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The Cuckold, the Saint, and the Madman

“The Miller’s Tale” and *The Book of Margery Kempe* are both hagiographies—one in the traditional sense, the other not so much—which raise questions as to the relationship between gender, sexuality, and religion. Though they feature empowered women pushing the boundaries of social norms, both texts seem capable of doing so only by bringing down the men involved. In reality, the dynamics are more complicated than that. Upon closer inspection, the texts are quite neutral: they neither rush to conclusions nor impose harsh impressions of characters. Rather, they redefine righteousness, illness, and intimacy in a way that blurs the lines between holiness, sickness, and romance. By the end, the reader is left without a clear idea of who the hero(ine) is.

Much of the confusion comes from the way each piece begins. Both works are framed in a way that allows (or even forces) the reader to question all that follows, to see it in a different light than the story itself seems to take. In his “Prologue,” the Miller introduces his tale as “a legend and a lif / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wif” (33-34). Not only does he boldly claim that he will recount a saint’s life, but he also specifically invokes the image of Joseph and Mary, implicating Christ. The Miller’s intoxication and his handful of blasphemous oaths might distance a serious religious interpretation, but the references persist. John and Alisoun’s age difference serves as another reminder of Joseph and Mary, but if the audience still fails to see the connection, the Miller spells it out, starting “The Tale” itself with Nicholas singing “*Angelus ad Virginem*,” an Annunciation hymn (108). Notably, the Miller doesn’t specify exactly who the

saint is—the carpenter, John, his wife, Alisoun, or even the clerk, Nicholas. That distinction is left to the reader.

Margery Kempe's autobiography employs a similar technique. The intentionality in this case is more unlikely than in Chaucer's work, given that Kempe is speaking of her own life. Regardless of intent, her introduction in "Book 1.1" paints her as both a mother and a patient, two lenses that shape the images which follow despite Kempe's attempts at dissociation from each (443-444). She begins by describing how she "was with child" and then "was labored with great attacks of illness ... [such that she] despaired of her life" (443). Her accounts seem to signal a serious case of postpartum depression which is conveniently left unexplored in the context of her thirteen later children (Simpson 152). "Book 1.1," titled "THE BIRTH OF HER FIRST CHILD AND HER FIRST VISION," is almost intentionally deceptive in the way that it implies she is the mother of just one. "The mother of one" is certainly more forgettable than "the mother of fourteen," but it doesn't make Kempe any less of a mother. Perhaps it makes her less of a psychopath, both clinically (with respect to her postpartum depression) and sexually. Still, "mother" and "maniac" are not the only labels she avoids. One might also argue that she portrays herself as a wife, "married to a worshipful burgess," only to discuss her attempts to rid herself of this very title; she never seems completely dedicated to this cause, though, ending up separated instead of divorced and eventually marrying the Godhead (443, 449). This uncertainty is what marks the whole work. The reader is constantly asked to decide whether the visions being described are holy or psychotic, whether Kempe's relationship with God is spiritual or physical. Going back to the unintentional nature of Kempe's mystery, it seems quite psychological and subconscious whereas the Miller is more explicit and unapologetic. Also unlike "The Miller's Tale," the context is flipped: instead of being a ribald comedy poorly masked as a saint's story,

The Book Margery Kempe is a hagiography that secretly aspires to be something more, a social commentary of sorts.

The depictions of men in both texts are similarly ambiguous, as are the women's relationships to them. Although the Miller never narrows down the identity of his so-called saint, the reference to John can be implied. Throughout the tale, John is both faithful and zealous—"he loved [his wif] more than his lif" (114). Aside from eventually breaking his promise to "nevere telle [of the impending apocalyptic flood] / To child ne wif, by him that harwed helle," his only sin is being too faithful and too zealous (403-404). "Jalous he was, and heeld hire [his wif] narwe in cage" such that this confinement backfires, inciting Alisoun to break free (116). Even John's faith in God is made to be excessive. John is too quick to believe that Noah's story could be repeated ; he is naïve to believe that his prayers are enough to ward off evil. In this manner, when John realizes his mistake and tells the townspeople, his transformation to a madman that "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye" allows him to simultaneously embody the position of a saint, a cuckold, and a madman (732). However, this reading is not a given. Close inspection of the text begins to explain some of what might seem like inconsistency. The second line of "The Tale" describes him as a "gnof" or a churl (80). Perhaps it is his true obsession with his wife more than God which is his fatal flaw. Though he is loyal to Alisoun, John's devotion to God is questionable. It is no surprise that John's intercessions fail to ward Nicholas off of his wife. His prayers are mixed with notes of magic and witchcraft alongside Christian practices of signing the cross and reciting the Lord's Prayer:

["I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes."

Therewith the nightspel said he anoonrightes

On four halves of the hous aboute,

And on the thresshold on the dore withoute:

“Jesu Christ and Sainte Benedight,

Blesse this hous from every wikked wight!

For nights nerye the White Pater Noster. (371-378)

The connotation surrounding John seems always to be negative, taking him as a fool rather than a victim.

On the other hand, “hende Nicholas” is described romantically—he is beautiful, smart, and “Of derne love he coude, and of solas” (92). Although the reader might initially be mistaken to view John as the saint, the Miller seems much more in awe of the clerk. Even when “prively he caught hire by the queinte,” the Miller is not judgmental (168). He suggests that the gesture is not unwanted and carefully prefaces the fact with a positively spun excuse: “That on [that] day this hende Nicholas / Fil with this Yonge wift to rage and playe” (164-165). If anything, Nicholas saves Alisoun, freeing her from her cage; John simply gets what he deserves. When Absolon returns to get revenge for Alisoun’s disrespect towards him, Nicholas rises even more—he goes from hero or saint to martyr, suffering the “iren hoot” on Alisoun’s behalf (701). This is besides the Miller’s clear appreciation for Nicholas’s sense of humor with regard to his farting gesture—a joke he sets up almost 500 lines earlier, describing how Absolon “was somdeel squaimous / Of farting, and of speech dangerous” (229-230). Even here, the ambiguity is evident. The line break makes it easy to mistake Absolon’s farting as dangerous alongside his speech, adding to the suspense and surprise at the story’s end. The only thing that is unequivocal is the lack of sympathy shown towards John.

Given their similar positions, the carpenter from “The Miller’s Tale” and Kempe’s husband are fitting namesakes. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is all too familiar with the same

kinds of contradiction present in Chaucer's work. Like the case of the Miller, the narrator is unable to remove her own impressions from her story-telling. This tension between accurate recording and personal emotions is the main source of discrepancy. Though the Miller does little to combat his own biases, Kempe visibly attempts to cover up some of her own leanings with varying success. One is inclined to search for fault in Kempe's husband due to the hints of resentment towards him. However, this functions counterintuitively in the text. In an attempt to condemn John, the reader begins to gain sympathy for the kind man who seems to respect, love, and obey his wife in spite of her refusal to "common naturally" with him and her preference to "rather see [him] be slain than [they] should turn again to [their] uncleanness" (445). These words serve as a metaphorical sword that martyrs John and leaves Kempe a widow capable of remarrying. Some readers might begin to change their views of who the saint is due to this merciless demeanor. As the story unfolds, John continues to suffer. Given that he remains literally alive and lawfully Kempe's husband, John is cuckolded by the Godhead when It weds his wife. To an extent, John concedes this of his own accord, agreeing that "As free may your body be to God as it has been to me." However, Kempe seems to submit to God in a manner far beyond anything she ever offered her husband. In the end, John falls ill with what appears to be dementia. This tribulation might be viewed as coming from God, who admits to "send[ing] ... pestilence and ... great sickness ... [so that people may] know my visitation" (447). John becomes a saint being tested by God. Even then, Kempe is "irked at her labor" taking care of him except in thinking of it as penance for her previous sins (454). Though her madness defines her as a saint in Kempe's own eyes, John's solidifies him as a burden. She clearly has a strong preference for God over John; this desire is the main justification for considering herself a saint. The reader's allegiance likely isn't as constant.

Because of the way in which the Godhead is depicted as a husband, *The Book of Margery Kempe* beckons a comparison between Kemp's relationship with God and John. In many ways, God defies the expectation and tone conveyed, that he is the perfect spouse. His relationship with Kempe is at best unsettling. When put up against John, a saint in his own right, the holiness of the Holiest is put into doubt. One might notice John's one major lapse: threatening to "meddle [Kempe] again" if she does not agree to lie beside him, pay his debts, and eat with him on Fridays (445). This proves to be an empty threat, but God takes it a step further. When the Father asks for Kempe's hand in marriage, it is not a question at all; it is a statement. "Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, ... for you shall dwell with me without end" (449). Jesus Christ on the other hand asks what she thinks of this, to which she remains silent and weeps, "desiring to have still himself [Christ rather than the Father] and in no way to be parted from him" (449). Still, Christ responds on Kempe's behalf and the Father recites His wedding vow. There is no mention of Kempe reciprocating this action though she is thereafter considered wed. Moreover, the Father's vow omits the portion where He promises to take her "in sickness and in health." This serves as a stark contrast to John's greatest act of devotion, remaining beside her in spite of her illness. As with this case of consent and loyalty, God seems to amplify many of the issues Margery encounters with John. Her intimacy with God brings about hysterical fits of sadness upon witnessing "his Passion," similar to the ones brought on by her postpartum depression (454-455). Kempe seems to worry about her adequacy in the eyes of Christ, protectively mentioning Christ's note that "Bridget saw me never in this manner" (446). Additionally, God confines her to the roles she despised and escaped with John: "Daughter, ... when you are in bed take me as your wedded husband, as your most worthy darling, and as your sweetest son" (451). She becomes a mother once more to God before He leaves her alone with

yet another child, this time from Him, in the form of the sick John who had “turned childish again and lacked reason so that he could not do his own easement by going to a stool” (454). As in the case of her postpartum depression, she begins to blame herself as well as John. However, in spite of these trials, she never turns from God, not even in the tone of her text. Though the ideas that can be parsed out may be sacrilegious, Kempe is oblivious to these features of her writing. She never veers from illustrating God as the perfect husband while doing her best to act indifferent to John.

This vexed relationship between the narrators and the texts they create allows for the dichotomies which arise in “The Miller’s Tale” and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Though the authors and the narrators are inseparably invested in their stories, the readers and the readings are not—they are their own living, breathing beings implicated in their own interests. The authors might be constrained to the guise of a hagiography, but the audience is not bound by this frame of reference. One may take either story at face value while another might read into everything; neither view is wrong. By introducing this space of conflict, Chaucer and Kempe kindle a spark for thought and conversation around the topics of gender, sexuality, and religion. It becomes impossible to discern whether traditional readings of these texts as empowering women are founded. Anything goes as the cuckold, the saint, and the madman merge into a singular form. Even Christ isn’t safe.

Works Cited

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