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"[S]che was evry aferd": Pilgrimage and Medieval Women in the Book of Margery Kempe

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Abstract

This article argues that the pilgrimage experiences of Margery Kempe in the *Book of Margery Kempe* provide relevant evidence about the dangers and difficulties experienced by medieval women pilgrims. Margery's constant articulation of rape as a threat to women pilgrims presents medieval pilgrimage as a gendered experience, and her story reveals medieval women's subjugation by gender specific factors in medieval society even when they attempt to transcend gender related limitations through spiritual development.

Key Words: Margery Kempe, Medieval Women Pilgrims, Rape in Medieval England, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, gender and pilgrimage.

Özet

Bu makalede *Margery Kempe'in Kitabı*'nda Margery Kempe'in Ortaçağ kadın hacıların sosyal cinsel kimliklerine bağlı olarak yaşadıkları zorluklar ve tehlikeler hakkında bilgi verdiği tartışılmaktadır. Margery Kempe kadın hacıları tehdit eden en büyük tehlike olarak tecavüzü gösterir. Tecavüz kadın hacıların karşılaştığı en önemli tehlike olarak Ortaçağ kadınlarının ruhsal ve dini gelişme yoluyla sosyal cinsiyetin getirdiği kısıtlamalardan kurtulma çabalarını da etkiler ve toplumda kadın olmalarından kaynaklanan zorluklara işaret eder.

Anahtar sözcükler: Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Ortaçağ kadın hacıları, Ortaçağ'da İngiltere'de tecavüz, sosyal cinsiyet ve hac.

The Book of Margery Kempe is a social document that provides evidence about the lives of medieval women. Staley recognizes Kempe's book as a social document (Staley:1996:1) and Atkinson states that "...the book must be appreciated first of all as product specifically of a woman's experience and placed within the context of a distinct tradition of women's history" (1983:207).The work provides new insights into various aspects of fifteenth-century religion and society (Atkinson, 1983:196). Mason compares Margery's book favourably to later stories of factual or fictional journeys and pilgrimages by women (1979:xiii-xv). The *Book of Margery Kempe* presents women's pilgrimage as a holy experience that involves frequent encounters with the unholy and the criminal. Margery's attempt to transcend gender

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and sexuality through her special relationship with God becomes an extremely difficult experience because of her evidently precarious position as a female pilgrim doubly subjugated because of her gender. Margery's documentation of her journey into the divine is intercepted by fears of rape and/or physical assault. As one of the few first-hand pilgrimage experiences of women in the Middle Ages,[1] there is in Margery's narrative a strong element of physical inadequacy and subsequent vulnerability that she introduces as gender specific: "[S]che was evyr aferd to a be ravischyd or defilyd " (Kempe, 1996:224). Margery's fears of assault that dominate her account of her time away from Lynn reveal the gender specific difficulties and dangers for women pilgrims of the Middle Ages and thus bear evidence for the precarious position of women in medieval society.

Margery's narrative of her mysticism is extensively informed of the medieval patriarchal discourse of gender and her self-definition as a woman is largely gender-biased. She presents herself as the "weak creature" of God's world, clearly conforming to the contemporary conception of women as spiritually and morally weak because of the original sin. Accordingly, Margery's narrative is also the narrative of the progress of the "weak" into a position to hold and wield relative power which she manages to generate out of her admission of weakness in accordance with the norms of the society. Margery's pilgrimages are important means of developing her status in the social and spiritual ladder of hierarchy. Holloway states that

> Medieval women - and women through time - found that the forms of pilgrimage… gave them a healing access to power and a voice they would otherwise have had silenced and suppressed, resulting in hysteria and illness. Pilgrimage gave them what anthropologists speak of as the power of the weak; in contradistinction to the politically or militarily strong the subdued autocthonous group is ritually potent. (1990: 168).

Margery Kempe introduces her pilgrimages to various pilgrimage sites in the fifteenth century as integral to her development as a true mystic. Very few women left records of their pilgrimages, but pilgrimage has always been one of the attractive forms of devotion for women, and in the fourteenth century, the number of female pilgrims increased (Luttrell, 1990: 184). The recognition of pilgrimage as an important religious experience by the authorities in the Middle Ages enabled women

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1 There are records of women pilgrims but full accounts are only a few. See Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England,* Chapter I. Luttrell (1990:184-185) cites the accounts of two other English women pilgrims in addition to Margaret Pastell who wrote a petition describing her ordeal as a pilgrim in Jerusalem.

as well as men to undertake pilgrimages (Morrison, 2000:44). An influential preacher of the thirteenth century, Jacques de Vintry, promotes pilgrimage as the most satisfying and efficient experience for the faithful (Birch, 1998: 59). On the other hand, as Bowden observes

> By the fourteenth century,… the perilous journey of extreme hardship taken in austere ardor by the sternly pious had almost vanished from the world, leaving in its stead a journey similar in difficulty to the nineteenth-century `trip abroad,' an undertaking which, even as late as 1900, still had some hazards and required serious preparation, yet was safe enough, sufficiently romantic and exciting to provide a never ending topic of interest for later conversations with the stay-at-homes. (1967:24)

Authorities tried to control the pilgrimage by laws and regulations as well as criticism of pilgrims abusing this originally holy experience, but Margery's account presents pilgrimage as a means of spiritual improvement. Her pilgrim travels are dully full of hardships, compounded by the attitude of her companions since her own devoutness conflicts with the picture of the typical pilgrim as one of merrymaking. Margery's seriousness as a pilgrim upsets her fellow pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem who urge her to "syttyn stylle and makyn mery, as we don, bothin at mete and at soper" (Kempe, 1996: 73), and eventually refuse to travel with her "thei wold not gowyth wyth hir for an hundryd pownd" (Kempe, 1996: 82).

Due to its popularity and the dangers it involved, pilgrimage was a highly monitored activity in the Middle Ages (Sumption, 1975:196-198;211-216). Medieval pilgrims had to obtain permission from the king or the local authorities to go on pilgrimage, especially when the pilgrimage involved leaving the country (Birch, 1998:72). Margery relates how she prepares for her pilgrimage and states that she sought the required permissions. Moreover, spousal permission had to be obtained and the document of permission had to be presented when asked, although, upon the demand for a written permission from her husband as proof, Margery retorts against the doctor in York: "myn husbond gaf me leve with hys owyn mowthe. Why fare ye thus with me mor than ye don wyth other pilgrimys that ben her, wheche han no lettyr no mor than I have ?" (Kempe,1996:123). Pilgrims were also required to make legal arrangements such as appointing power of attorney or making arrangements for the management of their land or property, and distribution of their wealth in case of their death. As Margery does, pilgrims had to settle their accounts or any dispute with their neighbours, too (Kempe, 1996: 69). Control of the pilgrimage extended to the vehicles carrying large pilgrim groups. Before any pilgrim could leave for pilgrimage abroad, the pilgrim had to certify that there was a ship available for the overseas journey. Additionally, the ships had to obtain

licenses to carry the pilgrims (Morrison, 2000:53-54). The regulation of pilgrimage did not involve only responsibilities of the pilgrims. Documentary sources, such as papal bulls and letters, suggest that pilgrims were often the target of attacks on the roads. Regulation of the pilgrimage guaranteed that the pilgrims had the right to safe passage as well as other pilgrims' privileges (Birch, 1998: 18). The pilgrims were to receive hospitality and friendly conduct by all. Among the protected, special care was given to widows and orphans. In return, pilgrims had to prove that they were genuine pilgrims by carrying letters of recommendation issued by the local bishop, abbot or parish priest. By the twelfth century, they also had to carry visible signs such as scrip, staff and badge to claim hospitality, safe conduct and exemption from the payment of tolls (Birch, 1998: 88).

The privileges and obligations of the pilgrims were consequent to many dangers that medieval pilgrimage involved. Among the dangers facing the pilgrims were not only the natural disasters, disease and warfare but also the robbers and murderers attracted by the relatively unprotected state of the pilgrims. However, documents suggest that pilgrims' safety was not always easy to provide, and the pilgrims were often victim to murderers and robbers although the authorities kept issuing decrees and laws imposing heavy penalties on those who attacked the pilgrims (Birch, 1998: 80).[2] The dangers of travelling to Rome was acknowledged in the thirteenth century by Pope Innocent III's letter *Vineam Sabaoth* to the archbishop, bishops, abbots and priors of the province of Canterbury (Birch,1998: 69).[3]Among the recorded instances, robbery appears to be the most common attack perpetuated upon the pilgrims. In 1126, a group of clergy were attacked by robbers soon after they had crossed the Alps and the robbers "took all they had". The robbers would ambush the unaware pilgrims by hiding in the woods, robbing and killing them. Women were not exempt from such attacks. St. Pona of Pisa (d.1207) was attacked by muslims on her way back home after her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Margery Kempe, too, is aware of the robbers and thieves. She expresses concern about safekeeping of her ring: "Sche had mech thowth how sche shulde kepe this ryng fro thevys and stelyng as sche went be the cuntreys" (Kempe, 1996:84). People in Lynn worry that she might be attacked by robbers on the way: "then was it seyd in Lynne that ther wer many thevys be the wey. Than had sche gret drede that thei schulde robbyn hir and takyn hir golde awey fro her" (109). The attacks on the pilgrims took very violent forms as an English woman of the fourteenth century in a letter to the Pope describes:

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2 An early type of this law dates from the seventh century, and it states that "anyone who injured, wounded, despoiled, bound , killed or sold such a traveller was compelled to pay a fine… and to restore twice over anything which he had taken from the pilgrim". Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in The Middle Ages,*1998. p. 81.

3 I am indebted to Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in The Middle Ages,* for the documentary sources of dangers of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages.

> Your humble and devoted petitioner and maidservant Isolda Parewastell of Bridgwater supplicates Your Holiness that she, inflamed with the fervor of devotion, visited the tomb of the lord and other sacred places of the holy land every day for three years and more, and further that there, stripped in the name of Christ, she was hung on the rack head to the ground and sustained very hard beatings, and then, being left half alive, she miraculously escaped from the hands of the Saracens. (Quoted in Luttrell, 1990:191)

Birch reports that a great risk for the pilgrims was the bandits who, kidnapping and holding pilgrims to ransom and torturing them to death if the ransom was not paid, or humiliating them in public, continued harassing the pilgrims (1998: 70). The variety of dangers facing the pilgrims made the fears of never returning home a strong likelihood. As Webb states, travelling alone as a pilgrim was the least wise thing to do; even all-male parties of pilgrims tended to travel together for the sake of safety and company, and women attached themselves to such groups or to family parties (1998:25). In fact, "men and women who travelled the roads without escort were believed to offer themselves up as prey, so it was legitimate to take everything they had" (Duby, 1988:510).

Evidently, although medieval women preferred pilgrimage as a means of spiritual advancement, it was not always liberating or empowering for them. On the contrary, especially in terms of the dangers it involved, medieval pilgrimage was a highly gendered religious activity. Morrison emphasizes rape as one of the gender specific difficulties of female pilgrimage in the Middle Ages (2000:57). In the case of women vowed to the religious life, the threat of rape caused additional anxiety since their chastity was at stake (Webb, 1998: 26). Margery feels great anxiety on the same account as a woman vowed to chastity late in life. Although Christ himself promises that he would keep her "fro alle wykked mennys power" (Kempe, 1996:45), she states very clearly to Christ in her plea for protection that if she is defiled "I make myn avow I wyl neyr come in Inglonde whil I leve" (Kempe, 1996:73). Indeed, Margery's account of her pilgrimages abounds in expressions of her concern about her safety as a woman, and she tries to protect herself by ensuring that she does not travel alone. When left alone at night by her fellow pilgrims, she is advised by someone who "lovyd hir wel" (Kempe, 1996:70) that she should go back to her fellow pilgrims, make it up to them and "preyn hem that sche myth go style in her cumpony" although clearly the people in the group do not like her travelling with them (Kempe, 1996:70).

Margery's admission of physical weakness and inability to protect herself against the potential dangers of robbery and, more significantly, sexual assault during her pilgrimages present a world which is hostile to women when unattached to a husband or home. Margery begs "he that was hir giyde" not to forsake her when,

giving back her gold and offering more money, her male companion prepares to leave her on account of her loud sobbing in Achen: "John, I desiryd not yowr gold: I had lever yowr felaschep in these strawnge cuntreys than al the good ye han, and I leve ye shulde mor plesyn God to gon with me as hite me at Dansk than yf ye went to Rome on yowr feet" (Kempe, 1996:220). Her articulation of the threat of rape is a constant reminder of her vulnerability as a lone woman: "The nyght fel upon, and sche was ryth hevy, for sche was alone… durst sche not slepyn for dred of deflying" (Kempe, 1996: 220). Significantly, Margery is not alone in her recognition of her gender as additional liability. She is aware that the male pilgrims who agree to go with her do not feel confident about protecting her from the potential dangers of the road. When an old man offers to go with her seeing that she is abandoned by her company, they "went forth togeydder in gret drede and hevynes" (Kempe, 1996:73). Margery's guide feels insecure on her account for the risk that they shall be attacked, and Margery will be violated and he himself will be robbed: "I am aferde thu schalt be take fro me, and I schal be betyn for the and forberyn my tabbarde" (73). Similarly, when she joins Richard, after being abandoned at Venice by the party with which she had gone to the Holy Land, Richard is reluctant to take her over, voicing the potential danger she will attract to them both as a woman:

> "Nay, damsel", he seyd, "I wot welt hi cuntremen han forsakyn the, and threfor it wer hard to me to ledyn the..For thy cuntremen han bothyn bowys and arwys, with the which hei myth defendyn bothyn the and himself, and I have no wepyn save a clokeful of clowtys. And yet I drede me that myn enmys schul robbyn me and peraventur takyn the awey fro me and defowlyn thy body, and therfor I dar not ledyn the, for I wold not for an hundryd pownd that thu haddyst a vylany in my company." (Kempe, 1996: 83)

Richard's worries concern the risks that both he as a man, and Margery as a woman face in taking the road by themselves. While men were afraid of robbery and possible murder, for women pilgrims the most frightening risk was rape although the gender specific rape was not the only threat facing women (Morrison, 2000:58). Richard's articulated fears reveal that robbery and kidnapping were not gender specific threats. Morrison cites a widowed noblewoman, who was separated from the group of people she was on pilgrimage with, and was kidnapped and made to spend several days in the municipal brothel (2000:58). Women, therefore, "suffered crimes both equally with men, and some peculiar to their gender" (Morrison, 2000:59). Margery as a lone woman pilgrim, unaccompanied by her husband, father or brother, is subject to constant soliciting for company to ease her fears of rape, particularly at night. Margery's pilgrimages prove that "laywomen who wanted to go on pilgrimage obviously encountered certain problems which flowed from their

gender and its perceived frailties" (Webb, 1998: 26). In fact, when authorities objected to women's pilgrimage, they had in mind a literal understanding of women's weakness as well as moral concerns. Women, for instance, would prove to be hysterical and given to constant fits of sobbing or fainting at the sight of relics, or they might turn out to be nagging, over curious or a gossip. Margery is frequently rejected by the other pilgrims on account of her loud weeping. Still, in addition to such misogynistic attitudes towards women, women's pilgrimage was not considered proper for reasons related to their physical vulnerability. It was often stated that women were a liability when crowds of pilgrims rushed to the relics, trampling women under their feet because of their frailty. Women's pilgrimage was also conceived as something that violated the natural order of existence, for women were not supposed to leave their homes, and seek strange and far away lands albeit for religious purposes. Hence, as early as the fifth century, religious women seeking the holy places were discouraged from doing so (Webb, 1998:20). Pointing to the dangers and difficulties awaiting women on the way, the English St Boniface urged the Archbishop of Canterbury in 747 that he should prevent "matrons" and "veiled women" from journeying to Rome since "a great part of them perish, and few keep their virtue" (quoted in Luttrell, 1990:185).

Margery's pilgrimage stories reveal clearly that "women's perceived frailties" made women pilgrims open to attacks on their body as her fears of rape are not confined to the times when she is away in foreign lands. Being in foreign lands clearly increases her fears of attack, but Margery is equally concerned and she does not feel safe when she is in England, either. Weisl argues that attacks on women's bodies were common means of subjugating women in the Middle Ages (1998: 115). Medieval literature provides several stories of rape; particularly courtly literature uses rape as a stock device. The rape in the *Wife of Bath's Tale,* for example, is instructive of rape as a real threat with which medieval women had to live (Weisl, 1998:130). Literature's role in introducing or representing rape had important cultural consequences. It was a common practice to use texts describing real rapes as textbooks for schoolboys. Some of these texts were critical of rape while some approved sexual violence. It was through such texts that medieval young men were familiarized with sexual violence (Woods, 1996: 60-67).

It is important to note that until the seventeenth century, rape was considered as a theft which rendered it an offence against property, kinship or community. Punishment of the offenders accordingly was possible only when women had a husband, a father or a master (Chaytor, 1995: 378-407). Margery uses her marital status as a legitimate defense against the potential violation of her body in Leicester: "I prey yow, ser, put me not among men, that I may kepyn my chastite and my bond of wedlak to myn husbond, as I am bowndyn to do"(Kempe, 1996:114). Margery

presents her body as the property of her husband and herself as responsible for its preservation. Thus, the idea that the body should be protected not only as her body but also as something that belongs to her husband is recognized as valid, and preserves her chastity. Abduction and rape were considered similar offenses in early medieval Europe; the legal term for abduction of women was *raptus* (marriage by abduction) (Bullough and Brundage, 1982: 141-8; Gravdal, 1991:6). While in medieval England a rape law existed, it primarily dealt with abduction and illicit marriages of heiresses (Clark, 1987: 47). In medieval England, juries tended to punish the rapists differently according to the marital status of the victim. When the victim was a virgin, the penalty would be death, because the rapist would have stolen the property which belonged to somebody else and would be damaging the property of somebody else (Carter, 1985: 154). In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Bracton, as a legal theorist, concluded that payment for the crime of rape in life and member was applicable only in the case of the rape of a virgin, while in the case of a married woman or a widow, corporeal punishment was enough (Hanavalt, 1998:127). In practice, however, monetary fines or imprisonment were common ways of punishing the convicted rapists. In addition to this categorisation of the victims into virgins and non-virgins, there was also the medical conviction that a woman would not conceive if she did not give consent to sexual intercourse. Hanavalt quotes the case of a man who was acquitted because the woman he raped had a child as a result of rape (1998:127). Brundage states that sexual molestation of a girl who had not yet reached puberty merited the death penalty under all circumstances (1987:531.) As noted by Manon van der Heijden

> marital state and sexual experience influenced the judges' attitude towards rape and assault victims. Rape and assault of young women were considered serious crimes for which perpetrators were punished severely. The statements of family members, neighbours, friends, and the victims themselves were noted extensively. Loss of honour seemed to play an important role in these cases. Whether it concerned attempted or completed rape, all sentence notes mentioned the loss of honour or defamation young girls suffered. However, judges showed a completely different attitude in rape and assault cases of married women. Most sentence notes were brief and not very informative. Furthermore, none of the sentence notes mentioned loss of honour, and no supportive statements of family members or neighbours were included. Moreover, judges were sometimes inclined to put equal blame on the victim. In any case, courts gave little attention to the rape and assault of married women. ("Women as Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence…")

Equally important in a rape case was the reputation of the rape victim. Jody Enders examines the case of Coton's wife whose life before marriage to her husband as a concubine was evidently used by her rapists as grounds for ill repute and made her rape less a crime and her case more difficult to prove (2004: 163-181). As

victimization of women was not considered criminal, perpetrators would increasingly receive minimal penalties as the laws made it difficult to prove cases against rapists (Weisl, 1998: 133). Although rape is one of the only two criminal actions in which medieval law accorded women a legal voice to narrate the story of event and to name the culprit, the law made it also extremely difficult for women to appeal or the appeals to succeed (Hanavalt 1998: 124, 131). Glanville, a legal theorist of the twelfth century, states that

> In the crime of rape [*raptus crimen*] a woman charges a man with violating her by force in the peace of the lord king. A woman who suffers in this way must go, soon after the deed is done, to the nearest vill and show to trustworthy men the injury done to her, and any effusion of blood there may be and any tearing of her clothes. She should then do the same to the reeve of the hundred. Afterwards she should proclaim it publicly in the next county court. (quoted in Hanavalt, 1998: 126)

It is clear why Margery Kempe does not consider appealing as an option if her fears of rape prove to be true. She does not show any interest in the legal punishment of rape. According to Margery, the attack on her body is an attack potentially destructive of her entire life and her commitment to chastity. Thus appealing for a rape case is not an alternative for Margery; she promises that she would never go back to England as a violated woman (Kempe, 1996:73). Margery, accordingly, is more concerned with preventing the potential crime by asking God to protect her from such evil but particularly by reducing the risk through attaching herself to able company: ”Sche woke and preyid ny al that nyght that sche myth be preservyd fro al unclennes and metyn wyth sum good felaschep that myth helpyn hir forth…” (Kempe, 1996:220). Evidently, even if Margery trusted the law and considered putting herself under legal protection and justice, medieval law was not very sympathetic to rape victims. Making it very difficult for the victim to appeal, medieval law further required the raped woman to bear witness both in her own voice and words, and both fully clothed and naked. Her audience and the judges were all-male audiences and judges in front of whom she had to uncover her body and show the signs of struggle and physical harm done to her body. Moreover, whenever she appeared before the court she was expected to repeat her case in exactly the same words and format covering all the necessary legal points (Hanavalt, 1998:126).

Pilgrimage control, on the other hand, did not provide legal help when the pilgrims were victims (Morrison, 2000:61). Margery is lucky to survive all her ordeals, for the road to pilgrimage was as hazardous for women as she presents it to be. For the female pilgrims, their own fellow companions could constitute a risk in

addition to those on the road. One recorded instance cites a canon accused of raping "Emma, wife of William Bole of Walsingham, coming on pilgrimage to Canterbury" (Morrison, 2000, 58). Similarly, St Brigitta's daughter, Catherine, also expressed fears of rape while on her way to Rome to meet her mother (Holloway, 1992:14). Margery, too, is warned of the risks of traveling alone with a friar, and with the help of an innkeeper's wife, she is got accepted into a passing party of pilgrims for her own safety.

Margery's emphasis on rape as a gender specific problem is instructive of women's status in the Middle Ages. The medieval world is a divided world in terms of gender, which subjugates women, and subjects women's experience of learning and the divine to the dominant patriarchal ideology, although it is the same world view that facilitates women's exercise of authority and power through religion. Margery's candid verbalizations of fears for her chastity testify that the route to power and authority through pilgrimage is a difficult route for the obvious physical fragility and vulnerability of women. Margery is not able to subvert the dominant ideology and is clearly subject to medieval law which treated women as property, and considered the violation of their body as damage to property, or as loss of honour to their families. As we see in Margery's quest, although Margery strives to transcend her gender specific limitations, for medieval women their bodies were an essential constituent of their integrity. Margery's account of her pilgrimages presents the pilgrimage experience as a site of struggle for independence and power, and since medieval women fought for independence and power through their bodies, it underlines her "weakness" as a medieval woman.

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