

*The Discourse of Hysteria: The Topoi of Humility, Physicality, and Authority in Women's Rhetoric* by Logan Dale Greene. Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. Pp. 239. ISBN: 9780773448438.

TO SCHOLARS IN the first half of the twentieth century, the discovery of a medieval English woman's memoirs was a delicious find. Hitherto hidden in an aristocratic library, the text narrates in exhaustive detail the life of an affluent and spiritual woman: her difficult pregnancy, her matrimonial spats, her extra-matrimonial affairs, her travels, her social and religious anxieties. It not only filled a gap, but it did so with extraordinary prolixity and candor, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* is still thought to be the first piece of autobiographical narrative written by a woman in English. While initially greeted enthusiastically by its early readers, the text and heroine suffered fierce criticism soon after.

Margery, the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century woman in question, has never quite been able to please. Not her early critics, not her modern students, not her medieval peers. There is something fundamental to Margery that makes people uncomfortable across the generations. She is disruptive. She often wails at depictions of the crucifixion, at church services, or at random infants. She makes for a peculiar dinner-party guest, her fellow companions complaining that she did not share their meat and that she talked about religion far too much. For this behavior among other eccentricities, she is often deemed crazy by her modern readers and willful by her medieval contemporaries.

Logan Greene's new study identifies the *Book's* rhetorical style at the intersection of these two charges in what she develops as a transhistorical "rhetoric of hysteria." Perhaps no other medieval woman has entertained more modern amateur and professional diagnoses than Margery Kempe. By far, Margery's most frequent diagnosis is hysteria. Her first editor, Emily Hope Allen, wrote in 1936 "that Margery Kempe was a victim of hysteria can hardly be open to doubt." Shortly after, J. McCann wrote that Margery suffered "violent hysteria" of weeping and exhibited a "supreme and amazing egoism." T. Drucker labeled Margery with the unscientific and condescending "religious hysteria." More sensitively, David Knowles wrote in 1964 that while "sincere and devout," she was a "very hysterical woman." In 1980, Donald R. Howard described Margery as "quite mad, an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend."

Then there are those accounts that reinscribe hysteria more positively, making it a conscious and effective rhetorical strategy. For example, H. P. Weissman writes that "by affronting the authority of patriarchal establishment with her hysteria—her woman's disease of womb-suffering—Margery transcended its

cure.” Similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy depicts Margery’s madness as “monstrous reenactment of the traditionally female protestations of hysteria and self-harm.” Many critics have seen in her tears a response to an alienated and voiceless place in society. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, for example, has discussed her sobbing and screaming as a “bodily response to the inadequacies of language, communicating on her behalf what words might or could not.”

Greene’s analysis is in line with these interpretations of Margery’s hysterical “symptoms” and is further influenced by new psychoanalytic work that describes hysteria less as a pathological or psychological illness than a cultural phenomenon, most notably Juliet Mitchell’s *Mad Men and Medusas* (2000). The aim of Greene’s *Discourse of Hysteria* is to reclaim hysteria as an important part in the history of rhetoric. Whereas men and *logos* have dominated the study of rhetoric, she attends to hysteria and *eros* so as to include women.

Margery Kempe is treated as one of five subjects who have adopted a “rhetoric of hysteria.” The innovation of Greene’s study is to position her voice within a transhistorical rhetorical tradition in women’s writing that includes Hildegard of Bingen, Margery Kempe, Aphra Behn, Sojourner Truth, and Hélène Cixous. Each of these subjects is analyzed in an individual chapter following an introduction and two theoretical chapters.

Greene employs traditional pathological diagnostics of hysteria to recognize certain rhetorical techniques in these writers. The “discourse of hysteria” emerges from a “stance of alienation” as articulated by Jacques Lacan and identified by Greene through three main *topoi*: humility, physicality, and authority. These writers take their culturally understood weaknesses—their lowliness and physicality—as sources of authority and a means of challenging the “master discourse.” Many of Greene’s points have been made elsewhere, particularly in reference to the writings of medieval mystics, albeit with a different frame. For example, her discussion of the use of the humility topos as a “gesture of inferiority” that “helps women to establish authority to write and speak by ensuring their acceptance by institutionalized authority” recalls Rosalynn Voaden’s work on *discretio spirituum* and the paradoxical means by which female religious expression is both restricted and liberated. Unfortunately, Greene does not engage with Voaden or *discretio spirituum*.

To meet the book’s ambitious aim—to establish a transhistorical rhetoric of hysteria across ten centuries—some choices, obviously, had to be made, particularly in regards to secondary scholarship. However, this limits the book’s utility for a medievalist, particularly in the vast fields of Margery Kempe and medieval mysticism. There are also interesting points that are raised but not developed, such as the relationship between Christianity and hysteria.

In her discussion of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Greene concentrates on Margery's attempts at establishing an "authorizing rhetoric" through her tears, dress, and erotic imagery. However, as Greene acknowledges, Margery herself is at great pains in the narrative to establish that her tears are not self-directed as suspected by her witnesses but divinely inspired. Focusing on a letter Hildegard wrote to Bernard of Clairvaux seeking permission to write down her visions that would eventually become *Scivias*, Greene develops references to and instances of humility and sickness as strategic functions in securing support from religious authority and creating her own.

Due to its broad nature, this book is more illuminating to a nonmedievalist as an argument for the inclusion of medieval female writers in the history of female rhetoric than it is to a medievalist. However, this is in keeping with the stated intention of the book, as a contribution to the history of rhetoric rather than criticism of medieval literature or of any other period covered. Her conclusion does, however, serve as a challenge to medievalists, particularly in the frequent insistence of Margery Kempe as anomaly. She writes that we ought to "modify our understanding of hysteria from an individual pathology associated with women to an individualized reflection of a cultural pathology that focuses on women."

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