

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Janette Dillon, 'Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 27 (1996), 131-38

Permanent URL:

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Leeds Studies in English
School of English
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Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s

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'Scharp' confessors frame *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In Book I, chapter 1, Kempe's confessor intervenes with 'scharp repreuyng' before she has completed her confession and thereby sends 'pis creatur . . . owt of hir mende'.¹ When she returns home at the end of the book, after journeying to Danzig without her confessor's permission, she is again the recipient of 'ful scharp wordys' (247/24). *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers notoriously uncertain evidence for the dating of its contents, and is explicit about its non-chronological structure (5/12-16), but it suggests a gap of about forty years between these two confessions. Book I, chapter 1 states that Kempe was about twenty when she married and that the childbirth which was the occasion for the confession of chapter 1 followed soon after; Book II, chapter 5 describes her as about sixty years old during her stay in Danzig (234/18-19).

Margery Kempe was, at both these points, a member of the parish of Lynn. The parish church of St Margaret's had responsibility over the two parochial chapels of St Nicholas and St James, and was in addition the church for Lynn Priory, built on its south side.² It was thus in the slightly unusual position of having the Prior of Lynn as its 'person & curat' (59/2-3), though the Prior provided one or more priests to perform the routine parish duties. Allen notes that the Priory rolls for Kempe's period record payments to three priests, and that the Trinity Guild maintained a further six chaplains in St Margaret's (329: 169/11).

At least two priests attached to St Margaret's heard confessions from Margery Kempe. Master Robert Spryngolde, 'hir confessowr, parisch preste of Seynt Margaretys Cherche' (163/13-14) is referred to more than once as her confessor, or 'principal' confessor (169/12). The parish priest would certainly be expected to be the normal confessor for any lay parishioner, and there is no doubt that Robert Spryngolde performed this function throughout most of the latter part of Kempe's life. Yet it is clear that there are occasions when, for whatever reason, he does not hear her confession. She notes in Book II, chapter 69, for example, that

owr Lorde sent be prouysyon of þe Priowr of Lynne a preste to ben kepar of a chapel of owr Lady, clepyd the Iesyn, wyth-inne þe Cherch of Seynt Margarete, which preyst many tymes herd hir confessyon in þe absens of hyr principal confessowr (169/8-12).

Furthermore, as Allen points out, a busy parish priest would hardly have had time to listen to all her confessions when, following her first mystical experience, she began to confess 'sum-tyme twyes or thryes on þe day' (12/23-24). We may assume, then, that even before she chose the Dominican anchorite as her confessor (see below), the parish priest of St Margaret's was not her only confessor.

Who then was the unnamed confessor who reproves her so sharply in the first chapter of the book? He is described in the text as 'hir gostly fadyr' (7/12-13), suggesting that he is her usual confessor. The most obvious candidate is the parish priest. We cannot be certain of the precise date of Kempe's confession, though it seems likely that it should be dated soon after 1393. William Sawtry, the first Lollard martyr, was parish priest of St Margaret's at the time of his first condemnation for heresy (1399);³ but he may not have held office in 1393.

A further possibility is that Kempe's confessor at this time was already Robert Spryngolde, the same confessor who hears the last confession recorded in the book. Though the forty-year gap between the two confessions must cast some doubt on identifying these two confessors as the same man, the gap is not an impossible one. Twenty-four was the minimum age for admission to the priesthood;⁴ if Robert Spryngolde was newly ordained at the time of Kempe's confession he could have been a mere three years or so older than her. His sharpness towards her, and in particular his apparently inept intervention before she has completed her confession, could be read as signs of his relative inexperience. Confessional manuals advised confessors against any behaviour that might inhibit a full confession and warned of the need to find a balance between discipline and consolation.⁵

Clearly his sharpness on this occasion establishes a model against which all Kempe's subsequent confessors are defined. The prominence of this incomplete confession in her sense of the shape of her own life, as she looks back over it, is indicated by her placing of it as the point of origin for her gradual conversion to a holy life.⁶ And as the point of origin it also assumes an authoritativeness against which all future penitence and absolution must be measured. Sharpness, or its absence, becomes the determining feature visible to Kempe in her confessors.

Fairly early on in the narrative, at a date again uncertain, Kempe makes a choice to adopt an unnamed Dominican anchorite as her confessor, in place of her

parish priest. Laypeople needed permission to make regular confession to anyone other than their parish priest, and Kempe received such permission from Archbishop Arundel on a visit which Meech dates to the summer or autumn of 1413. On the other hand, she last sees the anchorite alive before departing for the Holy Land, which Meech also dates to 1413, tentatively to the autumn of that year. The proximity of these two events makes it unlikely that Kempe only began to make her confession to the anchorite at the point of receiving Arundel's permission. In any case Arundel also gave her permission on this visit to confess every Sunday (at a time when the laity rarely confessed more than once a year and even those in religious orders confessed relatively infrequently by modern standards) (36/21-23; 274-5: 35/28-29); yet the narrative describes Kempe as confessing two or three times daily immediately after her first vision (p.132 above), many years before Arundel issues this permission. The citation of Arundel's permission here may be explained by the textual need to authorise Kempe's behaviour and underline its orthodoxy rather than by the actual order of events.⁷

More important to Kempe's claim to special status as a mystic is the authorisation that comes from God himself, who directs her to go to the anchorite and 'schew hym my preuyteys & my cownselys which I schewe to þe, and werk aftyr hys cownsel, for my spyrit xal speke in hym to þe' (17/32-34). Though this does not precisely specify that the anchorite is to take on the role of confessor, it strongly suggests it, particularly in the context of other holy women's texts, which frequently present them as divinely directed to a particular confessor. Allen, citing the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, notes that the anchorite's authority as a friar and a Doctor of Divinity was probably sufficient grounds to license him as Kempe's principal confessor (279: 43/35).

Certainly the closeness of the relationship between them suggests longer acquaintance than a few months. Kempe refers to him after his death as:

þe most special and synguler comferte þat eyur I had in erde, for
he eyur louyd me for thy lofe & wold neuyr forsakyn me for nowt
þat any man cowd do er seye. (168/32-35)

Significantly, the appeal of this confessor for Kempe seems to lie precisely in his absence of sharpness. She complains to him that the priest who has been hearing her confession during the absence of the anchorite 'is rygth scharp vn-to me' (44/20) and does not believe in her 'felyngys' (her regular term for the spiritual feelings she believes to be divinely inspired in her). The anchorite's response asserts his own

rejection of such sharpness ('I wold not for al þis world ben so scharp to 3ow as he is' (44/29-30)), but at the same time acknowledges the necessity for sharpness as well as love in the confessor (as outlined in confessional manuals, see note 5 above) and suggests that God has appointed two confessors to fulfil separately the two functions of discipline and consolation:

'God for 3owr meryte hath ordeynd hym to be 3owr scorge & faryth wyth 3ow as a smyth wyth a fyle makyth þe yron to be bryte & cler to þe sygth wech be-forn aperyd rusty, dyrke, [&] euyll colowryd. Pe mor scharp pat he is to 3ow, [þe mor] clerly schinyth 3owr sowle in þe sygth of God, & God hath ordeynd me to be 3owr norych & 3owr comfort. Beth þe lowe & meke & thanke God boþe of on & of oþer.' (44/30-45/1)

Allen rightly notes that this substitute confessor would be likely to be the parish priest (280: 43/35), and elsewhere unequivocally identifies him with Robert Spryngolde (329: 169/11), who certainly became Kempe's principal confessor after the death of the anchorite. Already by this point, it would seem, sharpness is the identifying quality of Robert Spryngolde. Given the focal importance of the post-partum confession of chapter 1, it may be that Kempe finds what she is looking for in Spryngolde, that she sees in him precisely the emphasis on discipline which was so formative an influence on her religious life and so notably absent in her beloved anchorite. On the other hand, it is equally possible that she singles out this sharpness because she is talking about the same man. If Robert Spryngolde was the first confessor, responsible both for her immediate distress and her subsequent conversion, his continuing presence as parish priest would explain both Kempe's need to turn away from him to the Dominican anchorite and her deeper need to come back to him for a discipline now indispensable to her conception of the good confession.

Other passages highlight the sharpness of Robert Spryngolde. He is certainly the confessor who speaks sharp words to her on her return from Danzig at the end of the book. He is also the confessor Kempe prays God to reward for half of her tears and good works, and on this occasion God tells Kempe:

þu xalt blissyn me wyth-owtyn ende þat euyr I 3af þe so trewe a gostly fadyr, for, þow he hath be scharp to þe sum-tyme, it hath ben gretly to thy profyte, for þu woldist ellys an had to gret affeccyon to hys person. (216/33-217/3)

Sharpness, given Kempe's traumatic experience in the first confession the book records, clearly remains something Kempe has to come to terms with, and a quality which comes to stimulate her greatest devotion. Though she describes the anchorite as her greatest comfort, it is the sharp confessor whom she chooses above husband or father to have with her in heaven (216-17, cited above; and 20-21).

It may be then that sharpness is the quality which should enable us to recognise this confessor when we come across him unnamed. *The Book of Margery Kempe* shares a widespread contemporary unconcern about fixing names, and it is part of the characteristic openness of medieval writing that it often omits to name the authors of texts and frequently refers to texts themselves in a number of different ways, rather than seeking to use a consistent name. The Dominican anchorite is never named, but is identified by one or both of these two terms ('Dominican' and/or 'anchorite'), and Alan of Lynn, though sometimes named, is often referred to just as a White Friar (Carmelite) or Doctor of Divinity, either in the expectation that this is sufficient identification or due to a lack of concern about clarifying identity.

'Sharp confessor' may be one more way of designating the man elsewhere referred to variously as Master Robert Spryngolde, Master Robert, Master R., (unnamed) bachelor of canon law, ghostly father, principal confessor or simply confessor. His sharpness is, after all, clearly more significant to the shape of the narrative than his name. While the forty-year spread of the narrative invites doubt about whether he is *all* the sharp confessors, including the first and most traumatic, it is not at all improbable that he represents all the sharp confessors after the first, and that he is singled out for his sharpness precisely because that is the quality which both links him to the model of the earlier confessor and renders him indispensable to the spiritual needs of the woman whose transformation is initiated by such a confessor.

A further question follows from the possible continuity of a single sharp confessor: was he also the second scribe, responsible for writing down the book in its present form? Certainly a comparison with texts of the lives and revelations of continental holy women indicates that it was the norm for the confessor or confessors to take on the role of scribe. Nor is it unusual for the scribe to remain unnamed within such texts. The scribes of Blessed Dorothea of Montau and Blessed Angela of Foligno, two married women whose lives offer close parallels with Kempe's, are nowhere named within the texts they transcribe. Given the haphazard way in which names are either used or dispensed with in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it should come as no surprise that it omits to name its scribes.

The first scribe, commonly identified with Margery Kempe's son, because of the close correlation of their circumstances, is nowhere named or identified as her son

by the text. Several points of information are given about the second scribe: he is a priest; Kempe has great affection for him; he has occasionally read letters to her from her son in Germany; he loses faith in her temporarily when others speak ill of her; and he is unwilling to write the book, but is persuaded to do so by a combination of his own bad conscience and the apparently miraculous intervention that allows him to make sense of the book on a second attempt and restores his deteriorating eyesight.

How does this profile sort with what we know of Robert Spryngolde? First, and most importantly, we know that Spryngolde was still alive at the time the book was written. A document dated April 1436 testifies to his continued existence at that date, while another document records his presence at an investigation held in St Margaret's Church, Lynn in November 1436.⁸ The scribe states that he began to write the second version in July 1436.

Spryngolde, like the scribe, is a priest for whom Kempe feels great affection, as her wish to have him with her in heaven indicates. He is certainly her parish priest and confessor for at least part, and probably all, of the time during which her son lives in Germany and, given his literacy and relationship to Kempe, a likely person for her to ask to read her son's letters aloud to her. His faith in her occasionally falters, and just as the scribe scarcely dares to speak with Kempe when there is evil talk about her weeping (4/21-23), so Spryngolde scarcely dares speak with her when the Grey Friar (probably William Melton) preaches against her (168/38). He is, however, capable of demonstrating great faith in her, as when he asks her advice about whether to take the sacred host towards the fire or not when their parish church of St Margaret's is on fire and proclaims his belief that her prayers are responsible for saving the church (163/10-13; 164/2-9).

There is nothing inherently unlikely in this combination of scepticism and support. It was no more than the duty of any cleric in the role of spiritual director to one claiming visionary experience to test the truthfulness of such claims, especially given the consternation within the contemporary church over the 'discernment of spirits' (*discretio spirituum*) in the specific case of female visionaries.⁹ Robert Spryngolde is probably one of the two priests who are stated as having 'gret trost in hir maner of crying & wepyng', but also as 'sumtyme in gret dowte whedyr it wer deceyuabyl er not' (200/1-3). These two priests test her by taking her to a remote church to see whether she cries even without an audience. The incident cannot be dated, but, if Spryngolde was her confessor at the time, the responsibility laid on him by the role would be sufficient reason to provoke him to test her.¹⁰

The scribe, as one testifying to the woman's holiness by virtue of writing the book of her life or visions, would be similarly responsible to the clerical

establishment: hence the normal coincidence of the two roles. Kempe's scribe explicitly records his testing of her, as if to assure a potentially critical readership of his scrupulousness in this matter of discernment:

The prest which wrot þis boke for to preuyn þis creaturys
felyngys many tymes & dyuers tymes he askyd hir qwestyons &
demawndys of thyngys þat wer for to komyn . . . (55/6-9)

He, like Spryngolde, is described as both doubting and trusting her, sometimes proving 'hir felyngys . . . for very trewth', sometimes withholding 'credens' (55/19-21).

In this respect, he is presented quite differently from the Dominican anchorite, who never displays doubts and is said to have willingly taken it 'on charge of hys sowle þat hir felyngys wer good & sekyr & þat þer was no disseyt in hem' (44/2-3). If the anchorite had remained alive to write *The Book of Margery Kempe* we can be sure that it would have been a very different book, and may speculate that Kempe's spirituality might have been taken a good deal more seriously by her contemporaries. As it is, the book is the product of a more sceptical scribe, whose scanty profile accords with the little we know of her sharp confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde.

NOTES

¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS OS 212 (London, 1940), 7/20-21. Further references to this edition are given in brackets following quotations. References to the text cite page and line; references to Allen's notes cite page number first, followed by page/line reference to the text.

² Fuller description of the parish organisation of Lynn can be found in Dorothy M. Owen, *The Making of King's Lynn: A Documentary Survey* (London, 1984), pp. 27-31, from which this information is taken.

³ *The Actes and Monuments of John Foxe*, 8 vols., (New York, 1965), III.225. Cf. Owen, p. 30 and K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London, 1952), pp. 150-52.

⁴ See R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), p. 42.

⁵ See Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, N.J., 1977).

⁶ As Nancy Partner rightly comments, 'the choice of what to tell first is always fraught with narrative significance, always overdetermined' ('Reading the Book of Margery Kempe', *Exemplaria* 3 (1991), pp. 43-44).

⁷ I have written at more length on the question of the need to foreground orthodoxy in the text; in 'The Making of Desire in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Leeds Studies in English* 26 (1995), 113-44.

⁸ See Meech and Allen, Appendix III.iv.

⁹ Alfonso of Jaén's *Epistola Solitaria* (finished 1375-6) and Gerson's *De Probatione Spirituum* (written 1415) take up the question both in general terms and in the context of the canonisation of St Bridget. The burning of Joan of Arc in 1431 also focused attention on the dangers for women whose visions were not deemed 'true'. I discuss the issue more fully in a forthcoming article on 'Holy Women and their Confessors or Confessors and their Holy Women? Margery Kempe and Continental Tradition', in *Prophets Abroad*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Boydell and Brewer).

¹⁰ 'Tweyn good clerkys þe wech longe & many zerys had knowyn hir conuersacyon and al hir perfeccyon' (167/32-34) are similarly paired a few chapters earlier, and identified as 'a White Frer, a doctowr of diuinite' and 'a bachelor of lawe canon' (168/2-3), almost certainly Alan of Lynn and Robert Spryngolde.