
MARGERY KEMPE

H. S. Bennett, *Six Medieval Men and Women* (Cambridge, 1955)

AMONG the many little books—scarcely more than pamphlets—printed by Wynkyn de Worde in his efforts to provide reading matter for the growing literate public of his day, was a small eight-page quarto pamphlet—‘A short treatise of contemplation taught by Our Lord, Jesu Christ, taken out of the book of Margery Kempe of Lynn’. Wynkyn de Worde may have printed some five hundred copies of this work, but in the course of centuries all of these save one seem to have perished, and from a study of the only known copy in the University Library, Cambridge, it was long thought that the work was a condensed version of a book of devotions, similar to that of other religious writers of the time, such as Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, or the *Revelations* of Dame Juliana of Norwich. In 1934, however, Miss Hope Emily Allen, well known for her work on Robert Rolle and other mystics, announced her identification of a manuscript in the library of Colonel Butler-Bowdon of Pleasington Old Hall, Lancashire, as the autobiography of Margery Kempe, from which Wynkyn de Worde had extracted a mere handful of sentences.

Here then we have what Professor R. W. Chambers called ‘our first biography in English’—a work in which the life, thoughts and experiences of a religious enthusiast

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are set out in detail. A generation earlier Geoffrey Chaucer had set down the thoughts and experiences of a sensual woman of the bourgeoisie in his portrait of the Wife of Bath. In her autobiography Margery Kempe, with a similar bourgeois background, unfolds for us the anxieties and experiences of a religious woman whose life was dedicated to the service of God. No English writer, hitherto, had committed to writing so intimate, revealing and human an account of his life and thoughts.

It would, of course, be easy to make a figure of fun out of Margery, who so frankly reveals herself. Even so sympathetic a writer as Father Herbert Thurston speaks of her 'terrible hysteria', while Miss Hope Allen says: 'she was petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously overstrained.' These things often betrayed her into outrageous and undignified behaviour, unworthy of herself or of her dedicated aims. The self-portrait of a minor mystic remains, however, the more credible for its merciless honesty and its fidelity to life.

Lynn in the fourteenth-century was a prosperous town with a flourishing trade with Scandinavia, Germany and the Low Countries. Its great church of St Margaret, the Guildhall and other buildings told of the wealth of its citizens who had contributed so handsomely to the funds for their construction. Among the leading citizens was John Burnham, the father of Margery, a man who had been elected mayor no less than five times and was for long an alderman of the borough. At one time he represented Lynn in Parliament, and was associated with the influential Corpus Christi Gild of the town. It was into this good bourgeois family that Margery was born about

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1373, and about her twentieth year she was married to another *bon bourgeois*, John Kempe, a freeman of the borough, a member also of the Corpus Christi Gild, and soon after his marriage one of the borough chamberlains. More than that we know little of him and of the part he played in the municipal and commercial life of the town, although members of his family (and probably himself) were engaged in trade with various seaboard towns of Germany from time to time.

We may imagine, however, that on marrying John Kempe, Margery could look forward with confidence to the normal life of one of the town aristocracy, blessed with money and family connexions as she was. So far as her private life went, however, it opened badly, for her first-born caused her much suffering and illness—so much so, that, fearing she would not survive, and wishing to clear her conscience of a matter that had long been haunting her, she sent for her confessor and began to unburden herself. Before she had got very far, or had reached the principal matter that was troubling her, her confessor began to reprove her so sharply that she feared to go on and was silenced. Overwhelmed by her confessor's reproaches and burdened by a sense of guilt, her mind gave way, and for some seven months she was the victim of fears and hallucinations. At this time, she tells us, she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths flaming with burning tongues of fire as if they would have swallowed her, sometimes ramping at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling and tugging at her both night and day. In her madness she slandered her husband and her friends, tried to destroy herself and lacerated her body with her nails, so that for a while she

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had to be bound and constantly watched. The day came, she believed, when sanity returned for, when she lay alone, Christ appeared to her in the likeness of a young man, clad in a mantle of blue silk, and sitting upon the bedside said: 'Daughter, why has thou forsaken Me, and I forsook thee never?' After this she recovered, and though her attendants remonstrated with him, her husband, 'having tenderness and compassion for her, commanded that they should deliver to her the keys', and she began to eat and to drink and her bodily strength returned.

Once she was recovered, she seems to have led a worldly life, and was notorious for the finery of her garments, cut in the latest fashion and made of brightly contrasting materials, so that men stared at her as she passed and her husband begged her to be more moderate. All in vain: she told him he should never have married above his station and that she would continue in her ways, hoping to outdo other wives in her array; she was for ever seeking the admiration and esteem of all beholders.

To increase her resources and to show that she was as good as another at practical affairs, she set up as a common brewer and for three or four years was one of the greatest brewers in the town. She was dogged with ill luck, however, and turned to milling. To this end she hired a man, and bought a pair of horses, and hoped with this horse-mill to make money, but here again she was unsuccessful: some said she was accursed and that it was God's vengeance on her, while others saw in it a call to her from worldly things to those of the spirit. Margery took the latter view, and henceforth her life was more and more given over to prayer and contemplation.

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By this time some fifteen or sixteen years of married life had passed and many children had come, but henceforth Margery more and more longed for the celibate life. For a time, all her pleas to her husband were vain. He at least, had no such wish. The most he would say was that 'it were good to do so, but he might not yet. He would when God willed it.' In the meantime Margery increased her devotions. She would rise at two in the morning, go to church and stay there till noon or later. She fasted, wore a hair-cloth for mortification of the flesh, and ever prayed that a chaste life might soon be hers. At this time began that 'plentyous and continual weeping' that was to be with her for so many years, and which was to evoke such fierce and hostile criticism, for as she tells us: 'Many people thought that she could weep or leave off at will, and therefore called her a false hypocrite.'

Margery cared little then or later for such criticism. She went her own way, seeing visions, having rapturous communications with Christ: at times in great quiet of spirit, at others sunk in distress and despair. Temptations came, but were so easily repulsed that she fell into the sin of vainglory. Then to punish her, as it seemed, God tempted her with lecherous desires, to which in the end she was anxious to succumb, but was humiliated when she approached her would-be lover who now repudiated her, and said that he would never consent for all the gold in the world: 'he would rather be hewn as small as flesh for the pot.' Further tribulations of this kind assailed her, but after much prayer and meditation an end came to this period of trial in due course: she and her husband went from place to place for her soul's health, until on one of their journeys, as they came from York in very hot

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weather on Midsummer eve, the old question of marital chastity was raised between them and Margery declared that she would rather see her husband slain than yield again to him. Later, as they sat by a wayside cross on the way to Bridlington, they came to a final agreement that he should not come again to her bed, on condition that she should pay all his debts before she started on her projected pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They solemnized their agreement by saying three paternosters kneeling beneath a cross in a field, and then with great gladness of spirit ate of the cake carried in his bosom and drank the beer from the bottle in her hand. Her emancipation was complete: henceforth, her husband was but a secondary figure in her life. She was the spouse of Christ, and her every waking hour was only profitable if spent in his service.

As we have seen, the great pilgrimage to Jerusalem was already in her mind, but, before this could be arranged, she spent much time moving about the country, at times impressing people by her sincerity and devotion, but often she ran into trouble by her outspokenness and scorn of religious men. At Canterbury she was accused of being a Lollard and threatened with the stake; at other times it was said an evil spirit vexed her or that some bodily sickness occasioned her behaviour, for she was wont to fall down in convulsions, making wondrous faces and gestures, all the time sobbing bitterly and crying loudly. At this period of her life two desires were uppermost in her mind. First, she wished to take a formal vow of chastity before a bishop, and to receive the mantle and ring of widowhood as a sign of her new estate: and secondly, she desired to dress in white, as a sign of virtue and purity. To this end

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she went to Lincoln to ask Bishop Philip Repington to grant to her her wishes. After waiting three weeks for the bishop to return to his palace she was received by him, and gave him an account of her meditations and contemplations, which so impressed him that he advised her to have them written down. This she was unwilling to do, and twenty years were to pass before she felt the time was ripe for this. When she made her request to be professed with mantle and ring and given the white robe, the bishop took advice of his council, and endeavoured to put her off until she returned from Jerusalem when, he said, she would be 'better proved and known'. In so doing he displayed worldly prudence, for to have afforded official recognition to this eccentric woman might have given his enemies a handle against him. This decision did not suit Margery, and on the next day she

went to church and prayed to God with all her spirit that she might have knowledge how she might be governed in this matter, and what answer she might give to the Bishop.

Our Lord Jesus Christ answered to her mind in this manner:

Daughter, say to the Bishop that he fears the shames of the world more than the perfect love of God. . . . Therefore, daughter, tell him though he will not do it now, it shall be done another time when God willeth.

The bishop apparently took no offence at this bold speech, but advised her to go to the archbishop of Canterbury 'and to pray him to grant leave to me, the bishop of Lincoln, to give her the mantle and the ring, since she was not of his diocese. This cause he feigned through counsel of his clerks, for they loved her not.' Margery refused his advice, but said she would go to the archbishop 'for other causes and matters which I have to show to his reverence'.

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Even this ungracious answer failed to rouse Repington, who gave her a present of two marks (26s. 8d.) and asked her to pray for him.

Margery and her husband made their way to Lambeth Palace, and while waiting in the great hall heard the archbishop's clerks, squires and yeomen swearing and cursing among themselves. With characteristic lack of tact she rebuked them, whereupon a richly dressed woman turned on her with a fury of imprecations and concluded: 'I would thou wert in Smithfield, and I would carry a faggot to burn thee with. It is a pity that thou art alive!'

Then she was sent for by the archbishop, who kept her talking to him in his garden 'till stars appeared in the firmament'. Archbishop Arundel was a great prince of the Church and a relentless foe of Lollardy, and the fact that he talked so long with her and found no 'default in her' is the strongest possible evidence of the strength of her personality and the essential orthodoxy of her views. So impressed by her was Arundel that he suffered her to rebuke him for the behaviour of his servants, for whom she said 'ye shall answer, unless ye correct them, or else put them out of your service'. Arundel replied meekly and gave her a fair answer, and at length after much talk she came away.

As the autumn of the same year (1413) drew on Margery made the final preparations for her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her debts paid, she bade farewell to her husband and friends, and after praying at Norwich and again at Yarmouth, some time in November she sailed to the Netherlands and landed at Zealand. During the next month she and her companions travelled across Germany to Constance, and from there to Bologna, and so to

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Venice which she reached in January 1414. Here began a tedious wait of some months before the time came for the pilgrim galleys to set out. In the meantime, however, Margery had encountered plenty of trouble. First, she was reproved because she would eat no flesh and cried so loudly and constantly as to make herself a nuisance. Besides they said that she would talk of nothing but the love of the Lord at all times and places. Her fellow-pilgrims roundly abused her, and told her that they would not put up with her as her husband did, while one of them went so far as to say: 'I pray God that the devil's death may overcome thee soon.' Some deserted her and induced her handmaiden to leave her, while a fellow-pilgrim who had charge of her money gave her only a fraction of it, and told her to fend for herself. Fortunately others were kinder and took her along with them, but at Constance her persecutors rounded on her again and cut her gown so short that it came but little below the knee, while at the same time they gave her a piece of white canvas cut in the shape of an apron so that she should be thought a fool and despised. They also made her sit at the end of the table below everyone else, where she dared not utter a word. An English friar took her part and set her on her way to Bologna with an old Devonshire man, William Weaver. There her former companions found her, and a reconciliation was effected, Margery promising not to speak of the Gospel in their presence, and to be merry when they sat at meat. On reaching Venice, however, they quarrelled again, and for weeks she was alone until the time came to sail, probably some time in April. Further trouble then arose, for her companions secretly hired gear and places for themselves in one ship and were reluctant to take her

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with them. They changed their minds, however, when they later discovered that her 'voices' had warned her not to sail in that ship and they incontinently left it, and much against her will all sailed with her in the ship of her choice—an unwilling tribute to the spiritual power she exerted.

Although Margery tells us nothing, we know much about these pilgrim convoys from other fifteenth-century writers who made the pilgrimage or who wrote manuals for travellers. One of the fullest accounts is given by Friar Felix Fabri, who made his second journey in 1484, some seventy years later than Margery, but in essentials the conditions had remained unchanged, and we may gather from his account a vivid picture of what it meant to sail in a pilgrim galley during the fifteenth century. As the spring advanced, a number of galleys began to make ready for the voyage, and the first thing to do was to bargain for a place on one of these. Although they were private ventures, the Venetian State exercised a strict control over their masters, and saw to it that reasonable living conditions were provided for the pilgrims while at sea, and that the masters were responsible for their safe-conduct in the Holy Land itself. 'Venetian galleys are as like one to another as swallows' nests', we are told, and the pilgrims found on going on board that their quarters were in a 'cabin' below deck, which stretched the whole length of the ship, and was 'like a great and spacious chamber'. The friar tells us that 'the berths of the pilgrims are so arranged that all along the ship, or rather the cabin, one berth joins the next one without any space left between them, and one pilgrim lies by the side of another along both sides of the ship, having their heads towards the side of the ship, and their feet stretching out towards

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one another. As the cabin is wide, there stand along the middle of it, chests and trunks in which the pilgrims keep their own private property.' Once the pilgrim had struck his bargain with the master, he was allotted his place, according to what he had paid, and throughout the voyage made himself comfortable there as best he could.

Before embarking, however, he had to provide himself with a variety of articles necessary for his journey. He was advised to buy 'a little caldron, a frying-pan, dishes, plates, saucers, cups of glass, a grater for bread and such necessaries'. A chest to hold his clothes and barrels for water and wine were essentials, while many took coops of hens and a variety of victuals, for though the captain contracted to feed them throughout their journey, 'some time ye shall have feeble bread and feeble wine and stinking water, so that many times ye will be right fain to eat of your own'. Furthermore, a mattress and bedding were essential, for the captain provided nothing of this kind.

Once the journey had begun, the pilgrims settled down to the tedium of the voyage, which lasted about a month, depending on the number of places called at *en route* for fresh provisions, water and trading; on the delays caused by storms and by the appearance of pirates and other enemy vessels from time to time. These things enlivened the journey which otherwise passed slowly enough in talking, reading, praying or writing. Some meditated, others took violent exercise, climbing the rigging or lifting heavy weights. At times all seemed at peace one with another: at times quarrels and disputes broke out, making the galley like hell, says Friar Felix, with the sound and fury of men's cursing and blasphemies. And finally 'there

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is among all the occupations of the seafarers one which, albeit loathsome, is yet very common, daily and necessary—I mean the hunting and catching of lice and vermin. Unless a man spends several hours in this work when he is on a pilgrimage, he will have but unquiet slumbers.’ Games of chance, gambling and wine-drinking helped the hours to pass for some, while they waited for the call of the trumpet, summoning them to meals. On hearing this, all rushed to secure a place at one of the tables, ‘for he who comes late gets a bad seat’. The meal is quickly served—salad, meat and some form of cereal and cheese, washed down by copious draughts of wine and water. A few noble or distinguished pilgrims had their own mess, and paid the cooks extra to cook for them, and the friar remarks on the noise and ill temper that comes from the close, over-heated cooks’ galley as men struggle at the crowded fire-places to contrive a little space for their own pots and pans.

At nightfall with everyone trying to get to bed in very cramped quarters, all is noise and confusion. Quarrels easily arise, as each pilgrim tries to keep or win back the little space allotted to him. Those who have drunk too much are a particular nuisance, while the snores, moans and coughing of others, and the movements of the sailors overhead, prevent sleep coming easily, particularly as the heat steadily mounts in the crowded space and the scamperings of rats and mice help to take away the pilgrims’ rest. As if this were not enough, some come to bed late and keep others awake by their chatter and by their refusal to put out their candles. Missiles and entreaties fail to move them: they only shout the louder and begin a new quarrel.

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By day life also has its difficulties: petty theft is rampant; moving about the ship requires care, for things fall from above on the unwary pilgrim, and to walk carelessly in certain places involves the risk of being pitched overboard. The sailors are no respecters of persons, and when at work will roughly push aside or knock down those who get in their way. Hats are quickly blown away, while it is only too easy to drop valuable things into the sea when standing at the side of the boat.

From time to time the galley would put into some port so that fresh water, bread and other supplies could be laid in, and also to allow the master and his crew to buy and to sell, for all of them were determined and experienced bargainers. The pilgrims would also land to replenish their own stores, to see the sights and to pray at shrines and churches until the trumpets warned them that the ship was about to sail and that they must return at once. So the days wore on until the Holy Land drew near, and from the look-out an eager watch was kept, while the more ardent pilgrims stood hour by hour straining to see the sacred land of their desire. As soon as it was dawn they rushed on deck, and at last the watchman gave the long-expected signal, and gradually more and more of the pilgrims could see the land as the galley drew nearer, until at last it came to its anchorage in the harbour of Jaffa.

Now began a tedious wait for the pilgrims, anxious as they were to get on their way to Jerusalem, for they could not land until a safe-conduct had been received from the various Moslem officials who were the officers of the Mameluke sultans of Egypt. The master had first to get word sent to the governors of Jerusalem and of the other towns they would pass through for permission to

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proceed, and not until they had struck their bargains with the master was a single pilgrim safe to land. When finally they did so, they were herded like animals before the officials who entered their names on the roll, after which they were hustled along by Saracens into a series of caves, known as St Peter's cellars. Here the Christian dogs were roughly treated by their guards, who forbade them to wander outside although the caves were stinking with filth which lapped about their feet, and which they had to clear as best they could to make any space whereon they could lie. Their sufferings were eased by the arrival of traders who brought rushes and branches of trees which they placed on the miry ground while others brought sweet-smelling herbs, unguents and perfumes to solace the pilgrims. Others again brought bread and eggs, water, fruit and salads which they willingly bought, and afterwards settled down to rest, but not before a fierce looking Saracen had exacted a penny from each of them in the way of rent—an operation he repeated early the next morning before he would allow anyone to leave the cave. Throughout the day young Turkish men moved in and out, provoking the pilgrims by their insults and outrageous behaviour, and if they struck back haling them before the Turkish officials so that they might be fined.

No term could be fixed to these delays: they were at the mercy of the various overlords, and until these were satisfied they were cooped up like beasts in the caves. At last, however, the period of waiting was over. The convoy was formed, and mounted on asses, with an escort of Saracens, the captains and governors leading the way, the pilgrims set out for Jerusalem. Their journey was often an eventful one, for the countryside was full of Arabs

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watching for an opportunity to rob or pillage. They would fall upon any small group if unprotected, or would attach themselves to the caravan and steal scrips, clothes and the like if these fell to the ground or were left unguarded. As the pilgrims passed through the villages they were often met with curses or even with volleys of stones. In addition the cavalcade raised clouds of dust, and this and the great heat made nightfall and rest in one of the pilgrim houses particularly grateful. There they were able to buy food and drink from the villagers—bread, eggs, rice cooked in milk, fruit and wine—but had to be extremely careful not to provoke them in any way.

So they gradually made their way to Jerusalem: on viewing the city many of the pilgrims wept for joy, knelt and bowed their faces to the earth, and above all, says Friar Felix, 'the women pilgrims shrieked as though in labour, cried aloud and wept'. Within the city there was much to see, and all the many places associated with the sacred story were visited, culminating in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, or the Temple as it was sometimes called. Here the pilgrims were shown the chamber in which was the supposed tomb of Christ, and in another part of the building was the hole that received the base of the Cross. Here also they spent the night in contemplation and prayer, Margery Kempe and her party staying within the Sepulchre from one evensong to the next.

On arrival in the Holy Land Margery's religious zeal and emotion knew no bounds. She could scarcely ride on her ass at times, so acutely did she feel, while Mount Calvary and other holy places provoked tremendous displays: she wept and sobbed plenteously; she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, and rolled and

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wrestled with her body, and cried as though her heart would burst asunder. This crying, indeed, became part of her for many years, for as she says:

This manner of crying endured many years after this time for aught that any man might do, and therefore she suffered much despite and reproof. The crying was so loud and so wonderful that it astounded people unless they had heard it before, or unless they knew the cause of the crying. First she had her cryings at Jerusalem and also in Rome. And when she came home to England, they came once a month, then once a week, then daily, and once she had fourteen in a day! and so on as God would visit her. She never knew the time or the hour when they would come, and as soon as she found that she would cry, she would suppress it as much as possible so as not to annoy people. For some said it was a wicked spirit vexed her: some said it was a sickness: some said she had drunk too much wine: some wished she had been in the haven: some would she had been at sea in a bottomless boat: and thus each man had his own thoughts.

Obviously, Margery was not easy to live with, and the pilgrims again deserted her on their return to Venice, some of them saying that they would go with her no further for a hundred pounds. The Lord told her to go to Rome, whither she was led by a broken-backed, poverty-stricken man, Richard of Ireland, and finally she reached Rome about September 1414 and was there until the following spring. While there, she assumed the white habit she had so long desired to wear, and lived as best she could, since she gave away all her money at one point in obedience to the Lord's command. Richard, not unnaturally, was 'greatly moved and evil pleased because of this, and spake right sharply to her', but she pacified him, and went about serving the people, declaring the faith,

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begging from door to door, welcomed here and repulsed there as the event fell. She gives many examples of all this, and was sustained throughout by her constant communings and messages from the Lord, and finally at Easter 1415 set off for England. Despite fears of thieves assailing her and her party on the way, she reached Middelburg in Zeeland by mid-May, and crossed over to England safely in a little boat in less than two days. She knelt and kissed the land on coming on shore, and happily passed on to offer the three-halfpence given to her then at the cathedral at Norwich.

So ended her first and greatest pilgrimage. She had been absent from England some eighteen months and had survived difficulties and dangers which would have overwhelmed one less convinced of her divinely controlled life. The habit of appealing to God for guidance grew on her, and she seldom seems to have failed to receive divine help, according to her own account. This made her more and more assured, and more and more difficult to live with. On her return she found a benefactor who furnished her with a new set of white robes, and these and her boisterous cries drew everyone's attention to her. 'Many said that there was never a saint in Heaven that cried as much as she did, and therefore they would conclude that she had a devil within her. . . . And yet Our Lord made some to love her and cherish her, and have her home to meat and drink, and they had great gladness to hear her talk of Our Lord.'

How she lived after her return is unknown. She tells us she had no money and many debts, and must have relied on casual gifts and food from the devout who believed her to be inspired of God. For her own part she never doubted

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this was so, and two years after her return started off on another pilgrimage, despite her poverty, for she had been told: 'Daughter, study not for any money, for I shall provide for thee.' This time her ambition was to reach the great shrine of St James, at Compostella, in Coruña, Spain, where the saint's supposed remains were enshrined. To begin with she went across England to Bristol where she tells us she met by agreement the broken-backed man to whom she repaid money borrowed from him in Rome two years before! She could not sail at once, for all the available ships had been commandeered for the king's service to transport troops for the great invasion of France that summer. While waiting, her tears and sobs and cries and shrieks caused the usual differences of opinion among those who heard them and it was not surprising that the newcomer with her white habit and strange ways should have been summoned before the bishop of Worcester whose residence was just outside Bristol. Here occurred one of those incidents which made her notorious—an incident similar to that at Lambeth.

When she came into the hall, she saw many of the Bishop's men in clothes freakishly cut in the fashion of the day. She lifting up her hands, blessed herself. And then they said to her: 'What devil aileth thee?' She said again: 'Whose men be ye?' They answered back: 'The Bishop's men.' And then she said: 'Nay, forsooth, ye are more like the Devil's men.' Then they were angry and chid her, and spoke angrily to her.

The bishop, however, received her kindly, saying that he knew her by repute, shrived and blessed her, and sent her on her way with money in her purse.

At last she sailed, but before doing so her fellow-pilgrims told her that if they met with tempests it would

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be because of her, and they would throw her in the sea. She survived, however; the outward journey taking seven days and the return, five. For the whole of a fortnight she was at the shrine, but tells us no more than that besides her 'great cries' and 'plenteous tears of compassion', she had 'great cheer, both bodily and of the spirit'.

Throughout this period the fear of Lollardy was strong in England. The arch-heretic, Sir John Oldcastle, was still at large in the summer of 1417 when Margery returned, and it was not until late November that he was captured, brought to London and burnt in mid-December. Characters such as Margery, with her strong individualism and outspoken condemnation of many ecclesiastics, inevitably fell under suspicion, and she was constantly in danger. Several times in the autumn of 1417 she was held to question, first at Leicester, on her way home from Bristol. There the mayor was strongly suspicious of her, and did not hesitate to call her 'a false strumpet, a false Lollard, and a false deceiver of the people'. He threatened to throw her into the common jail among a mass of men prisoners, but she was saved by the jailer who went surety for her and kept her in his own house. This did not protect her from the steward of Leicester, 'a seemly man', who took her into his chamber and made advances to her, but was abashed by her determined resolution. Later, she was brought before the abbot of Leicester and quickly persuaded him of her orthodoxy, but the mayor still remained unconvinced, and ordered her to go to the bishop of Lincoln and to bring back a letter discharging the mayor of all responsibility. This she did, and so after a three-week hold-up was able to go on her way.

She ran into more trouble in York, and finally was

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brought before the archbishop at his palace of Cawood. Here she showed great courage (and rashness) in her replies to the archbishop, despite the fact that she 'trembled and shook', so that she hid her hands under her clothes, in order that this should not be noticed. First the archbishop asked her if she was a maid, since she was clothed in white, and sent for fetters, calling her a false heretic. When the archbishop took his seat she burst into tears. 'Why weepest thou, woman?' said the archbishop, to which she made the spirited reply: 'Sir, ye shall wish some day that ye had wept as sore as I.'

After questioning her on the Articles of the Faith, and finding nothing wrong, the archbishop said to her: 'I am evil informed of thee. I hear it said that thou art a right wicked woman.' And she answered back: 'I also hear it said that ye are a wicked man. And if ye be as wicked as men say, ye shall never come to Heaven, unless ye amend whilst ye be here.' Then said he very violently: 'Why, thou wretch, what say men of me?' She answered: 'Other men, sir, can tell you well enough.' Then said a great clerk with a furred hood: 'Peace! Speak of thyself, and let him be.' Afterwards the archbishop said to her: 'Lay thy hand on the book here before me and swear that thou shalt go out of my diocese as soon as you may.' This she refused to do till she had taken leave of friends, and visited her confessor at Bridlington. Then said the archbishop to her. 'Thou shalt swear that thou wilt neither teach nor reprove the people in my diocese.' 'Nay, sir, I shall not swear', she said, 'for I shall speak of God and rebuke those that swear great oaths wherever I go.' Replies such as these continued, until at last the archbishop called for a man to lead her away from him. The man asked for a

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noble (6s. 8d.) for his pains, but the archbishop would not pay so much. 'See, here is five shillings, and lead her rapidly out of this country', he said, and so ended this memorable interview.

Even now she was not finished with the archbishop, for on the way to Hull to cross the Humber into her own county, she was arrested by two officers of the duke of Bedford, who said their lord had sent for her as the greatest Lollard in all the country, and that they would have a hundred pounds for her arrest. So they conducted her to Beverley, and once again she faced the archbishop who was there with 'many great clerks, priests, canons and other men'. 'What, woman! art thou come again? I would fain be delivered of thee' was his exclamation on seeing her. Various new charges were brought against her, including one saying that she carried about letters on behalf of Sir John Oldcastle, but the archbishop was convinced that there was no substance in them, and finally granted her petition, and gave her a letter certifying her orthodoxy, and so at last she came back to Lynn, where 'a reckless man, little caring for his own shame, with will and of set purpose, cast a bowlful of water on her head as she came along the street'. Margery was home again!

The next fifteen years or so of her life seem to have been spent mainly at Lynn, and Margery gives a somewhat confused account of her many experiences at the hands of religious and secular folk. Her cries remained both her glory and her shame. Some thought them evidence of 'a right gracious gift of God', while others said that she had a devil in her. One of the most famous preachers in England, a grey friar, came to the convent at Lynn and

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endured patiently Margery's cries at his first sermon, but on a second occasion, her outburst caused him to say: 'I would this woman were out of the church, for she annoys the people', and although her friends said that she could not help it, he insisted that she must stay away, or be quiet. Despite all their pleas, he insisted on her absence, going so far as to bang his hand on the pulpit, saying: 'If I hear any more of these pleas, I shall so smite the nail on the head that it will shame all her supporters.' A number of years later her cries ceased, and 'as some spoke evil of her before when she cried, so now some spoke evil of her because she cried not'. Cries or no cries, she was well known to all in Lynn, and to many from outside, and from time to time was summoned to converse with learned doctors of theology and preachers of renown. Evidently by this time she had won a reputation for herself as one touched with the divine, and in moments of stress was appealed to for help. Thus in January 1421 there was a great fire in Lynn, and people were fearful lest the great church of St Margaret should be destroyed. Margery was encouraged 'to cry and weep as much as ever she would' in the hope that the Lord would show mercy; she advised the parish priest to bear the Sacrament as near the fire as he could to arrest its spread. This he did, while Margery prayed in the church, although the sparks were falling about her, until men with snow on their clothes came in to tell her that God had sent 'a fair snow to quench the fire with'. On another occasion a man implored her aid, since his wife was out of her mind from childbirth. 'And dame', he said, 'she knoweth not me, nor any of her neighbours. She roareth and cryeth so that she makes evil folk afeared. She will both smite and bite,

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and therefore she is manacled on her wrists.' Margery visited her, and by her kindness won her confidence, and in due time she was cured. 'It was, as they thought who knew of it, a very great miracle, for he that wrote this book had never before that time seen man or woman, as he thought, so far out of herself as this woman was, nor so evil to rule or to manage.'

Margery lived through these years, now up, now down: sustained by her constant divine guidance and messages, comforted by the conversation and reading of other mystics' writings by her learned friends, and from time to time vouchsafed visions of Christ's life and of his Passion which brought forth floods of tears and gave her much comfort.

Sometime St Peter, or St Paul; sometime St Mary Magdalen, St Katharine, St Margaret, or whatever saint in heaven she thought of, through the will and sufferance of God spoke to the understanding of her soul, and informed her how she should love God, and how she should best please him, and answered to whatever she would ask of them, and she could understand by their manner of converse which of them it was that spoke to her and comforted her. Our Lord of his mercy, visited her so often and so copiously with his holy conversation that frequently she was unaware of how the day had passed. It was so sweet and so devout that it fared as if she had been in Heaven.

Her active days were not quite over, for when she was about sixty years old, in 1433, she set out on her last adventure. It happened that one of her sons had married a German woman, and brought her and his daughter to visit his mother at Lynn, and died there shortly after. The wife remained with Margery for eighteen months, and then wished to go home to Prussia, and Margery decided

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to go as far as Ipswich with her to see her safely embarked. *En route*, the voice of the Lord commanded her to go overseas with her daughter-in-law, and so she embarked, despite her daughter-in-law's entreaties to her not to do so. They encountered violent storms, and were forced to land on the Norway coast, but some weeks later were able to sail and arrived in Danzig late in April. She had set forth entirely unprepared, and was grateful to the master of the ship who gave her warm clothing and showed her much kindness.

After some weeks in Danzig, Our Lord admonished her to depart. This made her very uneasy, for she feared the sea and there was war in the country through which she must pass. Providentially, a man met with her and asked if she would go on pilgrimage with him to the Holy Blood at Wilsnak, in Brandenburg. To this she agreed, and after various difficulties they went by sea to Stralsund in Pomerania, and then by land. She soon fell out with her companion, who was fearful of being found in company with an Englishwoman, 'for there was open war betwixt the English and those countries' through which they passed. He also feared meeting with thieves, and pressed on at a great pace, much irritated by Margery's characteristic tears and sobbings. She collapsed at last, was brought into Wilsnak on a hay-wain, and from there was carried on in the same fashion towards Aachen; but after a while was deserted by her companion, and spent a miserable time until she joined a company of poor folk on their way to Aachen. She gives a vivid picture of their journey begging in each town, and

when they were without the towns, her fellowship took off their clothes, and sitting naked, picked themselves. Need com-

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elled her to await for them and to prolong her journey... She was afraid to put off her clothes as her fellows did, and therefore, through being with them, had part of their vermin, and was bitten and stung very evilly both day and night. She kept on with her fellowship with great anguish and discomfort and much delay, until they came to Aachen.

From there, after she had seen Our Lady's smock and other relics, her way to Calais was a series of misadventures. People promised to take her with them and then went off without her: others said she could go with them so long as she could keep up, and when she failed to do so, left her. Lodging was hard to come by, and companions few and often untrustworthy. She made the last stages with a poor friar, and together they struggled on, until wellnigh exhausted they arrived at Calais, where she paid the friar what little she had for his help, and sought out friends in the town.

Fortune favoured her, and she received food and lodging, fresh clothing and much kindness from them, but was cold-shouldered by fellow-pilgrims waiting to sail, who obviously did not want her with them (what the cause, she never knew) and would give her no information. However, after four days, she got a place on a boat, and by divine intervention was protected from sea-sickness and was able to care for a woman who had been particularly unkind to her.

At Dover they all left her, and 'therefore she took her way Canterbury-ward by herself alone, sorry and sad in manner that she had no fellowship and that she knew not the way'. From there she came to London, 'clad in a cloth of canvas, as it were a sacken apron', thus drawing much attention and derision upon herself. Many priests

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would not have her in their churches, and many jokes and stories were told against her. She gave as good as she received and 'spoke boldly and mightily wheresoever she went in London, against swearers, cursers, liars, and such other vicious people, against the pompous array, both of men and women. She spared them not, she flattered them not, either for their gifts, or for their meat, or for their drink.'

From here she went to Richmond to worship at the Brigittine house called Syon Abbey, and there on Lammas Day (1 August) saw the hermit who had accompanied her and her daughter-in-law to Ipswich the previous year. She begged him to lead her back to Lynn, saying, 'Ah, Reynald, you are welcome. I trust our Lord sent you hither, for now I hope as you led me out of Lynn you shall bring me home again.' The hermit was very unwilling, but at last consented, and so she came again to Lynn.

Towards the end of her days she made two attempts to record all that had happened in her adventurous life. Although she had often been asked to put it down on paper, she for long refused, saying that the time was not ripe. Shortly before her last journey, however, she decided that the time had now come and, as she thought, the man to act as her amanuensis, for she could not write herself. This man, she tells us, had lived for many years in 'Dutchland' (Germany), and on his return had come to live with her. Although she does not say so, it seems highly probable that this was her son, who, as we have seen, came to Lynn with his wife and child about this time. Be this as it may, he had only taken down part of her story when he died, and for a while Margery could get no one to help her. In the end she prevailed on a priest

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whom she trusted, and who had pressed her to set down her story, to look at what had been done. When he did so he complained that the language was neither English nor 'Dutch', and furthermore that the book was written in a difficult hand which he was most reluctant to try to reduce to order. Finally he made a start in July 1435, and although he found the script so hard to read that he thought the Devil had affected his eyesight, by reading it word by word to Margery and being aided by her memory when the text was obscure, he successfully re-wrote Book I, and then turned to write Book II, telling of Margery's further history and her last pilgrimage. This second book he began on 28 April 1438. While the book in its outlines gives a true account of Margery's life it makes no claim to chronological exactitude, for many years had passed since the events described occurred. Nevertheless, wherever people or events are mentioned which can be exactly placed, it is remarkable how accurate her memory appears to have been.

Once all this was safely set down Margery's eventful career was nearing its end. At any rate we hear no more of her, and can leave her in her native place, happy among religious buildings that had meant so much to her, and sustained by the certainty and faith that had carried her through so many adventures over the years.