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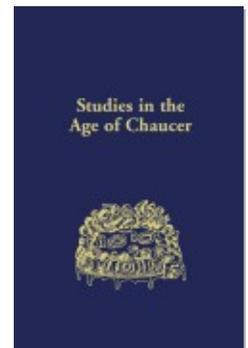
*Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*  
by Clarissa W. Atkinson (review)

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## REVIEWS

CLARISSA W. ATKINSON. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983, Pp. 241. \$8.95 paper.

This book is a very useful study of the enigmatic character of the medieval Margery Kempe, whose vicissitudinous life is known to us by her "autobiography," which was rediscovered in 1933. Atkinson expressly states that she has written a book for the general reader. She has achieved this task by a good organization of her material, which includes eight illustrations; by a discussion of the inherent problems "in a variety of contexts"; and by suggesting "several possible approaches to the subject" (p. 9). Thus the social, historical, spiritual, and literary contexts are examined. Atkinson discusses Margery's family environment by means of such documents as the Paston letters and the Goodman of Paris. The author describes how Margery came into conflict with the established church and what problems she had to face as a married woman aspiring to sanctity. The general antagonism against her is explained by the medieval tradition of antifeminism, and special references include the satire, the fabliau, and the witch hunt.

The author considers Margery as a genuine mystic, and in doing so, she follows a recent trend which takes medieval "feminine spirituality" more seriously than before. She points to some interesting links between Margery and Birgitta of Sweden and Dorothea of Montau, and she also indicates some interesting differences. She further draws our attention to the fact that the tradition of female sanctity in the Middle Ages continued well into the fifteenth century. Although she does not add any new major details to the picture of medieval affective piety, her book nonetheless presents a comprehensive and reliable perspective of the subject. She associates Margery's spirituality with that of Richard Rolle, and she is surely right in claiming that "the religious life of Margery Kempe seems neither aberrant nor even unusual but rather a complex personal response to a tradition established by some of the great medieval saints and theologians" (p. 155). When she explains part of Margery's eccentricity as a postpartum psychosis, she may be right, yet, of course, there is no proof of her argument. Moreover, Atkinson considers Margery an instance of "the extension of mystical ecstasy . . . to many people outside a spiritual elite" (p. 206), and therefore as proof of Oberman's theory of the "democratization" of mysticism.

Atkinson is less successful when she sets the *Book* in its medieval literary context. It is a pity that she does not make a more detailed comparison between the *Book* and the tradition of the medieval sermon, although she rightly emphasizes that “the Franciscan ethos and pathos color almost every aspect of the piety of Margery Kempe, from her love of sermons to the meditations that focused on homely details of Nativity and Passion” (p. 139). It would be well worth the effort to assess how extensive the influence of the sermons on Margery Kempe really was. It is not enough to refer to the importance of the warning against swearing and to the subject of spiritual tears in medieval sermons. The further question how Margery’s *Book* compares with a literary autobiography is the least satisfactory part of her study. It is here that her way of arguing is not without contradiction. On the one hand, she claims that the *Book* is highly original and shows no traces of imitation and fictional literature. In her last chapter, however, she maintains that Margery wanted to live up to her Continental models, who were known to her by their literary biographies. Unfortunately, Atkinson does not answer the question of the extent to which the *Book* as an autobiography has been shaped and influenced by the Continental literary autobiographies which no doubt were used by Margery as a literary model. It has to be admitted that Atkinson’s primary concern is that of the church historian; however, since she touched upon the problem, one would have expected her to provide a detailed stylistic analysis.

It is further to be regretted that the problems involved in this question are discussed with only a highly selective consideration of criticism on autobiography as a literary genre. Here another weak point of Atkinson’s book becomes evident: the author is rather careless with her references to secondary literature, although it has to be admitted that she expressly addresses the “general reader” and is therefore not too much concerned with entering a scholarly discussion. Yet why, one must finally ask, has the author used only the first edition of Robinson’s *Chaucer*, published in 1933, whereas Chaucerians are already waiting for the third edition to replace the second one of 1957? Nevertheless, Atkinson’s book is well worth reading — even for the specialist.

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