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"*Hir not lettyrd*": Margery Kempe and writing

Françoise Le Saux

Margery Kempe of Lynn was, as far as we can judge, totally illiterate. She had to have her book written down for her, under dictation, by two successive scribes; and we have no indication whatsoever that she knew how to read. Yet, her narrative is heavily influenced by other books, which clearly shaped both her own perception of her life, and the way in which this perception is expressed in the text. The notes to Meech and Allen's edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1940) thus reveal echoes and analogues of an impressive number of works; within the text itself Margery mentions by name Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle and his *Incendium Amoris*, St Bonaventura (erroneously, in connection with the *Stimulus Amoris* [ch. 17:39; ch. 58:143]), and the "Book" of St Birgitta,¹ from which she appears to have derived much of her self-image. Moreover, for Margery as for the whole of Christendom at the time, the Bible looms large as the ultimate authority, thus affording a quasi-mystical dimension to all writing.

Of another fifteenth-century mystic, it has been said: "She calls herself 'unlettered', which with the evidence is palpably untrue."² There is no hint that the same may be said of Margery's claim that she was "*nat lettryd*." (ch. 52, 128) Her reading skills, if they existed at all, were not sufficient for her

¹ i.e. St Birgitta of Sweden (1303–73), founder of the Bridgettine order. For an English edition of her *Revelations*, see Cumming (1929).

² See the introduction to Wolters' translation of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, p.2. Wolter suggests that Julian may have learnt to read only after her visions, or that the expression is best understood as meaning 'not trained in church Latin'. Margery's account of her life, however, allows neither of these hypotheses.

to recognise the incompetence of her first scribe, or — during one of her visions — for her to find her name in the Book of Life, even though it was in a prominent position.³ (ch. 85:206–7) Similarly, she has to ask one of her fellow-pilgrims — Thomas Marchale — to write a letter to her husband asking him to fetch her home after her return from Compostella. (ch. 46)

Literacy may not have featured among Margery's accomplishments, but she certainly recognised the power of the written word. Her account abounds with quests for official letters that grant her the right to live her somewhat eccentric lifestyle; and writing in her narrative appears more as an expression of authority than a means of communication. We know she owned at least one book — she describes herself holding it at mass (ch. 9); but the mass-book of an illiterate woman is the symbol of her social and financial status, rather than a vehicle of instruction. This does not mean that writing was absent from Margery's inner life; we are told that she had an inscription — "Christus est amor meus" — engraved on her "wedding-ring" with Christ.⁴ (Book 1, ch. 7) However, we may notice that with the ring, as with the book or the episcopal letters, we are dealing with predominantly public statements, establishing Margery's position in society as wealthy (books are expensive), married (to Christ rather than her husband, in this case) and approved by Church authorities.

This may perhaps explain the absence of any desire on Margery's part to learn to read and write; for there is no reason why she should not have been able to. She came from a well-to-do family, and could easily have afforded the expense of acquiring the skill.⁵ The main reason for her lack of interest in becoming literate, however, was probably that she didn't need to. She had alternative sources of information which were more acceptable to the authorities, easier of access, and emotionally more satisfying than the cold paper or parchment of books. She had at her disposal specialists in religious instruction: her own parish priests and the preachers of the mendicant orders. These men offered her the spiritual guidance and

³ She has to have her name shown to her by the angel holding the Book of Life, which is described as an illuminated manuscript.

⁴ This "mystical" wedding-ring betrays the strength of Margery's desire to break free from the oppression of married life with her husband; on the subject, see Delany (1975).

⁵ On Margery's social background, see Atkinson (1983:67–102).

personal support she craved, and acted as mediators between herself and the Bible, as well as the different saints' lives and the major devotional writers of her time. Margery's narrative is thus punctuated by the noteworthy sermons she has attended, and her difficulties with the preachers disturbed by her screaming and crying; she also lays great store on her friendship with certain priests and friars who read books to her and discuss them with her afterwards. Her debt to these men she freely acknowledges:

it was to hir gret solas & cownfort whan sche was chedyn & fletyn for þe lofe of Ihesu for repreuyng of synne, for spekyng of vertu, for comownyng in Scriptur which sche lernyd in sermownys & be comownyng wyth clerkys. (ch. 14, 29, II.28–32)⁹

The amount of information derived from reading sessions must have been considerable. The young priest who read "þe Bybyl wyth doctowrys per-up-on" and a number of devotional works to her did so "þe most part of vii 3er er viii 3er," and the education he derived from his reading ultimately got him a good living (ch. 58:143–4). To quote Margery, "þan lykyd hym ful wel þat he had redde so meche be-forn"! It follows from this that by the end of those seven or eight years, Margery must have been exceptionally knowledgeable, as well as having benefited from discussions with other religious people, including Julian of Norwich. (ch. 18)

The aspect which Margery underlines in connection with her confessors and priestly friends is their learning. Indeed, she seems fascinated by masters and doctors of divinity, and she never misses an opportunity to remind the reader of the quality of the ecclesiastics with whom she came in contact. (chs. 9, 11, 15, 18, 27, 71, 78) These learned men are qualified as worshipful, or worthy; and Margery displays great respect for them, as was fitting for a lay person in need of their guidance and teaching. However, the superiority which Margery concedes to the clergy is only apparent. The men themselves are repeatedly shown to be inferior in terms of personal quality and grace. The better among them openly acknowledge the fact. The anchorite to whom Margery is directed by

⁹ Margery's eagerness to be humiliated for the sake of Christ is identified by Roland Maisonroue (1982) as a trait belonging to a traditional model of mysticism.

Christ to be her confessor thus weeps at the extent of God's grace to her, exclaiming:

"Dowtyr, 3e sowkyn euyn on Crystys brest, and 3e han an ernest-peny of Heuyn. (Book 1, ch. 5:18)

All he can do to help her is to confirm whether her visions "ben of þe Holy Gost or ellys of 3owr enmy þe Deuyl" — a point which worried Margery a great deal;⁷ but it is significant that the only time Margery dares doubt the validity of one of her revelations, Christ punishes her by taking away all her good thoughts for twelve days.⁸

It quickly becomes apparent that Margery's relationship with members of the clergy — or at least the perception she has of it — is the reverse of what may be expected from a lay woman. It will be remembered that the Book starts with the account of Margery's madness, induced by her inability to confess a sin that was particularly troubling her, due to the lack of patience of her confessor: after her vision, the "creature" will herself become a sort of confessor, and exert over priests a similar type of authority as that to which she had been subjected.⁹ Most striking is the episode where Margery, taking on the role of spiritual advisor, chastises a monk for his sinfulness, and herself offers to intercede with God to obtain his forgiveness:

⁷ This concern is expressed as early as the Preface: "Than had þis creatur mech drede for illusyons & deceytys of hyr gostly enmys." (3)

⁸ Margery says she was told who was going to be saved, and who was damned; whereupon "sche wolde not heryn it ne beleuyn þat it was God þat schewyd hir swech thyngys.(. . .) Sche wolde 3euyn no cředens to þe cownsel of God but raþar leuyd it was sum euyl spyrty for to deceyuyn hir." (ch. 59:144–45) Margery appears at this stage to have refused to believe in the possibility of eternal damnation — a point which also troubled Julian of Norwich.

⁹ This movement from a position of subjection, at the beginning of her narrative, to one of relative control is perceptively analysed by Weissman, who considers that Margery never recovered from "the trauma of the confessional" (1982, 206); this may explain both her efforts to ensure unlimited access to confession, and her need to feel a certain spiritual independence towards her confessors.

pan seyde he "Schal I be sauýd?" "3a, syr, yf 3e wyl do aftyr my counsel. Sorwyth for 3owr synne, & I xal help 3ow to sorwyn; beth schrevyn Perof & forsake it wyfully (...) & God schal 3eue 3ow grace for my lofe." (ch. 12, 27,II. 3-8)

The sinfulness of certain members of the clergy is a recurrent feature of Margery's narrative. The courts of archbishops are full of worldly pomp and luxury, and resound with blasphemous oaths; preachers lack compassion and display unwarranted pride towards what they see as a hysterical woman; monks fail to keep their vows; and it is a priest who steals Margery's bedding during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This deficiency in grace on the part of the clergy is due – so the narrative hints – to ignorance. A number of Margery's opponents – including the priest who gave her book its present shape – thus undergo a total change in attitude towards her following their reading of certain saints' lives which force them to greater humility.¹⁰

Whilst remaining scrupulously orthodox in her faith and passionately attached to the sacraments, Margery's attitude towards the clergy is best described as patronising. She has turned the tables on them: she is the privileged party, not they. Her teacher, confessor and authority is Christ; priests are there only to minister to her needs, as indicated by the Lord Himself, and if they sin, she does not hesitate to remind them that they must "kepe pe comawndmentys of God." (ch.50:120)

The bookish learning of the clerics, which enables them to know but not to understand, aligns them with the Pharisees when Margery is called upon to clear herself of the charge of heresy, in scenes strongly reminiscent of Christ in the Temple. We see this illiterate woman astonishing whole parties of learned men by her knowledge of the Christian faith, to the joy of the "ful worthy clerkys" and the confusion of the others:

per sufferd sche many scornys & many noyful wordys, answeyng a-3en in Goddys cawse wyth-owtyn any lettyng, wysly & discretly þat many men

¹⁰ See more especially ch. 62, where the cumulative testimony of the lives of Marie of Oignies, Richard of Hampole or Elizabeth of Hungary give added authority to Margery's behaviour in the eyes of her future scribe; or ch. 68., where Master Custawns identifies Margery's weeping as a divine grace, on the grounds of his readings.

merueyled of hir cunnyng. per wer men of lawe seyde vn-to hir, "We han gon to scole many 3erys, & 3et arn we not sufficient to answeyn as þu dost. Of whom hast þu þis cunnyng?" & sche seyde "Of þe Holy Gost."¹¹ (ch. 55, 135,II.22–28)

Priests thus become divided into two categories: the good ones, who believe in her, and ask for her prayers and advice; and the pharisaic ones who preach against her, thus incurring Christ's displeasure. (ch. 34, 85) This division is expressed by Christ:

per is no clerk in al þis world þat can, dowtyr, leryn þe bettyr þan I can do (. . .) Ther is no clerk can speken a-3ens þe lyfe which I teche þe, & 3if he do, he is not Goddys clerk; he is þe Deuelys clerk. (ch.64, 158, II.3–4; 12–14)

This appropriation of authority through the figure of Christ — who can be read as the expression of Margery's inner thoughts, wishes and intuitions¹² — is also perceptible through a certain ambivalence towards written texts, which symbolise the oppression to which she was once subjected. As carriers of knowledge, they are important and worthy of respect; but this knowledge is limited and requires further authentication. Books allow men to assess the meaning of what they experience; but human actions are also necessary to confirm the validity — and therefore the truth — of written discourse.¹³ This ambivalence may best be perceived in relation to

¹¹ "Than sche (. . .) was receyued of mech pepil & of ful worthy clerkys, which enioyed in owr Lord þat had 3ouyn hir not lettryd witte & wisdom to answeyn so many lernyd men wyth-owtyn velani or blame, thankynge be to God." (ch. 52, 128,II.26–31)

¹² This subject is too complex for a satisfactory treatment within the scope of this paper. The psychologising reading — which I am here adopting, and which dominated earlier views of Margery's "revelations" — has increasingly been questioned over the past decade, and recent approaches are more theological in nature. See, for example, Maisonneuve (1982).

¹³ This feature has made a number of critics compare Margery with Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who also advocates the superiority of experience over written authorities. See Delany, and Aers (1988:73–116).

the Life of St Birgitta of Sweden, a book which provides Margery with both a model to follow and the justification of her own mystical experience. Important though the Book of St Bride may be, it is declared by Christ Himself to be inferior in authority to the testimony of Margery's life:

My dowtyr, Bryde, say me neuyr in Bis wyse (. . .). For I telle þe forsoþe rygth as I spak to Seint Bryde ryte so I speke to þe, dowtyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe euery word that is wretyn in Brides boke, & be the it xal be knowyn for very trewth. (ch. 20, 47, II.26–7; 31–35)

The written word requires the confirmation of Christ — the only source of truth — for it to be authoritative, and its credibility derives from the flesh-and-blood actions of Margery, rather than the opposite.¹⁴ Even the Bible appears to be subordinated to the testimony of life, represented for Margery by the voice of Christ; and even though she never expresses actual disapproval of what may be found in the biblical writings, Christ implicitly does so for her on one occasion in sending St Paul to her to make veiled excuses for the writings of his that were quoted against her:

Dowytyr, I sent onys Seynt Powyl vn-to þe for to strengthyn þe & comfortyn þe þat þu schuldist boldly spekyn in my name fro þat day forward. And Seynt Powle seyde vn-to þe þat þu haddyst suffryd mech tribulacyon for cawse of hys wrytyng, & he behyte þe þat þu xuldist han as meche grace þer-a-3ens for hys lofe as euyr þu haddist schame er reprefe for hys lofe. (ch. 65, 160, II.25–31)

The potential of writing to oppress comes to the fore here, and Christ himself implicitly condemns its use as an instrument of repression. With the Scriptures as with other works, the ability to read is not synonymous with the ability to understand; hence the absence of fear on Margery's part to take upon herself the teaching function of the clergy. She repeatedly mentions telling stories from the Scriptures (chs. 13, 14, 27, 40, 48, 52), and when she is arrested for lollardy, she relates how a crowd gathered under her window to listen to her:

¹⁴ This attitude towards writing in cultures that are predominantly oral is discussed by Ong (1982:96–101), who further points out the complexity of the interaction of orality and literacy in Christian teaching (178–79).

pan stode sche lokyng owt at a wyndown, tellyng many good talys to hem
 Pat wolde heryn hir, in so meche Pat women wept sor & seyde wyth gret
 heuynes of her herttys, "Alas, woman, why xalt Pu be brent?" (ch. 53:
 130-31)

Margery's systematic inversion of the power relations which crushed her, linked with her obvious gift for learning, was bound to arouse fears; hence the recurrent accusation of lollardy levelled against her. In this context, far from being a disadvantage, her illiteracy was her safeguard. Lollardy implied perverting the Word of God through uninformed interpretation of the Scriptures: Margery could justify her knowledge through reference to accepted sources of teaching, and benefit from the undoubted orthodoxy of her informants. It is clear, however, that the authorities suspected her of being literate. The steward of Leicester goes as far as testing whether she knows Latin:

pe Styward a-non, as he sey hir, spak Latyn vn-to hir, many prestys stondyng
 a-bowtyn to here what sche xulde say & oþer pepyl also. Sche seyde to þe
 Stywarde, "Spekyth Englysch, yf 3ow lyketh, for I vndyrstonde not what 3e
 sey." þe Styward seyde vn-to hir, "þu lvest falsly in pleyn Englysch." þan seyde
 sche vn-to hym a-3en, "Syr, askyth what qwestyon 3e wil in Englysch, &
 thorw þe grace of my Lord Ihesu Cryst I xal answeyren 3ow resonably
 þerto" (ch. 47:112-13)

This failed piece of intimidation betrays the true fears of the authorities: that the male monopoly of learning had been broken in a way that questioned its very foundations. It therefore comes as no surprise that attempts were made to prevent Margery from furthering her education, notably through creating problems for her clerical friends, who in this outlook were traitors to the system, though they were faithful to both their calling and their function in society. Master Aleyn, the white friar who was so openly appreciative of Margery's spirituality, is thus forbidden to continue teaching her:

And þan sum enuyows personys compleynyde to þe Prouyncyal of þe White
 Frerys þat þe sayde doctowr was to conuersawnt wyth þe sayde creatur, for-
 as-mech as he supportyd hir in hir wepyng & in hir crying & also enformyd
 hir in qwestyons of Scriptur whan sche wolde any askyn hym. Than was he

monischyd be vertu of obediens þat he xulde no mor spekyn wyth hir ne enformyn hir in no textys of Scriptur, & þat was to hym ful peynful, for, as he seyde to sum personys, he had leuar a lost an hundryd pownd, 3yf he had an had it, þan hir communicacyon, it was so gostly & fruteful. (ch. 69, 168, II.4–14)

The interdict cannot however be maintained for any length of time, since it goes against the duty of moral and spiritual guidance of the Church, and Margery is eventually able to continue her inner development with no major obstacles other than those caused by her own overwhelming personality.

It is perhaps somewhat ironical that the experience of so profoundly disruptive a creature should have ended up in writing, thus joining the body of works which gave its justification to institutional authority. This irony may have been felt by Margery; the preface to the first part of her book certainly suggests that her decision to have her story written down caused her some misgivings:

Summe of these worthy & worshepful clerkys (. . .) bodyn hyr þat sche schuld don hem wryten & makyn a booke of hyr felyngys & hir reuelacyons. Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys, & sche wold not consentyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in hir sowle þat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone. & so it was xx 3er & mor fro þat tym þis creatur had fyrst felyngys & reuelacyons er þan sche dede any wryten. Aftyrward, whan it plesyd ower Lord, he comawnded hyr & chargyd hir þat sche xuld don wryten hyr felyngys & reuelacyons & þe forme of her leuyng þat hys goodnesse myht be knowyn to alle þe world. Than had þe creatur no wryter þat wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr ne 3eue credens to hir felingys. (Preface, 3,II.20–25)

This passage reveals Margery's mixed feelings towards becoming the subject of a book. Her refusal to allow those "worthy clerks" to write down her experience suggests a strong reticence on her part to being integrated in the authority patterns of a society in which she was not happy; yet, that the temptation was great is indicated by the fact that she cannot bring herself to reject the idea outright. On the one hand, dictating an account of her life and revelations to a worthy clerk was part of the model she was — unconsciously? — following; on the other, once her book was written, she

would have to conform to the petrified image afforded by the narrative, even assuming it remained confidential.¹⁵

That Margery accepts to have her experience written down at the precise moment when she has no one to do it for her is certainly significant: the desire to be recognised by the establishment comes at the point in her life when she is most rejected by it and, more importantly still perhaps, when she no longer has the sympathetic and admiring clerical audience she was used to. At this stage, she has everything to gain by having a book written: she is of an age (over forty years old) for the check on her freedom not to matter too much; she will regain the interest of the clergy through submitting to their wish to appropriate her experience; and finally, her autobiography dictated towards the end of her life will align her more firmly with established saints. Margery emphasises that Christ had to command her to have her book written: an indication of her own secret eagerness to do so, which she feels she has to disguise, but also of her very deep-rooted reticence. The desire for recognition here enters into conflict with an underlying distrust of male power, as expressed in the act of writing.

The decision to enter the realm of writing thus occurs at the least favourable moment, as if Margery somehow wished to evade having to become an "authority"; and when she eventually selects a scribe, it is striking that he is a non-establishment character who proves to be totally incompetent. If we accept the assumption of a number of critics that this scribe was none other than her own son,¹⁶ it follows that for this man, Margery was doubly a figure of authority, both as parent and as putative saint. Although he could read and write, this scribe's level of instruction must have been considerably inferior to hers.

One cannot tell to what extent Margery was aware of the limitations of this first scribe who, though English-born, had lived a long time in

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that when Margery tries to get her book copied by a paid scribe, she insists that he promise not to divulge the contents before her death (Preface, 4), a feature which may also be related to the literary topos of saints requesting witnesses of their miracles not to reveal them until after their death. On the importance of her autobiography for Margery, see Mason (1980).

¹⁶ The possibility is evoked by Meech in his introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Meech remains dubious, but the case has been convincingly argued by Hirsh (1975, 146).

Germany; it would however seem somewhat astonishing for her not to have realised that he had to a great extent lost his command of the English language, and therefore was not well-suited to the task she was setting him — especially since it turned out that he was terminally ill. It is very tempting to see in this episode an unconscious sabotage on Margery's part of the whole writing process: she was satisfying a strong, if unacknowledged, inner urge, as well as obeying Christ and conforming to the models set to her, yet in such a way that the resulting object evaded the constraints set upon it by the male establishment of learning. As a result, the second scribe tells us:

þe booke was so euel wretyn þat he coud lytyl skylle þeron, for it was neiþyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben. (Preface, 4, II.14–17)

Despite the relative strength of Margery's position with regard to her first scribe, this redaction clearly distorts the voice of the dictating woman — how otherwise could one explain the intrusion of German in the idiom of the first text? This distortion, though, must have been relatively limited; the scribe had neither the competence nor the energy to recast Margery's discourse on a large scale. But whatever the state of this lost first book, it fulfilled the function Margery expected: it provided her with a sort of visiting card she could use to acquire more credibility in the eyes of establishment figures. The book thus appears to have been part of a wooing strategy on Margery's part to gain the sympathy of her second scribe:

Than was þer a prest whiche þis creatur had gret affeccyon to, & so sche comownd wyth hym of þis mater & browt hym þe boke to redyn. (Preface, 4.II.12–14)

By its very existence, the book gives Margery an excuse to seek out the learned priests whose company she so relished. It is obvious, however, that from the moment her attention was drawn to the defects of her book, she had to have it rewritten if she wanted her pretence to stand any longer.

The second scribe is everything that the first one was not. He is educated, a priest, and somewhat suspicious of Margery. He allows "euel

spekyng" to influence his attitude towards her, and ensures she is suitably grateful for the service he is doing her, by delaying and postponing the work, we are told, for three years. And when he eventually gets down to writing, Margery has to pay a heavy price: she loses her control over the structure of her narrative, which is expanded into two books, the second of which is controlled entirely by the second scribe, who is more of a co-author than a copyist.¹⁷

There are two reasons for this. On the one hand, the first redaction was certainly flawed. We are told that at one stage, Margery took her manuscript to a man who was familiar with the writing of the first scribe, in the hope that he would accept — against payment — to copy it for her. He is unable to do so:

his good man wrot a-bowt a leef, & 3et it was lytyl to þe purpose, for he
coud not wel fare þerwyth, þe boke was so euel sett & so vnresonably
wretyn. (Preface, 4.II.37–40)

The second scribe must therefore have effectively rewritten the whole book for it to make sense. This he did, we are told, with the help of Margery herself: We are thus faced with a composite redaction, based partly on a corrupt manuscript and partly on Margery's voice, with occasional comments by the writer. This second scribe was also acutely aware of the structural flaws of the work he was supposedly copying. He warns the reader in the Preface that the book is not written "in order," "but lych as þe mater cam to þe creatur in mend"; however, he tries to overcome this lack of formal structure through cross-references such as "as is written before," or "as it shall be written afterwards." Later, he will add to the first book another which corresponds more exactly to the demands of chronology and resembles more closely the hagiographical format.

he red it ouyr be-forn þis creatur euery word, sche sum-tym helpyng where
ony difficulte was.¹⁸ (Preface, 5, II.10–12)

¹⁷ See Hirsch (1975), who has tried to distinguish which sections of the book are Margery's, and which are her scribe's.

¹⁸ The writing process of the second scribe is reconstructed by Hirsch (1975, 146–147).

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The second reason for the taking over of Margery's discourse by her priestly scribe is that his writing is to a certain extent self-referential. He is describing himself as the trusted and beloved friend of a saint; though unworthy of such a grace, he is nevertheless a privileged witness reaping the benefits of God's gifts to Margery. He puts special emphasis on miracles made either for or by Margery, particularly those connected with his own writing activities. His first reaction to Margery's manuscript is thus that he "leued fully per schuld neuyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace" (4); and this grace will be given to him thanks to Margery's prayers:

pe preste, trustyng in hire prayers, be-gan to redyn Pis booke, & it was mych mor esy, as hym thowt, þan it was be-forn-tym. (Preface, 5, ll.8-10)

He can thus recognise, at the end of Book 1, that even though the first scribe "wrot not clerly ne opynly to owr maner of spekyng, he in hys maner of wrytyng & spellyng mad trewe sentens."¹⁹ (Colophon, Book 1, 220)

As may be expected, his endeavours are threatened by the Devil, who afflicts his eyesight:

Whan þe prest began fyrst to wryten on Pis booke, hys eyn myssyd so þat he mygth not se to make hys lettyr ne mygth not se to mend hys penne. Alle oþer thyng he mygth se wel a-now. He sett a peyr of spectacles on hys nose,

¹⁹ This overcoming of a cultural barrier is reminiscent of the "miracle" of the German priest in Rome (ch.40): even though he did not know any English, he could understand Margery – but no one else. Margery is also miraculously relieved of her illnesses when working on her book (ch.89, 219).

& Pan wast wel wers Pan it was be-for. He compleyned to þe creatur of hys dysese. Sche seyde hys enmy had envye at hys good dede & wold lett hym yf he mygth & bad hym do as wel as God wold 3eue hym grace & not levyn. Whan he cam a-geyn to hys booke, he myth se as wel, hym thowt, as euyr he dede be-for. (Prologue, 5, II.18–23)

It is this miracle, we are told, that prompts him to write the Prologue; and his literary endeavours earn him the express approval of Christ Himself, as Margery is told in one of her visions:

"þi stody þat þu stodiist for to do writyn þe grace þat I haue schewed to þe plesith me ryght meche & he þat writith boþe." (ch. 88, 216, II.14–15)

Moreover, divine approval is shown to him through the gift of tears, which he shares with Margery while he is working:

Also, whil þe forseyd creatur was ocupijd a-bowte þe writyng of þis tretys, sche had many holy teerys & wepingys (. . .) and also he þat was hir writer cowde not sumtyme kepyn hym-self fro wepyng. (ch. 89, 291, II.1–5)

Where miracles do not concern him directly, he takes on the persona of a witness attesting to the truthfulness of the narrative, which thus becomes his own.²⁰

At the same time, the priest was heavily influenced by literary models, both in his perception of facts and in the way he expressed them. (Meech 1940, liii–xi; Hirsch 1975, 149) Book 2 betrays his need to conventionalise Margery's life; it is a postscript which fills in the gaps of the somewhat haphazard narrative of the first book and brings it closer to the conventional format of the saint's life, complete with a description of Margery's spiritual exercises and the full text of her favourite prayer.

This second part of the work emphasises the dichotomy between the

²⁰ Margery's life is framed by the scribe's autobiography: see for example ch.75, where he adds his own testimony that the woman whom Margery cured of her madness was indeed violently afflicted, and the whole of chapters 24 and 25 of Book 1, which recount his testing of Margery's supernatural knowledge in both public and private affairs.

didactic intent of the priest and Margery's more self-centred religiousness — a dichotomy that had remained relatively unobtrusive in Book One.²¹ But to make a rigid distinction between these two aspects would be somewhat naive, for the models which guided the priest were also Margery's. She was just as influenced by the imagery and rhetoric of devotional writing as her scribe was — years of having such works read to her must necessarily have had some effect. Short of dictating her memoirs on a tape, the illiterate woman could hardly have benefited from a more favourable configuration. Her words were listened to with respect, and transcribed in accordance with conventions familiar to her.

The fact remains, however, that the act of writing necessarily placed new limitations on Margery's discourse, and undermined it even as it acquired a new authority. Like St Birgitta's book, like all books, her narrative now requires confirmation, because writing is by nature flawed, and has to be vindicated by the testimony of its readers for its truthfulness to be recognised. Moreover, Margery's experience, reduced to writing, becomes something exceptional; a noteworthy wonder that could not possibly become the norm. The threatening example of this woman who neglects, then leaves entirely husband and children, who refuses to be cowed by political or religious intimidation, who indulges in anti-social behaviour and defies authority without ever being able to be faulted — this example becomes a variation on the saint's life, an ideal unattainable by the vast majority of believers, and yet another authority reinforcing the power of writing. The subversive testimony of the rebel has been subdued by the pen, and her discourse appropriated by the male literati. The fate wished upon Margery by the disgruntled monk from Canterbury will finally come true: "I wold þow wer cloyd in an hows of ston þat þer schuld no man speke wyth þe". (ch. 13, 27, II.31–33) The woman herself had refused to be imprisoned between stone walls, yet the only surviving manuscript of her narrative belonged to a Carthusian monastery.

²¹ One of the more striking instances of the didactic intent of Book 2 is the appearance of Latin quotations in the text, as the priest recognises the source of a comment made by Margery.

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