

Report about *Contemporaneity of Margery Kempe. Medieval Mysticism, Sexuality, and Identity of Woman in the Late Middle Ages and Today.*

Doctoral Thesis by Alicja Kowalczywska

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General assessment

It is with pleasure that I have read this thesis. Not only is it very well written and is the author present in the text in a pleasant and sometimes amusing way (such as in the example of the taxi driver in chapter 2), also the topic is interesting. The author is capable of taking the reader into the complexity of the lives of medieval women and their struggle for freedom. Margery Kempe is an intriguing figure, and the thesis presents her life and motivations well. The hermeneutical approach in which historical sources are studied from a present-day perspective is well explained and works well. However, I do have some doubts about the theoretical decisions taken in the dissertation (ch. 4 and 5 and conclusion). The philosophical part of the thesis is less convincing than the first few chapters. The different theories do not relate too well to each other and the conclusion introduces new perspectives.

At large, I do think the thesis is sufficient for granting the doctor's degree.

Below are my comments and questions in detail.

Research question and structure

The thesis investigates the modes of construction of identity of a female medieval mystic and for this purpose chooses a hermeneutical approach combined with a Foucaultian genealogical one. I think the thesis is a good example of what Gadamer calls "historically effected consciousness", in that it explicitly takes a present-day perspective in order to study Kempe's book.

The thesis is well and clearly structured: the order of the chapters and the structure of the argument is clearly explained and logical.

Style of writing

As mentioned, the thesis is very well written and interesting to read. The writing style is clear, the steps taken are explained well. The author is present in the text in a nice way, which makes that the reader gets an impression of who she is and which amounts to the reading pleasure.

Argumentation

Clear argumentation. The reasons for arguing what is argued for in the thesis are clear and well informed and well substantiated by literature.

For example, in ch. 4 the author rejects the superficial interpretation of Kempe as hysterical woman, by first specifying what hysteria according to Freud means and arguing that Kempe indeed experienced traumas that sparked her actions and revelations. Next she suggests a possible explanation of Kempe's behavior (temporal lobe epilepsy) and then with Foucault contextualizes this manner of understanding Kempe's acts in terms of psychologizing moral failure, that is in a normative manner. That is an excellent way of arguing, that is well informed by psychoanalytical and philosophical literature and subverts and contextualizes the perspectives taken on Kempe.

Also, the part on the interpretation of Kempe's authorship is clearly argued and explained, and Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity is convincingly introduced as an alternative.

The chapters that are the least convincing are chapters 2 and 5. Ch. 2 contains long descriptions of the lives and works of mystics, that do not return in the rest of the thesis – even though it is argued that they were important for Kempe. Ch. 5 starts with a long analysis of the body-flesh distinction, that is perhaps interesting to read, but does not support the argumentation. It could have been shortened.

The conclusion introduces several feminist philosophical views (Beauvoir, Irigaray, Butler) that are not used very much in the thesis and that are very briefly introduced. These perspectives deserve a separate chapter instead of only being briefly mentioned in the conclusion. Also, in a conclusion you shouldn't introduce (so many) new perspectives.

Literature

This is not my expertise but I have the impression that the thesis clearly explains the different editions of the work of Kempe and also how the text has been changed and edited. In ch. 3 it is interesting to read how coincidences, such as scholars having a holiday and conflicts between scholars (Hope Allen and Meech) influence the reception of the book. The authors also addresses the misogyny, the non-recognition of the work of female scholars such as Hope Allen (p. 92), and the work done by the wives of scholars (Alice Ruth Meech) that is not mentioned and therefore forgotten in the course of history.

The philosophical and psychoanalytical literature used in the thesis is to the point and used and explained well. However, I do think that the dissertation jumps from one philosophical theory to the other rather quickly and that the tensions between these perspectives are not mentioned. In ch. 4 Ricoeur's narrative identity (by the way, in

Oneself as Another and shorter texts this notion is worked out in a way that suits the dissertation better than in *Time and Narrative*) is used to explain Kempe's self-construction and is then further scrutinized with Foucault's notion of avowal. However, there are tensions between Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Foucault's post-structuralism, when it comes to self-construction and the possibilities to do so. Foucault's perspective is normative, and is about self-construction within a normative context. Ricoeur is more focused upon self-examination and articulation in language. The thesis does not develop this tension, but instead jumps from Ricoeur's narrative identity to Foucault's. What is more, the concepts of *exagoreusis* and of *exomologesis* are developed in monastic institutions of the 4th and 5th century. Foucault himself argues genealogically and is always very cautious in using concepts from one period to explain another period. In other words, you cannot simply apply these concepts, without first investigating the trajectory that have taken from the 5th to the 14th century.

I do understand that in the thesis these notions are used as hermeneutical instruments to analyse Kempe's book. I question the importance for the thesis of Ricoeur's narrative identity, however. The Foucault part is stronger, because in Kempe's case the self-construction is strongly normative (towards herself, her relation to God and in relation to the church). In ch. 5 it is stated that Foucault's genealogical method is followed, which affirms my contention.

In ch. 5 I miss relevant literature in feminist philosophy, in which the association between man and ratio, woman and sexuality and flesh is explained, such as Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason*. Also, in ch. 5 Irigaray's notion of mimesis could have deepened the analysis. I have the impression that the author mainly focused upon the feminist philosophical texts about mysticism. She does not situate her perspective in the broader context of feminist philosophy.

In the conclusion, the author does not consider the vast literature on Beauvoir in which, what she calls, Beauvoir's "misogyny" is interpreted. The point is that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* aims at subverting the myth of woman as Other, and argues that mystics repeat this myth, or hold on to it and hence are not free subjects. That is precisely what the dissertation in my opinion shows: Kempe does not subvert the authority of the church, but it is important for her to obey it as much as possible. She does construct herself as a woman, but not in the free sense that Beauvoir aims at. However, I do grant the author that Kempe's book and life can be considered as an important attempt to female self-construction, that perhaps does not subvert the normative religious constraints of her day, but that might be interpreted as seeking the space for self-articulation that can form an example for other women in her days.

Butler criticizes the subject of feminism in *Gender Trouble* and argues against the heterosexual matrix in feminism. It is not convincing to apply Butler's notion of performativity and queering to Kempe's book and also it is not in line with the argument in the dissertation. Butler is not in favor of "self-construction of a woman"

but would rather argue that narrative self-construction is a repetition of normative practices.

References

At large fine and precise, but I miss sources that are mentioned in the footnotes in the Bibliography, such as Hollywood's Hypatia text.

Questions:

1. Related to the hermeneutical perspective taken in the thesis. "Historically effected consciousness" is differentiated from "historical consciousness" by H.G. Gadamer and characterized by taking into account one's own prejudices, that is one's own questions - that are typical for and informed by present-day ideas and theories. This means that reading a text from the past can be considered as a dialogue with the text starting from one's present-day context. Could you specify the prejudices in your reading of the book of Kempe?
2. You argue against the interpretation of Kempe as hysterical in ch. 4 and in an excellent way contextualize it (see above: Argumentation), but on the basis of Irigaray's and also Cixous' work, hysteria can also be seen as an act of subversion of patriarchal structures. It could even be interpreted as the only possible way of escape for women in such a strong normative world as you describe (in ch. 2) in which women need to choose between motherhood and virginity, between earthly love and life and a life dedicated to God. Can you explain your decision not to pursue this path (p. 129) - which is in line with your reading of Kempe as a feminist, and to concentrate instead on the construction of self-representation? It seems to me that you leave this path too quickly and could have used this argument to further substantiate your reading of Kempe's work?
3. Question about ch. 4. The thesis first convincingly argues for understanding Kempe's book as a form of Ricoeurian narrative identity, that is self-construction, and then relates this to Foucault's notion of avowal. My question is about the tension between these two perspectives. For Foucault, *exagoreusis* and *exomologesis* are related to truth-speaking and to self-disciplining. It are moral notions that explain how subjects discipline themselves and constitute themselves to a specific subject - in Foucault's case to sexual subjects. This normative aspect of submission is not present in Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity. For Ricoeur discourse is a laboratory for thought experiments about the self. In ch. 4 you point out that for Kempe it are not only her internal relationship to God, but also his earthly representatives that she wants to obey

(154). My question thus is to what extent Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity really fits in your interpretation?

4. About the section: "The use of erotic language to describe the relationship with the divine" (ch. 5): could this not be considered as a form of taking up the position that is assigned to women in the religious context? Irigaray argues that the place and role that is particularly suited for women in a patriarchal context is the one of mimesis. Mimesis can be interpreted as mere repetition of the same (that is merely repeating being flesh and being embodied), or as subversion, mimicking the images of men in a curved mirror. This notion of mimesis is close to p. 199, in which the author explains that Kempe repeats the ideas in religious texts about women. Question is: what kind of mimesis is Kempe's? Subversion or merely mirroring in a flat mirror?
5. Question about Beauvoir strengthening instead of dispelling patriarchal biases (p. 208). To what extent does Kempe's self-construction escape from and subvert the patriarchal norms of her Christian environment? Isn't her self-construction a repetition of the place and role women are assigned?
6. Question about use of Butler (see above).
7. To what extent can Kempe be called proto-feminist? Her work does not aim at liberation of other women, but at self-construction. Her work is not about engagement but about finding freedom for herself?