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# “The writyng of this tretys”: Margery Kempe’s Son and the Authorship of Her Book

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**T**HE AUTHORSHIP OF *The Book of Margery Kempe* (henceforth *The Book*) has been the subject of much debate ever since the sole manuscript copy of the text was identified by Hope Emily Allen in 1934.<sup>1</sup> This

I am deeply grateful to Lena Wahlgren-Smith for transcribing and translating Gdańsk, Archiwum Państwowe, APG 300, 27/3, fol. 12r (printed in the appendix), without which this article would not have been possible. An early version of this article was first presented at the New Chaucer Society Congress in Reykjavík, in July 2014. I would like to thank Amy Appleford and Cathy Sanok for inviting me to give the paper. This article has greatly benefited from my exchanges with Anthony Bale, Stephen Alsford, Nicholas Watson, Rory Critten, and David Wallace. My Groningen colleagues Kees Dekker, John Flood, and Alasdair MacDonald generously gave their time to discuss the Gdańsk letter with me. I am also grateful to the Editor, Sarah Salih, and the two anonymous readers for *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* for making a series of valuable suggestions. I have modernized the letter thorn in the title quotation.

<sup>1</sup>All references to and citations from *The Book* are, unless otherwise stated, to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS o.s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940). The complete text survives only in London, British Library, MS Additional 61823 (also known as the Salthows manuscript). Wynkyn de Worde printed extracts from the text in 1501 as *Here Begynneth a Shorte Treatyse of Contemplacyon Taught by Our Lorde Jhesu Cryste, or Taken out of the Boke of Margerie Kempe of Lyn(n)* (STC, 14924). On de Worde’s printing, see Sue Ellen Holbrook, “Margery Kempe and Wynkyn de Worde,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: 4th Exeter Symposium: Papers*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 27–46; Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 126–38; and Allyson Foster, “*A Shorte Treatyse of Contemplacyon: The Book of Margery Kempe* in Its Early Print Contexts,” in *A Companion to “The Book of Margery Kempe,”* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 95–112. The most important recent editions of *The Book* are *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996); and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004). The essays gathered by Arnold and Lewis in *A Companion to “The Book of Margery Kempe”* offer a good overview of the critical reception of the work since the discovery of the Salthows manuscript in 1934. In following Lynn Staley I use “Margery” when referring to the literary persona but “Kempe” when talking about the historical person; Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). On the question of authorship, see my discussion below.

article presents two pieces of new evidence relating to Margery Kempe's son and to Robert Spryngolde, her confessor. The first item, a letter prepared for her son in Danzig (modern Gdańsk) in 1431, discloses the son's name and the reasons for his journey to Lynn.<sup>2</sup> This information, in turn, sheds new light on the account of *The Book's* production as given in the proem. As a result, the discovery of the letter corroborates the theory that the son was Kempe's first scribe. A second previously overlooked document shows the extent of Robert Spryngolde's ties to Margery Kempe's family, strengthening the case for his role as the clerical scribe behind much of *The Book*. Both findings help to anchor the supposedly autobiographical narrative in its immediate historical situation. Finally, I offer a revised explanation for the collaborative model behind the production of this text.

### I. Margery Kempe's Son in Danzig

At the beginning of the second part of *The Book* the text introduces Margery's son, who had been working for a prominent Lynn merchant.<sup>3</sup> The son's personal conduct appears to have fallen short of Margery's exacting standards, and she yearns for him to be "drawyn owt of þe perellys of this wretchyd & vnstabyll worlde."<sup>4</sup> Her subsequent insistence that her son "leeuyn þe worlde" produces the undesired effect of his fleeing her company so that he "wolde not gladlych metyn wyth hir."<sup>5</sup> A time of misrule for the son follows: he goes abroad, falls into the "synne of letchery," contracts what may be a sexually transmitted disease, returns home, loses his job, and in turn earns a humiliating rebuke from his mother.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, however, he abandons his "mysgouernawnce," and, after seeking and receiving his mother's blessings, moves to Danzig, where he marries a German-speaking woman, with whom he has a daughter.<sup>7</sup> Years later, he pays a visit to his parents as a man transformed both in appearance and demeanour. Even Margery, at first suspicious of his new "gouernawns," gradually realizes that her son's conversion is genuine, to the extent that she "openyd hir hert to

<sup>2</sup>I refer to the modern city by its Polish name, *Gdańsk*, but denote the fifteenth-century city as *Danzig*.

<sup>3</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 221.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 222–23.

hym, shewyng hym & enformyng how owr Lord had drawyn hir thorw hys mercy & be what menys, also how meche grace he had shewyd for hir."<sup>8</sup> The text states that his mother's infectious devotion inspires in the son spontaneous bouts of piety: he goes on "many pilgrimagys to Rome & to many oþer holy placys" before returning to his wife and child as "he was boundyn to do."<sup>9</sup> Back in Danzig, the son's reports stir in his wife an unstoppable wish to visit her mother-in-law, and the couple resolve to travel to Lynn with their daughter. Plans for a sea-journey are thwarted by inclement weather, and they leave their child behind with friends and end up traveling to England by land. On the day following their arrival, the son is suddenly taken ill. He remains bed-ridden for about a month before he dies.<sup>10</sup>

It has been noted before that the literary relationship between Margery and her wayward son is loosely modeled on that of Bridget of Sweden and her son Charles.<sup>11</sup> And it could certainly be argued that the persona of Margery's son serves as an exemplum to showcase her religious talents and, perhaps, advertise her inspirational brand of spirituality, for, after all, she predicts the punishment for the son's promiscuous youth; she brings about his conversion to a settled, Christian life; and she makes him go on not one but a series of pilgrimages. Crucially, the son's sudden passing is a catalyst for Book 2 itself, since it is Margery's self-imposed mission from God of escorting her daughter-in-law to Danzig that lends sense and structure to this part of the narrative.<sup>12</sup> The description of her sea-voyage, with a vivid account of the shipping of the oars during a violent storm, shows the writer's familiarity with accounts of Brendan's journey and other hagiographical texts.<sup>13</sup> But

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>11</sup> The parallels are explored by David Wallace, *Margery in Dansk* (David Matthews Lecture 2005) (London: Birkbeck College, 2005), 3–5.

<sup>12</sup> David Wallace and Jonathan Hsy have written illuminatingly on her stay in Danzig in, respectively, *Margery in Dansk*, and "Lingua Franca: Overseas Travel and Language Contact in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity, and Culture*, ed. Sebastian Sobceki (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 159–78. Hsy's chapter has been reprinted, with modifications, in Jonathan Hsy, *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Sobceki, "Margery's Flight to Dansk," in *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 135–39; and Wallace, *Margery in Dansk*, 9. See also Hsy, *Trading Tongues*, 146. The travelers ship their oars: "þei left her craft & her cunningg & leet owr Lord dryuyn hem where he wolde"; *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 229.

Margery's Baltic voyage also serves to prove a much more fundamental point. When she first hears of her son's marriage and the birth of his daughter, the demands of the spiritual life clash with a personal desire to see him and his family: "Hys modyr being in a chapel of owr Lady thankyng God of þe grace & goodnes þat he schewyd to hir sone & hauyng desyr to sen hem ȝyf sche myth, a-non it was answeyrd to mende þat sche xulde seen hem alle er þan sche deyd."<sup>14</sup> Characteristically, her instinctive response to an inconvenient answer from God is sceptical: "Sche had *wondyr* of þis felynge how it xulde be so as sche felt, in-as-meche as þei weryn be-ȝondyn þe see & sche on þis halfe þe see, neuyr purposyng to passyn þe see whil sche leuyd."<sup>15</sup> Her sense of *wondyr* articulates the miraculous magnitude of the challenge of moving against her resolve. God says it will happen, but Margery says it cannot be done. "Neuyr-þe-lesse," she concedes that "she wiste well to God was nothyng impossibyl."<sup>16</sup> Structurally speaking, therefore, the son's death enables one of the greatest miracles of *The Book*: that of God changing Margery's mind.

Although the text at the beginning of Book 2 states that this part of the work was begun in 1438, the son's death is believed to have taken place in 1431.<sup>17</sup> It is now possible to confirm the historicity of the son's visit to Lynn, in addition to providing further details on his voyage as well as on the son himself. Among the collections of medieval and early modern missives produced for the senate of Danzig, the National Archives in Gdańsk hold the contemporary transcript of a letter furnished for one John Kempe on June 12, 1431, bearing the shelf-mark APG 300, 27/3 (fol. 12r) (Fig. 1).<sup>18</sup> According to this letter, the city of Danzig requested the English authorities to assist John Kempe in recovering a security of 15 Prussian mark he had paid on behalf of Robert

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 225. Barry Windeatt states that the son's death occurred "probably in the summer of 1431" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 5). Allen and Meech give the year as "in or before 1432" (vii). On the date, see also Kim M. Phillips, "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman," in Arnold and Lewis, *A Companion to "The Book of Margery Kempe"*, 17–34 (19).

<sup>18</sup> The appendix to this article gives a full transcription and translation of the letter, kindly furnished by Lena Wahlgren-Smith. All references to and quotations from this letter are to the text printed in the appendix. On this collection of letters, see Maria Sławoszewska, "Gdańskie missiva," *Archeion* 29 (1958): 199–207.

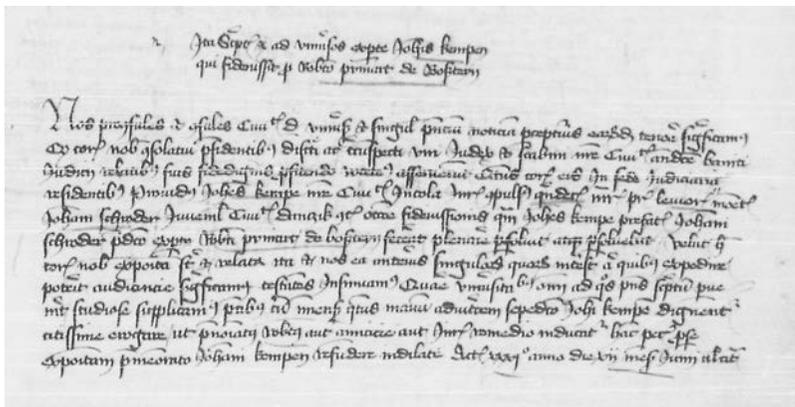


Fig. 1. Gdańsk, Archiwum Państwowe, APG 300, 27/3, fol. 12r. *Akta miasta Gdańska—Missiva*, June 12, 1431. By kind permission of the Archiwum Państwowe in Gdańsk.

Prinart of Boston to one Johannes Schroder.<sup>19</sup> Kempe bears the same first name as Margery Kempe's husband and her father-in-law.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Kempe is described as an inhabitant (*incola*) of Danzig in contrast to Schroder of the *Jungstadt* (an administrative division of the city), who is called "fellow burgess," or *conciues* in Latin: "Johanni Schroder Iuuenili Ciuitatis Danczik *conciui*."<sup>21</sup> Despite the intimate and extensive

<sup>19</sup>In addition to local authorities requiring non-resident merchants to obtain securities, it was common practice in the various European maritime codes to secure capital and cargo. Robin Ward, *The World of the Medieval Shipmaster: Law, Business, and the Sea, c. 1350–1450* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 70–78; Edda Frankot, *Of Laws of Ships and Shipmen: Medieval Maritime Law and Its Practice in Urban Northern Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 13–15; and Edwin S. Hunt and James Murray, *A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *passim*.

<sup>20</sup>On the Kempes and Brunhams of Lynn, see Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* (London: Longman, 2002), in particular chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>21</sup>The distinction between the rights and privileges of an inhabitant (*incola*) and a citizen (*cives*) was considerable both in the customary Hanseatic code of Lübeck and in the Teutonic Order's proprietary Kulm law. The Order gradually replaced Danzig's Lübeck law with its own code after it had gained possession of the city in 1308. See Andrzej Januszajtis, "Aus der Geschichte der Selbstverwaltung Danzigs," in *Deutsch-polnische Begegnung zu Wissenschaft und Kultur*, ed. Gilbert H. Gornig (Marburg: Danziger Naturforschende Gesellschaft, 2004), 144–67; and Sebastian Sobceki, "Danzig," in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418*, ed. David Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Ulrich Meier discusses the legal meaning of "burgess" in medieval German cities (*Mensch und Bürger: Die Stadt im Denken spätmittelalterlicher Theologen, Philosophen*

Hanseatic relationships between Lynn and Danzig, full burgess rights were difficult to obtain for Englishmen, even for established members of the considerable colony of Lynn merchants who lived in Danzig. Marriage to a local woman would not have given Kempe burgess rights by default—hence the term *incola*.<sup>22</sup> One reason for such difficulties was the number of spats and retaliatory measures exchanged between England and the monastic state of the Teutonic Order, which ruled Danzig at the time.<sup>23</sup> “Robert Prinart,” against whom this letter is directed, cannot be securely identified, but he may be a relation of the Lynn mayor John Parmonter.<sup>24</sup> The letter is issued in Latin, usually

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*und Juristen* [Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994], 127–212). For the distinction between *incola* and *cives* in Lübeck law, see David Mevius, *Commentarii in Ius Lubecense* (Frankfurt: Wohler, 1744), Book 1, Section 28, Chapter 2, “Ad municipales et de incolis.”

<sup>22</sup>Lynn merchants and their families constituted a sizeable community in Danzig, and there were also Danzigers living permanently in Lynn. Lynn’s role in the Hanseatic network that connected the town with Danzig is treated by Dorothy Mary Owen, *The Making of King’s Lynn: A Documentary Survey* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1984), 278–82, 285–95; T. H. Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse, 1157–1611: A Study of Their Trade and Commercial Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 91–94; Kate Parker, “Lynn and the Making of a Mystic,” in Arnold and Lewis, *A Companion to “The Book of Margery Kempe,”* 55–73 (57–61); Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 15–21; and, in particular, Stuart Jenks in a series of publications: “Der Liber Lynne und die Besitzgeschichte des hansischen Stalhofs zu Lynn,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 68 (1988): 21–81; *England, die Hanse und Preußen: Handel und Diplomatie, 1377–1474*, 3 vols. (Cologne: Böhlau for the Hansischer Geschichtsverein, 1992), esp. 1:276–79, 417–23; 3:1017–24, 1116–25, and 1215–26; and “King’s Lynn and the Hanse: Trade and Relations in the Middle Ages,” in *Essays in Hanseatic History: The King’s Lynn Symposium*, ed. Paul Richards and Klaus Friedland (Dereham: Larks Press, 2005), 94–114.

<sup>23</sup>Restrictions and expulsions were common during the trade disputes between England and the Teutonic Order in the fifteenth century. In 1402, for instance, only those Englishmen who were unmarried or married to “Prussian women . . . were allowed to remain,” whereas in 1405 the Grand Master ordered “all Englishmen without burgess rights in Prussia” to leave the country; Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse*, 114, 115. The 1420s and 1430s saw renewed disputes between the two parties, resulting in various curtailments of rights for non-burgesses; *ibid.*, 136–37. For the contemporary poundage crisis of 1431–34, see Jenks, *England, die Hanse und Preußen*, 2:575–88. An added layer of conflict was provided by the continued internal tensions between the city and the Order that led to the decision of Danzig and its fellow Prussian cities to join Poland in 1454; Sobecki, “Danzig.”

<sup>24</sup>I have not been able to locate Robert Prinart or individuals with similar-sounding names in the Boston area. Since English names were entered in such documents by Prussian clerks, a considerable amount of phonetic corruption is common. One possibility is that Robert Prinart is Robert Parmonter (also spelled Permenter; Parmenter; Parmontier; Permontere; and, after 1500, Parmyter), the son of the then mayor of Lynn, John Parmonter. Robert only appears in one notorious document (dating from between 1430 and 1432) in which he and his father are accused of assaulting the gauger of the town’s port at night (*Calendars of Proceedings in Chancery*, C1/26/290). The vintner John Parmonter was a prominent citizen of Lynn and six-time mayor between 1423 and

reserved for communication between Danzig and particularly England, Denmark, and Poland-Lithuania. Documents addressed to other Hanseatic member cities or to Dutch-speaking towns are composed in Low German, the language of the League and Danzig's town administration.<sup>25</sup> This letter, therefore, is clearly directed at the English authorities, asking them to induce Prinart "through the means either of friendship or of justice" to reimburse Kempe for the security the latter had paid to Schroder. At the same time, the validity of the letter is fixed at "three months [from] my putting my hand to this."

Given the date, contents, and address of the letter, I believe it safe to identify John Kempe with Margery Kempe's son, not least because the name "John" appears to have been a naming tradition in the Kempe family for at least two generations.<sup>26</sup> The three months' validity of the letter did not provide John with a great deal of flexibility in the first place, but it would have given him sufficient time to sail from Danzig to England to pursue this particular request, in addition to conducting other pressing business he may have had in Lincolnshire and East Anglia. This letter, therefore, must have been issued around the time of

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1437, including 1431; L. S. Woodger, "Parmenter, John (d. 1437), of Bishop's Lynn, Norf.," in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386–1421*, ed. John Smith Roskell, L. Clark, and Carole Rawcliffe, 4 vols. (Stroud: Alan Sutton for History of Parliament Trust, 1992), available at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421/member/parmenter-john-1437>. In March 1406 he entered into a partnership with Robert Brunham, Margery Kempe's probable brother, to import wine from Gascony (Woodger, "Parmenter, John"), perhaps through Boston, a major import hub for Gascon wine responsible for almost all the region's trade in wine; E. M. Carus-Wilson, "The Medieval Trade of the Ports of the Wash," *Medieval Archaeology* 11 (1962): 182–201 (190). Parmenter certainly had business dealings with Boston wine merchants: D. M. Owen, ed., *William Ashbourne's Book*, Norfolk Record Society 48 (Norwich: Norfolk Record Society, 1981), 71. It is not inconceivable that Robert was based in Boston to oversee his father's interests in the wine trade. The family connections with the Brunhams may have helped facilitate the financial arrangements for the security paid by John Kempe in Danzig.

<sup>25</sup>Outside the cities, Prussia's spoken language of administration was the Teutonic Order's East Middle German (written communication was conducted in Latin); see Sobeci, "Danzig"; Freimut Löser, "Literatur im deutschen Orden: Vorüberlegungen zu ihrer Geschichte," in *Mittelalterliche Kultur und Literatur im Deutschordensstaat in Preussen: Leben und Nachleben*, ed. Sieglinde Hartmann, Jarosław Wenta, and Gisela Vollmann-Profe (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2008), 331–54 (336); and Christopher Young and Thomas Gloning, *A History of the German Language through Texts* (London: Routledge, 2004), 175–84.

<sup>26</sup>Both Margery Kempe's husband and her father-in-law were called John; Felicity Riddy, "Kempe (née Brunham), Margery," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

his planned departure. *The Book* notes that bad weather prevents Margery's son from leaving Danzig by ship, and, after making arrangements for their daughter, he and his Prussian wife depart for England by land. The delay caused by the weather may have cost John and his wife a few days, perhaps up to a week. Therefore, his departure probably took place a few days after June 12, 1431 at the earliest. Traveling from Danzig to Lynn by land via northern France amounts to just over 1,000 miles, or 1,600 km. Given an average of 50 km per day, the Kempes would have required about 32 days to complete the journey.<sup>27</sup> At the earliest, therefore, they would have reached Lynn at the end of July 1431, but because the letter would have been valid for only some six more weeks at this stage, presumably John traveled first to Boston to present the letter to the town authorities. It is safe to assume, therefore, that John Kempe visited his mother in Lynn between the end of July and the beginning of August 1431, and that he therefore died either in late August or early September. His motivation for undertaking such a journey need not have been restricted to his wife's fervent desire to meet her mother-in-law (if this was indeed the case): it is difficult to establish the precise value of the security John was trying to recover given the many problems of calculating exchange rates for the middle of the fifteenth century, but 15 Prussian mark in the 1430s amounted to almost £4.<sup>28</sup> This was not a negligible sum, and it may have justified the outlay

<sup>27</sup> For travel times, see Michael McCormick, "Time under Way," in *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Chap. 16, 469–500. McCormick calculates the average speed of overland travel in early medieval Europe as ranging between 25 and 50 km per day (479). The higher figure is for journeys on horseback and depends on such factors as weather, season, and terrain. The Kempes traveled during the summer months over flat terrain with no mountain ranges or even hills to speak of. It is of course possible that they boarded a ship in northern Germany or the Low Countries. This would have accelerated their journey.

<sup>28</sup> This figure is based on recent research by Oliver Volckart on fourteenth-to-sixteenth-century exchange rates (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/Late%20Medieval%20Financial%20Market/datasheets/datasheetindex.aspx>). I have used the data on the Prussian mark and pound sterling (The "Mark of Prussia" data-sheet gives the value of the Prussian mark in 1431 as £0.25). Volckart's method uses the fine silver equivalent of each coin and is therefore more precise for this purpose than Peter Spufford's model, which relies on the Florentine florin as an index currency; Peter Spufford, Wendy Wilkinson, and Sarah Tolley, *Handbook of Medieval Exchange* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 1986). For an earlier approach, see Emil Waschinski, *Die Münz- und Währungs politik des deutschen Ordens in Preussen, ihre historischen Probleme und seltenen Gepräge* (Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 1952), 248. Volckart discusses the fate of the Prussian mark (and its relatively low value in the 1430s) in *Die Münzpolitik im Ordensland und Herzogtum Preußen von 1370 bis 1550* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996).

of expenses that was required to finance a round-trip journey to Lynn.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the discovery of this letter assigns a name to Margery Kempe's son and validates some of the historical information provided in the book, while showing the reason for their journey to have been at least partly commercial.

## II. The Writing Process

The Gdańsk letter has the potential profoundly to modify our understanding of *The Book* and the process by which the work was composed and copied. The idea that Margery Kempe's son was the original scribe was first suggested by Joan Wake to Hope Emily Allen in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> This theory is based on the description of the transmission process in the opening folios of the Salthows manuscript. Accordingly, for some twenty years Margery resists repeated invitations to write her life, but when she finally decides to record her experiences, she finds no "wryter þat wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr ne ʒeue credens to hir felingys."<sup>31</sup> The writer who eventually takes up the task exactly matches the account given of her son in Book 2:

a man dwellyng in Dewchlond which was an Englyschman in hys byrth & sythen weddyd in Dewchland & had þer boþe a wyf & a chyld, hauyng good knowlach of þis creatur & of hir desyr, meued I trost thorw þe Holy Gost, cam in-to Yngland wyth hys wyfe & hys goodys & dwellyd wyth þe forseyd creatur tyl he had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for þe tym þat þei wer togydder. And sythen he deyde.<sup>32</sup>

Not only does this description correspond to what can be gleaned about John from the surviving letter, but the circumstances are identical to what we know of his visit to Lynn in 1431 as narrated in Book 2: both

<sup>29</sup>In the late fourteenth century the purchasing power of £4 was equal to two years' tuition and board at one of the two English universities, or the annual salary of a chantry priest (Kenneth Hodges, *List of Price of Medieval Items*, <http://medieval.ucdavis.edu/120D/Money.html>). For another comparison, this amount would have covered the complete production costs of a late fourteenth-century *Evangeliarium* commissioned for the Collegiate Church of Saint George, Windsor, including the materials and the labor of scribes, limners, and binders; Joanne Filippone Overty, "The Cost of Doing Scribal Business: Prices of Manuscript Books in England, 1300–1483," *Book History* 11 (2008): 1–32 (8).

<sup>30</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, vii.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

he and the scribe are accompanied only by their wives, both stay with Margery, and both die shortly afterwards.<sup>33</sup> Margery then approaches a priest to furnish a clean copy. Claiming the original work to be illegible, the priest initially refuses Margery's invitation, and a third scribe is hired but struggles to produce more than one leaf.<sup>34</sup> However, some "iiii j̄er or ellys mor" after the first scribe's death, the priest is troubled by his conscience and eventually consents to this task.<sup>35</sup> He gives 1436 as the year when he first began to work on the clean copy of *The Book*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the deaths of the son and the first scribe took place at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

Critical attention has traditionally concentrated on the second scribe, the priest. In 1975, John Hirsh argued that this priest should be considered the co-author of the book because he gave the narrative its current shape.<sup>38</sup> This approach appeared to deny a considerable literary achievement to a medieval woman, and scholarship has struggled with Hirsh's theory over the years.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, in a series of important readings, Lynn Staley began to shift the attention away from a historical to a literary understanding of the second scribe as a trope, devised by Kempe to give credence to her tale.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, Staley went on to establish an influential separation between the author Kempe and her literary avatar, the persona Margery.<sup>41</sup> However, Nicholas Watson opened a significant new angle to this debate by suggesting that the "narrative bears a real relation to history" while maintaining that Margery Kempe is the

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the account in Book 2, *ibid.*, 225.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. On the brief stint of the third scribe, see Diane Watt, *Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 122. Watt refers to this third scribe as "second secretary" and to the priest as "clerical secretary."

<sup>35</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 4–5. See also *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 5.

<sup>36</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Given the close mercantile and personal networks that connected Lynn and Danzig it is theoretically possible if highly unlikely that two men fitting this description and these circumstances stayed with Margery Kempe, unless we imagine her to have been not only a brewer and a miller but also an inn-keeper.

<sup>38</sup> John C. Hirsh, "Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *MÆ* 44 (1975): 145–50.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Watson gives a detailed overview of this debate in "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434 (396–98).

<sup>40</sup> Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," *Speculum* 66 (1991): 820–38. See also Diana R. Uhlman, "The Comfort of Voice, the Solace of Script: Orality and Literacy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *SP* 91 (1994): 50–69.

<sup>41</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*.

book's author.<sup>42</sup> Rather than seeing the second scribe as a trope or as the shaping writer behind *The Book*, Watson empowers Kempe with a form of literacy that does not require written fluency by arguing that Kempe remains in control of her material, which she first dictated to her son before the priest began working on the book.<sup>43</sup> Watson's identification of the first scribe with the son is persuasive; any other theory surely requires multiple additional layers of assumption. This second scribe or priest, Watson maintains, did little to modify Kempe's account. Watson doubts, though, that the son could have written such a substantial text during his second stay, when he was dying, so he must have produced the first draft during his visit a year earlier.<sup>44</sup> However, this initial visit does not match the account of the first scribe given above because John came to stay on his own, without his wife, at the time when his mother encouraged him to go on pilgrimage. In fact, according to *The Book*, the wife's desire to meet her mother-in-law provides the very rationale for the second trip, in 1431.<sup>45</sup> Watson assumes that the priest made a mistake and collapsed or confused the two visits, but it is hard to believe that a matter of underlying causality, which separates the two visits, could have been overlooked by the priest who produced the clean copy. Furthermore, *The Book* suggests that the original dictation took place under time constraints, for the scribe wrote as much as Margery was able to tell him during the time that they spent together.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the Danzig letter reveals that John's reasons for traveling to Lynn were at least partly commercial. This is relevant new evidence because *The Book* specifies that the first scribe came to Lynn with his wife and with his goods—evidently to engage in mercantile activity.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the correspondence between what *The Book* tells us about the first scribe and what we now know of John Kempe makes the identification of the one with the other compelling.

When the text gives the priest's reasons for rejecting the project of copying the book, we read that the text was "euel wretyn" and that it was "neipyr good Englysch ne Dewch."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he adds that "þe

<sup>42</sup> Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," 397.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 398–415.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>45</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 224.

<sup>46</sup> "[H]e had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for þe tym þat þei wer togydder"; *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> "[He] cam in-to Yngland wyth hys wife & hys goodys"; *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* The point is repeated at the end of the preface, 6.

lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben.”<sup>49</sup> “þerfor,” the text continues, “þer schuld neuyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace.”<sup>50</sup> A few years later, however, the same priest found that it was “mych more esy . . . þan it was be-forn-tym.”<sup>51</sup> There is no explanation for this sudden change, other than that the priest now trusts in Margery’s prayers. However, once the project is under way, the process actually turns out to rely on such mundane tasks as the priest reading out every word to Margery, who provides explanations and corrections.<sup>52</sup> This sudden ability to read a text that was not readable before is therefore explained in terms that are not spiritual but thoroughly practical. Yet here, as in the account of the anonymous first scribe, there is now good reason not to trust the priest’s narrative. Why should we accept the priest’s assumption that the text was foreign and therefore illegible? Sarah Beckwith states that “the second scribe who attempts to transcribe the foreign, badly written text of the first scribe is suddenly granted clarity of understanding.”<sup>53</sup> Kate Parker adds that even though the letters were “oddly shaped and formed, . . . the initial difficulties . . . disappeared the second time he tried, when perhaps he had simply ‘got his eye in,’ as palaeographers would say.”<sup>54</sup> Watson characterizes the first scribe’s text as written “in an unfamiliar spelling system, in a merchant’s script that to the priest who became her second scribe” appeared an “unorthodox production.”<sup>55</sup> He adds that the difficulties (“þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben”) indicate not a morphological or lexical but an orthographical and paleographical problem.<sup>56</sup>

Yet as the letter furnished for John Kempe in June 1431 shows, contemporary writing from Danzig and East Anglian administrative and literary handwriting were certainly not worlds apart.<sup>57</sup> This point can

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>52</sup> “[H]e red it ouyr be-forn þis creatur euery word, sche sum-tym hylpyng where ony diffulte was”; *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Beckwith, “Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency, and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 171–99 (190).

<sup>54</sup> Parker, “Lynn and the Making of a Mystic,” 65.

<sup>55</sup> Watson, “The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 398.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 429 n. 16.

<sup>57</sup> On *The Book of Margery Kempe* and linguistic contact between Lynn and Danzig, see the chapter on Margery Kempe in Jonathan Hsy’s *Trading Tongues*, 131–56.

be made more clearly when comparing the Salthows manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is believed to have been written by a Norfolk scribe, not with Latin but with vernacular Low German handwriting from Danzig (figs. 2 and 3).<sup>58</sup> The vernacular letter is dated 1437 and comes from the same collection of missives as the letter issued for John Kempe.<sup>59</sup> The cursive hand of the Danzig scribe shows considerable similarities with the mixed letter forms used in the anglicana script underlying Salthows's hand. For instance, both scribes employ an almost identical *w*, one of the more complex letters in anglicana hands. Similarly, both hands feature a two-compartment *d* with a forward-sloping ascender as well as a two-compartment *b* with a significantly larger

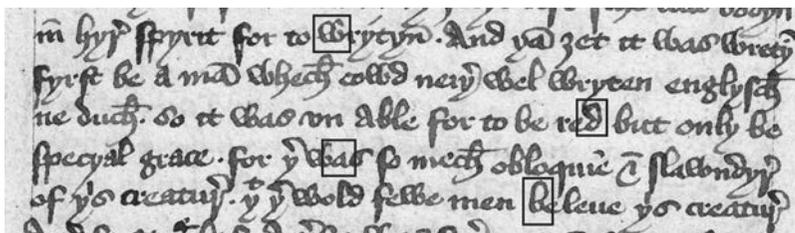


Fig. 2. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, London, British Library, Add. MS 61823, fol. 3v.  
© The British Library Board.

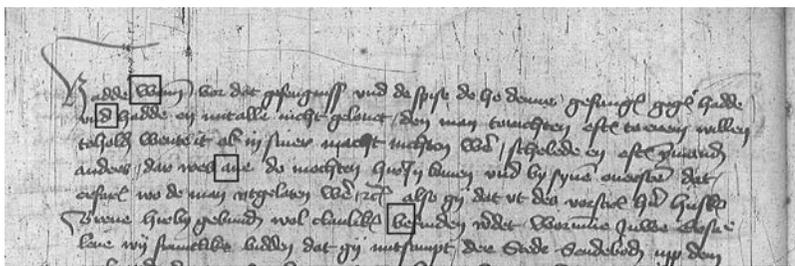


Fig. 3. Gdańsk, Archiwum Państwowe, APG 300, 27/2, fol. 176v. *Akta miasta Gdańska—Missiva*, July 1437. By kind permission of the Archiwum Państwowe in Gdańsk.

<sup>58</sup>The name of the manuscript's scribe, Salthaws or Salthouse, is common to Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Salthouse was a village in Norfolk, and one Edward Salthous was common serjeant in Lynn in 1477 (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, xxxiii). I have also been able to locate a Boston wool merchant named Robert Salthouse, who appeared twice as a plaintiff for debt in 1430 (CP40/677).

<sup>59</sup>Gdańsk, Archiwum Państwowe, APG 300, 27/2, fol. 176v (for the 1437 letter).

upper lobe. A final example of the similarities between the two hands, and the scripts on which they are modeled, is the single-compartment, characteristically angular secretary *a* employed by both scribes. The Danzig hand is a typical cursive business hand of the time, and such hands are usually more difficult to read than book hands or textura-based presentation scripts. Thus, it is difficult to see how mid-fifteenth-century Low German handwriting—even informal cursive scripts—that originated in Danzig could have presented problems for an educated reader from Lynn, a town that had seen a considerable volume of correspondence from Danzig since the early fourteenth century. This paleographical example further corroborates what Jonathan Hsy identifies as a “trans-lingual network of creation” behind *The Book of Margery Kempe*.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the similarities between a number of letter forms in these two examples is so striking that further research would be required to establish a possible mutual influence of English and Hanseatic business hands.

I would therefore suggest another explanation why the priest’s account states that the handwriting of the son was not legible and that “þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oper letters ben.”<sup>61</sup> There is no reason why John could not have written a first draft during his final month in Lynn, when lying on what would become his deathbed.<sup>62</sup> I do not necessarily agree with the assumption that John must have been in agony or in a delirium for all of this time. Depending on his condition, there could have been better days during which writing would have progressed at a reasonable pace. John Audelay, if he is to be believed, claims to have written a whole book while being blind, deaf, and dying.<sup>63</sup> The colophon to Book 1 certainly suggests that John produced a more or less complete copy:

Her endith þis tretys, for God toke hym to hys mercy þat wrot þe copy of þis boke, & þow þat he wrot not clerly ne opynly to owr maner of spekyng, he in hys maner of wrytyng & spellyng mad trewe sentens þe wech, thorw þe help

<sup>60</sup> Hsy, *Trading Tongues*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Windeatt suggests the possibility that the son’s illness may have caused the poor condition of the text, though he speaks of the handwriting as “idiosyncratic” and prefers to view the son and the first scribe as two persons (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 5).

<sup>63</sup> On Audelay’s deathbed composition, see Susanna Fein, “Good Ends in the Audelay Manuscript,” *YES* 33 (2003): 97–119. I am grateful to Rory Critten for this point.

of God & of hir-selfe þat had al þis tretys in felyng & werkyng, is trewly drawyn out of þe copy in-to þis lityl boke.<sup>64</sup>

John could have produced a very rough draft, certainly with gaps—as the later addition of chapters 24 and 25 suggests.<sup>65</sup> If he was sick, would he not have accepted his mother's request to take her dictation precisely *because* he knew that he might not live long? He could write, of course, as his letters document, and Margery certainly had no difficulty reading them or having them read to her.<sup>66</sup> The supposedly poorly formed letters could have been caused by the fact that the son was unwell for much of the month. Yet it seems that the priest is deliberately forgetful about the first scribe: in an attempt to erase John's name and his own, the priest writes his identity and that of Kempe's son out of the book. This is distancing by design, a purposeful removal of named individuals from a little book that was to go its way and prove comforting to sinful wretches.<sup>67</sup> To my mind, the literary trope at work is not the existence of a second clerical, authorizing scribe but the desire, shared with so many vernacular religious works, to universalize Kempe's experience and maximize her readership. A closer look at the priest sheds light on the reasons behind this scribal decision.

### III. Robert Spryngolde and the Brunhams

Sue Ellen Holbrook has formalized the surmise, shared by many readers, that Robert Spryngolde, Margery's priest-confessor, is the second scribe

<sup>64</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 220.

<sup>65</sup>On those chapters, see Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," 405–7; and Diane Watt, "Political Prophecy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in Arnold and Lewis, *A Companion to "The Book of Margery Kempe"*, 145–60 (148–52).

<sup>66</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 224. A merchant in his situation would have been literate, certainly beyond what M. B. Parkes calls "pragmatic literacy" ("The Literacy of the Laity," in *Literacy and Western Civilisation: The Medieval World*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby [London: Aldus, 1973], 555–77). On literacy among merchants in England and the Hanseatic League, see Debbie Cannon, "London Pride: Citizenship and the Fourteenth-Century Customs of the City of London," in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 179–98; and Stuart Jenks, "Werkzeug des spätmittelalterlichen Kaufmanns: Hansen und Engländer im Wandel von Memoria zur Akte (mit einer Edition von *The Nombere of Weygbtys*)," *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung* 52 (1992): 283–319.

<sup>67</sup>The work is introduced as "a schort tretys and a comfortabyll for synful wrecchys"; *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.

or at least the sponsor of the work.<sup>68</sup> A. C. Spearing has even gone as far as to suggest that “our understanding would surely be improved by an experimental envisaging of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as *The Book of Robert Spryngolde about Margery Kempe*.”<sup>69</sup> Spearing makes the crucial point that “events are included at which she was not present but Spryngolde was.”<sup>70</sup> Spryngolde is certainly known to have been alive in November 1436, when the clean copy was begun.<sup>71</sup> He was, in all likelihood, the same “sharp confessor” who provided guidance to Kempe over a span of forty years.<sup>72</sup> An overview of the many terms by which Spryngolde is referred to, gathered by Janette Dillon, gives a good sense of the degree to which his persona has been woven into the fabric of *The Book*: “‘Sharp confessor’ may be one more way of designating the man elsewhere referred to variously as Master Robert Spryngolde, Master Robert, Master R., (unnamed) bachelor of canon law, ghostly father, principal confessor or simply confessor.”<sup>73</sup> Dillon closes her analysis with the estimation that “the book is the product of a more sceptical scribe, whose scanty profile accords with the little we know of her sharp confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde.”<sup>74</sup>

But Spryngolde was even closer to Kempe and her family than has been previously assumed. In a celebrated passage in *The Book*, Margery singles him out in a literary will. Before going on pilgrimage, she decides to name Christ

myn executor of alle þe god werkys þat þow werkyst in me. In praying, in thynkyng, in wepyng, in pylgrimage goyng, in fastyng, er in any good word spekyng, it is fully my wyl þat þow ȝeue Maystyr R. halfyndel to encres of hys meryte as yf he dede hem hys owyn self. And þe oþer heluendel, Lord sprede on þi frendys & þi enmys & mi frendys & mi enmys.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Holbrook, “Margery Kempe and Wynkyn de Worde.” On Spryngolde, see also Watt, “Political Prophecy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 149–51. Goodman is hesitant on this identification; *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 90–91.

<sup>69</sup> A. C. Spearing, “Margery Kempe,” in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 83–97 (93). Watt considers Spearing’s argument to be contentious; *Medieval Women’s Writing*, 128–29.

<sup>70</sup> For compelling examples from chapters 57, 61, and 69, see Spearing, “Margery Kempe,” 92.

<sup>71</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Janette Dillon, “Margery Kempe’s Sharp Confessor/s: 1314,” *LeedsSE* 27 (1996): 131–38 (135).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>75</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 20–21. On this passage, see also Charity Scott Stokes, “Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book,” *Mystics Quarterly* 25 (1999): 9–68 (27).

We could brush this aside as a literary device, a spiritual mock-document embedded in a devotional narrative, but in 1430 Spryngolde was one of the executors of the will of Robert Brunham, who died before August 11, 1424.<sup>76</sup> This previously unnoticed document is a Common Pleas roll, CP40/677, Norwich, 1430 (Fig. 4). Spryngolde, together with two associates of Margery Kempe's father, John Wesynham and John Parmonter, appears as the executor of the will of Robert Brunham of Bishop's Lynn, submitting a plea for debt against John Grigges, a sheerman of Bishop's Lynn (the same roll also contains a previously unknown plea for debt by Margery Kempe's younger brother, John Brunham, Jr., against one William Kyverton of Lynn). In connection with another document, Anthony Goodman states that "the mayor [John Parmonter], John Wesenham, and Robert Springwell, executors of Robert Brunham, declared how Edmund Benet had injuriously arrested the mayor's goods for a debt owed to him by Brunham," but Goodman (or his source, H. Ingleby) must have misread "Spryngolde" as "Springwell," otherwise we would have known about the even deeper ties Spryngolde enjoyed with the Brunhams.<sup>77</sup>

Barry Windeatt and Clarissa Atkinson state that Robert Brunham was Margery Kempe's older brother.<sup>78</sup> While John Brunham's documented son, John Brunham, Jr., failed to make an impression on public

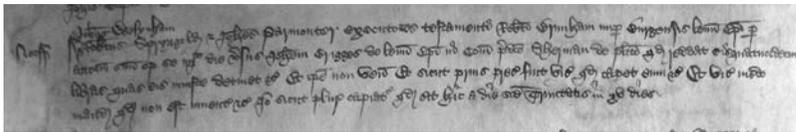


Fig. 4. Common Pleas, CP40/677, Norwich, 1430. John Wesynham, Robert Spryngolde, and John Parmonter, executors of Robert Brunham of Bishop's Lynn, submit a plea for debt against John Grigges, a sheerman of Bishop's Lynn. By kind permission of The National Archives.

<sup>76</sup>For the date of Robert's death, see Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 51. This could be the same Robert Brunham who is said to have had a daughter called Alice and a granddaughter with the name of Margaret (Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 5 vols. [Fersfield: 1739–75], 3:345).

<sup>77</sup>Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 34.

<sup>78</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 57–58, note to line 266; and Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76 and 213. See also L. S. Woodger, "Brunham, Robert, of Bishop's Lynn, Norf.," in Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *The History of Parliament*, available at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421/member/brunham-robert> (Woodger states that Robert may have been her brother or uncle). Goodman believes Robert to have been Margery Kempe's uncle (*Margery Kempe and Her World*, 50–51), but he is generally very cautious and does not necessarily accept as

life in Lynn, Robert Brunham “emulated the career of John Sr. [Margery’s father],” collecting many of the distinctions previously amassed by John, Sr.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, as Robert was older than John, Jr., it would make good sense to picture the former as John, Sr.’s eldest son, not least because he appears to have benefited from family ties by entering into business ventures with associates of John, Sr., such as William Herford (the executors of Robert’s will, Wesynham and Parmonter, were also former associates of John, Sr.).<sup>80</sup> Robert was also a feoffee of Edmund Belleyettere, a former apprentice of John, Sr.<sup>81</sup> The life dates for John, Sr. and Robert point to different generations, whereas the continued business links and the fact that both John, Sr. and Robert were successful entrepreneurs suggest inherited capital and commercial influence.<sup>82</sup> In addition, Robert also inherited the family’s reputation and political influence. He was a leading member of Lynn’s elite during his lifetime, being twice elected mayor before becoming *jurat*—an uncommon sequence; and both he and John, Sr. were aldermen of the Holy Trinity Guild and repeatedly mayors of Lynn: the only family member from whom Robert could have inherited such a reputation and status was the elder John Brunham.<sup>83</sup> That the Brunhams passed on their prestige across generations is not a speculation: even John, Jr. was admitted to the Holy Trinity Guild “by virtue of birth,” and when Margery Kempe was introduced into the Holy Trinity Guild in 1437/8 this was surely not because of her mercantile accomplishments.<sup>84</sup>

At the time at which both Margery Kempe’s son and her husband died, Spryngolde was busy enforcing debts owed to the estate of the man who was in all likelihood her older brother. As I have shown above, civic handwriting produced in Danzig in the 1430s was not at all difficult to read for an Englishman, not to mention a trained canon lawyer with exposure to secular and religious legal documents who also happened to enjoy a regional reputation: in 1424 the monks of Norwich

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proven the identification of the prominent John Brunham, Sr. as Margery’s father in the first place (48), despite this being explicitly stated in the text in Chapter 45 (“I knowe wel j-now þu art Iohn of Burnamys dowtyr of Lynne”; *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 109). It is highly improbable that there was a second prominent John Brunham of Lynn who was old enough to be Margery Kempe’s father.

<sup>79</sup> Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 50.

<sup>80</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 361; Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 38, 51.

<sup>81</sup> Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Alsford for this observation.

<sup>83</sup> I thank Stephen Alsford for this point. For details of the Brunhams’ roles, see Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, Chap. 2.

<sup>84</sup> For John, Jr., see Stokes, “Margery Kempe,” 19; and for Margery, see Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 105.

appointed him as one of their proctors in a legal dispute.<sup>85</sup> Spryngolde was parish priest of Saint Margaret's, Margery Kempe's parish, and the church staffed two detached chapels that were contracted to the Holy Trinity Gild—the same organization of which John, Sr., Robert, John, Jr., and Margery became successive members.<sup>86</sup> Now that we know that Spryngolde was also the executor of Robert's will, it is highly probable that as parish priest he oversaw the chaplains to the Holy Trinity Gild and that he was responsible for liaising with the Gild.<sup>87</sup> In Lynn, as in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, spirituality and merchant money were woven into a tightly knit social fabric. If Spryngolde was not also the executor of the wills of John Kempe, Jr. and Sr., then he must have had regular matter-of-fact dealings with Margery Kempe that included the settling of Robert's estate—we know she had money to buy herself out of her marriage in around 1413, at the time when her father died, so she may have inherited a portion of his estate.<sup>88</sup>

Spryngolde's proximity not just to Kempe but also to the Brunhams draws attention away from her saintly life, instead embedding the protagonist in a specific local history that enhances the visibility of one of Lynn's most prominent families. If Kempe's book was to extend its reach beyond Norfolk, her written life had to be her own. Her actions are certainly situated in the microcosm of Lynn, but *The Book* never shares more than it needs to about Kempe's social context. What is revealed is almost always functional, so much so that the book only contains snippets of information about the Kempes and the Brunhams: her father's impressive local standing and his name are separated from one another in the text, the important Robert Brunham is not mentioned, we never learn the names of Margery Kempe's fourteen children, and the protagonist herself is consistently referred to as "creatur" by the narrator.<sup>89</sup> This tendency to distance and, hence, universalize the work has been articulated by Felicity Riddy, even though her own reading of *The Book* argues vehemently against a historicizing approach:

<sup>85</sup> Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 84.

<sup>86</sup> Dillon, "Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s," 131; and Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 89. On the Holy Trinity Gild, see Owen, *The Making of King's Lynn*, 61.

<sup>87</sup> Some of the higher-level administration may have been shared with the prior of Lynn under whose jurisdiction Saint Margaret's fell.

<sup>88</sup> Barry Windeatt suggests that Kempe may have used (a part of) her inheritance for this purpose; *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, 89, note to line 780. John, Sr. died before October 16, 1413; Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, 50.

<sup>89</sup> When John Brunham's mayoral elections or his function as alderman are mentioned, his name is not (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 9 and 111). His name only appears once (*ibid.*, 109), not in connection with his status.

She is addressed as “Margery” by other characters within the text, but not until chapter 17 do we learn, almost by chance, it seems, that “worschepful burgeys” to whom she is married is called “John” . . . ; not until chapter 45 do we learn from a remark attributed to the bishop of Worcester that she is “John of Burnamys dowtyr of Lynne” . . . ; and not till very near the end of the second book do we discover that her married name is “Kempe.”<sup>90</sup>

Riddy attributes all of these instances and measures to the “indirect narrative strategies” of *The Book* in an anachronistic reading that foists the conventions of the postmedieval genre of autobiography on a multi-vocal, unsubdued text.<sup>91</sup> In her formalist argument—at odds with three decades of criticism that negotiated texts with their contexts—Riddy posits that, in the case of *The Book*, the narrative reality of current autobiographical conventions is the only reality we should care about. Riddy’s Barthesian objection to the intentional fallacy leads her to sever any ties between a historical and a narrative Margery Kempe, so much so that the historical situation surrounding the text is reduced to a set of unproveable hypotheses: “we have ‘Mar. Kempe of Lynne’ in the text, but no evidence at all for an author of this name outside it.”<sup>92</sup> And what evidence there is for a contemporaneous person of this name in Lynn, such as the admission of a Margery Kempe to the Holy Trinity Guild, Riddy dismisses as insufficient proof for this individual to be the real-world alter ego of Margery’s literary persona.<sup>93</sup> But by corroborating specific information given in *The Book* about the son and his visit, the Gdańsk letter changes the relationship between text and context because it links the historical reality surrounding the work to the narrative reality governing it. Furthermore, the closer ties enjoyed by the *historical* alter ego of Margery Kempe’s *textual* confessor Robert Sprynsolde with the *historical* Brunhams permit a more nuanced relationship

<sup>90</sup> Felicity Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” in Olson and Kerby-Fulton, *Voices in Dialogue*, 435–53 (441).

<sup>91</sup> While Riddy characterizes Watson’s approach to autobiography—by collapsing author with protagonist—as “old-fashioned,” Watson considers Riddy’s reading as marked by “presentism”; Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 436; and Nicholas Watson and Felicity Riddy, “Afterwords,” in Olson and Kerby-Fulton, *Voices in Dialogue*, 454–57 (456). Although Watson and Riddy’s joint “Afterwords” to their essays in *Voices in Dialogue* appear to establish the terms for their widely different readings, the fundamental variance appears to lie in the clash between Watson’s historicist and Riddy’s formalist approach.

<sup>92</sup> Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” 436.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 448–49 n. 4.

between author and persona. Unless we wish to claim that a second Robert Spryngolde was a priest in Lynn shadowing the ecclesiastical functions of his literary *Doppelgänger*, then we have further evidence for the historicity of *The Book*.

The anonymizing tendency is therefore not a function of the narrative strategies of the autobiographical genre—of which *The Book* can be considered a premodern vernacular English prototype at best—but must serve a different purpose. The case of a spiritually gifted woman's life might have been overshadowed by the fact it was first written by her son and edited by the Brunhams' priest and notary. Scribal anonymity surely helped to distance the Brunham dynasty from the subject of this book and foreground not only Kempe's independence but also the universality of her experience. The same distancing, after all, stands behind the term "creatur," which, as Riddy grants, "seems to have been a slightly formal or distancing word."<sup>94</sup> But this distancing need not be a narrative device or Shklovsky's *остранение* (defamiliarization); rather, it articulates the text's attempted (though never fully completed) work of universalization. After all, the distancing does not only apply to Margery, her father, the scribes, and the scribal process, but also to Lynn itself. For the same reason the text initially conceals the name of the town of Lynn as "N" (*nomen*) in a pattern familiar from the *N-Town Plays*, where "N"—as a placeholder for the town currently hosting the performances—suggests touring and geographical mobility.<sup>95</sup> The same mobility, though not of performance but of experience, is sought by *The Book*: the attempt to distance Margery Kempe, the Brunhams, John Kempe, Robert Spryngolde, and Lynn focuses attention on Kempe as a spiritual "N," whose life is expressed in the universalizing vernacular idiom common to many religious works written in English.<sup>96</sup> As with

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>95</sup> Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 279. See also John Thomas Sebastian, "Lewd Imaginings: Pedagogy, Piety, and Performance in Late Medieval East Anglia," Ph.D. diss. (Cornell University, 2004), 109.

<sup>96</sup> For the associations of vernacularity with writing in English, see Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *JMEMSt* 27 (1997): 145–88; and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 325. I show that these associations endured into the sixteenth century, where they characterize the work of John Rastell (*Unwritten Verities: The Making of England's Vernacular Legal Culture* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015], 11–12 and 128–52).

the text's other attempts to distance the narrative from its specific historical context, "Lynn" replaces "N" as late as Chapter 16. In other words, not only is "N" an instance of the same distancing and concealing of identities as "creatur" and the other examples given above, but it follows the same chronological pattern. The fact that other characters refer to Margery by her first name is not an exception to this pattern but its confirmation: "Margery" was a common name that, unaccompanied by a localized surname, could contribute to the geographical mobility of *The Book*.

#### IV. The Authorship of *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Perhaps the greatest challenge for modern critical responses to *The Book* lies precisely in the unfinished nature of this project of distancing and universalizing Margery Kempe's experience. It is conceivable that the distancing features were provided by John Kempe during his stint, as an expression of Margery Kempe's wish to conceal herself. But it is also possible that Spryngolde tried to anonymize certain aspects of the text without having been able to complete the task. Finally, a later scribe—perhaps Salthows—may have tried to anonymize the text, never following through. It strikes me as improbable that either John Kempe or his mother were familiar, for instance, with the literary and ecclesiastical conventions of "creatur" and the use of "N." Spryngolde, on the other hand, was a parish priest trained in canon law: the practice of inserting "N," or *nomen*, for a name was found in the templates for baptismal services, wedding banns, and marriage vows, all of which belonged to the regular rituals performed by parish priests.<sup>97</sup> And the name of the *N-Town Plays* stems "from the fact that the writer of the banns declares that the play will begin at six of the bell 'in N. town.'" <sup>98</sup> "N," therefore, belongs to the liturgical and administrative register of English parish priests such as Spryngolde.

As for the pattern of the inconsistency of applying the distancing layer to places and characters: since "Lynn" is first mentioned in Chapter 16, Margery's husband is first named "John" in Chapter 17, her father's surname is first given in Chapter 45, and her own surname only

<sup>97</sup> For an example of "N" in a marriage context, see Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 215.

<sup>98</sup> Craig, *English Religious Drama in the Middle Ages*, 279.

appears toward the end of the work, it is possible that Spryngolde may not have been able to complete the narrative. His extant life records do not extend beyond 1436, when the clean copy of *The Book* was first begun, and the comparatively brief second book, begun in 1438, is different in character and length, leaving also a gap between the dateable events in the two books covering much of the period between 1421 and 1431. Furthermore, there is no attempt to conceal names or places, other than that Margery is referred to as "creatur." A further highly relevant inconsistency is noted, in passing, by John Erskine: "the second scribe says of Book One that his intention was to have 'wrytyn it betyr' [4/20], yet he then begins the second book, by stating that he 'copijd' [221/4] the first."<sup>99</sup> Whereas the first instance suggests an attempt to improve the spelling and language, the second states that the text was merely copied. It is not inconceivable, therefore, that the second book was written not by Spryngolde but by another local scribe, perhaps even Salthows, who assumed the priest's authorizing voice. The fact that the only surviving manuscript is written in the same hand throughout suggests that this scribe, Salthows, inherited these distancing features. Unlike the proem and colophon to Book 1 and the opening of Book 2, the colophon to the second book does not have the priest pray for divine grace. Instead, *The Book* ends rather surprisingly with a long, unpolished trademark prayer used by Margery on various occasions. This ending might suggest that Kempe enjoyed greater control over the narrative during the dictation process for Book 2, another reason to suggest the writer might not have been Spryngolde but someone else. Finally, the last folio of the Salthows manuscript, fol. 123r, has "Jhesu mercy quod Salthows" just below the ruled area, leaving some seven-to-eight lines' respectful distance between the scribal signature and the end of the text. If Salthows took Kempe's dictation for Book 2, this might explain why he thought it appropriate to include his name in the manuscript.<sup>100</sup>

The entanglement of the original text produced by Margery Kempe and her son John on the one hand and Spryngolde on the other finds an echo, some 500 years later, in the enmeshing of Sanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen in their 1940 EETS edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*: here, the work of an independent female editor, sitting on scraps

<sup>99</sup> John A. Erskine, "Margery Kempe and Her Models: The Role of the Authorial Voice," *Mystics Quarterly* 15 (1989): 75–85 (81).

<sup>100</sup> On a possible Norfolk or Lynn background for Salthows, see my above comparison of his hand with those of Danzig scribes.

of notes, competes with that of an established male editor with the “right” institutional credentials; apparently, what was required to satisfy the (male) standards of the academy in twentieth-century England and America was not that different from the (male) standards of parish priests, abbots, and bishops in fifteenth-century England. Separated by more than half a millennium, two highly educated men, vetted and trained by the institutions whose approval the book sought, entered into competition with the raw work of two women who found themselves in unorthodox roles, both of whom were outside these institutions—Kempe and Allen. Many of the difficulties of answering the question of authorship are restated in the challenge of definitively establishing the editorship of the 1940 EETS volume.<sup>101</sup>

So whose book is it, Kempe’s or Spryngolde’s? Perhaps the debate about the book’s authorship only serves to illustrate that the work was not written with our modern sensitivities in mind. I suggest that we transcend the limitations of such terms as “author,” “scribe,” or “secretary” by embracing the collaborative model of authorship commonly practiced in comparable situations, where a medieval religious woman is forced to rely on the written mediation of a man.<sup>102</sup> It seems to me that the experiential, local aspects of *The Book* are Kempe’s, reflecting the microcosm in which she was embedded, whereas the distancing strategy has been attempted by Spryngolde to open the work up to a wider regional audience.<sup>103</sup> Our wish to see the authority of the female

<sup>101</sup> On Hope Emily Allen and Sanford Meech, see Frederic G. Cassidy, “Hope Emily Allen—A Personal Reminiscence,” *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 11 (1989): 149–51; Deanne Williams, “Hope Emily Allen Speaks with the Dead,” *LeedsSE* 35 (2004): 137–60; David Wallace, *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory 1347–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61–132; Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 105–28; and the work of John C. Hirsh: *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1988); “Hope Emily Allen and the Limitations of Academic Discourse,” *Mystics Quarterly* 18 (1992): 94–102; “Hope Emily Allen, the Second Volume of the *Book of Margery Kempe*, and an Adversary,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 31 (2001): 11–17; and “Hope Emily Allen (1883–1960): An Independent Scholar,” in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 227–38.

<sup>102</sup> See Laurie Finke, *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1999), 73; Watt, *Medieval Women’s Writing*, 2; and Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, eds., *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1100–1500* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

<sup>103</sup> Rory Critten reads *The Book* in the same mould as Thomas Hoccleve’s *Series*, seeing both works as attempts to regain control of their authors’ reputations; Rory Critten,

voice restored should not silence the authentic participation of the male writer: after all, the porousness of premodern textual production encourages us to study all contributors to the development of a text, no matter how marginal, hostile, or eccentric their position may be. But this does not mean that the collaborative arrangement is democratic. Modern authors also collaborate with their copy-editors in a process that cleans up and polishes a raw product. And even when a copy-editor makes stylistic changes, alters sentences, or even decides to rewrite or excise an entire passage, the proprietorship of the work is never shared between the two collaborators. In the case of *The Book*, the terms against which Spryngolde's labors must be judged are the mandate given to him by Kempe, who was initially looking for a "wryter þat wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr" and "zæue credens to hir felingys."<sup>104</sup> And this mandate is actually not very different from the expectations of many modern authors, who wish for their works to have their impact and reach maximized. Kempe required a writer who could lend credibility to her story, and although such a brief may not permit Spryngolde to be considered a ghost writer or even to share the role of *auctor* or *compilour* with her, this particular collaboration turns him into an interventionist copy-editor of Margery Kempe's *Book*: Kempe dictates her localized and historicized experience to an intimate audience; Spryngolde's attempted yet never completed distancing opens up this experience for readers far beyond Lynn.<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that the voices can be neatly separated from one another in the work. Instead, I believe that *The Book*'s two narrative tendencies, the historicizing and the distancing, can be ascribed respectively to Kempe and to Spryngolde. But it is *The Book* itself that ascribes authorship to Margery Kempe in an often overlooked passage. The very brief colophon to Book 1 turns her lived memory and experience into an unwritten *Book of Margery Kempe*, anterior to the dictation process: "thorw þe help of God & of hir-selfe þat *had* al þis tretys in felyng & werkyng."<sup>106</sup> Margery Kempe *had* the book in her before anyone wrote it down.

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"The Uses of Self-Publication in Late Medieval England," Ph.D. diss. (University of Groningen, 2013), 89–104.

<sup>104</sup>*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 3–4.

<sup>105</sup>The possible third voice, the amanuensis behind Book 2 (perhaps Salthows), does not significantly interfere with the historicity of the narrative and therefore with Kempe's dictation.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 220 (my emphasis).

## Appendix

*Gdańsk, Archiwum Państwowe, APG 300, 27/3, fol. 12r, transcribed and translated by Lena Wahlgren-Smith*

Ita scriptum est ad vniuersos ex parte Johannis Kempen qui fideiussit pro Roberto primart de Boszteyn.

Nos proconsules et consules Ciuitatis Danczik vniuersis et singulis presencium noticiam percepturis earundem tenorem significamus Quod<sup>107</sup> coram nobis consolatui presidentibus discreti ac circumspetti viri Iudex et scabini nostre Ciuitatis antedictae baniti Iudicii relationibus suis fidedignis profitendo vocetenus asseruerunt Quatenus coram eis In sede iudiciaria residentibus Prouidus Iohannes Kempe nostre Ciuitatis Incola Iuris<sup>108</sup> compulsus quindecim marcas prusiensium leuiores monetas Johanni Schroder Iuuenili Ciuitatis Danczik concivi occasione fideiussionis quem Iohannes Kempe prefatus Iohanni Schroder predicto ex parte Roberti primart de Boszteyn fecerat plenarie persoluit atque persoluebat velut haec coram nobis exposita sunt et relata ita et nos ea anterieus singulorum quorum interest ac quibus expedire poterit audiencie significamus testantes Infirmamus Quare vniuersitatibus omnibus ad quos presens scriptum peruenerit studiose supplicamus presentibus<sup>109</sup> trium mensium quatenus manum admitterem<sup>110</sup> sepedicto Johanni Kempen dignentur citissime erogare ut prenomatus robertus aut amicitie aut Iuris remedio inducatur hanc petitionem pro se expositam prememorato Iohanni Kempen refundere indilate Actum xxxi anno die xii mensis Iunii celeriter<sup>111</sup>

{Thus it is written to all on the behalf of John Kempe who {has made a pledge} on behalf of Robert Prinart of Boston.

We senators and aldermen of the city of Danzig to all those who will receive notice of the present letter indicate the tenor of it: We affirm testifying that before us, as we presided over our council, the discreet and circumspett men the judge and scabins of our aforesaid city in their trustworthy account of sworn

<sup>107</sup> "Testantes Infirmamus" is taken to be the predicate verb of "Quod."

<sup>108</sup> The abbreviation suggests "Iuris" but "compulsus" with a genitive is rare. It may be that it should be expanded as "Iure."

<sup>109</sup> Since the abbreviation sign is clearly above the "p," this has to be either "pnbus" (*presentibus*) or "pcibus" (*precibus*).

<sup>110</sup> The sudden first-person singular here is surprising but the ending confirms this form.

<sup>111</sup> The fourth letter could be an *a* rather than an *i*, yielding the reading "celeratur" or possibly "celanter" without affecting the sense.

judgment<sup>112</sup> assured us viva voce, that the prudent John Kempe inhabitant of our city summoned by law has fully paid and paid out 15 marks of ready Prussian coin to Johannes Schroder, of the *Jungstadt*, fellow burgess of the city of Danzig on the occasion of a security that the aforementioned John Kempe had made to the aforesaid Johannes Schroder on behalf of Robert Primart of Boston before them<sup>113</sup> as they resided in the judicial court, just as these have been set out and related before us and (as) we indicate above to the hearing of those whom it concerns and to whom it can be of use. Wherefore we earnestly pray in this letter all those communities whom the present writing reaches, that they may deign to speedily pay out to the oft-mentioned John Kempe within three months of my putting my hand to this, in such a way that the before-named Robert through the means either of friendship or of justice may be induced to reimburse without delay this claim spent/set out on his behalf to the aforementioned John Kempe. Carried out in the 31st year<sup>114</sup> on the 12th day of the month of June. Expedited.]

<sup>112</sup>It is assumed that "baniti" (sworn, summoned) corresponds to "iudicii," though it could also be taken to accompany "iudex et scabini." Furthermore, "baniti iudicii" is taken to be a genitive attribute to "relationibus."

<sup>113</sup>The "judge and scabins" above.

<sup>114</sup>1431.