Fractured Indignation in "The Book of Margery Kempe"

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Presentation Description:

Late medieval Business-woman-turned-mystic, Margery Kempe is generally disliked and disdained. However, informed by her gender and mercantile history, she maintains a place in society by using the very tools that the community attempts to expel her by.

Abstract:

The Book of Margery Kempe is a medieval autobiography dictated by the Christian mystic, Margery Kempe. My analysis will use new historicism in thinking about the Book in Margery's social and legal contexts. The scholarship on female speech in the Late Medieval period indicates how the traits of negative female speech and legally deceitful speech are often interchangeable, something that we see in the book. Past scholarship has analyzed the issue of Margery's gendered speech, or the mercantile culture in the Book as isolated subjects. My research considers Margery's historical context and connects the two disparate points of gendered speech and mercantile exchange as they intersect. I argue that their intersection is essential to understanding how Margery Kempe's book both diffuses and defuses the criticism directed against her. In the Book, those who speak in opposition to Margery must form a unity, like the unity required for binding oral contracts, in order to legitimize their attempts to remove her from the community. Within the same legal context, Margery's work shows how such accusatory labels Margery suffers further undermine a unified negative depiction of the mystic. Margery also aligns feminized speech categories such as gossip and scolding with her critics. She strips them of their ability to accrue a communal consensus and collectively expel her, leaving an authoritative gap that Margery herself fills with her own unified speech.