

*The Book of Margery Kempe*. Translated by Anthony Bale. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xliv + 275.  
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IN THE NEARLY eighty-two years since the 1934 (re-?)discovery of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, the text has commanded the attention of various readers, offering views of late medieval religious life and conduct; motherhood and marriage; pilgrimage; cultural contact; politics, culture, and social life; late medieval domestic life; the relationships between the laity and ecclesiastics; and more. The *Book* has become a staple of feminist medieval studies, and Bale's translation achieves a synthesis of scholarly rigor and artistic skill that successfully negotiates the fine line a scholarly translation must walk.

Bale provides a concise account of the manuscript's provenance and current scholarly consensus on the *Book*. The manuscript's own history of travel parallels its contents and subject. Just as the *Book* recounts the travels, pilgrimages, and social interactions of Margery Kempe, Bale's account (xxxiv-xxxv) of the manuscript's origins in East Anglia and passage to Mount Grace, the London Charterhouse, Catholic families including that of Edward Digby, and through the centuries to his descendants of the Butler-Bowdon family, in whose home the manuscript was found at a house party, preserves in a physical sense the mobility of the manuscript in the Middle Ages, a mobility highlighted by Margery Kempe's ceaseless movement within the text. Although fragments had been published in 1521 by Henry Pepwell, the full scope of this movement could not be known until the twentieth century.

The introduction and explanatory notes to the translation give a great overview of the scholarship on the *Book*, and the bibliography likewise covers this material. Bale recounts the reception history of the text, beginning with Hope Emily Allen's desire to see Margery Kempe's neuroses explored. Bale skillfully covers the pathologizing nature of this early strain of criticism, noting the problems with such an approach, which fails to account for Kempe's behavior in her time without treating the *Book* like "a set of symptoms to be explained and justified" (xxx). Bale rightly notes the increased attention the *Book* has received since the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of feminist and queer theories and their focus on gender, which rests so much at the heart of the text. Indeed, Bale's section on authorship (xvii-xx) introduces the question of gender and agency.

Bale's exploration of the authorship of the *Book* shows that the text offers not an unmediated voice, but rather a heavily mediated and remediated account. The text is narrated predominantly in the third person, referring to its protagonist Margery as "this creature," and relates in its twin prefaces the difficulties of

finding a suitable scribe to write down the account: one could barely write in English and wrote a nearly unreadable text, which the second had to decode. Although the text presents Kempe as unable to write, it would not have been unusual for a woman of her social status to be able to, and indeed the posture of illiteracy the text takes on her part may have been a strategic decision to raise the *Book's* credibility by presenting an account as mediated by a sympathetic, ecclesiastical, *male* authority figure. Bale is careful to stake no firm claim one way or another, remaining open to and cognizant of the scholarly discussion presently occurring among scholars studying medieval women and Margery Kempe specifically.

The translator's note hints at the potential difficulties in translating fifteenth-century East Anglian prose. While the language is familiar, the lengthy sentences with multiple clauses can create a difficult reading experience. Bale translates in what he terms a conservative mode, which seeks to recreate the syntactic experience while simultaneously presenting the text in a more idiomatically familiar English for the modern reader. Most interestingly, Bale translates reported speech in an even more "relaxed" manner (xxxvi), to represent the informal and intimate manner of such speech. As a translator, I find myself wanting more out of the translator's note than Bale gives, whether it be more detail or references to other translations to illustrate his translation's strengths.

I find it useful to compare Bale's choices to those made by B. A. Windeatt and Lynn Staley in their translations.<sup>1</sup> For instance, I present some lines randomly selected from chapters 48 and 52, one of reported speech and one of narration:

*"Therefore, sirs, if the Mayor wants to know why I go about in white, you may say, if you like, that my spiritual confessors have asked me to go about like this, and then you will tell no lies but he will not know the truth."* (Bale 106)

*"And therefore, sirs, if the mayor will learn why I go in white, you may say, if you like, that my ghostly fathers bid me go so, and then shall you make no lies nor shall he know the truth."* (Staley 85)

*"And therefore, sirs, if the mayor wants to know why I go about in white, you may say, if you please, that my confessors order me to do so; and then you will tell no lies, yet he will not know the truth."* (Windeatt 154)

*There was a monk who preached in York, and had heard many slanders and many evil things about the said creature.* (Bale 112)

*There was a monk who should preach in York, who had heard much slander and much evil language about the said creature.* (Staley 90)

*There was a monk who was going to preach in York, and who had heard much slander and much evil talk about the said creature.* (Windeatt 161)

Bale's translation stands out immediately for its crispness and a vocabulary that is both presently resonant without sounding distinctly modern. If Bale doesn't quite capture the feel of the Middle English, he makes up for it with distinct narrative voices among the first book, the second book, and the final prayer. This polyvocality in the translation is a great strength, considering his emphasis on mediated voice in the introduction, and may be one of the greatest benefits of this translation's attention to the *Book's* claims about its origins.

Bale offers an enjoyable point of entry for modern readers, presenting a carefully considered translation and an excellent critical apparatus for introducing them to the questions posed by the *Book*.

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I. B. A. Windeatt, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Penguin Books, 1985); Lynn Staley, trans. and ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York: Norton, 2001).