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## psychiatry in history

### Margery Kempe: puerperal psychosis, mysticism and the first autobiography in English

Greg Wilkinson

Kempe (c.1373–1438), a middle-class, partly literate, unsuccessful brewer and miller turned mystic from Lynn in Norfolk, authored, through scribes, the earliest extant autobiography in vernacular English, discovered in 1934. Through the prism of religiosity, *The Book of Margery Kempe* refracts her life, marriage, milieu, mental illness and mystical path.

Margery married John around 1393 and fell pregnant. She experienced great fevers until she gave birth and, together with labour, she feared death and summoned her priest to confess long-unspeakable sin:

'Anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side, and his sharp reproving of her on the other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wondrously vexed and laboured with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days'.

'And in this time, she saw, as she thought, devils opening their mouths all inflamed with burning waves of fire, as if they would have swallowed her in, sometimes ramping at her, sometimes threatening her, pulling her and hauling her, night and day during the aforesaid time. Also the devils cried upon her with great threatenings, and bade her that she should forsake Christendom, her faith, and deny her God, His Mother and all the Saints in Heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self. She said many a wicked word, and many a cruel word, she knew no virtue nor goodness, she desired all wickedness, like as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have destroyed herself many a time at their stirrings and have been damned with them in Hell, and in witness thereof, she bit her own hand so violently, that the mark was seen all her life after. And also she rived the skin on her body against her heart with her nails spitefully, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have done, but that she was bound and kept with strength day and night so that she might not have her will'.

Christ's apparition addressed her:

'And anon this creature became calmed in her wits and reason, as well as ever she was before, and prayed her husband as soon as he came to her, that she might have the keys of the buttery to take her meat and drink as she had done before'.

Margery had another 13 children before, in 1431, reaching a financial settlement with John to live chastely.

Persistent hallucinatory and delusory revelation, neuropsychiatric or socio-cultural, empowered Kempe's then unconventional independence and indomitable vocation, through sexual temptations, confrontations, trials and pilgrimages, in England and to Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela and Wilsnack. Still, she divides opinion:

'Her weeping was so plenteous and continuing, that many people thought she could weep and leave off, as she liked. And therefore many men said she was a false hypocrite, and wept before the world for succour and worldly goods'.

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