

Interpretive Essay

'wonderfully turnyng & wrestyng hir body': Agonies, Ecstasies, and Gendered Performances in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

I

On one notable occasion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery's priestly amanuensis interpolates an account of a period of personal scepticism about the author's prophetic abilities, confessing to having repeatedly called upon her to prove to him her own prophetic gifts. He recalls rather shamefacedly that his determined coercion of Margery on this matter was effected by his resolute refusal to continue writing down her text unless she complied with his demands. In view of the many difficulties which Margery has already encountered in finding a suitable amanuensis, she is loath to lose his services and as a consequence she is forced to perform a type of prophecy-on-demand for him. As a result of these prophetic games, which serve to prove to this priest that the word of God can indeed be made manifest in the voice of the woman, the priest is suitably impressed, telling us:

And so [. . .] this creature did as he entreated her and told him her feelings about what should happen in such matters as he asked her about, to discover whether her feelings were true. And in this way he tested them for their truth. (76)

Taking full credit for validating this prophetic manifestation of the divine word, this priest continues a tradition of compulsory endorsement of the female text by the stamp of male authority.¹ This incident, although ostensibly told against the priest's own scepticism, therefore stands as a paradigm for the difficulties faced by the woman writer – and Margery Kempe in particular – in achieving a

¹ The doctrine of *discretio spiritum*, as devised to help the priesthood differentiate between divine and diabolic manifestations, has been comprehensively examined in the context of medieval holy women in Rosalyan Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (York, 1999).

