

WEST NORFOLK AND KING'S LYNN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
In partnership with
True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum, Marriott's Warehouse Trust, the King's Lynn Minister

Presents an illustrated public lecture

**Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know?
Margery Kempe's boisterous mysticism and
medicine: uncovered**

By
Dr. Laura Kalas Williams
Department of English
The University of Exeter

King's Lynn Minister (St Margaret's Church), 4:30pm, Friday, 28th July 2017



Could this be Margery Kempe? Woodcarving from St. Margaret's Church, King's Lynn.

The King's Lynn Minister
Ticket Price: £5:00
A King's Lynn Festival Fringe Event

Booking Tickets

Tickets may be booked by telephoning True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum,
on Tel. 01553 770479, or by E-mail. info@truesyard.co.uk

West Norfolk and King's Lynn Archaeological Society www-page:
<http://wnklas.greghawk.org.uk/main.php>

Celebrating Fifty Years of The West Norfolk and King's Lynn Archaeological Society

Abstract

Margery Kempe (1373-c.1438) is perhaps one of the most famous residents of Lynn. Born into a prosperous, merchant family, her early life was dominated by pride and material wealth, and then by the birth of her fourteen children. She later experienced intense visions, engaging in a late-medieval style of devotion called affective piety, which encouraged emotional responses to meditations on Christ's birth and death and Mary's joys and sorrows. She is well-known for her loud, boisterously intrusive crying, weeping, collapsing and roaring: a state in which she became immersed during her visions in church or visits to holy places. As a result, Kempe divided religious clerics and lay onlookers: some thought her privileged and gifted, others considered her mad, or ill, or heretical. In fact, since the rediscovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in 1934, modern critics have continued this trend, with some 'diagnosing' Margery as hysterical, epileptic, or psychotic.

Dr. Kalas Williams' research has focused on the now widely-understood connection between religion and medicine in the Middle Ages. Based on the biblical notion of Christ the Physician, the health of the body was inextricably linked to the health of the soul in medieval culture. This talk therefore aims to reveal some of the ways in which Margery Kempe's spirituality can be understood in medical as well as theological terms. How did medieval understandings of the female body influence Kempe's devotion? Did Kempe have a physiological predisposition to mystical experience? In what ways might we regard her as melancholic? What medical knowledge is revealed in the *Book*?

Drawing on passages from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, including a previously undecipherable, medicinal 'recipe' that was added to the end of the manuscript, and extracts and images from medieval medical manuscripts, this talk will reveal how an understanding of medieval medicine is crucial for uncovering Margery's true mystical experience.



Biography

Dr. Laura Kalas Williams is a postdoctoral researcher and associate tutor at the University of Exeter. Her PhD was about Margery Kempe's spiritual experience, pain, and journey through the life cycle from a medieval medical perspective. She has published on Margery Kempe in *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, and her articles about medieval women recently appeared in *The Conversation*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. She is working on a book about Margery Kempe called *Desiring Dis-ease: Margery Kempe's Pain and Medicine*, is co-editing a volume of essays entitled *Gender and Emotion in Medieval Culture* and has a chapter on medieval Christian women and medicine in the forthcoming multi-volume Routledge series, *A History of Christian Women through the Ages*. As well as researching medieval holy women and medicine, Laura teaches English part-time in a Devon secondary school.