



# Bodily Autonomy and Mobility in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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# Background

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“Margery Kempe lived in the East Anglian town of Lynn in the early 15th century and was at various times the owner of a horse-mill and a brewer, but later in her life she became a visionary and mystic. She was also the mother of 14 children. Her remarkable Book, which only survives in this manuscript, records her feelings and revelations and the form of her living” (British Library).

# Thesis

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*The Book of Margery Kempe* exemplifies the unethical constraints that were placed upon women's mobility and bodily autonomy during the Middle Ages through exploring a narrative of a vocal, strong-willed woman as she navigates the societal restrictions of her time yet never hesitates to stand up for herself or for what she believes in even when men try to lay claim to her body and mind. Whereas in a longer version of this paper I explore multiple societal constraints that afflict Kempe, in this short presentation, I focus on the perceived male ownership of Kempe's person.

# But the Middle Ages were so long ago!

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- Time periods are not distinctly isolated. One bleeds into the next and some ideologies mutate and/or remain
- Understanding history gives us context for why sexism continues to persist—research indicates that Utah is the second most sexist state in the United States (Alberty et al. 1)
- Margery Kempe also provides an example for how women have fought for their autonomy even before feminist movements began

# Perceived Ownership of Kempe in Her Marriage

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- Kempe wanted to be chaste for religious reasons (visions)
- Kempe would rather have “eaten and drunk the ooze and muck in the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of obedience” (Kempe 50-51)
- John disrespects Kempe’s wishes for chastity (assault)
- Her husband does not listen to her requests for chastity, and Kempe expresses much emotional distress and describes crying as a result of her husband’s violations of her bodily autonomy (51)



Mosaic of Jesus Christ created in the Middle Ages

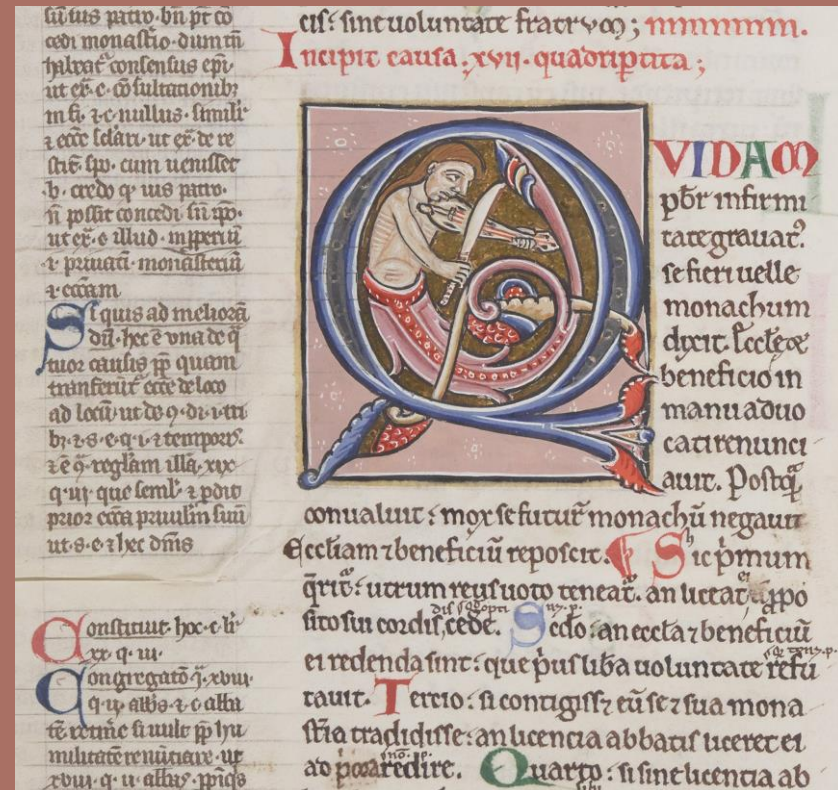
# Marriage, Continued

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- Kempe has to barter for her physical autonomy (with Jesus Christ and husband)
- After Kempe refuses John's demand that she eats with him on Fridays, he says, "well...then I'm going to have sex with you again" (66)
- Kempe's husband treats her body as something that belongs to him, therefore objectifying her and asserting that he owns her
- Kempe goes back to Christ and gets permission to eat on Fridays
- Eventually her wish for chastity is respected as a result of her bartering

# The Limit of the Law

- There was no legal framework for Kempe to defend herself against her husband's actions
- In 1382, the Statute of Rape defined rape as “an event which took place against the will of the husband or male guardian” (Dunn 12)
- Woman is property of her husband under this legal framework
- Even in a society that has such a sexist framework, Kempe stands up for herself again and again



Medieval legal manuscript

# Pilgrimages

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- Kempe makes several religious pilgrimages
- However, she needs male permission and accompaniment (she has her own reasons for seeking out male accompaniment)
- While she needs male approval to travel, these pilgrimages still serve as a way for her to exercise her autonomy and a commitment to her faith





PENGUIN CLASSICS

MARGERY KEMPE

THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

# Ownership of Narrative

- Kempe had to have multiple men transcribe *The Book of Margery Kempe* for her since she was illiterate
- However, Kempe's recording of her story in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is itself an act of reclaiming her personal identity and narrative

# Conclusion

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*The Book of Margery Kempe* explores themes of patriarchy and the attempted control over women. The *Book* provides a modern reader with context for how patriarchal views have affected and continue to affect women as well as providing evidence for how women have always stood up for their beliefs and autonomy regardless of the historical or societal context. Because modern times are not isolated from the Middle Ages, but rather have grown from that time, it is important to be aware of how sexist ideologies still permeate society in order to diminish their influence.

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