

# MARGERY KEMPE

HELEN STEELE

In the early fifteenth century, the Church persecuted heretics and Lollards throughout England, yet Margery Kempe avoided punishment. While many people despised her, she acquired powerful allies to protect her from the anger of her enemies. In particular, many churchmen who listened to her found no fault in her piety. She was thus able to preach, albeit in a limited fashion and to move about both England and Europe.

Attitudes to Margery ranged from utter loathing to deep respect and compassion. Many of those who opposed Margery were ordinary people. When she visited Canterbury for the first time, it was the mob that demanded her death (Chapter 13). Similarly, much of the verbal abuse she suffered in Lynn came from the common people. To them, she must have appeared a peculiar creature. She dressed in white, wept and wailed much of the time and lived much of her life apart from her husband. Christianity had become part of the social fabric, a backdrop to their mundane lives. Sermons in church were a social outing. People treated pilgrimages like vacations. The deep and vocal piety of Margery must have been disquieting to many people. It was a reminder to them of their own spiritual shortcomings. Margery was also about in society, taking her message to people. The people could not avoid her as they could Julian of Norwich and other anchorites who lived apart from society. When on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Rome, Margery's companions treated her terribly because she insisted on piety. They did not want to hear preaching at the dinner table, nor bear her weeping. They could not see, or did not want to see, the spiritual cause for Margery's behavior. By ignoring her, they could also continue to ignore their own failings.

In a sense, Margery was fortunate that her companions only wished to ignore her. Others whom Margery troubled labeled her a heretic and troublemaker. People accused Margery and her husband of slipping away

“to enjoy the lust of their bodies” after vowing chastity (76). It must have been easier to think that of Margery than to confront their own lechery and sins. The Mayor of Leicester accused her of similar faults, calling her a “false strumpet” (46). While certainly he may have been uneasy about her piety, he must have also seen her as a potential danger to the stability of society. Much of the trouble she went through in Leicester and later Yorkshire seems to have stemmed from a worry that her preaching would incite popular unrest. In York, the Archbishop tried to have her swear to “not teach people or call them to account in my diocese (52). In particular, they worried about the effect of her influence upon other women. They berated Margery for traveling without written permission from her own husband (52) and accused her of inciting a noble lady to leave her husband (54). In a society in which men held all of the power, Margery's actions must have seemed threatening. Margery broke with convention. She had left her husband behind in Lynn, spoke directly with women about faith and inspired other women to piety. It would have been so much easier to everyone had she followed the advice of the men in Beverley to “Give up this life that you lead, and go and spin and card wool, as other women do...” (53).

However, many people supported Margery through her life. The common people of Lynn might have been discomfited with Margery much of the time, but when they needed spiritual consolation they turned to her. When they were near death, they had Margery pray for their souls (72). A troubled husband had her calm his wife with post-partum depression (75). When they needed God in their lives, Margery was a solace rather than an annoyance and her piety reminded them not of their own failings but of the presence of God. Similarly, she received aid and comfort while on her journeys from those who were able to accept her message. Both rich and poor alike could see the

devotion of Margery. These people, such as Margaret Florentyne (38) or Thomas Marchale (45), were able to support Margery and speak in her defense when she was wrongly accused.

Although support from the laity was important to Margery's safety, her support from the clergy was to prove more vital. Those clerics who did not know her, such as the friar who preached against her in Lynn (61) might have reviled her. However, those who knew her best supported her. Her confessor Robert Spryngolde, Master Aleyn and other priests and friars often came to her defense. Presumably, they were secure enough in their own faith to be unthreatened by her spirituality and knew her well enough to know she was sincere. Naturally, some clergy were suspicious at first and tested her gift. In many cases, however, a discussion with Margery was enough. Certainly, the weeping was not without precedent. Other female mystics had wept uncontrollably and some of the clergy would seem to have been aware of the phenomenon. Extended discussions with senior clergy brought her yet more allies. In 1413, Margery visited the Archbishop of Canterbury and gained his understanding (16). Later she obtained the approval of his successor.

The senior churchmen who approved of her, helped her and ultimately saved her from charges of heresy and

Lollardism seemed to have realized that she was sincere. While her manner was unorthodox, her faith was clearly not. She was able to recite the Articles of Faith and to explain her convictions with clarity (48, 51). She believed in pilgrimage in a way that Lollards did not, she was devout about taking communion and she stressed her belief in the validity of the sacraments. She posed no threat to the authority of the Church in the way that women such as Marguerite of Porete had done. Indeed, by putting herself in the hands of the Church and showing obedience to her confessor and to the senior churchmen she had met, she reconfirmed the importance of the Church in her life and in the life of the community. Compared with the radicalism of the followers of Wycliffe and other heretics, she must have appeared more eccentric than dangerous.

Margery Kempe lived an unusual life that frequently went beyond the normal boundaries of convention. While she made a great number of enemies by her unusual behavior, her intense piety and her wanderings, she also accrued a number of influential friends. Indeed, the idea of Margery seemed to have been more threatening than the reality of the woman herself. When they met her and recognized her essential orthodoxy, many of her detractors changed their minds. She was thus able to navigate the perilous times unscathed.