

The Book of Margery Kempe (extract)

The book is a spiritual autobiography written by medieval laywoman Margery Kempe (1373-1438) where she narrates her pilgrim journeys to some holy sites in Europe and Asia. The book is considered to be the first autobiography in English. The fragment narrates the birth of her first child and first vision.

When this creature was twenty year of age and somedeal more, she was married to a worshipful burgess and was with child within short time, as kind would. And after that she had conceived she was labored with great accesses till the child was born, and then, what for labor she had in childing and for sickness going before, she despaired of her life, weening she might not live. And then she sent for her spiritual father, for she had a thing in conscience which she had never showed before that time in all her life. For she was ever letted by her enemy, the Devil, evermore saying to her while she was in good heal her needed no confession but [to] do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enow. And therefore this creature oftentimes did great penance in fasting bread and water and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, save she would not show it in confession. And when she was any time sick or diseased, the Devil said in her mind that she should be damned for she was not shriven of that default. Wherefore after that her child was born she, not trusting her life, sent for her spiritual father, as said before, in full will to be shriven of all her lifetime as near as she could. And, when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and gan sharply to undernim her ere that she had fully said her intent, and so she would no more say for nought he might do.

And anon for dread she had of damnation on that one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderly vexed and labored with spirits half year eight weeks and odd days. And in this time she saw, as her thought, devils open their mouths all inflamed with burning lows of fire as they should 'a swallowed her in, sometime ramping at her, sometime threatening her, sometime pulling her and hauling her both night and day [...]. And also the devils cried upon her with great threatenings and bade her she should forsake her Christendom, her faith, and deny her God, his Mother, and all the saints in Heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, her own self; she spoke many a reprevous word and many a shrewd word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; like as the spirits tempted her to say and to do so she said and did. She would 'a fordone herself many a time at their steering and 'a been damned with them in Hell, and into witness thereof she bit her own hand so violently that it was seen all her life after. [...].

And when she had long been labored in this and many other temptations that men weened she should never a scaped or lived, then on a time as she lay alone and her keepers were from her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesu, ever to be trusted (worshipped be his name) never forsaking his servant in time of need, appeared to his creature, which had forsaken him, in likeness of a man, most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bed's side, looking upon her with so blessed a cheer that

she was strengthened in all her spirits, said to her these words: «Daughter, why hast thou forsaken me, and I forsook never thee?» And anon as he had said these words she saw verily how the air opened bright as any levin, and he sty up into the air, not right hastily and quickly, but fair and easily that she might well behold him in the air till it was closed again. And anon the creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as well as ever she was before, and prayed her husband as soon as he came to her that she might have the keys of the buttery to take her meat and drink as she had done before.