


an understanding of medieval justice systems, this interesting book provides lots of food for thought.

Joanna Carraway Vitiello 
 Rockhurst University
 doi:10.1017/S0009640723000513

***Margery Kempe: A Mixed Life.* By Anthony Bale. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. 248 pp.**

In *Margery Kempe: A Mixed Life*, Anthony Bale provides an erudite and engaging study of the life and world of Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century pilgrim, entrepreneur, mystic, and matron whose *Book* is widely considered the first autobiography in English. Though it is directed at a popular audience and at times speculative, scholars will value Bale's book for its stimulating ideas and its insights into medieval society and devotional culture.

Bale moves through Kempe's life chronologically, each chapter taking a different approach to her experience and culture: "Creature," "The Town of Bishop's Lynn," "Places," "Friends and Enemies," "Things," "Feelings," "Old Age," and "Writing and Rediscovery." Each chapter's discussion is complemented by apposite maps and/or photographs. He intersperses among these thematically oriented chapters three "Interloges" that explore key moments in Kempe's life: her 1414 marriage to the Godhead in Rome, her 1417 interrogation for heresy in Leicester, and her witnessing of the 1421 fire in Lynn. Bale's mixed approach offers an effective introduction to Kempe's "mixed life," which blended a contemplative life of prayer and visions with an active worldly life of travel and engagement with others.

Bale begins the first chapter, "Creature," by conjuring up Kempe's first pregnancy and its aftermath—what might she have known, suspected, felt, feared? The narration makes Kempe accessible to the non-expert while challenging experts to imagine the lived experience of a medieval Englishwoman. While the chapter begins by reconstructing Kempe's interiority, it concludes by reconstructing the chronology of her life, moving deftly from fancy to fact in a manner appropriate to a book that moves freely between accounts of spiritual to bodily experience. I found Bale's narration such an effective tool for vivifying Kempe's experience that I wish he had taken that tack in other chapters. But mixing approaches is Bale's *modus operandi* for conveying Kempe's mixed life.

In startling contrast to the biographical approach of the first chapter, Bale's second chapter dilates on Kempe's hometown of Lynn—its history, government, topography, and economics, and what surviving records reveal about Kempe's family and in-laws. Bale follows this exploration of one place and its denizens with a chapter that guides the reader out of Lynn to the various sites Kempe visited as she travelled to and from Jerusalem, an expedition that took her through Constance, Venice, and Rome. He supplements her own accounts of these places with those of two other fifteenth-century pilgrims, John Capgrave and Felix Fabri. Bale analyzes political events that would have affected Kempe's visits, such as the Council of Constance,

and he discusses the persons associated with the sites Kempe visited, including the controversial John Jus and the celebrated holy women Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden.

One of my favorite chapters, “Things,” studies Kempe through the objects she handled, or might have handled, from spectacles to souvenirs to stockfish. Bale effectively conveys the materiality of medieval devotional culture through descriptions of Jesus dolls and chastity rings. Religious objects, he argues, “are not cheap substitutes for religious experience but, rather, a mode of having a religious experience” (133). Crucifixes and life-sized carvings of the infant Jesus and consecrated hosts are “enlivened things” that “represent intersections of life and death, miracles and mimesis, the extraordinary and the mundane” (133). Bale compares the writing of *The Book of Margery Kempe* to a set of eyeglasses. He intriguingly suggests that Kempe herself becomes a religious doll in the hands of admiring Roman matrons.

Having thoroughly explored Kempe’s life, Bale fittingly concludes with her afterlife. The final chapter recounts the well-known story of William Butler-Bowdon’s discovery of the only surviving manuscript of Kempe’s *Book* among a “clutter” of old papers and books in his Derbyshire mansion before turning to Kempe’s reincarnation in a variety of modern fictions, including Colin Curzon’s “high-camp wartime thriller” *Love in a Barrage Balloon* (1942) (202) and Robert Glück’s queer novel *Margery Kempe* (1995). For her impersonators and followers on Twitter, Margery Kempe remains a compelling example of “what it is to try repeatedly to change oneself, to seek words adequate to a difficult situation, and to maintain one’s faith in the future in a profoundly imperfect world” (205).

The book’s medley of approaches succeeds, to my mind, in achieving Bale’s goal: a “highly personalized history of fifteenth-century England” through an investigation of “the identity and subjectivity of one of its most voluble and fascinating individuals” (10). Each chapter offers a different window on Kempe’s life. Together, they offer a superb introduction to Margery Kempe and her world at a price that comports with student budgets. Bale unobtrusively defines terms like mixed life, *devotio moderna*, and Godhead for those new to the Middle Ages. The “Further Reading” cites monographs and essay collections on Kempe along with some broader studies of fifteenth-century devotional culture. Even as it targets a general audience, Bale’s study offers much to delight medievalists through his mixed approach to a mixed life.

Karen A. Winstead
The Ohio State University
doi:10.1017/S0009640723000380

***Spiritual Calculations: Number and Numeracy in Late Medieval English Sermons.* By Christine Cooper-Rompato. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. 192 pp. \$109.95 cloth.**

For Cooper-Rompato, the contribution made by medieval sermons to lay numeracy has been underestimated. “Number makes the abstract graspable and understandable”