

## The Real Margery Kempe

Abridged version of a talk given in King's Lynn Minster by Susan Maddock on 19 October 2022

### Introduction

The sole extant manuscript of Margery's Kempe's *Book* turned up in a country house in the 1930s, and since 1980 has been in the British Library. Before this rediscovery, Margery Kempe was known only from some short extracts printed in the sixteenth century. The manuscript has no title, and its subject is mainly referred to in the third person, as 'this creature'. Her name appears only 17 times; all but one of those just as 'Margery'. Just once, she is described as 'Margery Kempe of Lynne'.

Margery was born around 1373. She was the daughter of John de Brunham [Burnham] of Lynn, one of the town's leading merchant-burgesses: he was mayor five times between 1370 and 1392, then for several years alderman of the Holy Trinity merchant guild. Around 1393, Margery married another merchant-burgess of Lynn called John Kempe, but, after having 14 children, she persuaded her husband to agree to her leading a life of chastity and religious devotion. She died sometime after 1439.

Margery's Kempe's *Book* is not a refined and polished production: its early chapters, in particular, were written down piecemeal, so events don't always unfold in a logical sequence. That makes the early chapters hard to follow on a first reading, but the travel sections, which take up around half the *Book*, are full of drama and have a great narrative flow.

### Margery Kempe's travels and encounters with 'Duchemen'

Most of Margery's early travels across England were in the company of her husband, John Kempe. He was broadly sympathetic to his wife's aspirations for a holy life, with the exception, at least to start with, of her desire for chastity, and there are some touching insights into their marriage from this part of the *Book*. Margery says that John was 'evyr a good man and an esy man to hir', but even he was occasionally so alarmed by the public attention she attracted that he abandoned her for a while, as he did when they were at Canterbury together. She had been weeping noisily all day in and around the Cathedral, so infuriating people nearby that they began shouting that she should be burned as a Lollard - a heretic. Later that day, Margery was outside the city walls, the gates closed behind her. She was tired and disorientated, and didn't know how to get to the 'Dewchmannys hows' [a German's house] where she and her husband were staying. In answer to her prayers, two 'fayr yong men' kindly guided her back to her inn. This is one of several occasions in the *Book* when Margery was helped out of a tight spot by one or more handsome young men. It is also one of many mentions of encounters with 'Dewch/Duche' people.

A description of a dinner party in Rome, where Margery stayed for several months after returning from the Holy Land in 1414, shows how much easier Margery found it to communicate with Germans than with other non-English speakers. She had become acquainted with a 'Dewche' priest who lived in the city, and whom she first encountered in a church saying mass. To begin with, they used an interpreter, but after many days of diligent prayer, he found he could understand English, but only when Margery was speaking. This enabled him to become her confessor for the rest of her time in Rome, and he demonstrated, when tested by a party of English-speakers, that he

and Margery could understand one another, even though he could not follow the conversation of other English speakers.

At home in Lynn the voices of people from northern Europe and the Low Countries, speaking forms of what eventually would turn into modern German (Deutsch) and modern Dutch, would have been familiar - not only from visiting merchants and shipmen, but also among resident immigrants. Conversely, English apprentices to Lynn merchants often spent long periods abroad in their formative years. Margery's own son took up permanent residence in Danzig (now Gdansk), married a 'Duche' woman and ended up writing, and perhaps also speaking, a blend of languages described in the *Book* as neither good English nor 'Dewch'. In 1431, this son and his wife travelled to Lynn to stay with Margery, leaving their child with friends in Danzig. Unfortunately, he became ill the day after they arrived, and he died soon after, leaving his German-speaking wife a widow in a foreign land. She stayed in Lynn for 18 months and then, in 1433, arrangements were made for her to go home. Margery accompanied her daughter-in-law to Ipswich, in order to see her off. On the way, Margery became convinced that God wanted her to continue all the way to Danzig, and embarked, somewhat unprepared, on her last foreign trip. Margery stayed in Danzig for five or six weeks, enjoying 'ryth good cher of meche pepil', before returning overland. The vicissitudes of this last journey are described in exceptionally vivid detail in the last main section of the *Book*.

### **The *Book* as historical evidence: how reliable is it?**

Some of Margery's contemporaries accused her of lying and hypocrisy, and in modern times some commentators have seen the *Book* as partly fictional. There is no reason to doubt the *Book*'s veracity as regards facts, given that independent evidence has been found to verify a good number of events it describes. But what about its more subjective statements?

One issue on which Margery took a decisive partisan stand was the longstanding campaign by supporters of the daughter chapel of St Nicholas to make it 'lych to the parysch church'; to get its own font, in particular. They reinforced their case by rebuilding the chapel, on a spectacular scale, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Margery was a passionate supporter of her parish church of St Margaret, and she described those who pursued the cause of St Nicholas, and whose wealth had rebuilt the chapel, as 'ryche men, worshepful marchawntys, [who] haddyn gold anow, wech may spede in every nede, and that is rewth that mede chuld spede er than trewth' (a shame that money speaks louder than truth). Having plotted the distribution of wealth across the borough, I have found that the North End of Lynn, centred around St Nicholas, **was** consistently the richest in the town, thanks to its prime location and the number of wealthy merchants who lived there. Margery's description of the 'ryche men, worshepful marchawntys' around St Nicholas's chapel may sound prejudiced, but is backed up by archival evidence.

Another instance is Margery's assertion that John Kempe seemed an unlikely match for her because 'sche was comyn of worthy kenred'. It comes early on in the *Book*, when she describes how addicted she was in her youth to fashionable and extravagant clothes. When her husband remonstrated with her about her 'pompous aray', Margery snapped back at him that **she** came from worthy kin; he [John Kempe] had never seemed a likely match for her: **her** father was a former mayor and since then he had been alderman of the high guild of the Trinity. And therefore she would uphold the honour of her kin, whatsoever any man said.

It has been suggested that Margery's assertion that John Kempe seemed an unlikely match for her was ill-founded, as well as unkind: John Kempe was a merchant-burgess of Lynn, as was Margery's father, so from the same group of around 100 Lynn merchants from whom the mayor, guild alderman, councillors, chamberlains and MPs were selected. John Kempe made a promising start on a civic career around the time of his marriage, serving a year as chamberlain and joining the borough's ruling group of councillors, but soon afterwards his name drops out of the records of borough government, and he took no part in town affairs thereafter. This lack of ambition fits well with Margery's description of him as being 'content wyth the goodys that God had sent'. John Kempe comes over in the *Book* as a very sympathetic character: 'evyr a good man and an esy man to her', as Margery herself put it. But she goes further, describing how 'in hir yong age sche had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys and inordinat lovys to hys persone'. It appears that this was a love-match, and not the kind of strategic alliance we might have expected.

Margery's father, John de Brunham, wasn't just a top man among twenty or so of the most powerful merchants in a borough of great commercial and strategic importance. He had a national profile which outranked his contemporaries in Lynn: he was, for example, the only Lynn burgess in his lifetime to be appointed a justice of the peace for Norfolk, as well as for Lynn - a role which brought him into close contact with the county's aristocracy and gentry. His status really was higher than has previously been appreciated and Margery's assessment of her husband's as lesser was well founded, albeit unkindly expressed.

### **Margery Kempe and her friends in a time of conflict**

A related charge has been made by some commentators that Margery felt undermined by social changes in Lynn and reshaped her own life story through her *Book* to manufacture a new status for herself as a religious celebrity. There **were** significant social changes in Lynn during Margery's lifetime, and underlying tensions were brought to the boil by a protracted legal campaign in the early 1400s against the overlordship of the bishop of Norwich. This had been driven by the borough's small ruling group, consisting exclusively of the wealthiest merchant-burgesses: men like Margery's father. The bishop - the belligerent Henry Despenser - fought back, and the whole enterprise was an expensive and humiliating failure, followed by years of bitter conflict, riots and protests.

Artisans and others who were running businesses in the town, but weren't merchants engaged in international trade, had a much bigger role in all these events than was previously supposed. Such people, described as 'artificers', were as dismayed as some of the lesser merchants at the consequences of the anti-episcopal fiasco to the borough's finances and reputation. Dissenting merchants and well-off artificers now had a common grievance: they were all stakeholders in the borough economy, but lacked a political voice, and the more militant among them took direct action. Mayoral elections were swamped by reformers, many of them artificers who were hastily given burgess status so they could secure a reformist candidate as mayor. In a heroic effort to resolve the conflicts, the borough experimented with a radical new governing constitution devised through a process of arbitration, but it went too far, too fast, was unwieldy in practice and failed to reconcile the factions. The crown, increasingly exasperated, intervened, and in 1415 even overrode local autonomy by appointing its own nominee as mayor. That went down badly with all sides. A year later, the radical new procedures were abandoned in the interests of restoring stability.

The game-changer seems to have been the appointment of a new bishop of Norwich, John Wakeryng, in 1416. He oversaw the return to the old customs and procedures. But in the 'new normal' the body of burgesses was larger, and its character had changed. Around half, rather than a tiny minority, were now artificers, not merchants, and they had now acquired some political experience. Bishop Wakeryng seems to have understood this, acting as midwife to the introduction of an annually elected common council of 27 burgesses, an addition to the borough's governing structure which proved successful and long-lasting. The first common council, elected in 1418, consisted of sixteen ordinary merchant-burgesses and eleven artificers: all those eleven had become burgesses as part of a mass influx just before the mayoral election in 1412. This did not mean that artificer-burgesses had equal rights with merchants. Only merchants were entitled to have their apprentices admitted as burgesses without paying an entry fee; artificers' apprentices had to pay the same £2 entry fine as outsiders. That last distinction was abolished in 1425, when an exceptionally diplomatic mayor invited the artificers to put their case to a Guildhall meeting. They won, despite some vocal mercantile opposition, and the proof of the pudding is the gradual appearance of artificers in the inner council of 24 jurats and, by 1436, as mayors of Lynn. This wasn't just a shift in the personnel and character of its merchant elite, it was the breaking of the merchants' monopoly on power.

We might expect Margery to be dismayed by these changes, especially as her father and brother (or half-brother) were part of the old regime, and both suffered during the troubles. But some of Margery's friends appear to have been peacemakers. One of her longest-standing supporters in Lynn was the distinguished Carmelite friar, Alan of Lynn, who came from a family of immigrant artificers (his grandfather, Stephen Warnekyn, was a tailor who moved to Lynn from German-speaking parts of the Continent before 1374). It is a telling tribute to the respect in which Alan was held that he was invited to join Thomas Hevingham, the Prior of Lynn, at a critical meeting in the Guildhall in December 1412. This was a tense occasion, when over 400 people packed into the hall to listen to an exposition of the controversial new borough constitution. Another of Margery's best friends, her parish priest and confessor, Robert Springold, seems to have been trusted equally by old-regime merchants and up and coming artificers: he was chosen as an executor by men in both categories.

One man who spoke up for Margery when she was at her most unpopular is described as 'a worschepful burgeys, the wech in fewe yerys aftyr was meyr of Lenne'. He is not named, but in all probability he was John Permonter, the mayor who resolved the conflict between the merchants and artificers in 1425. At the end of his mayoralty he was described as a respected and energetic man, humane and understanding, who established peace and tranquillity between different status groups in the town.

Not only did some of Margery Kempe's friends act as peacemakers in the long-running conflict over the borough's governance and the status of burgesses, but she had connections in her later years with at least some artificer-burgesses. When she applied to join the Trinity guild in the mid 1430s, the guarantor for her £5 entry fee was one of the artificers who had benefited most from recent reforms: a successful commercial brewer called John Asshenden. Together with his friend and business partner, Edward Mayn, he owned the biggest brewery in Lynn. They had both had been among 112 artificers controversially admitted as burgesses in 1412; both benefited from reforms introduced in 1418 and 1425. Asshenden was elected to the common council in 1419; a chamberlain the year after. He joined the inner council of twenty-four jurats in 1435 and in 1440 was the second non-merchant to be elected mayor of Lynn. It is also possible that he was Margery

Kempe's son-in-law. His wife, Isabel, joined the guild in the 1430s at about the same time as Margery, together with Edward Mayn's wife, Joan.

Despite her pride in her family background, the older Margery seems to have embraced the changing social order in her home town; one in which merchant-burgesses like her father had begun to share power with successful artisans and commercial brewers. And Margery's decision, along with Isabel Asshenden and Joan Mayn, to enrol in the rich and powerful Trinity guild feels symbolic of reconciliation. The guild had once embodied the dominance of the old-style merchant-burgesses, but now included newly empowered artificers and their wives.

## Conclusion

The balance of evidence suggests that Margery Kempe **was** a reliable witness of the events she chose to describe. The context of her *Book* - its stated aim of providing a comforting treatise for sinful wretches - makes its contents selective, but the same is true of all historical sources. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is an exceptionally rich - and entertaining - piece of oral history in written form. It is a unique document of which her town and her church can and should be very proud.

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susan.maddock@uea.ac.uk

## Further reading

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, Early English Text Society, 212 (London, 1940).

*The Book of Margery Kempe* [an accessible modern translation], ed. Anthony Bale (Oxford, 2015).

British Library, Add MS 61823 [digitised version of the unique manuscript]: [https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_61823](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_61823).

Anthony Bale, *Margery Kempe. A Mixed Life* (London, 2021).

Kate Parker, 'Lynn and the Making of a Mystic', in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. J.H. Arnold and K. Lewis (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 55-73.

Susan Maddock, 'Margery Kempe's home town and worthy kin', in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Laura Varnam and Laura Kalas (Manchester, 2021), pp. 163-84.

Susan Maddock, 'Encountering the 'Duche' in Margery Kempe's Lynn', in *The Fifteenth Century XIX: Enmity and Amity*, ed. Linda Clark (Woodbridge, 2022), pp. 90-112.