

Changing images of medieval women saints from St. Æthelthryth to Margery Kempe of Lynn

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On 18th December 2015, the media reported that Pope Francis recognized a second miracle attributed to Mother Teresa and it cleared the way for her to be a saint.¹⁾ And according to the Vatican Radio, Pope Francis will sign the decree for her canonization on March 15.²⁾ On March 15, *USA Today* reported that Mother Teresa will become a saint on Sept. 4.³⁾ Even before her death, she is a 'living saint' to millions of people for her unconditional love for the poor, the diseased, and the dying people. Mother Teresa is a *de facto* saint, however, it is essential to follow a procedure such as investigating her life, her writings and behavior by church authorities and being proved posthumously miracles. Woodward pointed out that "only Roman Catholic Church has a formal, continuous, and highly rationalized process for making saints." He compares canonization to the Nobel Prize, because why and how candidates are chosen is not clear, however, after making the decision, their names are memorized as great people.⁴⁾

The beginning of canonization by Pope is 993, and church did not have a formal process of making saints before 1234. The norm for canonization have been modified since, and recently in 1983, Pope John Paul II made extensive changes in the canonization procedure.⁵⁾ However, from early church era, there are many saints and

1) Pope Francis recognises second Mother Teresa's 'miracle', BBC News, 18 Dec. 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35129463>, accessed Jan. 10 2016; V. Cotovio & B. Brumfield, Mother teresa to become a saint after Pope Francis recognizes 2nd miracle, Dec. 18 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/18/europe/pope-francis-mother-teresa-second-miracle/>, accessed Jan. 10 2016.

2) Mother Teresa's canonization date expected on March 15, Vatican Radio, March 7 2016, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/03/07/mother_teresa%E2%80%99s_canonization_date_expected_on_march_15_%E2%80%8E/1213712, accessed March 20 2016.

3) Pope Francis: Mother Teresa to become a saint on Sept. 4, *USA Today*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/03/14/mother-teresa-canonization-vatican/81779554/>, accessed March 20 2016.

4) Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints*, NY, 1996, p.16.

5) Congregation for the Causes of Saints, The Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/

the role of saints in Christian society is one of the subject of historians' controversy. The lives of Saints constituted one of the dominant literary genre in Europe from Late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Age, and they are important source materials on the history and culture of the medieval society. Especially the lives of women saints get much attention in the field of history of women or gender history, because the number of historical documents written by women or written about women are limited. Most of lives are written in Latin first, and for monastic or clerical audiences. Then, they are translated to vernacular versions and have some impact on lay people's religious culture.

It is clear that women saints' lives are important source materials, but these lives do not always show us what we expect to find. Actually, medieval hagiography is not a biography in modern meaning. These lives are written to glorified the memory saints, and authors and/or scribes often added new episode inspired by other saint's legend when they made new manuscripts. In addition, woman saints' lives are written by male clergy, and it is difficult to find to what extent woman saints' voice are reflected in their lives. Ridyard pointed out that hagiography was often written to educate, to edify people, and hagiography shows idealistic Christian's virtue which people should follow. Thus, Hagiographer highlighted the good point of saint's life, and omitted bad point or put inconvenient truth under wraps. Also following standard form and contents made saints' lives be similar each other. Hagiographers described how saints lived, how they died, and what kind posthumous miracles were observed, and how their relics translated to other sites. To use hagiography as historical sources, establishment of date and understanding who wrote and what purpose is essentials. Hagiography reflects the social circumstances, especially the cult was belonged to local community.⁶⁾

In this paper, I shall examine the life of St Æthelthryth and *the Book of Margery Kempe*(hereafter *the Book of MK*). St. Æthelthryth and Margery Kempe are both famous woman of medieval England, and they are contrasting women. Then, I shall compare the Life of St. Æthelthryth and *the Book of MK* to show the changing image of woman saint from Anglo-Saxon Age to the late Medieval Age.

csaints/index.htm, accessed March 20, 2016.

⁶⁾ Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge, 1988, pp.8-16.

1. The lives of women saints: St. Æthelthryth

St. Æthelthryth(also St. Etheldreda, St. Audrey) is one of the most important woman saint in Anglo-Saxon England. She was a daughter of Anna, king of East Anglia, queen of Northumbria, a foundress and an abbess of Ely. She was married to Tonberht, an ealdorman of South Gyrwas. On his death c. 655, she once retired to the isle of Ely which she got as her dowry, but in 660, she was again married to Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria by political reason. She remained a virgin throughout both of these marriages, and when her second husband asked her to consummate a marriage, she decided to leave her husband and became to a nun at Coldingham under the rule of her aunt Æbbe. In 673, she founded a monasterium for men and women at Ely, and she remained there as abbess until her death. She lived with acute pain in neck tumor her later years and she regarded it as a divine punishment for her vanity in wearing necklace in her youth. She died c. 679, and she was translated on Oct. 17, 695, 17 years after her death. According to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (hereafter *HE*), her body was found to be incorrupt. Æthelthryth was succeeded in the office of abbess by her sister Seaxburh who oversaw her translation.⁷⁾ Also *Liber Eliensis* (hereafter *LE*) describes this translation and miraculous thing of her undecayed body in detail.⁸⁾

The earliest known hagiography of Æthelthryth was shown in Bede's *HE*, written in the 8th century. There is no other surviving contemporary source. In the 10th century, Aelfric included her life in his *Lives of Saints* in Old English but he turned to Bede's description of Athelthryth.⁹⁾ In the 10th century, Æthelthryth's feast day appears in calendars, and in the 11th century, Æthelthryth's feast of translation begins to appears in calendars.¹⁰⁾ In the early 12th century, Gregory of Ely composed a prose Life and a verse Life including her life, translation and posthumous miracles, and they are both incomplete. *LE* is a 12th century chronicle and history written at Ely in Latin. *LE*

7) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford, 1991(revised edition); Bede, *Ecclesiastical history of the English People*, translated by Leo Sherley-Price, revised by R. E. Latham, London, 1968, IV 19.

8) *Liber Eliensis*, edited by E. O. Blake, London, 1962; *Liber Eliensis, A History of the Isle of Ely*, translated by Janet Fairweather, Woodbridge, 2005, Book I 25-30.

9) *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, The Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely*, ed. and trans. Rosalind C. Love, Oxford, 2004, p.lix.

10) Virginia Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, p.6.

covers the period from 673, the foundation of the double monasterium by Æthelthryth to the mid of 12th century. There are two complete manuscripts survived. In chapters 1-21 of Book I, her life is described in detail, and in chapters 25-32 of Book I, her translation and posthumous miracles are described. And from chapter 35-38 show Athelthryth's successors, Seaxburh, Eormenhild and Waerburh. Chapter 39-42 shows the Danes attack and end of the monastery. Source for chapters 43-49, Book I of *LE* describing posthumous miracles is ascribed to Ælfhelm's *Exortatio sacerdotis*.¹¹⁾

Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, a Benedictine hagiographer, came to England in early 1060s, and wrote many lives of English Saints including a life of St. Æthelthryth and lives of her successors. These saints are mainly connected with with Canterbury. Goscelin visited Ely under the abbacy of Simeon. His name was in *LE* as stated below.

“There was something further happened, and one must marvel greatly at this latter miracle. To explain: the abbot and brothers most earnestly wished that the outcome of matter be set down in writing, as a guaranteed record of a chastisement, for the attention of posterity. Among them, at that time, there was a certain monk called Goscelin, a most eloquent man: all around England he brought about a transformation of the lives, miracles and deeds of the saints, male and female, by setting them forth in history and in liturgical sequences.”¹²⁾

Love pointed out that this description of Goscelin may be from Williams of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum* in which he explained that Goscelin had produced innumerable lives of saints. Goscelin rewrote old neglected lives in more attractive way, and “he was second only to Bede in his efforts on behalf of the saints of England.”¹³⁾ Goscelin's reputation as a hagiographer has been established, and his works contributed to make local saints or to set ignored or forgotten local saints in a fresh light.

Athelthryth's Ely was destroyed in the Danish invasion of c.870, but the church of St. Æthelthryth has not been abandoned except immediate aftermath of the Danish attack. Bequests to St. Æthelthryth were made from the mid-10th century¹⁴⁾, and there

¹¹⁾ *Liber Eliensis*, 2005, op. cit., p.77.

¹²⁾ *Liber Eliensis*, 2005, p. cit., Book II, chapter 133, p.257.

¹³⁾ *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*, op. cit., p.xx.

¹⁴⁾ Mechthild Gretsch, *Ælfric and the Cult of Saints in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge, 2005, p.199.

was a community of canons and canonesses at Ely. In 970, under the monastic reform movement led by Archbishop Dunstan and Archbishop Æthelwold, King Edgar refounded Ely as a Benedictine monastery, and church abbey and domestic buildings were restored. But this monastery was only for men, and canons who refused to be monks were cleared out from the new monastery. For King Edgar and for his adviser Bishop Æthelwold, refoundation of Ely may be an important step to recreate the 'monastic empire', and promotion of Æthelthryth's cult may be a part of Bishop's strategy.¹⁵⁾ After the Norman Conquest, fen folk led by Hereward raised rebellion against William the Conqueror and Ely became a focus of Anglo-Saxon resistance, but they surrendered to the king in c.1071. King William installed Simeon who was a relative of the king as Abbot, and Simeon started to rebuild the church on the grand scale. In 1107, Æthelthryth's sarcophagus was moved into the new Norman church. This third translation of Æthelthryth is significant for the development of Ely's Hagiography. In 1109, the county of Cambridgeshire was separated from Lincoln Diocese to form a new diocese of Ely. The abbey became a cathedral and the abbot became the bishop of Ely. In 1252, cathedral was dedicated to St. Peter, Mary, and St. Æthelthryth on Sept. 17 in the presence of King Henry III. The change of circumstance of Ely, such as Old double monasterium founded and led by royal woman saint to re-established monastery under Benedictine rule, and to become cathedral church, to become the seat of Norman Bishop, needed to reproduce the life of St. Æthelthryth.¹⁶⁾

St. Æthelthryth's images in her lives has been shifted with a change in society. Bede highlighted in his *HE* her suffering neck tumor and undecayed body. When her translation, her wound of neck made by surgeon healed and only scar was left on her neck. When Æthelwold refounded Ely and promoted her cult 300 years later, her retirement from queen to a nun, her choice to monastic life under rule and her keeping virginity were highlighted. After the Norman Conquest, her cult became to be a symbol of protection of properties of Ely, and violation of the rights of Ely regarded as an attempted rape of her body, i.e. the community. The scene of her escape from her husband, King of Northumbria, was depicted on the cathedral fabric. And also she was described as powerful woman who seek revenge against enemy of Ely community.

¹⁵⁾ Ibid., pp.198-203.

¹⁶⁾ *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*, op. cit., p.xxiii.

In the 12th century, her image was changed to appeal for aristocratic women, and her support for monastery as an married aristocratic woman was emphasized.¹⁷⁾

2. The lives of women saints: Pseud saint, Margery Kempe

I have already introduced *the Book of Margery Kempe* in the Seventh Korean-Japanese Symposium on Medieval History of Europe in 2010 under title of ‘Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia’.¹⁸⁾ Margery Kempe is a troublesome woman both for her contemporary people and for modern readers. *The Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter *The Book of MK*) has been disputable subject of study since the discovery of the only surviving manuscript in 1934. In *The Book of MK* translated to modern English, Windeatt introduces her as stated below:

“Margery Kempe, born c.1373 of well-to-do middle-class parentage in King’s Lynn in Norfolk, was married at twenty, had a vision of Christ in her madness following her first childbirth, and after early failures as a businesswoman, saw visions and felt herself called to a spiritual life. At about the age of forty, when she had borne fourteen children, she persuaded her husband to join he in a mutual vow of chastity, and embarked on the eventful life of pilgrimage in England, Europe and the Holy Land, visiting both great and humble religious figures of her day, ceaselessly seeking the counsel of mystics and recluses.” Windeatt also describe *the Book of MK* in his introduction that *the Book of MK* is the earliest surviving autobiographical writing in English.¹⁹⁾

Question I indicated in 2010 was what kind of writing *The Book of MK* is. This book can be categorized into various genres such as an autobiography of a medieval merchant wife²⁰⁾, a hagiography of a vowess²¹⁾, or devotional prose by a woman mystic²²⁾.

¹⁷⁾ Blanton, op. cit.

¹⁸⁾ Sono Morishita, ‘Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia - Not isolated, but marginalized’, *Journal of Western Medieval History*(『西洋中世史研究』, Ewha Womans University, Korea), No. 26, Sept. 2010, pp.25-49.

¹⁹⁾ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, translated by B. A. Windeatt, Penguin Books, 1994.

²⁰⁾ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, Early English Text Society, Original Series 212, London, 1940, Introduction, pp.xxxiii-xxxiv. :S. Dickman, ‘Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman’ in M. Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical*

If *the Book of MK* was a really autobiography written by a medieval wealthy merchant's wife, it would be a precious and valuable source for study on medieval woman's life. Unfortunately, *the Book of MK* is a problematic source and even if it is really written by a medieval woman called Margery Kempe, I could not regard *The Book* as an autobiography in a modern sense.

The manuscript of *the Book of MK* written in single hand was probably written c. 1450, and was discovered in 1934 from the library of Colonel Butler-Bowdon in Lancashire. Until then it had been known only from seven pages of extracts published by Wynkyn de Worde c.1501, and when Henry Pepwell came to reprint it in 1521, he described Margery as a devout anchoress. Worde's extracts show Margery as a woman mystic like Julian of Norwich, therefore, the discovery of *the Book of MK* which revealed Margery as troublesome, arrogant, and active lay woman had a great impact among scholars.

The Book of MK attract heavy doses of both praise and censure. From point of Theological studies, whether Margery is a member of 14th century English mystics or not has provoked a great deal of controversy. Compared with Julian of Norwich, one of the 14th century mystics and famous anchoress, Margery evaluated herself much higher without hesitation. She declared that she was a saint woman chosen by the God, and in her vision, she saw herself as a spouse of God the Father. Religious woman and woman mystic in the middle ages often regarded herself as a spiritual spouse of Jesus, but a spouse of God the Father is against the teaching of the church. However, considering the social and religious climate in the late medieval England, some

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- Tradition in England, Exeter Symposium III, Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1984*, Cambridge, 1984, pp.150-168: M. Gallyon, *Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England*, Norwich, 1995, p.4.
- 21) Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p.47: Julia Bolton Holloway, 'Bride, Margery, Julian and Alice: Bridget of Sweden's textual community in medieval England', in: *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire, New York, 1992, p.209: Gunnel Cleve, 'Margery Kempe: A Scandinavian influence in medieval England?', in: *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, Cambridge, 1992, p.171.
- 22) M. Thornton, *Margery Kempe, an Example in the English Pastoral Tradition*, London, 1960, pp.12-15: T. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York, 1967: K. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Philadelphia, 1991: S. Beckwith, 'A very maternal mysticism: the medieval mysticism of Margery Kempe' in Jane Chance (ed.), *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, Gainesville, 1996, pp.195-215

scholars said she can be a member of 14th century mystics.

Also I pointed out in 2010, there is no clear evidence that Margery Kempe in *The Book of MK* is the same person whose name was recorded in the documents of medieval Lynn. Even if Margery on the contemporary historical documents is an actual model for Margery of *The Book of MK*, it is difficult to prove that she really behaved like Margery and she really dictated *the Book of MK* to her scribe. So there is no clear evidence that *The Book* is written (or spoken) by a substantial merchant wife of medieval Lynn.

Beside the problem of theology and her identity, *the Book of MK* has a difficult question to be solved. The question is who wrote the Book of MK, Margery Kempe, her first scribe, or her second scribe? When we read books, we know the author and we know what kind of books they are. At least, we believe it. But the structure of *The Book* looks much complicated. Between the text of *The Book of MK* and readers, at least three people are involved: the first scribe who wrote down the words of Margery, the second scribe who edited and revised *The Book of MK*, and Margery herself. In addition, she consistently refers herself by using the third person as “this creature”. In proem of *the Book of MK*, Margery said before she wrote this book, some of clerics offered to write for her, but she waited for many years and then finally she started to write. It was written by first scribe who was an Englishman and afterwards married in Germany. He came to England with his family and write what she said until he died. Then a priest took over the scribe, but he struggled for four years to read what the first scribe wrote because it was ill-written. The first scribe was not good at writing in English nor German. The second scribe, a priest, gave up reading once, but when he challenged later, it was much easier to read. From chapter I, Margery used “this creature” instead of I.²³⁾ The author-subject-scribe issue is one of the most disputable topics of *The Book of MK*.²⁴⁾ There are two amanuenses in *The Book*, and ‘who wrote what’ is not clear. The most part of *The Book of MK* seems to be told by Margery and the scribe seems to write down her words.

²³⁾ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Windeatt, op. cit., Book I, Proem, pp.33-37.

²⁴⁾ J. Hirsh, ‘Author and Scribe in The Book of Margery Kempe’, *Medium Aevum* 44, 1975, p.150; J. A. Erskine, ‘Margery Kempe and her models: The role of the authorial voices’, *Mystics Quarterly*, 15-2, 1989, pp.80-81; R. Voaden, *God’s Words, Women’s Voices: the Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries*, New York, 1999, pp.112-113.

Staley pointed out that “it is less important to ascertain whether Kempe was actually illiterate and therefore dictated her book to a scribe than to seek to understand what function the scribe serves in her book.” Since medieval woman’s hagiography was written by priest, Margery needs to set scribe in her book to show her as a woman saint. Staley’s opinion is unique and she insisted that Margery use the trope of scribe to show her book has orthodoxy. Lives of woman saints had been under control of male clergy, and voice of female saints had been changed, or maybe was not left in her hagiography. Staley concluded that scribe is an essential factor of *the Book of MK* which guarantees readers that they are reading a story of orthodox saint.²⁵⁾ Erskine’s opinion is more radical. He insisted that author of *the Book of MK* used a narrative structure, and did not follow the way of writing of hagiography. *The Book of MK*’s basic model is a life of saint, but hagiography should be written in the third person and it is impossible to write an autobiography of a saint. Margery’s direct voice in her book makes the *Book of MK* unstable, and Erskine said this unstableness makes *the Book of MK* more interesting novel. Margery is not a self-claimed saint, but a novelist.²⁶⁾

Beckwith also pointed out that arguing she is really saint, mystic, pilgrim, Lollard, Catholic is pointless. Mystical autobiography is a problematic genre, and she “seeks to look at the relations of text/history/subjectivity” in *the Book of MK*. Mystic text such as *The Revelation of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich consists of two voices, the voice of God and the voice of mystic. Orthodox mystic’s vision is written as dialogues between the God and the mystic. “The mystic must be a transmitter, and not a representor of the word. Her voice must not mix with, fuse with, talk with his.”²⁷⁾

In the age of Margery, the monopoly of learning by the clergy was broken up, and lay women sought “vita apostolica” and wanted to follow life of “imitatio christi”, rushed to newly founded monastic order such as the Gilbertine Order in England and Abbey of Fontevault founded by Robert of Arbrissel in France. Both orders accepted laywomen including married, and some women selected life as Beguine on the continent of Europe. Margery Kempe was a lay woman, a wife, a mother of 14 children, and a vowess. and she was eager for communication with the God. She often described as “Pseudo-Saint”.

²⁵⁾ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, Philadelphia, 1994, pp.31-38.

²⁶⁾ J. A. Erskine, op. cit., pp.80-81.

²⁷⁾ Sarah Beckwith, ‘Problems of authority in late medieval English mysticism’, *Exemplaria*, 4-1, 1992, pp.171-199.

3. Conclusion

Images of St Æthelthryth described by monks and clergy has been changed, and various images such as miraculous scar on her neck and incorrupt body, retired queen to be a nun, married but kept virgin, the protector of the community, and noble woman supporter of religious institutes. Her image is quite different from the image of Margery, whose voice was mixed up with the God, whose behavior looks suspicious Lollard, and whose identity is not clear. St. Æthelthryth is a true, undisputed saint, and on the contrary, Margery is not a saint, or she may be a Pseudo-Saint. But Margery is attractive subject to study, and when you start searching books of Margery and St. Æthelthryth, you may find that the number of books related to Margery is bigger than that of St. Æthelthryth. On May 15, The Guardian reported that Margery Kempe's autobiography does not lie. Unfortunately, it does not prove the existence of Margery Kempe, because it reported that a short letter written in Latin on 1431 for John Kempe, who identified a son of Margery, was found.²⁸⁾ How many John Kempe was in the 14th century England? This letter cannot be an evidence for Margery's son's existence, but I was surprised that the name of Margery Kempe is so well known among non-academic people.

Images of St. Æthelthryth and Margery look different, but both images show similar problem and both images give us clue to understand the social and religious circumstance of women in those days. *The Book of MK* may be an autobiography of medieval lay woman or may be a fiction like the Canterbury Tales. It doesn't matter. *The Book of MK* was copied c. mid 15th century, and it reflects the religious climate in those days. The lives of St. Æthelthryth shows a standard, well controlled images of woman saint, and *the Book of MK* shows breaking up monopoly of literacy and losing control of saint's image over the lay people by the church. The Book of MK might be regarded as a proto-type hagiography.

²⁸⁾ Archive find shows medieval mystic Margery Kempe's autobiography 'doesn't lie', The Guardian, May 8 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/08/archive-find-shows-medieval-mystic-margery-kempes-autobiography-doesnt-lie>, accessed May 30 2015.