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### Bears with Pears or Heavenly Intercessors?

While the Reformation is generally regarded to have begun with Martin Luther's famous treatise of 1517, the seeds of dissent sown in the 14<sup>th</sup> century had already taken full root in England by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. War, disease, and oppressive government led to a general anger toward the Catholic Church, believed to be "among the greatest of the oppressive landowners" (Norton 10). John Wycliffe, whose sermons preached against abuses in the church and attempted to shift the focus of religious faith away from church rituals and onto scriptural interpretation, was persecuted. Renaissance Humanism's notion of individual agency was filtering across the Channel. The medieval texts *The Book of Margery Kempe* (probably written in the late 1430s) and *Everyman* (after 1485) are therefore products of turbulent religious times. *Everyman*, in that it highlights the importance of the sacraments and the clergy, can be seen as a response on the part of the Catholic Church to the challenges it faced. *The Book of Margery Kempe* gives hints into the nature of these challenges. Both texts reveal a medieval concern about the role of the clergy in England.

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, while presented as spiritual autobiography, was also a story *as transcribed by a priest*. Although the manuscript was not "discovered" until 1934, it shows evidence of having been read and studied much before this time.

Annotations by four additional hands, probably "monks associated with the important Carthusian priory of Mount Grace in Yorkshire" fill the margins of the British Library MS (Staley 2). Believed to retain "much of the characteristic form and expression of its

author”, it nonetheless must be remembered that Kempe’s story was interpreted and presented through a very specific (clerical) lens (Norton 367). Lynn Staley, who studied the early annotations made to the original manuscript, notes that the marginal comments and underlining “are directed toward elucidating the “affective” emphasis of the text” (5). “The challenge to authority implicit in Margery’s experiences,” Staley continues, “is downplayed by highlighting those characteristics that link Margery to the conventions of spiritual ecstasy” (6). Staley suggests that Kempe’s narration is shaped “to guide subsequent readers towards a carefully controlled response, one that obviates the radical social gospel submerged in Kempe’s Narrative” (6). Given that this “radical social gospel” is nonetheless present in Kempe’s story and that it contains an ambiguous picture of the Catholic clergy, it is significant to ponder why it was transcribed and studied at all.

Perhaps those clergy sympathetic to Kempe used her story as a vehicle for contemplation of troubling religious questions. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, framed as it is between two domestic scenes (childbirth and care of an elderly husband), has a pseudo-domesticity that disarms one for the degree to which it challenges Church authority. As such, it provides a covert airing of issues such as the need for priestly intermediary in the laity’s relationship to God, corruption within the clergy, and the role of women in a male dominated church.

The first challenge (and the one most threatening to the power structure of the Catholic Church) is to the need for priestly intermediary. It is, ironically, Kempe’s botched attempt to have her confession heard through a priest that leads to her madness and to her personal relationship with God. “Our merciful Lord Christ Jesu [...] appeared to his creature,” the story goes, “and anon the creature was stabled in her wits and in her

reason” (368-369). She is innocent of deliberately bypassing the priest, for it is Christ who comes to her. By including Margery’s initial seeking out of the sacrament of Penance, her transcribers maintain Kempe’s position within the church and enable her story to be heard and not dismissed as mere heresy.

Heresy was, however, suggested in this story of a lay woman leading a life that frequently imitated priesthood. The tradition of male priest following in Christ’s footsteps was established at the Last Supper. It was they whose lives were supposed to parallel Christ’s, they who had power to perform the sacraments, to intercede with God. Kempe’s obvious parallels to Christ--her arrival into Jerusalem on an ass, her trial before the archbishop with its clear overtones of Jesus before Pilot—threatened the exclusivity of priesthood. The Archbishop’s challenge to her, “Why goest thou in white?” alludes to an imitation of priestly chastity (374). Kempe’s behavior even intimates she has power to forgive sin. The clerk’s response to her parable of The Bear and The Pear Tree, for example, is to “[come] to her and [pray] her of forgiveness” (377). Her response, “God forgive it you,” suggests a usurping of priestly position (377).

This parable of The Bear and The Pear Tree merits some attention. It is, of course, another parallel between Kempe and Christ, who was famous for his parables. Beyond that, though, it is a doubly submerged exposure of clerical corruption. A dream interpreted within a story within yet another story; it both distances the criticism and elevates it to parable status. The story is of a priest who falls asleep and dreams he sees:

“a bear, great and boisteous, ugly to behold, shaking the pear tree and felling down the flowers. Greedily this grievous beast ate and devoured

those fair flowers. And, when he had eaten 'em, turning his tail-end in the priest's presence, voided 'em out again at the hinder part. (376)

A palmer interprets this dream:

Priest, thou thyself art the pear tree, somedeal flourishing and flowering through thy service-saying and the sacraments-ministering, though thou do undevoutly [...] Thus be thy misgovernance, like unto the loathly bear: thou devourest and destroyest the flowers and blooms of virtuous living to thine endless damnation and many men's hindering, less than thou have grace of repentance and amending. 376-377.

Kempe's transcribers give this parable a pivotal place in her story, thus using the occasion of Kempe's trial to put the entire clergy on trial. Clearly their message hits home. One notes an abrupt shift in attitude toward Kempe on the part of the Archbishop of York and his clerk. The archbishop "liked well the tale and commended it," while the clerk was "smiteth [...]to the heart (377). Perhaps *The Book of Margery Kempe* offered an opportunity for the transcribing clergy to present their concerns without directly confronting their peers.

If the Catholic Church was on a trial of sorts during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was certainly also on the defensive. A primary mechanism by which Catholic clergy held power was their privileged place as necessary intermediary between lay people and their God. Morality plays such as *Everyman* were a perfect platform for instilling this concept into the populace. This is made clear in *Everyman* when Five-Wits states, "For of the blessed sacraments pure and bening / [the priest] beareth the keys, and thereof hath the cure/ for man's redemption" (lines 716-718). Ultimate redemption, Catholicism teaches,

can only be achieved through full involvement with the church and its sacraments. As these sacraments can only be performed by an ordained priest, it becomes obvious that to eschew priestly intercession is to abandon hope of heaven. In *Everyman*, this privileging of priesthood goes so far as to place it above the angels:

For priesthood exceedeth all other thing:  
To us Holy Scripture they do teach,  
And converteth man from sin, heaven to reach;  
God hath to them more power given  
Than to any angel that is in heaven [...]  
No remedy we find under God  
But all only priesthood.  
Everyman, God gave priests that dignity  
And setteth them in his stead among us to be.  
Thus be they above angels in degree.

732-736, 745-749.

Priests were presented as the closest thing to God on earth, beings whose intermediary function for an illiterate populace went in two directions. Not only did the priest hear confessions and *listen* for God, they also *spoke* for Him. They interpreted scripture and controlled most of what was written, preached, or performed as Morality or Mystery Plays. *Everyman*, can be seen as a carefully crafted medium which delivered the Church's point of view.

In fairness, this view is not so sanitized as to omit all reference to corruption in the clergy. Of simony and lack of chastity, Knowledge says:

That Jesu's curse hath all they  
Which God their Saviour do buy or sell,  
Or they for any money do take or tell.  
Sinful priests giveth the sinners example bad:  
Their children sitteth by other men's fires, I have heard:  
And some haunteth women's company  
With unclean life, as lusts of lechery.  
These be with sin made blind. 756-763.

The presentation of these lines as an aside while *Everyman* is offstage suggests that the priests wanted to acknowledge these stories but believed them to be the exception rather than the rule.

That all will eventually face Death and a reckoning before God, by contrast, is presented as the rule without exception. Death, in fact, sets out with a merciless enthusiasm, promising to “cruelly” seek man out (73). Death gleefully tells *Everyman* that unless “Almsdeeds be his good friend” he’ll be “In hell for to dwell, world without end” (78,79). *Everyman* thus manipulates a deep seated fear of damnation in the interest of encouraging an increase in giving to the poor and, presumably, to the Church itself. This fear of death and the final reckoning is so intense that Fellowship tells *Everyman* he would rather “murder or any man kill” than “a foot with thee go” (281,293). In the course of *Everyman*'s path to salvation he is deserted by those around him --kindred, goods, cousin, fellowship-- and taught to rely on personal strengths—beauty, knowledge, strength, discretion and five-wits.

It is significant to note, in this allegory condoned by the clergy, just where Everyman's personal strengths lead him. It is not until Everyman returns to the Church, to "the House of Salvation," that he begins to find comfort and hope for salvation. What he receives in church is "a precious jewel [...] Called Penance", a sacrament which, by Catholic doctrine, must be administered by a priest. Thus only via priestly intercession can Everyman can "be secure of mercy [...], saved, [find] the oil of forgiveness" (568-569,572). The tone of the play shifts at this time from a frantic preoccupation with earthly possessions to a prayerful turning to God. Everyman's long speech beginning with the lines "O eternal God, O heavenly figure, / O way of righteousness, O goodly vision" is a beautiful prayer (581-607). For medieval Catholics, the language of prayer was not a personal dialog but the language of the Church. Everyman's salvation, then, is directly linked to his return to the Church.

Returning to the Church meant returning to its priests. *The Book of Margery Kempe* illustrates that the Catholic hierarchy was concerned by followers who attempted an individual relationship with God. It also shows the Church to be very protective of the role of the clergy as privileged intercessors with God. *Everyman* reinforces this notion that man cannot be redeemed without the help of the church and its sacraments. Both texts illuminate the medieval Church's desire to have its priests perceived as heavenly intercessors and not like the clergyman in *The Parable of The Bear and The Pear Tree*.

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