

# The book of margery kempe on female celibacy essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The Book of Margery Kempe is a book that speaks about a desperate need of the protagonist for chastity and complete obedience and devotion to God.

This necessary endowment by Margery to God for such service comes through the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit and her burning desire to follow Christ.

Many of us read various literatures, both poetry and prose to find beautiful words of many great writers; to be entertained by the characters' lives; and even to find someone in the story with whom we can relate with. I believe this work is remarkable in that it has demonstrated life during the late medieval period. It gives readers a peek into the life, vocations, and values of the characters, and explores the sexual politics of the time, including the rational or irrational behaviors of the characters from which insights may be gained and found relevant in this generation.

What is more, it raises issues on mysticism, spirituality, psychosis, gender differences, gendered assertions, sexual economy, social myths, and powers of the church and of secular persons, which are also of interest and relevant in this point in time. One thing that also makes me think this literary piece remarkable is its uniqueness - the manner by which it was written, as it deviates from the conventional approach of writing a story. Probably written in the late 1530s, the book uses unusual spelling and grammar, which makes it a little bit difficult to decipher and which lends the book to much interpretation.

The literary piece uses a style that initially puzzles a reader due to its syntax, sentence structure, and its use of the third person in most of the text. For a

story, the author uses lines and verses as is usually used in poems, instead of paragraphs of regular prose. In spite of these observations, however, a reader is encouraged to read on because the story delights a reader about the touch of mysticism, spirituality, and the interplay of male and female assertions in each verse.

The characters of the book include the protagonist, often referring to herself as the creature; this creature being Margery. Margery demonstrates the manners and tastes of her time. She exhibits goodness, faithfulness to her husband, and godliness. However, a personal vision of Jesus that came to her shortly after the birth of her first child breaks up the conventional life of husband and wife and her traditional dealings with the world. Her spiritual commitment grows and tells her husband,

“ And aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyll to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyens. And so sche seyde to hir husbond, “ I may not deny yow my body, but the lofe of myn hert and myn affeccyon is drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys and sett only in God.”

The character of Margery is dynamic and not flat. As with the rest of the characters, however, the author depicts them as rather flat characters with very little or no change at all. Margery's character shows changes from one

that is conventional at the time to one that isn't since she dissociates herself from what she perceives as a greedy, covetous, and avaricious life.

She also attempts to separate herself from restrictive values and traits of women, and even to usual female roles and duties. Her goal was to live in chaste. But even as she wanted to live in chastity, the sexual economy at the time was to express submission to the husband, an act which symbolizes and creates order in society. This gendered act of control in Margery sets her to express female lamentation:

“ He wold have hys wylle, and sche obeyd wyth greet wepyng and sorwyng for that sche mygth not levyn chast. And oftyntymys this creatur levyd chast, cownselde hir husbond to levyn chast, and seyde that thei oftyntymes, sche wylde wel, had dysplesyd God be hir inordynat lofe and the gret delectacyon that thei haddyn eythyr of hem in usyng of other, and now it wer good that thei schuld be her bothins wylle and consenting of hem bothyn punschyn and chastysyn herself wylfully be absteynyng fro her lust of her bodys. Hir husbond seyde it wer good to don so, but he mygth not yett, he schuld whan God wold. And so he usyd her as he had do befor, he wold not spar. And evyr sche preyde to God that sche mygth levyn chast, and three or four yer aftyr, whan it plesyd ower Lord, he made a vow of chastyté, as schal be wretyn aftyr be the leve of Jhesu.”

The emotions of the characters in the story are strong and evident. Examples of this include those previously quoted. The actions, events, and episodes of the story are deliberate and lingering much on Margery's expressions of

female lamentation; prayers of forgiveness for being unclean; and mostly issues of sexuality. Much passion was expressed as the author depicted Margery as one who intended to abandon her dual role as obedient wife and compliant member of society.

It depicts a tale of conflict between Margery, her husband, spiritual authorities, and including those in the secular community. The conflict mounts as “ her personal relationship with Jesus leads her to espouse a radical social gospel that threatens the very basis for town life”.<sup>[1]</sup> Conflict is found to be focused on the issue of sexuality as “ the issue of sexuality was a particularly important one for female saints, for by their wishes to lead celibate lives, women signified their espousal of a new and less socially defined existence.”<sup>[2]</sup>

“ Now, good ser, amend yow and aske God mercy, for I teld yow ner three yer sythen that ye schuld be slayn sodeynly, and now is this the thryd yer, and yet I hope I schal han my desyr. Good sere, I pray yow grawnt me that I schal askyn, and I schal pray for yow that ye schul be savyd thorw the mercy of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst, and ye schul have mor mede in hevyn than yyf ye weryd an hayr or an haburgon. I pray yow, suffer me to make a vow of chastyté in what bysshopys hand that God wele.”

“ Lord God, thu knowyst al thyng; thow knowyst what sorwe I have had to be chast in my body to the al this three yer, and now mygth I han my wylle and I dar not for lofe of the. For, yyf I wold brekyn that maner of fastyng whch thow comawndyst me to kepyn on the Fryday wythowtyn mete or drynk, I

schuld now han my desyr. But, blyssyd Lord, thow knowyst I wyl not contraryen thi wyl, and mekyl now is my sorwe les than I fynde comfort in the. Now, blyssed Jhesu, make thi wyl knowyn to me unworthy that I may folwyn theraftyr and fulfyllyn it wyth al my myghtys.”

And than owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst wyth gret swetnesse spak to this creatur, comawndyng hir to gon agen to hir husbond and prayn hym to grawntyn hir that sche desyred. “ And he schal han that he desyreth. For, my derworthy dowtyr, this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for thu schuldyst the sonar opteyn and getyn thi desyr, and now it is grawntyd the. I wyl no lengar thow fast, therfor I byd the in the name of Jhesu ete and drynk as thyn husbond doth.” Than this creatur thankyd owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst of hys grace and hys goodnes,”

Oftentimes, female celibacy is equated with female resistance to marriage. However, Margery’s case works against this definition. Like Paul and other male leaders who devoted themselves to Christ, Christian women became or remained celibate primarily to achieve spiritual purity and to free themselves for a spiritual life,[3] As opposed to some extreme feminist groups’ belief that female celibacy was a challenge to the premises of male dominance.

[1] Staley, Lynn. (Ed.). (n. d.). “ The Book of Margery Kempe: Introduction”. *The Book of Margery Kempe , Book I, Part I* . Originally Published in *The Book of Margery Kempe* . Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996. Retrieved on February 15, 2007 at [http://www. lib. rochester. edu/camelot/teams/kempint. htm](http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/kempint.htm)

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[2] Staley, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/kempint.htm>

[3] *Historical meanings of female celibacy* . (n. d). Retrieved on February 15, 2007 from <http://louisville.edu/a-s/english/subcultures/colors/red/g0bedf01/bedfintro.html>