

LITERATURE

MAPPING THE PROBLEMS OF SEXUAL DESIRE IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE**

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Because he dreams of seeding the world with
words
his eyes bite
She looks He looks away
He is snowblind
from staring at her breasts
They make love
This is marked by asterisks
those gaps
disguised as stars

* * *

He thinks the future is a mouth
She invites him into her apple¹

Erica Yong's interpretation of original sin brings forward the very controversial question of the initial fallibility of women. Eve, the first temptress, appears to be the first active element in the history of mankind and, as it seems, it is her activity that forwards the couple's banishment from paradise. Yet, to many scholars (Bal 1987: 11-36) Eve is not the physical cause of the fall; she symbolizes the coming of the inevitable, the recognition of sexual identity. Paradise lost, then, signifies the beginning of the human world with human sexuality as the creative and affir-

* This article is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Annual PASE conference in Poznań, May 1995.

mative force of life. Erica Yong's redefining of the symbolic apple intensifies the sin of carnal knowledge. In the symbol of the "apple" knowledge is equated with the recognition of fleshly desires and earthly needs, which in turn is responsible for the development of individual identity. This paper deals with female subjectivity in the Late Middle Ages as exemplified in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In Kempe's book the terms of the two domains, the erotic and the metaphysical, are interchangeable, raising the question of the true nature of mystical union with the divine. My paper discusses the issue of control over one's body, mapping the problems of sexual desire disguised as ideal love for the Son of God.

Margery Kempe was considered to be a minor mystic, as Knowles observes (1961: 149) "little of spiritual instruction is to be found in her book". She was classified as a second-rate writer not because of a doubtful value and authenticity of her experience but because of the awkwardness in which she renders her visions. Her mysticism lacks the spiritual insight we find in so many other mystical works. Undoubtedly, there is earthly simplicity in her communication with God. As Margery Kempe was dictating her text, by contemporary standards she was not creating the book, she was recreating herself through her visions of God. She narrates the events chronologically only to confirm her own spiritual development. Thus, her desire to fully understand the love of God gives her work a confessional nature. Putting genuine divine experience into primary position the text, however, often makes itself available to an erotic reading. Love scenes in her autobiographical self-conception are the generative matrix of the text.

Margery Kempe externalizes in her cumbersome manner her inner psychic needs, she attempts to recreate herself as a woman through her love of Jesus. Her book presents a reflection of identity as the surface of a mirror. She is the ultimate centerfold, embedded – when her text is published – within the narrative of the priest. She performs a self-definition in relation to significant others. The "I" of the text is changed by the priest into "she", but usually she features as "this creature". So we, as readers, are additionally distanced from the author's self. And, what is more, textually that self loses part of control over her confessions. It is that process of "speaking" that plays a crucial role in the process of appropriating subjecthood. And here even more so than in later female writings one can see how she becomes the "thief of language" (Rubin Suleiman 1986: 10). As female autobiographer she mediates her selfhood through the text that is being created, her invisibility results from her lack of a tradition, and marginality in the male-dominated culture. Her fragmentation is social and political as well as psychological.

Margery, however, attains a sense of self-importance through the feeling of being chosen by God. Such certainty was very much needed not only to convince the priest about the value of her visions that had to be written down, but also establish her own voice in relation to the community she lived in. Julian of Norwich, another mystic, writes in her *Revelations*: "because I am a woman you should I therefore believe that I ought not to tell you about the goodness of God since I saw at the time that it is his will that it be known?" as if expecting negative reaction of the part of the male audience. Margery as a wife and a mother had

very different duties than those of learning and instructing others. Julia Kristeva claims that Christianity defined femininity through maternity (Kristeva 1986: 161). "Because of their identity in gender with their mothers or because of social training, women have always tended to perceive themselves through their relationships to family rather than as isolated individuals" (Higonnet 1986: 73). If Margery wanted to be heard as an individual voice she had to negotiate the validity of her experience, because as an author she is framed in the conditions of her femininity, social class and marital status.

The concept of authorship is inseparably connected with the concept of authority. The name of the author signifies the beginning of the process of individuation. Mediating the author's position in this text one has to bear in mind the position of women in the society. The history of women's writing is the history of silence and repression institutionalized through the Scripture. Women were supposed to be silent because silence affirmed patriarchal values of respect (read subjugation) towards fathers, brothers and husbands; garrulous women were always scorned in pastoral and pedagogical texts. Denying them words meant denying them the right to express themselves. Writing the self out also meant power and control over oneself, and a woman was necessarily identified with powerlessness and a lack of authority. No wonder Margery was ostracized by her society. According to medieval scholars, women were not capable of controlling their desires or regulating their relations with others. They needed men to tame and channel the intrinsic excess of their nature (Klapisch-Zuber 1994: 14). Medieval literary education, because of some prevailing attitudes that were hostile to women, perpetuated their subordination.

The way of dealing with that situation was appropriation and submission to the authority and working within the hostile environment against all odds. Almost all women visionaries stress that they wrote down their experiences, or had them written down with great reluctance and only under obedience to some superior authority. The literary mystic presents herself as merely a passive vehicle for her experiences and for edifying the message of God's love to verify this. Loosing oneself to God should lead to a thinning out, even disappearance of the writer's personality. The writer hopes to write herself out of her text. Mystics strive for a union with the divine, which means a partial annihilation of the self. Yet, strangely enough Margery is not annihilated; on the contrary, she emerges from the text as a creature whose experience accelerated the individuation process through the externalization of her unconscious desires. She is far from being a subjugated little wife. The text does not offer a passivized female figure but a woman who at some point wants to take her life in her hands. She breaks the silence and talks about such taboos as woman's life and the miseries of pregnancy and childbirth. She also rejects institutionalized religion striving for her individuality and an individual approach to God.

She has the confidence that she has a very personal relationship with God. To her weeping and frequent tears signal that very relationship, while clearly presenting a case of hysteria which according to Freud, hysteria stems from access femininity which is why it is a female disease connected with repression of the

libidinal neurosis (Brennan 1992: 144). She considers herself an obedient daughter of God, while in reality, she is fulfilling her inner needs, which she thinks are the commands of God. Her individuality then, is rooted in the gradual development of the imperative to take control over her own body. One of the ways of assuming control was through observing certain religious rites like fasting or wearing a hair-shirt. She refused to share her husband's meals. Bunyam assumes that fasting came out as the psychic replacement and blocking out (repressing) painful experiences connected with "legal rape". Part of such an attitude was the result of enduring physical brutality and constantly confronting pain and degradation (Bunyam 1987: 213). Prolonged fasting also defied body functions such as menstruation, (menstrual blood was considered unclean and the connected with the lack of purity) and bring her closer to the spiritual ideal. Finally, Margery refuses to conform to her position of subordination to her husband by denying him the privilege of controlling her body.

And so she said to her husband 'I may not deny you my body but all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone'. But he would have his will with her, and she obeyed with much weeping and sorrowing because she could not live in chastity. And often this creature advised her husband to live chaste and said that they had often (she knew well) displeased God by their inordinate love, and the great delight that each of them had in using the other's body and bow it would be a good thing if by mutual consent they punished and chastised themselves by abstaining from the lust of their bodies (46-47).²

One of the consequences of eating the apple in paradise was sexual knowledge, for which in later Christianity is treated with abhorrence. The sins of the body usually required severe repentance.³ The split between body and soul, retrospectively blamed on woman, is further represented through Church teachings about human physicality being the cause of corruption and evil. The ideal achieved through fasting, ascetic behavior and prayer, in fact, approached the state before the split, with the sexually undifferentiated nature of earth creatures. While trying to maintain sexual abstinence Margery struggles not only with her husband but also with herself.

Yet, here lies another problem, opposition towards her husband's needs, equally sinful as subduing to his lust. The good woman should have been silent, passively abiding to what was being inflicted upon her. "Since man is the head of woman as Christ is the head of man, any wife who does not submit to her husband, that is to her head, is guilty of the same crime as is a man who does not submit to his head (Christ)" says Master Gracian of Bologna (Blamires 1992: 82). A married woman's husband was her universe, she should forget herself and live through others, her family. Her body belonged to her husband while the spirit belonged to God. Margery gives both her soul and her body to Christ, striving for eternal

² All quotations from *The Book of Margery Kempe* are from Windeatt 1994.

³ For more information on the Church views on sexual abstinence see Foucault 1980 and Deschner 1994.

bliss which will result from mutual incorporation. She is remapping sexual relationships into the "egalitarian" domain of religion (and out of the male-dominated home).⁴ In this aspect Margery represents a modern woman, responsible and willing to negotiate the terms of life together, but also self-centered and fulfilled through the attainment of her needs. When asked by her husband if she would "commune fleshly" with him if his life depended on it, she said no. "You are no good wife" (58) said the husband. And he was right. By all medieval standards she was not a good wife at all.

"And in all this time she had no desire to have intercourse with her husband, and it was very painful and horrible to her." (49) Rejection of sexual activity brings us to the complex images of self-denial and physical desire which intertwine in the text. Yet, symbolically through giving up her sexuality she composes herself, "embracing the self" (Bunyam 1987:263) as the sign of closeness with Christ.

Then on the Wednesday of Easter week when her husband wanted to have intercourse with her, as she was used to before, and when he was coming near to her she said: "Jesus help me," and he had no power to touch her at that time in that way, nor ever after that with carnal knowledge (56) ... When she asked her husband why he did not made love to her for the last eight weeks, since she lay with him every week night in his bed he answered that did not dare to do so any more (58) ... and finally he wished her: "May your body be as freely available to God as it has been to me" (60).

In this way Margery wins. She defies the common conviction that female identity can only be proven through her husband's. Her sexuality (the symbolic apple) was a liberating element and therefore had to be controlled because such was the law of nature. Medieval scholars compared the sexual desire of women to moist wood, slow to take flame but apt to burn for a long time. Men were intrigued by the secret ardor of women (Thomasset 1994: 61). The constraints on carnal love were designed to control female sexuality, which to medieval men was a source of great mystery (Dalarun 1994: 19-20). Medieval misogyny originated from the fear of that power. When repentance and confession became integral elements of Christian conduct, in the process of confessional extracting the "truth", fleshly desires were transformed into discourse. And such discourse enabled the control within the patriarchal structures. The destructive force of women could be channelled into procreation and domestic functions and turned away from sexual liberation which meant freedom.

Yet Margery seems to be confused because of the clash between her attempt to fashion her identity according to clerical version of purity and sancticity (the good woman image) and the need to have control over herself. The assumption was that a wife was always inferior to a virgin (the loss of the seal was irreparable

⁴ My colleague Agnieszka Rzepa suggests that Margery Kempe while denying her body to her husband and fantasizing about Christ still remains inscribed within patriarchal structures. I agree with such an interpretation, yet for my line of argument it is not the absolute, ultimate change of medieval consciousness which is important but rather very act of defiance as significant for the beginning of gradual changes of power dynamics that take place within her family.

morally and physically) and the only way for a married woman to restore the state of grace was to bring forth children and obey her wifely duties with humility. Scholars believed that the loss of virginity made women vulnerable, or that motherhood deprived them of their capacity to fight (Huston 1986: 129); hence, the ideology of salvation for married women was inseparably connected motherhood. It had nothing to do with dignity and respect for motherhood. A body marked by sexual knowledge was always dirty. The uniqueness, the Virgin's ideal could only be attained "through an exacerbated masochism: a concrete woman, worthy of the feminine ideal embodied by the Virgin as an inaccessible goal, could only be a nun, a martyr or, if she was married, one who leads a life that would remove her from the "earthly" condition and dedicate her to the highest sublimation alien to her body. A bonus, for a good life was the promised *jouissance*" (Kristeva 1986: 181)⁵. Margery, after fourteen pregnancies, starts to have visions and reports conversations with God who commands her to exercise her right to live in chastity. Challenging the socially assigned role of mother and a wife she subverted the authority of the husband and patriarchal structures and was so persistent in her claims of communication with God, that even the priests gave up.

These problems of conflicting attitudes are frequently translated into discourse in her conversations with God. She realizes that the state of wedlock is less perfect than the state of maidenhood in her communication with God, searching for comfort and approval which she receives in the form of assurance "I love you, daughter, as much as any maiden in the world." (85). Throughout the text she speaks of the desire to be loved and incorporated and that the Lord would not forsake her. Her individual relationship with God is one of mutual envelopment; hence, God's reciprocal desire can also be described in erotic, physical terms. She seeks protection against those who are against her "...daughter, the more shame, contempt and rebuke that you suffer for my love, the better I love you, for I behave like a man who greatly loves his wife: the more envy that other men have of her, the better he will dress her to spite his enemies" (78-79). The metaphors of Christ as the husband again reveal her spiritual needs of for affection and care. In such moments her metaphysical desire has been remapped onto yet another metaphorical (and physical) domain: the figures of Christ the groom and Christ the child become interchangeable.

Reporting God's words about his love for her she also speaks about the physical union between mother and child. The love between mother and child is equally mutual, and Margery uses this biological relationship as a metaphor for the relationship of individuals with God; one which is not abstract, not even dependent, the metaphor suggests, on a philosophical leap of faith (a disembodied conceptualization): a link as natural and inevitable as the physical bond of kinship.

When you strive to please me, then, you are a true daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and my Passion, then you are a true mother having compassion for her child; when you weep for other people's sins and adversities, then you are a true sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a true spouse and

⁵ Kristeva understands *jouissance* both in terms of psychological as well as physical satisfaction.

wife, for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company. (67).

The ultimate union is reached, however, not through the mother-child bond but when she has the revelation of being married to God. "He told her that she should be wedded to Godhead and before the Holy trinity and all the Saints." (123). Margery desires eternal bliss, eternal spiritual orgasm, a metaphysical union with God. The words that she hears in her soul maintain a connection between that eternal bliss itself and the domain of the erotic: for God/Heaven itself can be described as the one great body of which each individual desires to become a part. And the highest level of intimacy is established through the words of the need for physical union.

Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son. For I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head my feet as sweetly as you want (126-127).

The voice that Margery hears, which calls her beloved daughter, mother and wife, is the cry of a woman entrapped within the patriarchal system. Her work recreates the first feminine experience functioning within the complex structure of medieval male-dominated textual culture preserving the tension between selfhood and textuality. Margery is trying to raise herself above her earthliness, yet the way she conveys her visions clearly suggests a psychoanalytic case of repressed sexuality. Her need to eschew physicality (fasting and contemplation) and become spirit is also a sign of liberation and female autonomy. The symbolic search for the ideal love both on the part of children (Christ as a child) as well as a husband (Christ as a bridegroom) serves to counterbalance the misogyny and sexual abuse encountered on daily basis. The apple is the forbidden fruit because she is or rather makes herself the forbidden fruit in this way symbolically assuming the control over her own life.

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