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The Spiritual Development of a Medieval Woman: *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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Bir Orta Çağ Kadınının Ruhani Gelişimi: *Margery Kempe'in Kitabı*

Öz– Doğum tecrübesine kadar sıradan bir hayat yaşayan Margery Kempe, hayatını bağlıklıkla Tanrı'ya adayan kadın bir mistiğe dönüşmüştür. Okuma yazma bilmemesine rağmen, Orta Çağ toplumunda kadın bir mistik olarak kendi deneyimine odaklanarak hayat hikayesini anlatabilmiştir. İsa'yla ilgili hayali gördüğü şeylerin hikayesi hakkında iki erkek katip tarafından yazılan *Margery Kempe'in Kitabı* adlı otobiyografik çalışması, ataerkil toplumda bir Orta Çağ kadınının hayatına dair pek çok detayla birlikte, Margery'nin ruhani gelişimini tasvir etmektedir. Kendisi için ruhani bir kariyer çizen Margery, toplumunun kısıtlayıcı kurallarına direnmiştir ve kitabı aracılığıyla kendisini güçlendirmiştir. Bu çalışma, *Margery Kempe'in Kitabı*'nda anlatılan hayat hikayesine göre Margery Kempe'i sıradan bir Orta Çağ kadını, mistik bir kadın ve hacı olarak öne çıkarmayı amaçlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler– Margery Kempe, *Margery Kempe'in Kitabı,* Orta Çağ'da Kadınlar, Mistik.

The Spiritual Development of a Medieval Woman: *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Abstract– Living an ordinary life until her experience of childbirth, Margery Kempe turned into a female mystic who devotedly dedicated her life to God. Despite her illiteracy, she was able to tell her own life story by focusing on her experience as a female mystic in the medieval society. As an account of her visions of Christ, her autobiographical work, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, written by two male scribes, depicts Margery's spiritual development tinged with various details about the life of a medieval woman in the patriarchal society. Making a spiritual career for herself, Margery resisted the restrictive norms of her society and empowered herself through her book. This paper aims to bring the figure of Margery Kempe into focus as an ordinary medieval woman, a female mystic and a pilgrim in reference to her life story narrated in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Keywords – Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Women in the Middle Ages, Mystic.

Introduction

Born in Bishop's Lynn in England, Margery Kempe (1373-1438) is one of the eccentric female figures in the medieval period. Coming from an eminent family, Margery was the daughter of John Brunham who was the mayor of Lynn five times, a merchant and a member of the parliament. At the age of twenty, she married John Kempe and, hence, she shared a similar fate with the majority of medieval women by moving from one patriarchal domain to another and became a wife and a mother. However, the pain of childbirth induced her to have the first vision of Christ, and her life totally changed after a while since she dedicated herself to the love of God. *The Book of Margery Kempe* – probably written in the second half of the 1430s – recites Margery's life story in fragments by focusing on her spiritual experiences as indicated in "The Proem," the prologue part of the book: "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan thyngs befellyn."[1]This work encompasses Margery's spiritual development in that she abandons earthly pleasures and concerns and metamorphoses into a pious figure with the guidance of God. While the book presents her personal life story in the manner of autobiography in its episodic chapters, this work mostly covers her spiritual experiences with the details on her sufferings and pilgrimages similar to hagiographical writings. Therefore, Margery's work, according to Laurie A. Finke, is "a mélange of medieval genres. It is part hagiography, part mystical revelations, part confession, part travelogue."[2]

Yet, as Clarissa W. Atkinson suggests, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is "a most unusual autobiography"[3] in that Margery's authorship becomes a topic of discussion because of her illiteracy. She was an illiterate figure, but she was able to produce a text of her visions upon God's order after twenty years of spiritual experiences. She dictated her experiences to two different male scribes, the first of whom was a man living in Germany with poor English; the second scribe was a priest, and he corrected the first scribe's writing and helped Margery to finish her book although it took a few years for him to believe in the author of the book. The act of writing by the two male figures, however, makes one question the voice of Margery as an author[4] since her experiences are not narrated by herself. On the other hand, "The Proem" is functionally used to draw attention to the fact that Margery Kempe is the authoritative figure considering that this work is particularly about Margery's own experiences as a mystic woman in the medieval society. She is able to gain a kind of authority throughout her spiritual progress and defines her identity in her relationship with God. Rather than a domestic woman at home with her husband and children, Margery Kempe becomes a mystic and a pilgrim. This paper, accordingly, aims to analyse Margery Kempe as a medieval woman, mystic and pilgrim with respect to the accounts given in *The Book of Margery Kempe.*

The Ordinary Life of a Medieval Woman as Depicted in Margery Kempe's Life Story

In the Middle Ages, the social status of women was bound to their familial and domestic identity as a daughter, wife, mother or widow. Therefore, marriage played an important role in the representation of women in social life[5] as the position of women changed in relation to their marital or nonmarital status. In this regard, the categorisation of women was linked with "a life stage model of maid-wife-widow" as well as "a hierarchical model of virgin-widow-spouse."[6] This order was constructed by the powerful institution of the Church in the medieval age. The dominant discourse of Christianity shaped female identity in terms of sexuality through the binary images of Eve and the Virgin Mary. As the inferior sex, women, the descendants of Eve, were claimed to be vulnerable to seductions. However, "[a]s the figure of worship, the Virgin Mary focused the painful contradictions in the struggle, waged throughout the Middle Ages, to control female sexuality. Medieval churchmen divided women into a tripartite hierarchy; at the top were virgins, then widows, and last – and least – wives."[7] The beginning of Margery Kempe's work opened in *medias res* in that the work directly introduced Margery as a wife by excluding her previous position as a virgin daughter: "Whan this creatur was twenty yer of age or sumdele mor, sche was maryed to a worschepful burgeys and was wyth chylde wythin schort tyme, as kynde wolde."[8] That is to say, she began her journey in the lowest status of a medieval woman through her marriage.

Initially, Margery's matrimony served the main aim of this type of relationship on the belief that "marriage was intended for procreation."[9] Becoming a wife, Margery, thus, grew into a mother: "And, aftyr that sche had conceyved, sche was labowrd wyth grett accessys tyl the chyld was born, and than, what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng beforn, sche dyspered of hyr lyfe, wenyge sche myght not leyn."[10] From the patriarchal point of view, motherhood is always an important stage in women's lives as it is a sign of more mature identity for women. Anne Woollett advocates that "[m]otherhood is highly valued symbolically as the key to adulthood: having a child makes a woman a mother *and* an adult."[11] However, Margery's motherhood was troublesome as she suffered from labour pain and seemed to lose her healthy mental state after this birth. Along with maternity, her guilty conscience about an unnamed sin made Margery believe that the devil possessed her. It is described that "in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng hir bothe nygth and day duryng the forseyd tyme."[12] She became violent by harming herself and others and lost her mind after the birth. Although this abnormal psychology was related to the idea that Margery was under the control of the devil, her state referred to postpartum depression.[13] To illustrate Margery's problem, postpartum or postnatal depression is the experience of women who cannot adapt themselves to the new identity of motherhood since they are inclined to feel anxious and distressed following delivery as a result of "identity formation, endocrine

[1] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, (Ed. Lynn Staley), Michigan University Press, Michigan, 1996, p. 20.
[2] Laurie A. Finke, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England,* Longman, London, 1999, p. 177.
[3] Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, Cornell University Press, London, 1983, p.18.
[4] Carolyne Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, Routledge, London, 1995. p. 223.
[5] Christine Peters, "Gender, Sacrement and Ritual: The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England", *Past&Present*, 169, 2000, p. 63.
[6] Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 15.
[7] Finke, *Women's Writing,* p. 16.
[8] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.1.21.
[9] Larrington, *Women and Writing*, p. 12.
[10] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.1.21.
[11] Anne Woollett, "Having Children: Accounts of Childless Women and Women with Reproductive Problems", *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies,* (Eds. Ann Phoneix, Anne Wollett, and Eva Llyod), SAGE, London, 1991, p. 53.
[12] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.1.22.
[13] Finke, *Women's Writing,* p. 178. Sandra j. McEntire, "The Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality", *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, (Ed. Sandra J. McEntire), Garland Press, London, 1992, p. 56.

changes and role transition."[14] It is probable to think that Margery went through this sort of depression, but her despair ended with the divine consolation as she had the first vision of Jesus Christ who told her: "Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?"[15]After this spiritual experience, Margery returned to life again and carried out her responsibilities at home[16] although *The Book* did not portray Margery as a mother taking care of her children except for the scenes where she helped her son to repent his sins.[17]

What is more, the domestic territory of home was not the only place that medieval women were located. They appeared in public life by working in different jobs although the options were limited for women. Mavis E. Mate remarks that "[m]arried women, whatever their social class, contributed by their labour to the economic well-being of their families" and lists some works for women such as "baking, brewing, selling fish and preparing wool" as well as some positions in merchantry and land management especially in the cases when the husbands were absent or dead.[18] Likewise, Margery was an active woman in business life for a while. *The Book* illustrates that Margery was of envy and pride in that she ambitiously worked as a brewer: "And than, for pure coveytyse and for to maynten hir pride, sche gan to brewyn and was on of the grettest brewers in the town N a three yer or four tyl sche lost mech good, for sche had nevyr ure therto"[19] Margery's depiction of her business life draws attention to the dominant patriarchal approach to "the notable woman [. . .] viewed as an anomaly, extraordinary in vigor and ambition, an exception to her age"[20] in medieval society. Although she was very successful, she suddenly fell down on the job which led her to believe that God punished her for her interest in material gain.[21] Yet she did not give up and had a horse-mill, but this job also ended with failure. Michael D. Myers expounds that Margery's attempt to achieve success in different jobs can be regarded as "a search to recover status and prestige" and a struggle "to establish feminine independence in an overtly masculine world."[22] However, Margery considered her efforts as the works of her proud nature. Then, she completely understood that her failure in those earthly achievements was God's call for her spiritual development as she told: "An than this creatur, seyng alle this adversytes comyng on every syde, thowr it weryn the skourges of owyr Lord that wold chastyse hir for hir synne. Than sche askyd God mercy and forsoke hir pride, hir coveytyse, and desyr that sche had of the worshepys of the world, and dede grett bodyly penawnce, and gan to entyr the wey of evyrlestyng lyfe."[23]

Margery Kempe as the Female Mystic

Margery's spiritual awakening became more concrete when she heard a heavenly melody one night. The divine music transformed her identity in that it "caused this creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to have ful plentyuows and habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon wyth greet sbbyngs and syhyngys aftyr the blysse of heven, not dredyng the schamys and the spytys of the wretchyd World."[24] From this moment, she began to retreat herself from the world and those around her because God's love only pleased Margery. Therefore, her spiritual development prompted her to have bodily penance at first. Margery made a habit of fasting and praying at the church regularly while dedicating herself to the grace of God. Her strict life style attracted the attention of her community. Carolyn Dinshaw upholds that Margery's new state after hearing the melody "is a very private experience [which] opens up a gapping difference between her and those around her in her everyday sphere." [25] Firstly, she had great trouble with her husband because she wanted to live in chastity. However, this demand was against the nature of marital relationship on the grounds that marriage was based on the conjugal debt which can be defined as follows:

Conjugal debt was a doctrine of medieval theology, enforceable under canon law, that a married person possessed a tightly correlated set of rights and duties to claim sexual relations from his or her marital partner.The idea of the conjugal debt takes its origin in the medieval reflection on the teaching of St. Paul that 'the wife had not authority over her body, but the husband; the husband likewise had not authority over his body, but the wife [. . .].' [26]

In other words, Margery's husband John had the right to ask for intercourse, and his authority over her body was approved by the religious doctrine. As she could not persuade her husband to have the vow of celibacy, Margery continued to give birth. She became a mother of fourteen children, but R. N. Swanson highlights that although "[m]otherhood is a part of her own life [. . .] Margery is strangely silent"[27] about her maternal identity. In relation to the discussion of sexuality, motherhood and celibacy, Eluned Bremner argues that "[a]s a wife and mother of fourteen children she is marked as a sexually active woman yet she resists the cloister as a means of redemption from her fleshly past."[28] For the sake of her spiritual dedication, she challenged John when he asked her "if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kendly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens [. . .] whethher wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr met o medele wyth wyth yow agen as I dede sumtyme?"[29] She replied that keeping her chastity would be more important than his life which angered her husband. He claimed that Margery "arn no good wyfe"[30] as it was his natural right to have sex with his wife. Therefore, Margery felt herself shameful and unworthy of God's mercy as long as she had sex with her husband. As a case in point, when the almighty Lord informed her that she was pregnant again, Margery said "I am not worthy to heryn the spekyn and thus to comown wyth myn husbond. Nerthelesse it is to me gret peyn and grey dysese."[31] Yet God's repsonse to her was outstanding since God's views contradicted the hierarchy of women's status maintained by the Church:

Ya, dowtyr, trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thow dost, for, thow the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of

[14] Virginia N. Walther, "Postpartum Depression: A Review for Perinatal Social Workers", *Social Work in Health Care*, 24(3-4), 1997, p. 100.
[15] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.1.23.
[16] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.1.23.
[17] Kempe, *The Book*, 2.12. 207-213.
[18] Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 14, 15.
[19] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.2.24.
[20] Susan Mosher Stuard, "Introduction", *Women in Medieval Society*, (Ed. Susan Mosher Stuard), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 2.
[21] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.2.24.
[22] Michael D. Myers, "A Fictional-True Self: Margery Kempe and the Social Reality of the Merchant Elite of King's Lynn", *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 31(3), 1999, p. 392.
[23] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.2.25.
[24] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.3.26.
[25] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2012, p. 110.
[26] Charles J. Reid, "Conjugal Debt", *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, (Ed. Margaret Scahus), Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 164.
[27] R. N. Swanson, "Will the Real Margery Kempe Please Stand Up!", *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, (Ed. Diana Wood), Oxbow, Oxford, 2003, p. 148.
[28] Eluned Bremner, "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction", *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, (Ed. Sandra J. McEntire), Garland Press, London, 1992, p. 120.
[29] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.11.37.
[30] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.11.37.
[31] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.21.59.

wedewhode, and the state of wedewhode mor parfyte than the state f wedlake, yet dowtyr I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world.[32]

As can be observed, albeit God's recognition of the rank in terms of women's status, Margery's position was unique in that her wifehood did not diminish God's love for her. After fourteen children, Margery finally took a vow of chastity with her husband, and they started to live separately. Nevertheless, the pressure of the society was felt by Margery as a wife even after their separation. When her husband's health got worse after he had fallen down the stairs, Margery was not only held responsible for nursing him but also accused of his illness by others: "And than the pepil seyd, yyf he deyd, hys wyfe was worthy to ben hangyn for hys deth, forasmeche as sche myth a kept hym and dede not. They dwellyd not togedyr, ne thei lay not togedyr, for, as is wretyn beforn, thei bothyn wyth on assent and wyth fre wil of her eithyr haddyn mad avow to levyn chast."[33] Rather than the pressure of the community, however, Margery was persuaded by God to look after her ill husband for the sake of His love.

In contrast to the rupture in her relationship with John, Margery achieved a spiritual union as Lynn Staley pinpoints that "[t]o this rigid concept of marriage as a physical union, Kempe juxtaposes a different way of thinking about intimacy. Margery abandons physical union with John for spiritual marriage to the Godhead."[34] The spiritual marriage is presented in *The Book* as follows: "Also the Fadyr seyd to this creatur, 'Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn the my prevyteys and my cownselys, for thu schalt wonyn wyth me wythowtyn ende'."[35] Her marriage spiritually took place in front of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Ghost and other saints and apostles as she was told that "I [Godhead] take the, Margery, form y weddyd wyfe, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so that thu be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do."[36] More interestingly, however, this union had complex dynamics because Margery was not only God's bride, but also she played other female roles in her holy relationship with God: "Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, tak eme to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde."[37] To put it differently, Margery became God's wife, daughter and mother in a way that she managed to turn the mundane female roles into a sacred position through her spiritual development.

In addition to her marital relationship, Margery's devotion was also problematised on social level with her community. For instance, before her commitment to God, Margery used to wear gold pipes, fashionable hoods and cloaks to show off.[38] While those clothes were a sign of her social status as a wealthy wife, her interest in her appearance signified her arrogance and pride. After her withdrawal from the earthly concerns, however, Margery turned into a humble figure only wearing white clothes upon God's order. Nevertheless, the colour of white troubled Margery because "[w]hite was a symbol of purity, particularly sexual purity, as well as of holiness."[39] In other words, white was not the colour for wives to wear so "hir owyn cuntremen wer obstynat, and specyaly a preste that was amonx hem. He steryd meche pepyl agen hir and seyd mech evyl of hir, for sche weryd white clothyng mor than other dedyn whech wer holyar and bettyr than evyr was sche as hym thowt."[40] At another instance, the Archbishop of York questioned her white clothes, asking "[w]hy gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?"[41] Then, he ordered his men to tie her because she was "a fals heretyke."[42] Despite such threats and imprisonment, Margery kept her promise to God by wearing white throughout her whole life. Therefore, "Kempe expresses the ideal of spiritual virginity externally by wearing white clothes"[43] in her daily life. Like her clothes, Margery changed her eating habit, too. She fasted regularly and gave up eating meat unless God ordered otherwise. Therefore, she achieved humility with her diet as eating meat was only a privilege of the aristocracy in medieval society,[44] and Margery refused her social class with her rejection to consume meat. She endured the harsh reaction of her society whenever she did not attend their feast.

More troubling than her dressing and eating codes, Margery's weeping was another problematic practice that came out during her spiritual path. God speaking in her mind blessed Margery with weeping out of divine love. However, her cries were so loud that the community who could not have Margery's insight condemned her; she was even othered by the religious figures around her. For example, when Margery was in a church in Canterbury, "sche was gretly despysed and reprevyd for cawse sche wept so fast bothyn of the monkys and prestys and of seculer men ner al a day bothe afornoon and aftyrnoon, also in so mech that hyr husbond went away fro hir as he had not a knowyn hir."[45] Her weeping was a source of discomfort even for the monk that she was declared to be a heretic and a Lollard, and people wanted her to be burnt.[46] Such announcements of Lollardy and heresy were repeated throughout the book because Margery's weeping as her own way of speaking[47] threatened the authority of the Church. Katherine L. French argues that "[s]cholars studying heretical groups often assume that women were more active in heretical sects because of the patriarchal nature of medieval Christianity and the lack of opportunity for women within the established Church."[48] Although her tears were called "fre gyftys of God"[49] for Margery, her incessant weeping, a sign for her everlasting love of God, disrupted sermons and intimidated the power of the Church; hence, she was regarded as a Lollard. Finke further argues that

[t]here is no reason to believe that Kempe was herself a Lollard and much evidence against such a conclusion. Her regular participation in such practices as pilgrimage and fasting, her fascination with relics, her worship of the saints, and her participation in the rituals of the Eucharist all testify to her orthodoxy. Yet she shares with the Lollards a contempt for the wordliness of the clergy, an abhorrence of swearing, and a claim to enjoy a direct relationship with God unmediated by the clergy.[50]

In other words, Margery's private connection with God was against the Church's missionary agency between humankind and God. From this point of view, Margery's weeping became a sort of menace considering that "her tears and her cries [were] her public language, an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in

[32] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.21.59.
[33] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.76.172.
[34] Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania, 1994, p. 63.
[35] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.35.91.
[36] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.35.92.
[37] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.36.94-95.
[38] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.2.24.
[39] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p.51.
[40] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.33.89.
[41] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.52.124.
[42] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.52.124.
[43] McEntire, "The Journey into Selfhood," p. 65.
[44] "Medieval Diet", *British Library*, n.p.
[45] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.13.40-41.
[46] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.13.42.
[47] Huriye Reis, *Adem'in Bilmediği, Havva'nın Gör Dediği: Ortaçağda Türk ve İngiliz Kadın Yazarlar*, Dörtbay Yayıncılık, Ankara, 2005, p. 105-106.
[48] Katherine L. French, "Maidens' Light and Wives' Stores: Women's Parish Guilds in Late Medieval England", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29(2), 1998, p. 400.
[49] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.14.43.
[50] Finke, *Women's Writing,* p. 182.

defiance of the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system."[51]More interestingly, her sense of otherness and her radical opposition to the Church authorities establish a strong tie of female solidarity between Margery and female saints. According to Alexandra Verini, Margery's acts of wearing, eating and crying echo the habits of female saints with whom Margery developed a bond of spiritual female friendship although she had never met them. Verini clarifies the fact that "[s]uch acts suggest that Margery's imitation of female exemplars was the forerunner of a practice of female imitation that adumbrated a larger web of female interconnections. [. . .] Margery's bonds with holy women she has never met can be considered friendships."[52] This amounts to saying that Margery's power resides in the female tradition of religious devotion so that her state of otherness and the acts of discrimination can be deemed relevant to the patriarchal hegemony dominant within the different institutions of medieval society.

Undoubtedly, Margery's appearance with religious authority was intolerable for her society. In one of her private communication with God, it was revealed to Margery that God's voice could be heard in her speech as God was always with her: "I am in the, and thow in me. And thei that heryn the thei heryn the voys of God."[53] In this regard, God's grace was shown in that He even chose a married woman to convey His message. Nevertheless, her words uttered in the public were denounced through religious discourse. The Archbishop of York, for example, warned her not to preach, and a cleric "browt forth a boke and leyd Seynt Powyl for hys party ageyns hir that no woman schulde prechyn."[54] However, she firmly presented herself as God's servant to transmit the divine message and became a kind of prophet figure according to Ellen M. Ross: "Like the biblical prophets [. . .], Kempe perceives herself as God's spokesperson, personally charged to preach the dangers of spiritual lassitude and to deliver God's offer of mercy and compassion, exhorting believers to reform their lives and renew their spiritual vigor."[55] She was thought to have a strong insight thanks to the knowledge that God provided her. At one instance, she helped a monk to confess his sins;[56] at another one, her intuition was juxtaposed with the priest who was blind enough to believe in a dishonest man although Margery warned the religious figure before deception.[57] The power of her knowledge brought autonomy to Margery, and she was particularly condemned by the Church whenever she preached a sermon to those around her. On this account, Margery was observed to subvert the legacy of St Paul who misogynistically prohibited female voice in the public. In a conversation with God, St Paul was said to apologise Margery because she suffered from his writings against women: "Seynt Powle seyd unto the that thu haddyst suffyrd mech tribulacyon for cawse of hys wrytyng, and he behyte the that thu schuldist han as meche grace ther agens for hys lofe as evyr thu haddist schame er reprefe for hys lofe. He telde the also of many joys of hevyn and of the gret lofte that I had to the."[58] This apology was of significance in terms of Margery's stance as a medieval woman. Indeed, she deconstructed the patriarchal discourse by using the most powerful religious authority that was God. From this vantage point, it can be maintained that Margery, like other medieval women, "used what they were allowed to use, the power of their visionary spirituality"[59] to go against the grain of misogyny.

Additionally, Margery went on pilgrimage in and out of England as part of her spiritual career. In fact, pilgrimage "was a normal part of medieval religious life,"[60] and Margery "was a typical medieval pilgrim in that she traveled to greater and lesser shrines to venerate relics, to commemorate the lives and deaths of Christ and the saints, and to expiate her sins. Pilgrimage reflected her devotion to the sacred humanity of Christ and her desire to share in his Passion."[61] Her narration about the travels to the holy places can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, Margery was able to give a realistic account of the pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. As a woman, she was not allowed to travel alone without the permission of her husband. For this reason, she sometimes went on pilgrimage with her husband,[62] but when she was alone, she was asked to prove her husband's written permission letter for her travel.[63] In other cases, she was accompanied by male figures.[64] It was not easy to make a pilgrimage as journeys were dangerous for the whole pilgrims at those times; there were thieves on the roads,[65] and Margery as a woman was afraid of being raped or violated.[66] Furthermore, pilgrimage was used to criticise the medieval society in this work. As a case in point, the journey to Constance was a great torment for Margery with other pilgrims; they discriminated her because of her eating habit, weeping and clothes.[67]As Staley demonstrates, "[s]upposedly bound together by shared religious values, these pilgrims reject Margery for her unwillingness to abandon her private rule and join their more earthly community."[68] She could not be a part of the pilgrims' community although their holy aim was supposed to bring those people together for the sake of God. While she was under the threat of violation as a vulnerable female figure, Margery also felt insecure even among the pilgrims. Therefore, her account of pilgrimage became a means of social criticism: "Kempe's reasons for imagining that society the way she does are directly related to her analysis of its weakness and to her sense of the danger she might incur as a social critic."[69] Nevertheless, Margery gave importance to her relationship with God and revealed her determination to continue her spiritual progress in her visits to the holy places. Despite troubles and hard conditions, she was able to complete her journeys with God's love in her heart.

Conclusion

With respect to the analysis of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it can be concluded that Margery who changed after her holy connection with God became the target of harsh treatment and criticism.[70] However, she strived to continue her spiritual career and defined herself in her sacred relationship with God. Following the divine will and using the powerful religious discourse, Margery gained authority and autonomy in that she was challenged by her society. Therefore, her

[51] Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language", *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays,* (Ed. Sandra J. McEntire), Garland Press, London, 1992, p. 40.
[52] Alexandra Verini, "Medieval Models of Female Friendship in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*", *Feminist Studies* 42(2), 2016, p.384.
[53] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.10.36.
[54] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.52.126.
[55] Ross, Ellen M. "Spiritual Experience and Women's Autobiography: The Rhetoric of Selfhood in *The Book of Margery Kempe*", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 59(3), 1991, p. 540.
[56] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.12.39-40.
[57] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.24.64-67.
[58] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.65.155-156.
[59] Armstrong, Elizabeth Psakis. "'Understanding by Feeling' in Margery Kempe's *Book*", *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, (Ed. Sandra J. McEntire), Garland Press, London, 1992, p. 33.
[60] Powell, Raymond A. "Margery Kempe: An Exemplar of Late Medieval English Piety", *The Catholic Historical Review*, 89(1), 2003, p. 14.
[61] Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 51.
[62] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.10.36.
[63] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.51.123.
[64] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.27.73.
[65] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.30.83; 1.42.103.
[66] Kempe, *The Book*, 2.7.224.
[67] Kempe, *The Book*, 1.26.69-71.
[68] Staley, *Margery Kempe's,* p. 52.
[69] Staley, *Margery Kempe's,* p. 78.
[70] Huriye Reis, "*Margery Kempe'in Kitabı*: Bir Ortaçağ İngiliz Kadın Yazarından Ortaçağ Kadını ve Evlilik", *Ortaçağdan On Yedinci Yüzyıla İngiliz Kadın Yazarlar,* (Ed. Deniz Bozer), Hacettepe Üniversitesi Yayınevi, Ankara, 2014, p. 90.

life story narrated in *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only reflected Margery as a woman in the medieval age but also introduced her to the reader as a fearless mystic and pilgrim who did not feel herself bound to accepted social norms.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the life story of Margery Kempe (1373-1438) by focusing on her portrait as an ordinary medieval woman, a female mystic and a pilgrim represented in her book entitled *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Although Margery Kempe was an illiterate medieval woman, she was able to produce her own work which was written down by two male scribes in the second half of the 1430s. The act of writing with the help of male figures might make one question Margery's authority as a female writer considering that she could not narrate her own story. Yet she was able to make her voice clearly heard throughout the book in a way that she established her authoritative power by drawing attention to her spiritual experience. In effect, *The Book of Margery Kempe* essentially narrates the title character's spiritual development, but it is tinged with the details about the life of medieval women. At first, the roles that Margery conforms to in her story are not unusual for a medieval woman. Coming from an eminent family as the daughter of the mayor of Lynn, John Brunham, Margery converts her role from a daughter to a wife with her marriage to John Kempe. Later, she becomes the mother of fourteen children and starts her spiritual journey in the lowest status of medieval women ranked by the Church in the Middle Ages. What is mesmerising about Margery's motherhood is that she does not show the reader her maternal identity so that the book does not consist of her life as a mother at home. More interestingly, however, Margery's experience of motherhood is quite significant for her spiritual career since she first hears a heavenly melody after the first birth. Although she believes that her body is possessed by the devil and, then, she feels herself blessed with the divine melody, she probably inclines to religious devotion as a way to cope with her postpartum depression after the labour. Moreover, *The Book* illustrates that Margery is allowed to work and lead different jobs as a brewer and a miller. Despite her active role in the business world, Margery later fails which causes her to question her agency. She accuses herself of ambition, envy and pride in a way that she echoes the patriarchal discourse which condemns empowered women in the society. What is of particular interest in this experience is that Margery regards it as a call for her spiritual development. In her autobiographical work, the life story of this medieval woman in fragments highlights her story as a female mystic. Isolating herself from the outside world and society, Margery dedicates herself to God by confessing her sins, having bodily penance, fasting and praying. However, her account of religious dedication displays that the spiritual path disrupts her private and social relationships at home and in the public sphere. On the one hand, Margery is at pains to subvert medieval women's mundane roles into a sacred connection with God, Christ, the Virgin Mary and female saints. In her visions of holy figures, she begins to establish a new identity for herself by making use of traditional patterns of womanhood in the medieval period. Her spiritual union with God transforms her into God's mother, wife and daughter so that she attributes herself a divine role through her subversion of stereotypical roles for women. On the other hand, Margery's new lifestyle radically disrupts her family ties and separates her from the society. Her vow of celibacy and her choice to wear white clothes can be regarded as the construction of virgin identity according to the norms of medieval society. While she disregards her role at home as John's wife, her new diet routine and her loud cries trouble her to the extent that she is accused of Lollardy. Her habits challenge the patriarchal authority at home and the religious institution in social life considering that she rejects certain norms and rules that limit herself as a woman. In this regard, her practice of preaching further afflicts Margery because she shatters not only social norms but also deconstructs religious authority and discourse. Her claim that God chooses her to deliver His message empowers her, and her religious knowledge gives her authority to act on behalf of God. Therefore, she helps people confess their sins and guides the public for the salvation by preaching without the fear of punishment although she is punished several times. Lastly, Margery is depicted as a female pilgrim who has to be accompanied by male figures during her journeys to holy places since women are not allowed to travel alone in the Middle Ages. Although her account of pilgrimage is realistically depicted in this aspect, Margery uses pilgrimage to criticise the hypocrisy of her society. Her religious practices and her means of communication with God put Margery in a vulnerable position among the pilgrims who cannot tolerate and respect her during the pilgrimage. To conclude, what emerges in Margery's book is that the female writer is exposed to harsh treatment and criticism while she tries to establish a new self after her religious devotion. Yet she insists on her religious authority by drawing her power from her connection with God through the holy visions. In her account of this sacred relationship, Margery not only delivers her holy message as a female mystic and pilgrim but also critically describes the life story of a medieval woman in social life.