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**The Books of Margery Kempe and Alice Rowley:
Literate Religious Expression and Women in Late Medieval England**

Carol Lynne Hemmingway

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In 1407, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel, in response to an increase in religious dissent during and immediately after the life of John Wycliffe, drafted a list of constitutions outlining thirteen statutes which condemned religious expression outside of that approved by the Church. Those “contrarying the ancient doctrine” and “refusing the traditions” that had been established as the Church’s orthodoxy were rebelling against God.¹ First enforcing the general authority of the Church, preaching was limited to those with express permission and the efficacy of the sacraments was not to be challenged.² Later constitutions solidified clerical control over written religious texts, a medium which could be used against them. The sixth constitution prohibited Wycliffe’s books. It also restricted the purchase and possession of religious texts to those “expressly approved or allowed” by orthodox examiners from or selected by England’s universities, Oxford and Cambridge.³ Notably, the clergy asserted authority to restrict vernacular translations of the Bible.⁴ However, these efforts of censorship were not very successful as vernacular translations continued to thrive.⁵ Arundel’s *Constitutions* demonstrate England’s growing problem of heresy, particularly Lollardy, in the minds of the clergy after the thirteenth century. Suspecting more than homegrown Wycliffism, the clergy censored continental traditions of radical mysticism and visions, often documented through books, as well.⁶ Within this environment, the literate religiosity of those not conventionally allowed this form of expression, like women, were viewed with suspicion.

This environment of increasing hostility towards religious dissent in late Medieval

¹ John Foxe, Vol. 3 of *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. George Townsend (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1843), 243.

² Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 243-245.

³ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 245.

⁴ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 245.

⁵ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 16.

⁶ Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion*, 14.

England was the setting for the lives of Margery Kempe and Alice Rowley. As told by *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Kempe chose to live as a holy married holy woman, renouncing her former sinful materialism. Her pilgrimages, visions, refusal to tolerate the swearing of oaths, and distinctive uncontrollable sobbing made her a controversial figure to her English contemporaries in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. However, this did not stop Kempe from orally composing the narrative of her life to a believing scribe in her old age. While Kempe was suspected of heresy for her religious expression which contradicted social norms, Alice Rowley of Coventry chose to express herself through explicitly deviating from orthodoxy in what little is known from the Litchfield Court Book recording the Coventry heresy trials of 1511 to 1512. Rowley used her local influence to teach against orthodox beliefs about the sacraments, eventually becoming a major figure in the local community of those who held similar views and being convicted as a heretic. As women with unconventional religious paths, they share experiences as the targets of inquisitorial interrogation but also the importance of literacy and English texts in their religious lives. The cases of Kempe and Rowley demonstrate how books and literacy at times provided the means through which women could assert some control over their immediate religious environment; however, despite how both Kempe and Rowley benefited from the culture surrounding literacy in the vernacular, medieval English religion created boundaries on their religious expression which they could not permanently exceed.

The female religious of the late Middle Ages existed in a space plagued by tension with the rise of female religious participation outside of the accepted example of the cloistered elite nun.⁷ The lack of oversight by male clergy in female religious houses like beguines and the sensual visions, asceticism, and physical miracles that are associated with mysticism attracted

⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 13, EBSCOhost.

much attention. The latter of these could be accepted as women were thought to be more physiologically predisposed towards these bodily experiences than men.⁸ Direct contact with the divine did not bring a higher status in the faith to the average woman, since the expression of the corrupt female body was still inferior to the spiritual training of the soul and mind which was considered a male domain.⁹ Some, like historians of women's history Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, have viewed heresy as something embraced by many women as a path towards female liberation or gender equality.¹⁰ Rejecting orthodox forms of expression also rejected the subordination of female religiosity, those historians believe. However, Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that the appeal of heresy to women might have been the same types of physical religious expression which attracted orthodox women at the time.¹¹ Heresy was only one religious option for women in this period with its own gendered restrictions. For contemporary priests, the physicality of female belief was an observable phenomenon that had to be addressed.

Concerned about the growing number of female mystics, Church leadership sought to define this site of controversy within orthodoxy. Male clerics used the signs and miracles of female mystics to inspire faith in orthodoxy to discourage the masses from heresy and to keep them under the Church's care.¹² By the fifteenth century, opinion within the clergy towards female religiosity shifted towards suspicion, calling for "discernment" towards the women whose behavior had been tolerated for the sake of fighting heresy.¹³ While at the Council of Constance in 1415, John Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, wrote against famous but

⁸ Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 204-208, EBSCOhost; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 189-194.

⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 235-236.

¹⁰ Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1:224-227.

¹¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 17.

¹² Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 195; Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 72.

¹³ Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 299-303.

controversial female saints and holy women like Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena.¹⁴ In these circumstances, women needed male advocates to defend them against accusations of heresy. Female mystics often depended on their confessors to play that role for them.¹⁵ By submitting to this relationship and remaining within the control of the church, women could avoid the charge of heresy. No matter the Church's judgment of a religious woman, orthodox or heretic, clerics sought to regulate their controversial forms of religiosity.

Female literacy in late medieval England was often connected to religious expression. By the sixteenth century, female readers, particularly those of printed texts, included nuns, aristocrats, or gentry.¹⁶ For those with access to wealthy monastic libraries, the reading and study of devotional texts were part of their religious lives.¹⁷ However, reading as a form of religious expression went beyond the cloister. Women in secular society needed wealth and standing to be able to access the education needed to read. It was often for pragmatic reasons, like business and household management, that women were taught to read.¹⁸ Female education outside of the nunnery often came from other women in their family.¹⁹ Outside of pragmatic business uses, women followed a "recognizable pattern of women's participation in literate culture": the reading group.²⁰ The books known to have been owned and read by women, which were used in these groups, were largely religious in nature, leaving little evidence for secular reading outside of documents related to business or household affairs.²¹ Status also affected the ability to engage

¹⁴ John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*. *Gender, Theory, and Religion* (New York: Columbia University, 2006), 211, EBSCOhost.

¹⁵ Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 212.

¹⁶ Mary Carpenter Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133.

¹⁷ Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*, 30-35.

¹⁸ Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 4, 12.

¹⁹ Krug, *Reading Families*, 67, 70-71.

²⁰ Krug, *Reading Families*, 77.

²¹ Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*, 3.

in literate culture because access to books depended on social connections.²² Consequently, women of higher standing could own vernacular devotional texts with little consequences. Social and economic class affected greatly the acceptability of female literacy and engagement with often religious texts in late medieval England.

Since the discovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, questions of authorship and the identity of its titular character have concerned scholars of English literature and history. Early scholarship diminishes Kempe's authorship. John C. Hirsch, for example, credits Kempe's second scribe as a co-author of the text because of his drastic rewriting and expansion of Kempe's original draft.²³ More recent scholarship argues that Kempe played an active role in creating her book, maintaining control throughout the writing process.²⁴ Diane R. Uhlman contends that the prologue explaining the creation of the *Book* instead erases the role of the scribe, giving the most credit to Kempe.²⁵ Taking this further, Lynn Staley writes that the very existence of the male scribe in the text serves to further authorize Kemp's authorship, confirming the orthodoxy of the religious woman and her *Book*.²⁶ In her influential *Dissenting Fictions*, Staley also argues that the character Margery Kampe was created by the author Margery Kempe for the book's largely fictional narrative.²⁷ This stance is not universally agreed upon. The distinction between character and author has been called "problematic" by Diane Watt, while Genelle Gertz argues that Kempe's life is only fictionalized in that it is told from a subjective

²² Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*, 25, 136.

²³ John C. Hirsh, "Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medium Ævum* 44, no. 1 (1975): 147-150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43628104>.

²⁴ Nicholas Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 405-409.

²⁵ Diana R. Uhlman, "The Comfort of Voice, the Solace of Script: Orality and Literacy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Studies in Philology* 91, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 55-56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4174475>.

²⁶ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 20-21.

²⁷ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 3.

perspective of past events.²⁸ To discuss Kempe's use of vernacular books, I contend that Kempe employed the *Book* to negotiate a space for her spirituality, while critically examining Kempe's construction of herself as partially autobiographical rather than entirely fictional.

For the Lollards, few prominent women like Margery Kempe exist to study, so scholars study the role of women in Lollardy more broadly. As previously mentioned, some have viewed heresy as a haven for female emancipation and gender equality. When these ideas were prominent, Margaret Aston, although hesitant to assert that female Lollard priests existed, supported the idea that heterodoxy gave important roles to female converts. She claimed that Lollardy "produced some famous women preachers in their time and promoted the religious and educational equality of the sexes."²⁹ Anne Hudson's study which shaped the modern study of Lollardy, *The Premature Reformation*, defers to these positions. Hudson views critics' suspicions of the Lollards as evidence for female education and possibly teaching.³⁰ Alcuin Blamires more recently support this viewpoint, citing Walter Brut's defense of a female priesthood as part of his trial before theologians in 1391.³¹ More recently, scholarship on female Lollardy has shifted.

After a reexamination of the evidence of Brut, the scholarly consensus moved away from beliefs that Lollard women commonly had positions of leadership. Fiona Somerset has since dismissed the idea that Brut's meant to defend women, placing it within a larger theoretical argument on the priesthood, absent of any real female perspective, that was seized upon by his

²⁸ Diane Watt, *Medieval Women's Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100-1500* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 130; Genelle Gertz, *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48, EBSCOhost.

²⁹ Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 49, 55, 69, EBSCOhost.

³⁰ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 137, 188-189, 326-327.

³¹ Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 250.

detractors.³² Shannon McSheffrey's *Gender and Heresy* is the most prominent work on Lollardy that demonstrates the change. Contrary to previous scholars, McSheffrey's view of the status of women in Lollard was pessimistic. She noted that Lollardy held more appeal to men and the women who were found to be heretics usually joined through familial connections.³³ McSheffrey wrote that, "In the Lollard view, family life pleased God best," and, for this reason, most Lollard women were relegated to supporting roles in the home.³⁴ It is on this subordinate status of Lollard women that I base my analysis of Alice Rowley who has received little individual attention, highlighting her as an exception to this rule and addressing how she used the spread of books to overcome gendered obstacles.

The use of books through Kempe's writing and Rowley's reading necessitates a discussion of each woman's literacy. According to *The Book of Margery Kempe's* portrayal, Kempe was an illiterate holy woman through whom God spoke. The key to a discussion of Kempe's illiteracy is the implied but not explicit nature of the trait in the text. Kempe confirms her ignorance of Latin when prompted to speak in it during a trial, but that gives no information on her literacy in the vernacular.³⁵ Due to Kempe's social standing, she quite possibly could at least read English. Kempe, the daughter of a former mayor of the important port town of Lynn and delegate to parliament, came from a prominent leading family that would have gained power through its involvement in regional politics and trade.³⁶ Even if she could not read herself, she had the means, and likely the connections to the various priests that she mentions throughout her

³² Fiona Somerset, "Eciam Mulier: Women in Lollardy and the Problem of Sources," in Olson and Kerby-Fulton, *Voices in Dialogue*, 249-257.

³³ Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 4.

³⁴ McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 81-82.

³⁵ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 82-83.

³⁶ Kate Parker, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic" in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. John H. Arnold and Katherine. J. Lewis (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 56-57.

text, to gain access to devotional books popular among upper-class orthodox women. Kempe's possible literacy is also evidenced by her failed business ventures and the skills necessary to be able to start and manage a business in late medieval England.³⁷ Despite the very real possibility that someone of Kempe's standing would have been able to read English, her illiteracy in the text serves a purpose. Kempe's dependency on orality and lack of education bolster her claim of direct communication with God.³⁸ Staley argues that Kempe's apparent illiteracy was a strategy to protect herself against claims of Lollardy.³⁹ No matter the truth, Kempe needed the text to suggest her illiteracy.

In contrast, Rowley's literacy and education are quickly apparent in the heresy trials of the Coventry Lollards. For Rowley, literacy was an advantage. Part of this was due to the emphasis of the primacy of lay access to vernacular biblical translations in the Lollardy of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁴⁰ These small networks of religious dissenters needed people to read the texts on which their association was based. The heretical group at Coventry also had a uniquely high rate of female literacy, encouraging the involvement of women in the community.⁴¹ As a member of the city's upper class, she had greater access to education than her male artisan Lollard counterparts. Having been married to a prominent merchant and former mayor of Coventry, Rowley's status provided the authority and wealth to gain access to vernacular books.⁴² As most Lollards only possessed vernacular tracts, Rowley's copies of entire translations of biblical books showed her privilege.⁴³ Because of her circumstances, she acquired

³⁷ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 8-9.

³⁸ Uhlman, "The Comfort of Voice," 57.

³⁹ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 32.

⁴⁰ Shannon McSheffrey, "Heresy, Orthodoxy and English Vernacular Religion, 1480-1525," *Past & Present*, no. 186 (February 2005): 49, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3600851>.

⁴¹ McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 34-36.

⁴² Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner, eds. and trans., *Lollards of Coventry, 1486-1522* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 123-124, 315-316.

⁴³ Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 106.

the ability to support the Coventry group spiritually through the transmission of knowledge from the religious texts she owned, creating a bond between members through the exchange and public reading of books.

Both Kempe and Rowley's attempts to influence their religious environment relied on networks centered around the exchange of information, particularly through books. For Kempe, networking and collaboration with others were essential for the completion of her text. Over seven to eight years, a local priest reads her religious texts. The mystical concepts present in these texts, like Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*, provide Kempe an understanding of her mystical predecessors before putting her life to writing.⁴⁴ The influence of St. Bridget's *Revelations*, another of these texts, appears several times throughout the *Book*. The *Book* makes a direct comparison between the divine experiences of St. Bridget and Kempe during one of Kempe's visions, and, like Bridget, Kempe becomes spiritually wedded to God, commemorated by a ring.⁴⁵ Lynn's literate community also made possible the writing of her manuscript. Through her connections to scribes, she was able to finish the text, ordering its secrecy until after her death.⁴⁶ Literary networks also disseminated her book to audiences. Connections between the pious educated people would later lead to the creation of an unknown number of copies and its inclusion in the Yorkshire monastery of Mount Grace's library collection.⁴⁷ Despite, or perhaps because of, her ostracization from the community, her religious work was not conducted alone. These literary networks not only provided support for Kempe's religious training but also served to further authenticate the holiness of her life and later to spread her message to others.

⁴⁴ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 105-106.

⁴⁵ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 35-36, 57.

⁴⁶ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 5.

⁴⁷ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, New Cultural Studies Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 206, EBSCOhost.

Like Kempe, Rowley depended on her connection to others through written texts. The exchange of books created networks connecting the disparate communities of later Lollardy.⁴⁸ The records of the Coventry trials show a web of relationships between citizens, established through the exchange, reading, and discussion of vernacular texts. Rowley is reported to have lent books to at least five other members of the group of heretics from Coventry convicted from 1511 to 1512 and a local vicar, who she believed “favoured her and the others.”⁴⁹ She was mentioned by name in the testimonies of fifteen of her fellow accused who connected her to even more members of the community. Her prominence caused Robert Silkby, another local leader, to implicate her from the beginning of the trials, reporting a meeting in which she read from the *Gospels*.⁵⁰ Other accusers highlighted Rowley’s public readings as the Lollards’ web unraveled. Roger Landesdale, another leader, confessed that Rowley had brought her personal biblical texts, including the Commandments and the letters of St. Paul, to his home for readings.⁵¹ By bringing books, the scattered group of religious dissenters could meet for secret gatherings surrounding the texts. The ability to facilitate group meetings through her books gave Rowley an unusual amount of influence and further emphasized her heterodoxy.

How each woman employed books determined where she stood in relation to orthodoxy. To provide evidence of her orthodoxy as a mystic, Kempe needed a record of her holy life and miracles, following the style of the hagiography. Well-known figures acknowledge her sanctity and divine knowledge in the text. Notably the anchorite and visionary Julian of Norwich affirms Kempe in the face of public condemnation, saying, “Set all your trust in God and fear not the

⁴⁸ Maureen Jurkowski, “Lollard Networks,” in *Wycliffite Controversies*, eds. Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, *Medieval Church Studies* 23 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 273; John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 243.

⁴⁹ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 116-120, 130-131, 159-160, 217-218.

⁵⁰ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 104.

⁵¹ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 107, 119.

language of the world, for the more despite, shame, and reproof that you have in the world, the greater is your merit in the sight of God.”⁵² Passages in which Kempe appears to deviate also reinforce her orthodoxy. When correcting priests, Kempe follows the “pastoral norms” of the time by using exempla, moral short stories, to prove her criticisms just.⁵³ The model of the female visionary available in hagiographies created a space of toleration for Kempe’s more socially unacceptable behaviors. For example, Kempe’s scribe, who at first did not condone her sobbing, later compares them to those of Marie of Oignies, another married holy woman and beguine.⁵⁴ The scribe was a witness to Kempe’s holiness who represented the church when condoning her actions as a religious laywoman. Katherine J. Lewis suggests that Kempe was utilizing a “renewed interest” in venerating local English saints to establish a cult through her text.⁵⁵ However, there is little evidence that her confessors attempted to establish a cult surrounding her. While Kempe numbers herself among the saints, the more direct result of the text is to define her life within the bounds of orthodoxy.

To Rowley, her books are a physical element of her heterodoxy and rebellion against clerical authority. Possession and reading of vernacular texts by the upper classes were not considered heretical itself.⁵⁶ Decrying the church and rejecting its sacraments through texts, however, was prosecutable. An “overwhelming portion” of the religious and biblical texts produced and possessed by dissenters like Rowley were written in the vernacular.⁵⁷ The possession of English versions of the Bible outside of the control of the Church was in direct

⁵² Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 32-33.

⁵³ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 93-94; Edwin D. Craun, *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 137-142, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁴ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 112.

⁵⁵ Katherine J. Lewis, “Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England,” in Arnold and Lewis, *Companion to Margery Kempe*, 205.

⁵⁶ McSheffrey, “Heresy, Orthodoxy and English,” 69; Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion*, 16.

⁵⁷ Patrick J. Hornbeck II, *What is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40-41.

contradiction of Arundel's seventh constitution. The spirit of the act of doing so broke the decree to not "bring any thing in doubt that is determined by the church."⁵⁸ Rowley is alleged to have said, "My belief is better than theirs save that we dare not speak it. And why should God give us great goods more than other men have but because of our good steadfast belief and good books."⁵⁹ Books, especially those in English, allowed her dissenting group to claim superiority over the dominant orthodox majority surrounding them. Rowley believed that their possession of the Word of God and other "good" texts positioned them to receive God's blessings. From the perspective of Rowley, the prohibition of her actions only made them more justified. Thus, she could exercise local authority over the Coventry community with confidence.

Although in different ways, Kempe and Rowley derived their authority from written texts. Kempe's *Book* publicized her sanctity while influencing her audience. Without written evidence, her influence would quickly disappear after her death. "Communication and good words" only last while she is alive, which she acknowledges.⁶⁰ Without transmission, her visions had no value for the edification of others. In creating a devotional work like those with which she was familiar, Kempe had a religious audience in mind. After her death, she received a monastic audience in the Carthusians monks of Mount Grace who annotated *The Book* and analyzed its parallels to contemporary mystical literature.⁶¹ As a growing new monastery in the fifteenth century, Kempe's work could have been an attractive addition to its library, representing the monk's interest in local mysticism. Scholars of Margery Kempe in recent years have emphasized her role as a social critic.⁶² Implicitly commenting on the role of women in society, her text

⁵⁸ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 245.

⁵⁹ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 240.

⁶⁰ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 93.

⁶¹ Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh*, 206-220; Genelle Gertz, *Heresy Trials*, 52.

⁶² Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, 39-82; Terence N. Bowers, "Margery Kempe as Traveler," *Studies in Philology* 97, vol. 1 (Winter 2000): 15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4174658>.

contains statements obscured by orthodox imagery. Venerating the feminine, many of her visions feature female saints, sometimes with those saints placed on the same level as prominent male saints. During one vision before her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Christ promises Kempe “the same grace [he] promised Saint Katherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Barbara, and Saint Paul.”⁶³ In another vision, God affirms to Kempe that he loves women of all sexual statuses. While conceding that chastity was better than the alternative, God praised wives, endorsing their godly service.⁶⁴ A devotional text was the means through which Kempe attempted to influence a religious audience, including some ideas about female piety while providing proof of her special relationship with God.

The authority that Rowley received from texts was far less subtle than Kempe’s because her beliefs inherently put her at odds with the Church that Kempe embraced. McSheffrey has noted that Rowley’s position was unique in Lollardy due to her education, widowhood, temperament, and social status.⁶⁵ While all these qualities were indeed necessary for her to have a position in the community, the means through which she was able to do so was through her books. In a departure from gender norms, Rowley led readings, and implicitly discussions, alongside the more educated male Lollards at Coventry, having read the Commandments publicly in Roger Landesdales’ house with “Landesdale reading another book after Alice had finished.”⁶⁶ Rowley taught her beliefs to members of her community, including the previously discussed mixed groups, individual men like Thomas Bown, and at least one group of women.⁶⁷ The members, including the mother and daughter Agnes and Julian Yong and their friend Agnes

⁶³ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 15, 38-39, 64.

⁶⁴ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 36-37.

⁶⁵ McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 30.

⁶⁶ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 107.

⁶⁷ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 104, 130-132, 150-151, 217-218, 232-234.

de Bakehouse, admitted to rejecting the sacraments and attending “communications of this kind in Alice Rowley’s home.”⁶⁸ She also hosted traveling teachers with similar dissenting beliefs at her home, discussing “the deepest scriptures” with them.⁶⁹ Without her literacy and book ownership which allowed her to take texts outside of her home freely but discretely, these acts would have been impossible in similar male-dominated communities founded around a communal desire for access to vernacular biblical translations. In this case, the value of texts seems to have overshadowed the subordination of female believers in importance. Rowley was able to negotiate for herself a teaching position within the local religious network, a position departing from popular orthodox female symbols and spirituality.

As late medieval women, Kempe and Rowley engaged with the spiritual symbols of the physical like the Eucharist. Kempe’s visionary writing allowed her to more freely employ symbolism.⁷⁰ The signs of life in the movement of the bread and the cup during the eucharistic miracle which Kempe witnesses exemplify an emphasis of body and vitality.⁷¹ Bynum has argued that “the notion of the female as flesh became an argument for women's *imitatio Christi* through physicality.”⁷² *Imitatio Christi* more explicitly appears throughout Kempe’s struggles, particularly during her first pilgrimage across Europe. She suffered physically through fasting and fits of uncontrollable sobbing.⁷³ On her journey to Jerusalem, she faced persecution from her English traveling companions who refused to accept her holy tears and diet.⁷⁴ *Imitatio Christi* also appeared from imagery as well. While visiting the Mount of Calvary, Kempe received a vision of Christ’s death and fell to the ground with her arms stretched out to parallel Christ’s

⁶⁸ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 232-234.

⁶⁹ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 151.

⁷⁰ Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion*, 21.

⁷¹ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 35.

⁷² Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 263.

⁷³ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 45, 50-51.

⁷⁴ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 45-49.

position on the cross.⁷⁵ While these symbols prove useful to her, her holiness seems to primarily come from the “contemplation” and “study” of religious texts and sermons to which Christ directly calls her.⁷⁶ Later in life, God the Father and Mary commanded her to express her dedication through not fasting, so she would have the physical strength to deal with spiritual matters.⁷⁷ Kempe’s physical expressions of piety and obedience to Christ distinguish her from the corrupt mortal world, but she was not limited to such expression.

Alternatively, Rowley had no need for such symbols. They served orthodox women navigating the restrictions placed upon female spirituality by the Church, which was irrelevant for her. As part of her breaking from the Catholic church, she explicitly rejects the Eucharistic symbols many women came to appreciate and employ, urging Thomas Bown to remember that “the host was offered spiritually in memory of Christ’s passion” during the elevation of the host.⁷⁸ She later confessed to further denying transubstantiation with the question, “How can the priest make God?”⁷⁹ Rejecting the physical, Rowley’s expression through the reading and discussion of books was explicitly intellectual. By reading and teaching others in the community, Rowley asserted her spiritual knowledge gained through study that was not miraculously granted to a weak vessel. Instead of being known for physical signs, she was known for her beliefs and was usually associated with books when others testified against her, with one man identifying her with a “primer in English in a red cover” that she owned.⁸⁰ Deviating from the worldly realm to which women were normally relegated, Rowley relied on her education and intellect to create her place in her religious community, although this role was still limited as was the case for her

⁷⁵ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 50.

⁷⁶ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 65-66, 157.

⁷⁷ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 118-119.

⁷⁸ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 131-132.

⁷⁹ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 159.

⁸⁰ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 145.

orthodox counterparts.

Despite the new opportunities literacy and written texts brought to their spiritual lives, Kempe and Rowley faced limitations of their actions and influence. In Kempe's case, she could not completely embrace her literacy in her book. Despite how much her book emphasized her spiritual learning through texts, she still had to deny her knowledge in an interrogation by a clerk in York, attributing her responses to the questions of the faith to "the grace of God."⁸¹ As a woman pushing the boundary of what was acceptable for the time, the threat of trial and condemnation as a heretic is present throughout her life. Elements of her life like her education were necessarily self-censored so her life remained firmly within the realm of the orthodox. Although obscured, her voice was still able to be heard through the text while it still had a monastic audience in the first century after her death. This changed when Wynkyn de Worde's 1501 edition of selections from *The Book of Margery Kempe* largely erased Kempe's life, leaving only excerpts of some of her visions.⁸² In 1521, Henry Pepwell printed his edition based on Worde's selected passages while giving Kempe the title of "Ancress of Lynn."⁸³ Kempe's reach was largely minimal even after these attempts to clean her image, but the reprintings demonstrate some intellectual interest in her name in the century after her death if not a popular cult. Following the path of orthodoxy like Kempe did not always lead to lasting influence or the preservation of original intent.

With Rowley's kind of literacy, her actions were always legally limited. Besides her beliefs that challenged ecclesiastical authorities, her books made her a target. As English

⁸¹ Kempe, *Book of Margery Kempe*, 89.

⁸² Wynkyn de Worde, *Book of Margery Kempe. Selections*, ed. Joey Fredell (London: printed by the author, 1501). http://english.selu.edu/humanitiesonline/kempe/showcase/webapp_wynkyn.php.

⁸³ Edmund G. Gardner, ed., *The Cell of Self-knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises Printed by Henry Pepwell in 1521* (New York: Duffield & Co., 1910), 51-59.

inquisitorial methods began searching for evidence of vernacular scriptures and other religious books, her provision of vernacular texts to members of the artisanal class in Coventry put her at odds with the interests of local authorities.⁸⁴ In the end, Rowley faced weeks and months of medieval imprisonment until she finally confessed and abjured her heretical beliefs, likely exhausted from the long imprisonment compared to others in the community.⁸⁵ For Rowley's consistent rebellion against the Church and undermining of inquisitorial procedures through her past false acquittal, she received the harshest punishment out of those who abjured: the duty to assist in the execution of Joan Warde alias Wasshington by burning.⁸⁶ Despite her connections to her fellow Lollards, we have little evidence of her specific ideas and teachings from her perspective. All that is known of her is from trial documents told from the inquisitorial perspective. Because she relied on distributing books and not creating her own, her voice is largely lost to time. However, this can be seen as a natural consequence of a group that at that time relied more on biblical texts than tracts and treatises.⁸⁷ Perhaps, in the tradition of late medieval English dissenters, Rowley prized the spread of the Bible above any ideas of her own.

The ability to read and take advantage of books and literary culture opened possibilities for Margery Kempe and Alice Rowley but not without limitations. Women's relationships to literacy could be complicated as being openly literate had disadvantaged Kempe and advantaged Rowley. Both women took advantage of the connections they made through a common interest in reading books to further their goals. The use of books could be a powerful determiner for them to determine their relationship to the Church. Books gave them the ability to exert authority over future religious audiences in the case of Kempe's *Book* and over her contemporary local

⁸⁴ Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 206-209.

⁸⁵ Thomson, *The Later Lollards*, 111.

⁸⁶ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 241-242.

⁸⁷ McSheffrey and Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, 343-344.

community for Rowley's books. The two women also in using the written word engaged with the physicality and symbols of medieval female religious expression. In the end, they were limited by the Church's influence over the treatment of women and the definition of orthodoxy. Much work has been done searching for women readers, writers, and book owners in late medieval England. Kempe and Rowley show how women could aim to distribute books to audiences outside of the small female reading circle in this period. Studying women's motives for participating in the distribution of books more broadly can reveal the growing importance of books in their lives near the beginning of the modern era. Through written texts, women in England could explore spirituality in a world of gendered religious expression.

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