Margery and "the Juice": Teaching The Book of Margery Kempe Using O. J. Simpson's If I Did It

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For the more than dozen years I have taught literature courses in a variety of institutions of higher learning—a community college, a small liberal arts college, and two large public universities—I have found medieval literature to be, as a rule, a hard sell. Admittedly, there are exceptions to this rule. However, most students find their ways into my medieval literature courses only under the duress of having to fulfill a graduation requirement and believe that the Middle Ages is oddly religious, full of boring plot lines and old-fashioned ideas, and too historically distant and different for them to understand. I consider changing students’ minds about medieval literature, helping them discover and explore what is interesting and even exciting about it, to be very important work: If students develop an appreciation for the literature of the Middle Ages, even discover a few favorite medieval texts, they are at least less likely to perpetuate the lamentable stereotype of the “Dark Ages,” and if they are training to be teachers, they may well include medieval texts in their own curricula and find ways to get their own students interested in and excited about them.

One strategy I use to make medieval literature appealing to students is the contemporary cultural reference: When we study saints’ lives, I ask students to find commonalities in depictions of such female superheroes as Catwoman and Lara Croft, and then explain how the lives of virgin-martyrs are similarly stylized and the heroines themselves similarly sexualized. To explain the Rude Mechanicals in the York Crucifixion Play, I compare them to the ever-popular Three Stooges. When we study the prologues to The Canterbury Tales and Piers Plowman, I invite students to consider how the different styles of social commentary provided by Chaucer and Langland might parallel those employed by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Popular culture is not always the best place to turn for pedagogical assistance, and analogies likening contemporary

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culture to medieval culture does run the risk of being reductive. It is a risk I am almost always willing to take because it is an important first step that holds the great promise of allowing students to see past preconceptions about medieval texts and find something in them that they recognize and with which they can even possibly identify—something that makes them want to learn more.

I hope that what I have said so far will act as ballast for the contemporary cultural reference that is my focus here: 1970s American football icon O. J. Simpson’s book If I Did It, which I ask students to compare to The Book of Margery Kempe. On the surface, this seems an odd parallel to draw: Kempe’s Book, which depicts Margery’s singular devotional practices and powerful engagement with male authority, is the first autobiography written in English and an important example of early English writing by women, a work of great literary and historical importance. By contrast, O. J.’s “fictionalization” of the murder of his ex-wife and her friend, an obvious product of celebrity culture, is of far more negligible and transitory importance. Also, as cultural references go, the murders that Simpson’s book recounts are not so “contemporary”—they occurred in 1994, when the students studying medieval literature with me this past school year were not yet in kindergarten. A final complication is that the most felicitous contemporary cultural references hold the promise of allowing students near-instant recognition of the parallel I hope to draw, and that is not the case with Margery and O. J. You have to know the details of O. J.’s book and then really think about how they relate to Kempe’s Book, in order to see the instructive similarities between them. Though problems these surely are, they have, in my experience, been far outweighed by the useful fruits that a comparison of Margery and O. J. yields.

Published in 2006, If I Did It tells Simpson’s “fictional account” of the 1994 murders of Simpson’s ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman. O. J. was acquitted of these murders in a criminal trial in 1995 (though convicted of them in a civil trial in 1997 and ordered to pay a hefty amount to the families of the victims). With the assistance of ghost writer Pablo Fenjves, Simpson tells a “hypothetical” story—how it would have happened if he had committed the murders. In his preface to the book, Fenjves explains that when they began work on the chapter focusing on the murders, Simpson insisted on having an accomplice in the text, so he and Fenjves invented a character whom they agreed to call “Charlie.” Charlie enters the narrative for only the chapter telling the story of the murders, but his presence is crucial: he both instigates the murders and plays a role in their execution. Indeed, Simpson refused to narrate the murders without the intervention of Charlie; according to Fenjves, Simpson explained, “if the time comes that I have to defend myself, I can say, ‘Hey, look, it can’t be me because that couldn’t have happened. . . I don’t know any Charlie.’” By all accounts Charlie has no real-life counterpart; he seems to be an invention of and for the narrative that Simpson uses for his own benefit.

I recognized in Charlie a useful and interesting way to explain an aspect of The Book of Margery Kempe that I had previously struggled to convince my students was worthy of note. Kempe’s Book is fraught with episodes demonstrating Margery’s anxiety over the lack of validation she experiences as a woman attempting to pursue an unconventional active life of piety. Jesus plays a key role throughout The Book of Margery Kempe but especially when he enters the narrative to validate Margery’s piety at crucial moments. Scholars who study Kempe’s Book have, of course, discussed this aspect of Jesus as Kempe depicts him. However, this scholarship can be difficult to translate to the undergraduate classroom for a couple key reasons. First, students tend to balk at interpreting Jesus as a literary character, because many of them are used to thinking of him as divine. In addition, many students rather quickly dismiss Margery Kempe as crazy, a conclusion that effectively shuts down analysis of the Book rather than encouraging it. This is where Charlie becomes useful. Simpson and Kempe share a similar narrative crux: Their stories require the intervention of a character whose presence makes the stories easier, even less dangerous, to tell; in this regard, Charlie is to Simpson as Jesus is to Margery. Though it does not explain the many complex ways the figure of Jesus operates in Kempe’s Book, this parallel can allow students to see that, whatever religious significance Jesus carries, in the text he is a character in need of interpretation. It can also compel students to leave behind less fruitful speculations regarding the sanity of the author and focus instead on the narrative strategies enacted in the text. This parallel, in short, provides an opportunity for students to begin to understand Kempe’s narrative as not simply religious and not simply delusional.

In what follows, I will outline my lesson on The Book of Margery Kempe using O. J. Simpson’s If I Did It, providing quotations and paraphrases from my class discussion and group
worksheets for this lesson to give a sense of how it proceeds. Though a more lengthy and elaborate lesson plan is surely possible, mine requires only one 75-minute class session. In my experience, full class discussion alone or in combination with directed small group work is an effective format for this lesson. While I have a larger set of excerpts from Kempe’s Book that I regularly teach, eight typically short chapters that demonstrate Kempe’s remarkable use of Jesus in the text work best with my O.J. lesson: chapters 5, 11, 21, 22, 28, 35, 36, and 52. From If I Did It, I assign one twenty-page chapter, titled “The Night in Question,” which relates the story of the murders. Before my students read the chapter, I explain to them the invented nature of Charlie and that O.J. refused to tell the story of the murders without him, though this explanation can also be taken care of by assigning a brief extract from the prologue of the book, in which Charlie is explained.

While it seems likely that most readers of this article have at least a passing knowledge of The Book of Margery Kempe, If I Did It is probably less familiar, which makes a brief summary of the relevant chapter useful. Charlie, who is introduced in the narrative as a casual friend of O.J.’s, comes to O.J.’s house to report rumors that he had heard about Nicole—that she had been doing drugs and behaving licentiously. O.J., who still has feelings for Nicole and also is concerned for his children, who live with her, is in a fury over this news. He forces Charlie to accompany him to Nicole’s house to “scare” her.5 When they arrive, O.J. produces a knife from under the driver’s seat, but Charlie takes it away from him. O.J. goes alone to talk to Nicole but, instead, encounters Ron Goldman in the backyard. Nicole comes out of the house, and there is a heated exchange. Charlie comes to the backyard carrying the knife, and O.J. grabs it from him and turns to confront Goldman, though Charlie attempts to restrain him. The murder itself is not described, but the account of its immediate aftermath is, a remarkable example of evasive narration. O.J. explains:

Then something went terribly wrong, and I know what happened, but I can’t tell you exactly how. . . . The whole front of me was covered in blood, but it didn’t compute. Is this really blood? I wondered. . . . I looked down and saw [Nicole] on the ground in front of me, curled up in a fetal position at the base of the stairs, not moving. Goldman was only a few feet away, slumped against the bars of the fence. He wasn’t moving either.

Both he and Nicole were lying in giant pools of blood. I had never seen so much blood in my life.6

Compelled by O.J., Charlie drives away from the scene of the crime with him and agrees to dispose of O.J.’s bloody clothes. This is the gist of the part of the narrative from If I Did It that my students and I analyze and compare to The Book of Margery Kempe.

I begin my lesson by telling students to set aside Margery for a moment and focus on that chapter from If I Did It. “What is this chapter trying to do?” I ask. “What point is it trying to make for its audience?” Some representative student responses are as follows: “O.J. is attempting to explain how he would have done it,” and also why. “It’s trying to spread some of the blame” society put on O.J. and “show [a cause for the murders].” “O.J. attempts to create sympathy in his audience” with the story he tells. “He’s trying to justify the crime.” Next, I ask students, “How does the character Charlie help with the work the chapter is trying to do? In what places does he serve as an accomplice?” Again, some representative responses: “Without Charlie the crime could not have happened—Charlie tells O.J.,” the information that leads him to the scene of the crime and gets him angry enough to execute the crime. Or, as another student put it, Charlie “deliver[s] the information that lights the Juice’s fuse.” Recognizing the importance of Charlie’s news about Nicole’s bad behavior, students identify Charlie as providing what passes in O.J.’s book as verbal encouragement for, even perhaps justification of, the crime. But Charlie does more than just talk; to quote another student response: “He brings the knife, he is in the [getaway] car, he disposes of [O.J.’s bloody] clothes. He is, in O.J.’s story, integral to the crime.” Charlie becomes involved in the action of the crime; he is not just the behind-the-scenes instigator. He is a third party playing a part in the action. When we get this far into analyzing O.J.’s narrative, I remind students that he refused to tell the story of the murders without Charlie, and I ask them to consider the more general questions, “What role does Charlie play, not so much in the crime but in the narrative of the crime? How does his presence affect the story?” Again, some student responses: “Charlie is always . . . used conveniently to O.J.’s advantage.” “The use of Charlie splits the blame for the murders, even though Charlie is a hypothetical character.” Charlie is someone for O.J. to point to in the story instead of taking all the blame himself.
When we have gotten this far with O. J., we turn to Margery, and I present the idea that *The Book of Margery Kempe* bears a similarity to *If I Did It*. At this point in the lesson, few of my students see Kempe’s *Book* as anything more than (again, to quote and paraphrase from student comments) an “entertaining biography” or a story meant to inspire audiences, and my suggesting the comparison to O. J. opens the door to less quaint and tedious perspectives on Kempe’s text. I remind them of some of the purposes they identified for O. J.’s book, emphasizing the idea that it attempts to justify the murders of which it tells the story. Margery Kempe, I explain, had something to justify too: She felt called to lead an active life of piety in society and very publicly, a vocation unique in an era when religious females were cloistered and other lay women like Margery practiced their faith in private devotions. Margery is repeatedly called upon to defend her unique spiritual life to church representatives, family, and even strangers. We who specialize in the Middle Ages are, ironically, so used to Margery’s unconventionality that we often miss the fact that she actually can look “typically medieval” to students who have little experience with the Middle Ages and come into class thinking of the era as “oddly religious.” Because students likely will recognize Margery as nothing if not “oddly religious,” it is important to help them understand that her vocation was odd, even in her own time and place. Often, I ask students to identify the pious practices that seem like they are controversial or troublesome to those around Margery in the text. Students immediately point to her weeping, which disturbs virtually everyone who witnesses it; typically they point to passages in Chapter 28, in which Margery’s weeping is described as “so lowde and so wonderful that it made the pepyl astoynd,” and we learn the popular speculations of its cause: “summe seyd it was a wirkyd spiryt vexed hir; sum seyd it was a sekenes; sum seyd she had dronkynd to mech wyn. . . .” Students observe that her practice of “preaching” or talking about God gets her in trouble with church authorities—particularly with the Archbishop of York, who orders her not to “techeyn ne chalengyn the pepil in dyociye.” They also notice Margery’s husband is not happy with her desires to remain celibate and to go on pilgrimages, something revealed during an argument they have in which he makes what might be the largest understatement recorded in Middle English, telling Margery, “Ye ar no good wyfe.” Once students begin to see that many of Margery’s devotional habits were unconventional in her own era, they are willing to consider Kempe’s *Book* as more than just an “entertaining biography”—as a complicated text bound up in the struggles that Margery’s unique vocation created.

At this point in the lesson, I begin advancing the idea that Jesus’s voice in the text is strategically useful to Margery. I ask students: If *The Book of Margery Kempe* is trying to justify Margery’s piety, how does Jesus help? I emphasize that this is virtually the same question I asked about the role of Charlie in *If I Did It*, and I encourage them to think about Jesus as a character—and, like Charlie, as a character who acts as an accomplice. Without doubt, the more noble pursuits of Margery and Jesus as he helps her along her path of piety contrast sharply with the murderous partnership of O. J. and Charlie, but the pedagogical point is to explore how these characters operate in texts as characters, not to cast moral judgments. The clear parallel between these two pairs makes it easy for students to see that Jesus does act as a textual accomplice for Margery in passages they can identify. Here are some representative samples from students’ group work notes on the question above, including the quotations from Kempe’s *Book*, which they chose to illustrate their responses:

Jesus is an accomplice in that he helps her justify her doubts about herself. . . . For example Margery is bitter because she is no longer a virgin and Jesus is there to assure her: “I lofe wyfes also, and speek thi wyfys which woldyn levyn chaste, yf thi myghtyn have her wyf, and don her besynes to presyn me as thow dost.” In this passage Jesus not only erases Margery’s doubts about how being a wife affects her status, but also justifies her desire to live chaste.

Jesus validates Margery’s weeping by saying it really bothers the devil: “thu turmentyst hym mor wyth thi wepyng than doth al the fyer in helle.”

He just offers general encouragement. For example, he says, “yf i wer er in erde as bodily as i was er I deyd on the croos, i schuld not ben aschamyd of the as many other men ben, for i schuld take the be the hand amongs the pepil and make the gret cher that thei schuldyn wel knowyn that I lovyd the ryth wel.”
These are all instances in which Jesus supports Margery's piety by talking—like Charlie, he offers verbal encouragement and justification. One group of my students this past semester was quick to point out that, since "Charlie manifests himself in physical form," he can act in the story—carry the knife, dispose of the evidence, and so on. Jesus is a powerful advocate for Margery, but he exists in what my students called a "mystical" way in the text, rather than a physical one. So does he—he can he—ever participate in the action? A passage that another group of students had identified as a moment when Jesus acts as accomplice seemed to answer this question. They pointed to the incident in which Margery's husband tries to strike a deal with her: if she agrees to stop fasting on Fridays, he will allow her to live chastely. Margery refuses to give up fasting, saying "to breke the Fryday I wyl neyvr grawnt yow whyl I leve." Had specifically directed her to keep the Friday fast, making it an impossible bargaining point for Margery. However, she really wishes to live chaste, so she prays for guidance. Jesus solves this problem "quite conveniently," as my students put it, by telling Margery: "this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for the schuldyst the sonar opetyn and getyn thi desyr, and now it is grawntyd the. I wyl no lenger thow fast..." Though not physically present, Jesus does participate in the action of this scene, my students argued, when he "instructs Margery in the bargain" she makes with her husband.

When students have taken to the idea of recognizing Jesus as an accomplice to Margery, I remind them of these questions I asked about If I Did It: "What role does Charlie play, not so much in the crime, but in the narrative of the crime? How does his presence affect the story?" Then I ask the similar question: "What role does Jesus play, not so much in Margery's piety, but in the story of her piety told in Kempe's Book?" My students have noticed that, with very little substituting, the answers they provided to the question about Charlie and O. J. work also for Jesus and Margery: "Charlie is always... used conveniently to O. J.'s advantage" easily converts to the accurate statement "Jesus is always used conveniently to Margery's advantage," and "Charlie is someone for O. J. to point to in the story instead of taking all the blame himself" can be changed to the equally arguable "Jesus is someone for Margery to point to in the story instead of taking all the responsibility for her piety herself." Class discussion that leads to this kind of concluding statement is, to me, a victory: Though making the parallel between O. J. and Charlie and Margery and Jesus takes some doing, it has allowed me a way to demonstrate to students that The Book of Margery Kempe is not simply religious or simply delusional—not simply anything at all. Without question, Charlie is nowhere close to being as culturally charged a character as Jesus is, but it is precisely the culturally charged aspect of Jesus's character that I hope to overcome in this lesson so that, whatever personal beliefs they might hold about Jesus, my students see that in Kempe's Book, he exists as a character, and a very useful one—or more accurately, a masterful narrative strategy. Recognizing this, they have a way to begin to appreciate some of the complexity of the text.

Strange though this may sound, the O. J.-Charlie/Margery-Jesus parallel is one of several that If I Did It and The Book of Margery Kempe share. Though I have not attempted to use any of these parallels in my own classroom, I offer this list of them because they may offer remedies for complications that others have encountered teaching Kempe's Book:

Both narratives unfold under the shadow of serious accusations—heresy for Margery and murder for O. J.

Both texts read as autobiographies but are arguably not, taking liberties with the truth when it was advantageous to do so.

Both were written with professional assistance—Kempe's Book by a series of scribes and If I Did It with a ghost writer.

Both Kempe and Simpson had great trouble producing their narratives: As described in the prelude, the process of writing Kempe's Book involved three different scribes who present such roadblocks as being able to write only in a nearly unreadable combination of English and German, being afraid to be seen with Margery, and temporarily going blind. If I Did It is similarly hampered by circumstances too complex to recount with any specificity here but involving a sham corporation, Barbara Walters, a last-minute cancellation of publication, and the Goldman family buying rights to the book.
As strong an advocate as I am for using contemporary cultural references in the classroom, I want to stop short of suggesting that, on the strength of these other parallels, If I Did It should be taught in its entirety alongside The Book of Margery Kempe. However, these similarities are interesting, and I do not doubt that, like the parallel I discussed at length here, they hold the promise of offering students a way in to some of the most sophisticated aspects of The Book of Margery Kempe—its construction of narrative voice, the social context for the complications of its production, and its methods of conveying authority, to name just a few. Using a contemporary cultural reference to approach these aspects of Kempe’s Book, while not without risk, affords students an opportunity to realize some of the ways in which the medieval is modern and—even better—the modern, medieval.

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Notes


3 My students are unfortunately not alone in their opinion that Margery Kempe was crazy: a minority of literary scholars has also made this claim, which is roundly dismissed as unenlightened. Gail McMurray Gibson and Lynn Staley, in particular, have eloquently explored and argued against scholarship that insists on the mental illness of Margery Kempe and makes it central to their interpretation of Kempe’s Book. See Gibson, The Theater of Devotion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47–50, and Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 1–5.

4 Thanks to my winter 2010 Medieval Popular Piety class for their diligent small group work and wonderful class discussion of Margery and O. J. This article would be less lively and insightful without their input.

5 Simpson, 125.

6 Simpson, 131–32.

7 Lynn Staley, ed., The Book of Margery Kempe (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 76.

8 Staley, 126.

9 Staley, 37.

10 Staley, 59.

11 Staley, 61.

12 Staley, 126.

13 Staley, 38.

14 Staley, 38.