was *not* to be expected that a woman accused of Lollardy and of attempting to lead other women astray would turn to an accuser and say that *he* was guilty of swearing, nor was it the convention that she would delay an answer to a specific question until the point in the question-answer sequence at which it would most dramatically call attention to her accuser's reliance on false information. But again, reading from a pragmatics perspective, we can see not just how these violations of expectation enable Margery Kempe to defeat her adversaries, but how they function as elements in the dramatic representation of her story of triumph over difficulties posed by men of authority. Let us turn, then, to what Margery Kempe shows herself *doing* with the words she speaks.

It is now August of the year 1417. Margery has returned from her pilgrimage to the Holy Land,⁷ has undertaken another pilgrimage—this time to Santiago, and finds herself threatened, once again, by difficulties encountered on the homeward journey. Thomas Marchale, a “good man” who traveled with her to Santiago and is continuing to help her on her homeward journey, is writing a letter to Margery's husband when he is interrupted by their hosteler's demand that she come quickly to speak with the Mayor of Leicester. In what can be read as a pre-trial scene, we hear the Mayor's opening demand that Margery tell him what country she comes from and whose daughter she is. Her reply follows here, recast from Windeatt's 2000 edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* into conventional dramatic form (229):

⁷ Staley uses Margery Kempe's surname to refer to her in her function as narrator of her own story, and her given name to refer to her as the person whose story is being told. I will be using *Kempe* to refer to Margery Kempe the playwright and *Margery* to refer to the central character of her drama of personal experience, but I should perhaps say here that I am not suggesting, of course, in referring to Kempe the “playwright,” that Margery Kempe was dictating with the intention that her plays would be performed. Her intentions, however, do not seem notably different from the intentions Gail McMurray Gibson ascribes to those of the theater of East Anglia at the time her words were being recorded, which were “to teach and preach, and move to penance and rightful action” (1989:67).

MK: Syr, I am of Lynne in Norfolke, a good mannys dowtyr of the same Lynne, wech hath ben meyr fyve tymes of that worshepful burwgh and aldyrman also many yerys, and I have a good man, also a burgeys of the seyde town, Lynne, to myn husband,

an answer to which the Mayor responds,

M of L: A, Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet ar ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl, and therfor I schal have the in preson.

Margery then replies,

MK: I am as redy, ser, to gon to preson for Goddys lofe as ye arn redy to gon to chirche.

There can be no doubt that when “the meyr [of Leicester] askyd [Margery] of what cuntre sche was and whos dowtyr sche was” he was certain he had a right to ask these questions. There can, however, be some doubt about whether his speech acts satisfy one of John Searle’s conditions for questions. A speaker who asks a question, if it is a genuine question, does not already know the answer (1969:66), and it is likely that the Mayor of Leicester *does* know who Margery Kempe is, since she has by this time achieved a certain notoriety with her public displays of weeping and crying out, or “roaring.” But, in any case, she answers his “question.”

In fact, she over-answers it, thus violating what Diane Blakemore, following Paul Grice, presents as one of the requirements specified by the Maxim of Quantity. “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required,” Blakemore states the rule (1992:26), and Margery not only tells the Mayor she is from Lynn and the daughter of John Burnham; she also shows how important her father is by referring to offices he has held, and she establishes her own identity with respect to her husband and *his* position as well. She has, then, done more than tell where she is from and who her father is. She has asserted the importance of two male relatives, and assumed a self-importance by virtue of her association with her father and her husband.

The Mayor responds to *her* response with a negative assertion. He says her answer is not like the answer of Saint Katherine, who told the truth when she was asked to identify herself. This assertion, in itself, constitutes an indirect accusation of lying (Saint Katherine told the truth; Margery does not answer as Saint Katherine did, therefore Margery lies), which the Mayor

makes more directly with the repeated adjectives of “*false* strumpet,” “*false* Lollard,” and “*false* deceiver”—and of course with the agent noun “deceiver” (a “deceiver” is one who “deceives”) as well. He continues with a threat of imprisonment to which Margery cheerfully responds: if imprisonment is what her love of God requires of her, she does not object to it. She asks only that she not be imprisoned with men.

With the emergence of the Steward of Leicester as a second pre-trial adversary, we find justification for Margery’s request. As chapter 47 begins, the Steward, identified by Margery as a “semly,” or good-looking, man, first begins to speak to her in Latin, a verbal strategy that could be regarded as a violation of Grice’s Maxim of Manner (1989:27),⁸ since Margery does not understand Latin. She responds with a natural request that the Steward speak the language she understands and the exchange progresses in this way (231):

MK: Spekyth Englysch, yf yow lyketh, for I undyrstonde not what ye sey.

S of L: Thu lvest falsly in pleyn Englysch.

MK: Syr, askyth what qwestyon ye wil in Englysch, and thorw the grace of my Lord Jhesu Cryst I schal answeyn yow resonably therto.

Despite the Steward’s rude accusation (he says Margery lies in plain English), he asks questions that, having promised to do so, she answers readily and reasonably. Unable to get a case against her, the Steward leads Margery into his chamber and speaks “foul ribald words” to her, wrestles with her, shows “unclean signs,” and otherwise indicates his intentions. The dialogue continues as follows (231-32):

MK: Ser, for the reverens of almythy God, sparyth me, for I am a mannys wife.

S of L: Thu schalt telle me whethyr thu hast this speche of God er of the devyl, or ellys thu schalt gon to preson.

⁸ Having listed the requirements for the Maxim of Manner as “1) Avoid obscurity of expression, 2) Avoid ambiguity, 3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and 4) Be orderly,” Grice notes that “one might need others.” It would seem that since, as R. W. Chambers observes (Butler-Bowdon 1944:xvii), “the Norfolk towns, to judge from the regulations of their guilds, had been the first in England to abandon the official use of Latin and French,” another requirement we might add would be 5) Speak in a language that the Hearer can be expected to understand.

MK: Ser, for to gon to preson I am not aferd for my Lordys lofe, the which meche mor suffyrd for my lofe than I may for hys. I pray yow doth as yow thinkyth the beste.

Margery has again answered in a way that is straightforward and courteous, but the Steward, his verbal and nonverbal demands for sex having been denied, repeats the Mayor's threat of prison. If preparatory conditions for threats are to be understood as Frank Parker and Kathryn Riley suggest (1994:18), that is, as being different from promises because a Speaker believes that a Hearer does *not* want something to be done, the steward succeeds in performing the illocutionary act of threatening. He does not, however, achieve the perlocutionary effect⁹ that he, and the Mayor of Leicester before him, intended to achieve: he cannot force Margery Kempe into a state of compliance. She must, therefore, be brought to trial.

As the formal trial scene of chapter 48 begins in the Church of All Saints in Leicester, the presence of an audience increases our possibilities for interpretation of perlocutionary effects. Margery is brought before the altar, where the Abbot of Leicester sits with the Dean of Leicester. There is a large audience, with friars and priests and so many lay people that some have to stand on stools to be able to see Margery Kempe, who is praying to God on her knees. Margery's consciousness of her audience is shown by the substance of her prayers: she wishes not just to answer the questions put to her in ways that may be most pleasing to God and of greatest benefit to her soul; she also wishes to be the "best exampyl to the pepyl" (234).

A priest enters, takes Margery by the hand, and brings her before the Abbot and his "assessors." Margery is now required to "answeryn trewly to the artyculys of the feyth lych as sche felt in hem." She asserts her belief that a man who has taken the order of priesthood, no matter how vicious he may be in his daily life, is empowered to turn the bread and wine of Communion into the body and blood of Christ,¹⁰ and she correctly answers

⁹ William P. Alston (2000:37) defines perlocutionary success with respect to the Speaker's intention of affecting the Hearer in some way, that is, by getting the Hearer to believe that what is being presented is true, or getting the Hearer to do something the Speaker wishes him to do. The illocutionary success of a Speaker's performance of an act of threatening, then, would depend on a Hearer's understanding that the Speaker's utterance is a threat. Perlocutionary success in this case would depend on (1) the Hearer's willingness to do what the Speaker wants her to do or (2) her willingness not to do what the Speaker does not want her to do.

¹⁰ Louise Collis (1964) and Katharine Cholmeley (1947), who see the life of Margery Kempe from strongly contrasting perspectives (Collis views Margery as a headstrong woman who would talk as long as anyone would listen, while Cholmeley

all the other questions addressed to her as well. The Mayor of Leicester, however, claims that “sche menyth not wyth hir hert as sche seyth with hir mowthe” (235), which, if his accusation were well founded, would mean that she has violated a Quality Maxim that Blakemore expresses with the succinct imperative: “Do not say what you believe to be false” (1992:26). Margery’s adversary, then, has just accused her again of lying, but the assembled scholars, who say she answers “rhyt well,” are convinced of her sincerity.

Margery chooses to leave the mayor’s further accusations unexpressed, but then declares her innocence with a first person “I” followed by the verb phrase “take wisse” (235-36):

MK: Sir, I take wisse of my Lord Jhesu Crist, whos body is her present in the sacrament of the awter, that I nevyr had part of mannys body in this worlde in actual ded be wey of synne, but of myn husbondys body, whom I am bowndyn to be the lawe of matrimony, and be whom I have born xiiii childeryn.

Her assertion of innocence, its sincerity supported by what would seem to be an act of swearing (“as God is my witness” might be a reasonable Modern English equivalent for “I take wisse of my Lord Jhesu Crist”), succeeds as an act of illocution. No one could misunderstand her intention. It also achieves a perlocutionary success in that it accomplishes her objective. The Abbot of Leicester and his colleagues consider it to be a straightforward and appropriate self-defense.

Margery does not stop here. She moves on to a dramatic performance of the role of the accuser. Her accuser, the Mayor of Leicester, is now forced into her former role (235-36):

MK: Sir, ye arn not worthy to ben a meyr, and that schal I prevyn be Holy Writte, for owr Lord God seyde hymself er he wolde takyn veniawnce on the cyteys, “I schal comyn down and seen,” and yet he knew al thyng. And that was not ellys, sir, but for to schewe men as ye ben that ye schulde don no execucion in ponischyng but yf ye had knowyng befor that it wer worthy for to be don. And, syr, ye han do al the contrary to me

finds her “manner [to be reminiscent] of St. Joan” [xiiii]), both advise that this assertion be taken as an affirmation of orthodox belief rather than criticism of the priesthood. Margery does not hesitate to criticize individual representatives of the church when opportunity arises, but she does not let her perception of their failures interfere with the way she represents her understanding of basic articles of faith when called upon to do so.

this day, for syr, ye han cawsyd me myche despite for thyng that I am not gilty in. I pray God forgeve yow it.

With this speech Margery successfully reverses the roles she and the Mayor play with respect to each other. She accuses the Mayor of being unworthy of his office. She states her intention to prove her case by reference to Holy Writ, and then she proceeds to tell a story. The All-knowing Judge himself set an example for earthly judges by coming down to earth to verify with his own eyes that accused sinners were indeed guilty. The Mayor, on the other hand, would determine guilt without evidence. Indeed, this is what he has just attempted to do in the case of Margery Kempe. Thus this Mayor, this self-appointed judge, is now found guilty of poor performance of his office as mayor, because, failing to follow the example of the Lord, he has just found an innocent woman guilty without cause.

The Mayor of Leicester is not silenced. He introduces another complaint, but as we see in the following exchange, Margery has an answer for this as well (236):

M of L: I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han away owr wyvys fro us and ledyn hem with the.

MK: Syr, ye schal not wetyn of my mowth why I go in white clothys; ye arn not worthy to wetyn it. But, ser, I wil tellyn it to these worthy clerkys, wyth good wil, be the maner of confessyon. Avyse hem yyf thei wyl telle it yow.

The Mayor's change of subject, which leads to yet another accusation, does not result in what he would seem to be hoping for: control of the exchange with Margery Kempe. Margery lets the Mayor's white clothes question rest for the moment (and this will not be the last time she delays a response to a question), and she does not choose to dignify his accusation concerning the wives of Leicester with a reply. She responds instead by saying he does not have the right to ask her about her white clothing. That question, she says, must be directed to men of the church empowered to hear her confession. With this speech Margery calls upon a higher authority than the secular authority of the Mayor, and wins the round by challenging once again the right of an accuser to speak as he does. The scholars, when consulted, tell Margery's accuser that she wears white clothes not to lead the wives astray, but because she has been ordered to do so by her spiritual father. And thus the Leicester sequence ends, with charges brought and left unsubstantiated.

Chapters 50, 51, and 52 serve as preparation for the first trial Margery faces in York. Upon coming into Yorkshire Margery finds that an

anchoress, a former friend, has been turned against her by her enemies; and here, in this unwelcoming place, we observe that an issue concerning the length of time that Margery plans to stay—a question that will come up again—very quickly arises. On this occasion Margery, who often seems to violate the Quantity Maxim by saying *more* than she has been asked to say, gives too little information. This is the question-and-answer sequence (242):

A CLERK IN THE MYNSTER OF YORK: Damsel, how long wil ye abyden her?

MK: Ser, I purpose to abyden these xiiii days.

Though Margery *could* have understood the scholar's question to be a request for information about her expected time of departure, she apparently does not choose to do so. Then, when the question arises again in chapter 51, this is the pattern of exchange (245):

CLERK: Damsel, thu seydest whan thu come first hedyr that thu woldyst abyden her but xiiii days.

MK: Ya, ser, wyth your leve, I seyde that I wolde abydyn her xiiii days, but I seyde not that I schulde neithyr abydyn mor her ne les. But as now, ser, I telle yow trewly I go not yet.

This second exchange can be taken simply as an effort to clarify Margery's earlier answer, but it is not hard to see that there could be reason to regard her as a difficult woman to deal with. She will stay as long as she pleases, and then she will go.

The how-long-will-you-be-here question, at least as it is first asked, could be taken as a simple request for information. Another question addressed to Margery right after the first how-long-will-you-be-here exchange can hardly be considered a question at all, but these are the words that she recalls from an exchange with a priest from York Minster (242):

PRIEST: Thu wolf, what is this cloth that thu hast on?

If we could disregard the direct address to Margery as “wolf” (and this is difficult to do, especially if we take into account Atkinson's suggested reference to Matthew 7:15, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” [1983:121]), we might take this utterance as a request for information. At least this is the way the schoolboys who overhear the question and answer *for* Margery—that her

clothing is made of wool—would seem to understand it. It is more likely, however, since Lollards were known to wear white, that the priest is trying to force a pre-trial admission of heresy. In any case, with Margery's subsequent reprimand of him for swearing (she simply ignores the white clothes question, or non-question, for the moment), it would seem that she oversteps the boundaries laid down for her. She is obligated as a Christian to follow the commandments; she is not obligated to instruct other Christians—priests or plain members of the spiritual community—about *their* obligations.

As chapter 51 begins, Kempe tells of another scholar who approaches Margery and asks her how the words “Crescite et multiplicamini” should be understood. Recognizing the question as an intended trap (Lollards were said to believe in free love), Margery says that the words should be understood not only with respect to the begetting of children but also with reference to the “purchase” of virtue through “charite and chastite.” After this display of understanding, which could suggest a greater literacy than it might be prudent to admit,¹¹ Kempe returns to the more familiar who-are-you-and-why-are-you-here question-and-answer format (246):

A WORSHIPFUL DOCTOR: Woman, what dost thou her in this cuntre?

MK: Syr, I come on pilgrimage to offyr her at Seynt William.

WD: Hast thou an husband?

MK: Ya.

But when the Worshipful Doctor (note the respect built into the nominalization) then asks Margery if she has written permission to travel, she gives him an extended answer that again makes it possible to see why she could be considered difficult, and why the Archbishop of York will finally be willing to hire a man (even as he quibbles about how much it will cost him) to guide her out of his diocese. But let us proceed to chapter 52 and the first York trial.

¹¹ Staley, writing about the defensive value of Kempe's claim of illiteracy, says that “throughout the Book, Kempe reveals her sensitivity to the tone of the debate about literacy and the uses of the vernacular. Though she locates the *Book's* action during a period of anti-Lollard activity, she maintains that the *Book* was written some twenty years or more after it was lived. Kempe thereby distances herself (and her reader) from Margery and from activities that are manifestly suspicious” (1994:146).

The setting now is the Archbishop's chapel. Accusations and threats become a part of the audible context as members of the audience call Margery "loller" and "heretyke" and swear "many an horrybyl othe that sche schulde be brent" (248), and once again Margery responds in kind to those who would call her virtue into question. She predicts a terrible punishment for them: if her accusers do not stop their swearing they will most certainly go to hell. Her strategy works. Her accusers retreat, seemingly ashamed. And now with the entry of the Archbishop of York the trial begins.

I read the Archbishop's opening questions—"Why gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?" (249)—as close to the "Are you twenty-one?" question I am sometimes asked at the grocery store check-out counter. The Archbishop can see that Margery Kempe is not a young maiden, and she knows he can see this, but she answers respectfully. When he orders that she be fettered, however, she not only denies she is a heretic but asserts that he cannot prove that she is. The Archbishop retreats, leaving her to stand alone, and Kempe's narrative focuses again on the audience gathered in the chapel. Some wonder if she is a Christian or a Jew; some say she is a good woman and others say "nay." And Margery stands alone, praying for help against her enemies until at last she cries out.

Her crying past, she is again brought before the Archbishop, who questions her about her tears. Instead of directly answering his question, she predicts: "Syr, ye schal welyn [wish] sum day that ye had wept as sor as I" (250). The Archbishop may be asking a straightforward question, but Margery answers with an implicit threat of future punishment for him.

The Archbishop consults again with his advisors. He says that Margery knows the rules of her faith well. *They* say that she cannot be allowed to stay because she has such influence over the people and may "pervert" them. The pattern of accusation and counter-accusation then continues with this exchange (250):

ARCHBISHOP: I am evyl enformyd of the; I her seyn thu art a ryth wikked woman.

MK: Ser, so I her seyn that ye arn a wikkyd man. And, yyf ye ben as wikkyd as men seyn, ye schal nevyr come in hevyn les than ye amende yow whil ye ben her.

ARCHBISHOP: Why, thow . . . ! What sey men of me?

MK: Other men, syr, can telle yow wel anow.

At this point of the tit-for-tat exchange a great scholar enters to insist that the rules of interrogation be followed, thus defending the Archbishop from Margery's attacks.

Margery refuses to make promises she is asked to make. She will not swear to leave the diocese of York as soon as she can. She will not promise not to speak of God nor will she promise to stop telling offenders to cease their swearing. Furthermore, having been given the right to speak by the words of Christ (she tells a gospel story that recalls His permission to a woman in support of her position on this issue), she will not cease speaking until the pope and holy church order her to be silent. As Staley observes (1994:148-49), Margery will not make an insincere promise. She does, however, perform an unconditional act of promising concerning her own future use of words: she will use "good wordys" as long as she lives.

A Doctor of the Church now enters the exchange with a report of a story that Margery told about a priest. This speaker's clear intention is to add another charge to the series already brought. Margery Kempe wears white clothes, she assumes a right to speak that women do not have, and furthermore she tells stories about men, priests, who *do* have the right to speak. But his accusation provides an opportunity for Margery to tell the story of the bear and the pear-tree blossoms.

This story describes a priest who walks in a wood for the improvement of his soul and finds that night has come upon him before he finds a resting place. He lays himself down in a fair arbor that has a pear tree all blooming with flowers. A bear comes to the arbor, shakes loose all the blossoms from the pear tree, and then devours the flowers. Then, turning his "tayl ende" toward the priest, he voids the flowers he has just devoured. The priest wanders forth the next day, all heavy with thought. He meets an aged man who explains the meaning of what the priest has just seen. The priest is himself the pear tree. He seems to flourish through saying the service and ministering the sacraments, but because he does his work undevoutly and has little contrition for his sins all that he does comes to nothing.

Margery's story ends with the aged man addressing the priest with words that she, as a teller *required* to tell a story, is privileged to repeat, and once again she plays her accuser role (255):

MK: Thu brekyst the comawndmentys of God thorw sweryng, lying, detraccyon, and bakbytyng, and swelch other synnes usyng. Thus be thy mys-governawns, lych onto the lothly ber, thu devowryst and destroyist the flowerys and blomys of vertuows levying to thyn endles dampnacyon and

many mannys hyndryng, lesse than thou have grace of repentawns and amending.

Her story not only constitutes a successful defense, it impresses the Archbishop and has a very strong effect on one of her scholar-accusers, who says “Ser, this tale smyteth me to the hert” (256).

With the response of this listener Margery’s perlocutionary success would seem to go beyond her own expectations, but she does not stop here. She follows her verbal victory with a parallel recollection. She knows a preacher back home in Lynn who speaks boldly against the sins of the people and who will flatter no one. This preacher often says that anyone who is displeased by what he says shows his guilt by his displeasure. The man who has just been smitten to the heart would seem to have acknowledged his guilt in a comparable way. Margery may deny that she preaches (only Lollards extended this privilege to women), but she says to the scholar who has responded as the sinners back home who recognized their sins responded, “ryth so, ser, far ye be me, God forgeve it yow” (256).

This trial over, Margery is allowed, once again, to proceed on her homeward way. But this is not the end of her tribulations, nor is it the last of her meetings with the Archbishop of York. As she reaches Hull, Margery is once again beset by “malicyows pepil,” and by the time she is ready to cross the Humber she is arrested by two servants of the Duke of Bedford, who is identified by Meech and Allen (1940/1979:316) as John, the third son of King Henry IV by his wife Mary; the Duke is now acting in the absence of the King as Lieutenant of the kingdom. The power of the secular forces pitted against this sixty-year-old woman seeking to return to her home has escalated considerably, and the threat posed by Margery Kempe would seem to have escalated as well. She is now accused not just of being a heretic and a Lollard, but of being “the grettest loller in al this cuntre er abowte London eyther” (258).

One of the men required to arrest her, however, is sorry to have “met with her,” which I take to be intended to function as an apology, an assertion that he is sorry to have had to arrest her because it seems to him that she speaks “ryth good wordys” (259). Margery is nevertheless required to meet once again with the Archbishop of York, whose greeting when they meet is “What, woman, art thou come agen? I would fayn be delyveryd of the” (261).

We are not told how many people are in the audience as Margery’s second meeting with the Archbishop of York begins in Chapter 54. The Archbishop, however, begins with an address to a group assembled in the chapterhouse at Beverley (261-62):

ARCHBISHOP OF YORK: Serys, I had this woman befor me at Cowode, and ther I wyth my clerkys examynd hir in hir feyth and fond no defawte in hir. Forthermor, serys, I have sithyn that tyme spokyn with good men which holdyn hir a parfyte woman and a good woman. Notwythstandyng al this I gaf on of my men v schelynges to ledyn hir owt of this cuntre for qwietyng of the pepil. And, as thei wer goyng in her jurne, they wer takyn and arestyd, my man put in preson for hir, also hir gold and hir sylver was takyn away fro hir, wyth hir bedys and hir ryng, and sche is browt her agen befor me. Is her any man can sey any thyng ayens hir?

The Archbishop clearly feels that he has performed his responsibility to listen to complaints. He has examined Margery and found her beliefs to be in conformity with those of the church. “Forthermor” (he is building his case with the language of judicial argument), he has followed through by questioning other reliable Christians and they spoke in very positive terms concerning her character. “Notwythstandyng al this” (the legal phrase attests to his willingness to go *beyond* what could be expected of a man called upon to adjudicate a case involving charges of Lollardy), he still, to satisfy the complainers, had her safely escorted out of his diocese only to have her arrested, deprived of property, and brought before him again. Nevertheless he asks, as he concludes a speech that is as much a defense of his own procedures as it is of Margery Kempe, if anyone has anything now to say against her. And thus the way is cleared for what can be read, perhaps, as a post-trial sequence when a group of men put forth a friar as spokesman, saying that he “can meche ayens her” (262).

Much of the “much” the Friar knows against Margery is indirectly referred to with a phrase about the “meche ylle langage” he uttered concerning her. Kempe does, however, show how the Friar directly accuses her of disparaging all men of the holy church and expresses his judgment that she should have been burned at Lynn. The Friar’s accusations then become more specific. Margery Kempe not only gives offense by her loud crying but she asserts her *right* to do so, saying that she can weep and express her contrition when she pleases. Next she is said to be the daughter of Cobham, or John Oldcastle, a famous Lollard who escaped from the Tower of London and has been in hiding for years, which, of course, she is not—either literally or otherwise. She is the daughter of John Burnham, five times mayor and often alderman of Lynn, as she does not hesitate to say when challenged on other occasions. And she is not “the spiritual [heretical] daughter of Sir John Oldcastle, the Arch-Lollard, who bore the title of ‘Lord Cobham’ by right of his wife.”¹² Her challengers also say that Margery

¹² As Butler-Bowdon explains the reference to “Combomis dowtyr” (1944:119).

has lied about having gone to Jerusalem and has never been there at all, but her insistence that “‘a staf of a Moyses yerde,’” a relic she had brought from the Holy Land, be returned to her would seem to belie that charge as well.

The Archbishop, having listened to these charges, turns to Margery, questions her, and accepts her words as truth, dismissing the friar-spokesman’s words as lies. The Friar now turns to a second line of attack. Margery cannot, perhaps, be proven to be a teller of lies, but the Archbishop cannot dismiss the difficulty to which the Friar will next draw attention.

Pleading her wedded state once again, Margery asks not to be imprisoned with men and is assured that she will not be harmed. She is well treated by the man into whose charge she is given, and a crowd of well-wishers gathers outside his home to hear her speak. Summoned shortly afterward by the Archbishop, she thanks him for his earlier kindness, and another question-answer sequence begins. Margery is now charged with an attempt to deprive Lord Greystoke, a man of high rank, of his wife’s companionship.¹³ Her success in dealing with the current charge now depends, to some degree, not just on the time sequence of Margery’s travels but on the timing of her answers.¹⁴

Margery *delays* her correction of the Friar’s dating of her meeting with Lady Westmoreland (he says simply that they met “at Easter”) until it will do her defense the most good. When the right moment comes, she says she has not seen Lady Westmoreland (the mother of Lord Greystoke’s wife whose help she supposedly attempted to gain in her effort to deprive Lord Greystoke) for two years or more. She *did* once have an audience with her, but that was before she went to Jerusalem (and her return now is from a pilgrimage undertaken after that pilgrimage). The Friar’s account of her supposed meddling, then, is clearly open to challenge. Margery’s opponents, however, do not give up easily. Members of the audience ask for written verification of Margery’s account of the time of her meeting with Lady Westmoreland. The forty days it might take to get such verification, one advisor says, could be well spent by Margery in prison. But the Archbishop is less concerned with the time of an earlier visit than with what she said when the conversational exchange took place. Margery’s response to this request for information includes a story of judgments that becomes

¹³ His wife, Meech and Allen note (1940/1979:317), was Joan de Beaufort, the legitimated daughter of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and Catherine Swynford.

¹⁴ David Aers relates this charge—and the Mayor of Leicester’s earlier charge that Margery intends to lead wives astray—to male anxiety about losing control over women (1988:ch. 2, espec. 99-103).

directly relevant to her present situation: “I telde hir [Lady Westmoreland] a good tale of a lady that was dampmyd for sche wolde not lovyng hir enmiis and of a baly that was savyd for he lovyd hys enmys and foryaf that thei had trespasyd agen hym, and yet he was heldyn an evyl man” (266).

The story of an unkind woman damned for her unkindness, and of a kind man wronged, brings forth a response from a pro-Margery spokesman identified as the Archbishop’s steward, and from a group of her supporters who ask the Archbishop to let her go and promise to burn her themselves if she ever returns. It also brings forth this expression of a judgment of Margery’s accusers, made directly to those accusers, by the Archbishop: “I leve ther was nevr woman in Ingland so ferd wyththal as sche is and hath ben,” and an acknowledgment to Margery of his own inability to make a judgment on her case: “I wote not what I schal don wyth the” (267).

Margery takes the Archbishop’s “I don’t know what to do with you” as a request for advice. He does not say “I request that you tell me what to do now that you have been so mistreated,” but Margery promptly responds by *telling* him what he should do. The form of her response does not violate fifteenth-century conventions of courtesy and respect. And it does satisfy the rules for making an explicit request set forth by twentieth-century speech-act theorists (267):

MK (to the Archbishop of York): My Lord, I pray yow late me have yowr lettyr and yowr seyl into recorde that I have excusyd me ageyn myn enmys and nothyng is attyd agenys me, neither herrowr ne heresy that may ben prevyd upon me, thankyd be owr Lord.

The direct address, “My Lord,” is perfectly appropriate in this context. Then, with the word “I,” we have the first person singular nominative pronoun required for speech acts of requesting; with “pray” (which would become “ask” in Modern English) we hear a first person singular present tense verb of speaking; and the proposition follows: the Archbishop is to write that Margery has cleared herself of all charges brought by her enemies and there are now no charges of error or heresy against her, and he is to verify his written words by attaching his official seal to the document. Finally, with a gratuitous “thankyd be owr Lord” Margery ends a sentence that satisfies all the requirements for performance of requests. But the act Margery performs goes beyond this format. Margery *tells* the Archbishop what he should do. He is to grant her request for a letter of safe conduct.

The Archbishop complies, and thus Margery’s “request” succeeds not simply as an act of illocution, which is to say that the Hearer, the Archbishop, is able to respond to it as a request. It also succeeds as

perlocution, perhaps in part because her story of the unforgiving lady and the generous man of the law (the good man of her story is referred to as a “baly,” or bailiff) fits so neatly into the trial scene that Margery Kempe, the dramatist, has created. The Archbishop of York not only grants her wish for a guarantee of safe conduct, he also returns property seized by the Duke of Bedford’s men and provides a guide to help her on her way. Margery is at last free to go home.

But Chapter 54 of *The Book of Margery Kempe* does not end without one final criticism of Margery’s behavior. The Archbishop’s men, now ready to show their respect for her commitment to God, ask her to pray for them, but his steward, hearing her laugh as she goes, says “Holy folke schulde not lawghe” (267). Margery’s response is quick. She has good reason to laugh, she says, and, as Karma Lochrie explains (1991:138), she rejoices not simply because she has triumphed over her accusers, but because the trials she has undergone have made her spiritually stronger. And since I have chosen to focus on Kempe’s skill as a dramatist, I cannot help adding that Margery’s triumphant exit as a character from this scene is as beautifully contrived as the scene itself.

What does Margery Kempe do with words? She tells a story of her life. In the opening scenes of her *Book* she shows herself, a woman twenty-some years of age, despairing of life after the birth of her first child. She tells of her recovery, made possible by a conversation with a young Christ who comes to her in person, and of her later lapses into vanity and lecherous thought. She tells of persecution by people who cannot tolerate the cries she is unable to hold back when overcome by religious fervor. And she tells of difficult pilgrimages in which fellow pilgrims are determined not to associate with her while other people, some of them high-ranking men of the church, help her on her way.

What does Margery, the central character of the scenes just considered, do with the words she speaks? She answers questions about whose daughter she is and where she comes from. She denies the truth of allegations against her, asserting that she does not lie and that she is not a heretic. She asks an accuser to speak in language she can understand. She accuses another accuser of failing to perform his duties as he should. She refuses to be intimidated by threats and, at one point, introduces a threat of damnation that awaits an accuser if he does not show contrition for his own wicked ways. She asserts her right to wear white clothes and to weep when she must weep. She predicts a terrible punishment for adversaries who refuse to stop their swearing. She refuses to make promises she is asked to make, but asserts her own intention to speak the “good words” she knows she must speak for as long as she lives. And finally, in requesting a letter

that will enable her to return safely home to Lynn, she advises the Archbishop of York about the course of action he should take.

And thus we see, in a text dictated by a woman who, according to her own account, did not have the ability to write, abundant illustration of her power to speak in her own defense and to move the hearts of those who would listen to her words.

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