PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION
NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 06 | Issue 01 Fall 2025

On Frustration: Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the Classroom

Hannah Lucas
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0664-2859
Cambridge University, U.K.

Lucas. 2025. On Frustration: Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the Classroom. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 6.1: 53–65.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

On Frustration: Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the Classroom

Hannah Lucas
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0664-2859
Cambridge University, U.K.

Abstract

This article thinks about the role of frustration in pedagogical encounters with texts. Taking as my case study the frequently frustrating (and frustrated) *Book of Margery Kempe*, I ask: Why might this text elicit negative responses from first-time readers? What is so frustrating about Margery Kempe? And to what extent should we—as teachers, students, and scholars—attempt to repair our frustrated feelings about the text? Answering these questions involves some investigation into the much-discussed tension between reading symptomatically or sympathetically, and how we can learn (and teach) a permissibly affective response within the parameters of the discipline. I propose that, in fact, moments of frustration can act as "teaching moments" both for the student and the educator, because they remind us of the ways that the medieval text might elude or vex us, and of the expectations we place upon ourselves, as scholars, to respond in certain ways and with or without certain expressions of feeling. The paper concludes by arguing for the importance of learning to tolerate frustration, and with a redefinition of the reparative as a forward-looking, preparative mode.

Frustration, writes psychoanalyst and critic Adam Phillips, is the night-side of satisfaction: "Without frustration there can be no satisfaction" (2012, 14). This is a Freudian idea: that the capacity for satisfaction depends upon the capacity for tolerating *not* being satisfied, a process more commonly known as "frustration tolerance" (Harrington 2007). In this article, I am interested in the moments when a reader finds themselves frustrated by the medieval text, and how these moments figure into the process of learning scholarly reading practice. The classroom is where we begin to learn how to negotiate the boundaries of affective response in our scholarship. It is where we learn to be thoughtful, self-reflexive readers who can recognise and self-correct inappropriate responses to a text, and carve out new furrows of inquiry in turn. Frustration is a common—and, I suggest, necessary—byproduct of this process. As a feeling deeply connected to desire (and the thwarting of that desire), the experience of frustration is perhaps self-evidently implicated in the acquisition of knowledge: to learn something new, one must desire to know the thing, and that learning is not always easy or straightforward. The classroom then becomes a setting where that desire is encouraged and mediated, and where, when we fail, the feelings related to that failure can be confronted and managed. This article attempts to map some of these moves and counter-moves of the pedagogical encounter, to consider the significance of frustration in the training of the scholarly reader. Taking as my case study the frequently frustrating (and frustrated) *Book of Margery Kempe*, I ask: Why might this text elicit negative responses from first-time readers? What is so frustrating about Margery Kempe? And to what extent should we—as teachers, students, and scholars—attempt to repair our frustrated feelings about the text? Answering these questions involves some investigation into the much-discussed tension between reading symptomatically or sympathetically, and how we can learn and teach a permissibly affective response within the parameters of the discipline. I propose that, in fact, moments of frustration can act as "teaching moments" both for the student and the educator, because they remind us of the ways the medieval text might elude or vex us, and of the expectations we place upon ourselves, as scholars, to respond in certain ways and with or without certain expressions of feeling.

Frustration and Desire in Reading

When a reader encounters a text in frustration, this implies a difficulty in meeting its form and content—that the satisfaction of understanding has not been attained, an expectation unmet or eluded. For students of medieval literature, this difficulty may arise from the strangeness of the historical text: though one of the pleasures of teaching and reading premodern literature is the revelation of its oft-surprising relatability, there are many points of potentially alienating otherness, too. It may be hard to understand, for instance, why Gawain's decision to wear the girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is so starkly at odds with what it means to be a true knight, or why anyone would be willing to commit themselves to an anchorite's cell for the whole of their lives—not to mention the difficulty of grappling with hard theological ideas, complex political timelines, and new languages. In these encounters, incomprehensibility may lead to frustration because the reader wants to understand the motivations of these characters or figures, or the social logics that govern the text, but these peculiar forces do not yet make sense to them. To begin to understand such texts entails the development of an historical literacy, a kind of fluency with the cultural languages of the medieval world (as well as a practical literacy with the written languages of medieval literature), and developing this fluency takes time.

How this frustration plays out in the classroom depends on a host of factors, including, but not limited to, the student's preexisting patterns around frustration tolerance and the teacher's ability to negotiate the student's frustrations (and possibly their own in turn). A brief examination of this interpersonal exchange will shed light on the potentially productive parts of frustration in the pedagogical encounter, and set the stage for my subsequent discussion of my case study, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In accounts of early literacy learning, for example, the educator adopts a substantial role in mediating between reader and text. Scholar of educational studies, Gail Boldt, provides a particularly interesting example of frustration at this early stage of the readerly career, as her young son, Nick, is learning to read. Boldt's study opens with a description of Nick's hatred for reading, and his "growing anxiety and shame" (2006, 272) in all areas of his school experience as he realises he is falling behind. These emotions ripple outwards, directed largely toward Nick's tutor, Nita, who he perceives to be the instigator of his humiliation. Ultimately, though, Boldt witnesses Nita's willingness to validate Nick's frustration, which allows him to change; Nita acknowledges that he is having a hard time, remaining a patient and reassuring presence, and Nick responds positively in turn. Boldt also draws on psychoanalysis in her interpretation of this relationship, invoking D. W. Winnicott's concept of the *holding environment* (Winnicott 1953), where the caregiver (in this case, the teacher) is able to "hold the affective expressions of the student," and to "receive the child's range of emotional expression, including the child's anger and negativity, without becoming defensive" (Boldt 2006, 295–96). In providing such a holding environment, Nita acts as the foil for Nick's frustration, an "other" onto which he can externalise his frustrations. Nick's annoyance is not born out of Nita's actions directly: while his frustration may be projected onto her, the feeling can be located within himself—that *he* doesn't understand. This example then shows how the teacher (and arguably, the text) can act as a mirror to the self, revealing that what may appear to be an inter-subjective problem between two agents (the frustrator and the frustrated; teacher/text and student) may in fact be an intra-psychic problem about the student's relationship with themselves. The role of the educator, in this context, is to lead the student up against their own bad feelings, holding this negative affect so that they can move through their discomfort.

Of course, as many teachers know, it is not always easy to remain as patient and reassuring as Nita; in two studies (Sutton 2004; 2007) surveying teachers' emotional self-regulation, two-thirds of respondents talked about frustration when reporting their classroom emotions. This frustration might arise as a symptom (and cause) of burnout (Carson 2007), associated with an institutional lack of support, costs associated with teaching, or other such practical challenges (Morris & King 2018). Or, frustration may be caused by student misbehaviour, noncompliance, or boredom (Pekrun et al. 2010). It is also clear that student frustration often precipitates teacher frustration; a correlation called "teacher-student frustration" in a recent study (Park & Ramirez 2022), which has suggested that managing student frustration is as important for teachers' emotional regulation. Moreover, it has been shown that both student and teacher frustration affect student attainment, with higher frustration tolerance correlating positively with academic achievement (Meindl et al. 2019; Shi et al. 2021). With all this in mind, I am interested in the ways that frustration about a text might be understood within the context of literary studies, especially as it relates to debates about literary "methods," and further, how certain forms of frustration can be met and managed by the educator, such that they might become productive points of learning in themselves. I am interested in the potentially positive sides

to frustration: to again quote Adam Phillips, "frustration is optimistic in the sense that it believes that what is wanted is available, so we might talk about frustration as a form of faith" (2012, 8). Which is also to say, learning to tolerate frustration is also learning to maintain belief in the face of failure; to keep trying, again and again until something clicks. Because tolerating frustration requires a capacity to believe we can have what we want, not only through moments where that belief is affirmed, but in moments where it falters. In this sense, frustration and hopeful desire are the constants which undergird all learning projects; the energies that motivate us to imagine different futures, and to project ourselves toward their realisation.

Is This Meant To Be Funny?

The Book of Margery Kempe (c. 1430s) precipitates frustration on a few levels, both within the text—the figure of Margery is herself continuously and repeatedly frustrated in her desires—and in terms of the frustration the text might generate in its reader. This is not necessarily a new claim: Margery's noisy crying fits, unusual sartorial choices, and unsolicited pious advice have invited many decades of highly affective readings (see Bremner 1992), from early diagnoses of the Englishwoman as neurotic or hysterical (Allen 1940; Knowles 1961; Ober 1985) to more recent reflections about why she makes for such an embarrassing (Park 2020), even annoying subject (Oliver 2011). Very few, though, have identified these dynamics as connected to frustration.[1] The form of the text, too, frustrates readerly expectations, with its narrative disorder paralleling the very unruliness that characterises the actions of the "creature" Margery within. I want to consider how we respond to these various frustrations as students and scholars, because I propose it is by attending to such "surface" responses that we can begin to hone the readerly instincts necessary for scholarly work. Kempe's *Book* serves as a particularly helpful exemplar for this task: it has by now established a firm foothold in syllabi and in criticism, a popularity I see as having emerged not despite, but in part because of its frustrating qualities. There has, furthermore, been a noticeable scholarly turn in recent years toward more self-reflexive responses to the *Book*. This turn is demonstrative of an increased willingness to acknowledge the personal in the professional, combined with the colliding energies of affect theory and debates around so-called postcritique. Such energies find special purchase with the *Book*, which I suggest can act as a mirror (even, dare I say, a model) for its reader and the enaction of our own desires, as we respond to the playing out of Margery Kempe's desires in and through the text.

I call Kempe frustrating, because the many reactions to her text documented by critics—whether embarrassment, annoyance, or Clarissa Atkinson's "ick factor" (2015)—all register in some way a subversion or evasion of readerly expectation and comfort. In this, the *Book* conforms to Robert Cawdrey's definition of "frustrate" in the first English dictionary, *A Table Alphabeticall* (1604), as "make voyde, deceive" (quoted in Phillips 2012, 14). Whether or not we think Kempe is deliberately deceiving

[1] Those that do often focus on the frustration of the publics of the text: Carolyn Dinshaw writes that Margery's neighbours "are frustrated with her because she will not be social with them anymore" (2012, 109), while Clementine Oliver notes Margery's fellow pilgrims' "frustration with her behavior" (2010, 324). Liz Herbert McAvoy meanwhile writes that Margery "[creates] for herself a means towards self-empowerment within a socio-religious hegemony which is also intent on frustrating her desire for autonomy" (2004, 40). More generally, Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us, "We must never forget the pain and frustration . . . that accompanied the quest of religious women" (1991, 234).

us (and this raises important questions about whether the text is self-conscious or oblivious in its representation of Margery; whether we take her "at her word" [Park 2020, 258]), the *Book* certainly finds ways to suspend, or make void, our satisfactions. This is particularly the case for students, whose expectations are shaped in advance by the inevitable prescriptivism of reading lists and syllabi: if I assign *The Book of Margery Kempe* in a reading list alongside Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, for example, students come to the text primed for a certain kind of encounter, say, about the possibilities of asserting female authorship within the confines of a patriarchal church. Some may hope to find in the text an illustration of the medieval "girlboss"; "stronger, sassier, more glamorous and more progressive than [such historical women] could have been in their own centuries," as Irina Dumitrescu (2022) describes this modernising phenomenon. These readers may indeed find a rebellious woman in Kempe's *Book*, but perhaps not in the way they expected: when Margery's companions on pilgrimage are so intensely irritated by her fits of weeping that "thei wold not gowyth wyth hir for an hundryd pownd" (Staley 1996, 1755–76), for instance, is the readerly instinct to sympathise with the "creature" Margery or her peers? Is it not easy to agree that yes, we too would find her a rather difficult woman to know, indeed to like? As Clementine Oliver puts it: "It is difficult to love Margery because it is far too easy to empathize with her companions" (2011, 326). Margery's behavioural excesses are ultimately frustrating because they do not satisfy the demands placed upon the text, both by the classroom setting and the social codes with which a reader may approach the *Book*—frustrations that are in turn mirrored by the publics of the text.

These frustrations play out in the classroom in different ways, but it is the management of thwarted expectations and affective responses I wish to focus on here. In my classes on Kempe, more than once a student has asked the question (or a version thereof): *Is this meant to be funny?* There are a number of incidents in the text that might induce this question (see Larsen & Curnow 2013; Sidhu 2016, esp. 149), many of which involve Margery's own desires being thwarted by those around her—that is, Margery being frustrated. To give one example: in chapter 28 of the *Book*, Margery is on the boat to Jerusalem when a priest in the group allegedly steals her bedsheet, claiming it is his: "a preste wech was in her company toke awey a schete fro the forseyd creatur and seyd it was hys" (1543–44). The priest swears on "the boke in hys hand" (probably a portable bible, breviary, psalter, or book of hours; Bale 2016) that he is telling the truth, but Margery takes God as her witness that "it was hire schete." This is given in the text as an example of the "mech tribulacyon" Margery endures until she reaches Jerusalem, but rather than a sympathetic incident it is often received by students as comic. I understand the comedy of the scene as arising from the seeming excess of significance placed on this quotidian object (the bedsheet), an excess evidenced by the subsequent invocations of God that follow. Does God really need to be involved in a bedsheet dispute? Among many other such incidents, this event aligns the text with what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) describes as Menippean satire, wherein vulgarity and the carnivalesque sit astride foolishness and exaggeration, all in the service of telling a moral tale. It also exemplifies what Yea Jung Park in her discussion of Kempe's *Book* calls an "undue excess of desire" (Park 2020, 257): here we see a performance of narrative or discursive excess, where the bedsheet moment becomes one dispute among many against the "poor creature" Margery, put forward as part of her project of "pseudo-autohagiography" (Larsen & Curnow 2013, 287). As Park writes, this kind of "oversharing . . . is easily laughed at and trivialized," whereby the "legibility of desire itself becomes a source of readerly embarrassment" (2020, 256). As such, the reader who finds

humour in such scenes is again implicitly aligned with those very publics of the text that would laugh at Margery and scorn her excessiveness.

As well as disclosing something about Margery's thwarted desires, such moments of questioning in the classroom—asking *Is this meant to be funny?*—productively reveal another kind of frustration, too: that of the reader. They do so in two moves: first, by identifying that there is something in the text that this reader has found funny, and second, by demonstrating an awareness that this response is somehow not "correct"—not what the text or the classroom context demands of them; an unmet expectation. Such a question demonstrates, then, the ways that reader responses are inevitably filtered by the unspoken rules of the institution: the lingering fantasy of an objective critical stance, and above all, the expectation that texts should be taken seriously (a posture usually taken to be at odds with affective responses, especially laughter). A scholar like Rita Felski might classify this question as a gesture of suspicious hermeneutics, whereby academics "are called on to adopt poses of analytical detachment, critical vigilance, [and] guarded suspicion" (2008, 2). A suspicious reader is required to problematise what Felski terms "surface" responses—which are, more often than not, of the affective variety. In the above case, the student is suspicious of—problematises—their own amusement, adopting a posture of distrust about whether they should or should not be responding in this way. Yet this is, in fact, where I locate the productive force of the question, because it raises the very operations of critique and surface response as objects for discussion. That is, by not being sure of the "correct" reaction, the student who asks the question, *Is this meant to be funny?* opens up a conversation *about* correct and incorrect reactions, and then, more broadly, about authorial intention and the self-consciousness of the text.

In my role as a teacher, I hope that making space for such discussions can provide a kind of "holding environment" (to go back to Winnicott's phrase), for students to begin to negotiate their responses to the text, and so too to start to reflect upon scholarly methods more broadly. Because when we address our frustration about a text, our thwarted desires for a certain "correct" reading, we also address the expectations of reading practices in the academy as such. In doing so, we practice tolerating this difficult feeling and staying in a state of interpretive uncertainty. This kind of practice might also be called "beginner's mind" (Suzuki 1970), a Zen concept commonly used in mindfulness contexts to describe the psychological openness which accompanies *not* knowing about a subject. Importantly, the term describes a practice as much as a spontaneous state of naivety: it acknowledges that openness is a position which can be curated through training, such as that described above. This practice can be productive for students and educators alike: Alex Mueller, Cheryl Nixon, and Rajini Srikanth have theorised this stance in the classroom, encouraging teachers to construct in themselves what they call "the innocence of the first textual encounter" (2010, 1–16). In their study, they include a striking quote from Shakespeare scholar Ann Thompson, who confesses, "I find that I know [*Hamlet*] almost too well for the purpose; it is virtually impossible for me to imagine what it must be like to read the play for the first time, and I am capable of becoming impatient with students' perfectly reasonable desires to discuss topics which for me have become tedious through over familiarity" (2001, 7, quoted in Mueller et al. 2010, 9). I am sympathetic to Thompson's plight: though I remain able to imagine reading the texts I teach for the first time (it was not so long ago since I was in this position; one of the benefits of being an early career scholar), it is certainly the sources I am most familiar with that are the hardest to teach. Nevertheless, Mueller argues that this posture can be

"performed" regardless of an instructor's *actual* experience, through what he calls a "pedagogy of restraint," where the instructor "[restrains their] impulse to survey the field of interpretation for [their] students," thus allowing them to "become the surveyors, revealing 'innocent' avenues of inquiry that challenge 'authoritative' readings" (9–11). So, the instructor becomes moderator, leading their students in a dance of exposure and insulation—holding their unknowing (or "imperfect knowing") such that they are reminded that, as Mueller, Nixon, and Srikanth put it, "innocence is an opening to question our texts, our world, and ourselves as students and teachers" (13). In the case of Kempe's *Book*, this openness allows for a negotiation of the suspicious impulses of the first-time reader, as well as the possibility of other, more sympathetic postures.

Frustration as (P)reparative

After decades of scholarship that variously diagnosed, derided, and distanced itself from Margery Kempe, there has in recent years been a notable critical turn toward more sympathetic responses to the *Book*. This turn might be seen as the product of nearly half a century of feminist scholarship redirecting criticism away from twentieth-century masculinist narratives that would pathologise women visionaries (see Newman 2017, 13). An increasingly interdisciplinary and intersectional field has expanded the horizons of literary-historical criticism, asking scholars to reflect on the categories and boundaries we place on a text when writing from one positionality and (consciously or unconsciously) excluding others. The case of Margery Kempe exemplifies this cartography, as she has travelled through exclusion because of her excess of affectivity, to a slow welcoming into the critical fold, partly on *account* of this same affectivity. For example, Laura Varnam and Laura Kalas, in the introduction to their recent edited volume, *Encountering* The Book of Margery Kempe, express their desire to "[extend] a charitable hand to Kempe," and subsequently, "to each other," "[drawing] strength from Kempe's own persistence in the face of critique" (2021, 5). Varnam and Kalas describe the emergence of this compassionate stance across the 2018 conference that generated many of the essays contained within—"Margery Kempe Studies in the 21st Century"—at which "delegates received 'Team Margery' badges and . . . discussed what it might mean to be a 'friend' of Margery, to be her 'avoket' (advocate), like the woman in chapter 60 who speaks up for Kempe to the parish priest who belittles her emotional response to the pietà" (4). As an attendee of this conference, I remember this atmosphere of collegiality and collaboration among participants but also in the critical conversations about Kempe, where claims to friendship were made in spite of admissions that she would, undoubtedly, be a rather tiring acquaintance. Instead of aligning with Margery's scorning peers, such a position finds allies both within and with the text, choosing to support the visionary in the face of public derision.

In this concluding discussion, I want to consider the implications of such self-consciously reparative modes of reading, especially when applied to such a frustrating text as the *Book*. In particular, I'm keen to think through the possibility of repair as a practice of incorporating ambivalence; of sustaining rather than "fixing" frustration in both pedagogy and scholarly reading. As I noted at the start of this article, Adam Phillips states that frustration is grounded in a desire that cannot be fixed by satisfaction; in psychoanalytic terms, "Desire desires, above all, its own continuation, not its fulfilment," as L.O. Aranye Fradenburg (2002, 4) also puts it. Margery Kempe's life exemplifies this in her pursuit of the "lost object" of her desire, Christ, the satisfaction of which

will always elude her (Kalas 2016, 84). But unfulfilled desire is also at play in the practices of reading and literary study, especially for that of the historical text, which necessarily leads the medievalist up against the alterity of the past and her feelings about it. As Nicholas Watson stresses, "we must learn to theorize the affective component of [our] projects: or, to translate this, [to] discuss whether we are right to care for or about the past, what this caring is, and the impact our feelings legitimately have on our scholarship" (2004, 151). To do so without falling into the trap of presentist self-identification, such as has been critiqued by James Simpson (2010), requires a strategic interrogation of what desires can be satisfied, what form this satisfaction takes, and the places where *dis*satisfaction is ultimately a necessary condition for scholarship. I have been arguing that in the context of the classroom, a willingness to tolerate frustration may in fact initiate a transformation for both student and teacher. Here, then, I suggest that this tolerance should be carried forward into scholarship, as a way of facing up to our own feelings about the text.

Psychoanalytic writings on frustration can also help to explain what to do with this difficult emotion. Wilfred Bion, for example, claims that everything depends on the decision to "evade frustration or to modify it" (quoted in Phillips 2012, 13, 24). Bion here speaks to the problem of repair, where if it appears we cannot get what we want, we can either patch over the feeling with some other satisfaction, or we can transform it into something different. Herein lies one of the major criticisms levelled at sympathetic or reparative reading strategies: that they evade negative feelings (like frustration) by instead emphasising positivity. Patricia Stuelke takes this position in her recent book, *The Ruse of Repair*, arguing that the reparative gesture imagines that a kind of "feeling with" or "feeling right" constitutes action in the world, when real reparations are not possible (2021, 26). Bion's second option—to modify it—meanwhile suggests a possibility of change by recognising the experience, its obstacles, and what we might do about it (if indeed we can do anything at all). Responding to Bion, Phillips claims that this modification depends on the "ability to think," which he defines as "conversation with oneself and other people," a dialogue that "[bridges] the gulf of frustration between the moment when a want is felt and the moment when action appropriate to satisfying the want culminates in its satisfaction" (2012, 25). This intersubjective emphasis means we are always reliant on others for our satisfactions—and so, asks Phillips, "How could we ever be anything other than permanently enraged?" (27). His answer is deeply conditional: "Perhaps we are," he muses, without offering any resolution himself. This discussion is surely a reminder, then, that any bid for repair must acknowledge where resolution is not possible—where ambivalence prevails, with negative and positive feelings jostling for space as we move through the world. In this way, choosing to modify frustration is also learning to tolerate it: "a means by which the frustration that is tolerated is itself made more tolerable" (Bion, quoted in Phillips 2012, 24). Because as Bion implies, our frustration is not the problem; the problem is what we choose to do with it.

What might this kind of modifying repair look like in the context of Kempe studies? In one such reading of the *Book*, Diane Watt has argued for a kind of "compassionate criticism" that pairs "sensitivity to and respect for its subject matter" with "an overt articulation of personal and political commitments" (2004, 190). Reading in this way, for Watt, means acknowledging one's part in an interpretive community, and admitting one's personal and political feelings. The "we" of this community (as I have been using in this article) does not assume a shared identity, but is a site of "complex differences," demanding that we acknowledge our unique positionalities and identities that

we bring to our reading (and teaching) practices. What frustrates me about a text might not frustrate you, and what a student might find frustrating may be surprising to me (and so frustrating in turn). These differences preclude one clear route for modification or repair, because every reader has their own source of rupture. Choosing to modify frustration might therefore also be described as admitting irresolution, which involves learning how to read and think in an environment (the classroom; the academy) that may not give us what we want. There will never be a learning or research experience that does not in some way instigate frustration; this is the paradox that governs all such epistemological and pedagogical projects, where the possibility of change depends upon a recognition that the desired object may never be realised, but that this fact does not negate the need for further work. In the classroom, this means that recognising frustration, and finding productive value and even positive feelings in this recognition, does not necessarily change the fact of frustration itself—nor should it. Instead, it means acknowledging frustration as an essential and unchanging feature of the textual (and pedagogical) encounter.

Kempe's *Book* exemplifies this necessary tension, both at the level of the narrative (Margery's frustration) and in the ways we respond to it (readerly frustration). As I described earlier, Margery's desires are continuously thwarted throughout the text; she makes for a very frustrated subject. But while the *Book* is filled with instances of Margery facing obstacles and derision (being called a "loller" and a "heretyke," among other, more mundane rejections), she nevertheless perseveres, repeatedly and publicly reasserting her desires with an implicit optimism as to their fulfilment—just as Phillips describes as the beginning of all experiences of frustration. In this way, the "excess of desire" Park identifies as characteristic of Margery seems also to equip her with a correlating tolerance for excesses of frustration. It may seem counterintuitive to frame Margery as an exemplar of tolerance—if, that is, we abide by the modern associations of "tolerant" with a quality of cool-headedness (certainly not Margery's foremost character trait). But in its original meaning, *tolerate* (from the Latin: *tolerare*) straightforwardly indicates an ability to endure pain; to be patient, as in *patientia*, suffering. This is more like Margery, who endures suffering at every turn across the course of her life and still does not concede to those who intercept her desires. This resistance to frustration manifests in both Margery's affective excesses (what is her loud crying if not the endurance of pain?) and in the rhetorical panache that characterises her interactions with so many of her critics—as in chapter 45, when a man refuses to let her on board the ship to Bristol because he thinks she is not a "good woman," and she replies, "Syr, yf ye put me owt of the schip, my Lord Jhesu schal put yow owt of hevyn" (2552–53). Together with her weeping, such expressions of resistance demonstrate a sincerity and willingness to defy social codes in order to persist in pursuing her desires, and to endure the discomfort that accompanies this task. In this way, the very excesses that render the text a potentially comic object can also be read as modelling tolerance to frustration. A nexus is revealed between Margery's own encounters with frustration and those of the *Book*'s readers, whereby the text both instigates readerly frustration and exemplifies the route to repair, in the "creature" Margery's continued willingness to persist. This reparative mode does not *resolve* Margery's situation, nor does it obtain necessarily positive feelings related to it—as Larsen and Curnow argue, in the end neither Margery's nor her husband's desires are resolved, and they are "increasingly unhappy as the narrative unfolds" (2013, 297)—but it nevertheless propels the hopeful optimism necessary for the continuation of these same desires.

A compassionate reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* need not, then, feel positively about Margery's self-presentation within the text, nor must it resolve the unruly formal features of the narrative itself. Instead, I have been suggesting that admitting irresolution may be just as a sympathetic posture, because it acknowledges the gaps between desire and its fulfilment as they are borne out both in and by the text. Such an openness to be frustrated, and to tolerate the feelings that attend to this experience, is the definition of compassionate reading—in the sense that the reader is willing to suffer *with* the frustrations of the text. The classroom is the ideal venue for cultivating this kind of openness; a place where negative feelings can be externalised and held by the teacher, and suspicious or symptomatic postures—like asking *Is this meant to be funny?*—can be starting points for further discussions of the complex, ambivalent hermeneutics the text may inspire. Despite acknowledging the significance of "suspicion and second-guessing as a key part of literary intellectual endeavor," Yea Jung Park argues that symptomatic readings that question Margery's intentions (if she is self-consciously or obliviously funny, for instance) are all "inescapably condescending," because they do not take Margery "at her word" (2020, 258–60). But as I see it, when students are developing the skills associated with scholarly reading—that is, developing the kinds of fluency or literacy that we call *literary methods*—it is important that we unpack the kinds of surface responses that arise when reading the text for the first (or fiftieth) time. Indeed, maybe we can only get to the kinds of scholarly reading that take Kempe at her word *after* we have admitted these kinds of feelings. In this way, perhaps it is not so important to arrive at an answer to questions like *Is this meant to be funny?* because the question itself is in fact the site of transformation. The discussion that follows is, ideally, the kind of intersubjective dialogue that Phillips identifies as the means to modifying frustration, which he calls the "ability to think." In the classroom, thinking happens when a teacher can "hold the affective expressions of the student" and "receive [their] range of emotional expression" (Boldt 2006, 295–96), which also involves holding their own affective expressions, modelling the kinds of tolerance expected for scholarly reading. This is the groundwork of academic work, the tilling of the soil in which the seeds of criticism can be sown.

Might it be more fitting, then, to rethink the pedagogical encounter with frustration as *prep*arative, rather than strictly reparative?—a subtle temporal shift which, rather than implying something broken, needing to be fixed, instead suggests a developmental process of futural possibility. To return to Phillips' injunction, frustration teaches us about our desires, which are always anticipatory. To come face-to-face with these desires is a beginning, not an ending; an opening, not a closing. The classroom is an exemplary space in which such beginnings can occur: where, with the guidance of an interpretive mentor or community, the frustrated party is taught to look forward, onward to new possibilities of thinking and reading. But in line with the intersubjective quality of this meeting, this opening may also, in turn, reflect back on the educator, inviting them to practice new postures which may reveal the text in new and enlivening ways. Considered in this way, frustration is therefore loaded with potential—for different kinds of fulfilment, far beyond the satisfactions we might have thought we wanted.

Works Cited

Allen, Hope Emily. 1940. "Prefatory Note." In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, vol. 1, edited by Hope Emily Allen and Sanford Brown Meech, 53–65. London: Oxford University Press.

Atkinson, Clarissa. 2015. "'This Creature': 40 Years of Margery Kempe." *Oldest Vocation Blog*, 24 February. https://oldestvocation.com/2015/02/24/this-creature-40-years-of-margery-kempe/.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bale, Anthony. 2016. "Reading En Route with Margery Kempe." *Women's Literary Culture and the Medieval Canon Blog*, 22 November. https://blogs.surrey.ac.uk/medievalwomen/2016/11/22/reading-en-route-with-margery-kempe/.

Boldt, Gail. 2006. "Resistance, Loss, and Love in Learning to Read: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry." *Research in the Teaching of English* 40 (3): 272–309. doi.org/10.58680/rte20065101.

Bremner, Eluned. 1992. "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction." In *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sandra J. McEntire, 117–35. London: Routledge.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1991. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.

Carson, Russell L. 2007. *Exploring the Episodic Nature of Teachers' Emotions As It Relates to Teacher Burnout.* PhD Diss., Purdue University.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. 2012. *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dumitrescu, Irina. 2022. "Beyond the girlboss." *TLS Online*, 11 February. https://www.the-tls.co.uk/regular-features/afterthoughts/beyond-the-girlboss-afterthoughts-irina-dumitrescu.

Felski, Rita. 2008. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fradenburg, L. O. Aranye. 2002. *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harrington, Neil. 2007. "Frustration Intolerance as a Multidimensional Concept." *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 25: 191–211. doi.org/10.1007/s10942-006-0051-0.

Kalas, Laura. 2016. "'Slayn for Goddys lofe': Margery Kempe's Melancholia and the Bleeding of Tears." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*. 52 (1): 84–100. doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.2055.

Knowles, David, 1961. *The English Mystical Tradition*. London: Burns and Oates.

Larsen, Vickie, and Mary-Katherine Curnow. 2013. "Hagiographic Ambition, Fabliau Humor, and Creature Comforts in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Exemplaria* 25 (4): 284–302. doi.org/10.1179/1041257313Z.00000000038.

Lochrie, Karma. 1991. *Margery Kempe's Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

McAvoy, Liz Herbert. 2004. *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*. Cambridge: Brewer.

Meindl, P., A. Yu, B. M. Galla, A. Quirk, C. Haeck, J. P. Goyer, C. W. Lejuez, S. K. D'Mello, and A. L. Duckworth. 2019. "A Brief Behavioral Measure of Frustration Tolerance Predicts Academic Achievement Immediately and Two Years Later." *Emotion* 19 (6): 1081–92. doi.org/10.1037/emo0000492.

Morris, Sam, and Jim King. 2018. "Teacher Frustration and Emotion Regulation in University Language Teaching." *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics* 41 (4): 433–52. doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2018-0032.

Mueller, Alex, Cheryl Nixon, and Rajini Srikanth. 2010. "Constructing the Innocence of the First Textual Encounter." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 8 (1): 1–16. doi.org/10.17613/n7cp-dd66.

Newman, Barbara. 2017. "New Seeds, New Harvests: Thirty Years of Tilling the Mystic Field." *Traditio* 72: 9–20. doi.org/10.1017/tdo.2017.7.

Ober, William. 1985. "Margery Kempe: Hysteria and Mysticism Reconciled." *Literature and Medicine* 4: 24-40. doi.org/10.1353/lm.2011.0013.

Oliver, Clementine. 2011. "Why Margery Kempe is Annoying and Why We Should Care." In *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources*, edited by J. Glenn and R. Brentano, 323–31. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Park, Daeun, and Gerardo Ramirez. 2022. "Frustration in the Classroom: Causes and Strategies to Help Teachers Cope Productively." *Educational Psychology Review* 34: 1955–83. doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09707-z.

Park, Yea Jung. 2020. "The Embarrassments of Confession: Reading Margery Kempe Today." *postmedieval* 11 (2–3): 253–63. doi.org/10.1057/s41280-020-00177-6.

Pekrun, R., T. Goetz, L. M. Daniels, R. H. Stupnisky, and R. P. Perry. 2010. "Boredom in Achievement Settings: Exploring Control–Value Antecedents and Performance Outcomes of a Neglected Emotion." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102 (3): 531–49. doi.org/10.1037/a0019243.

Phillips, Adam. 2012. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. London: Penguin.

Shi, Song, Zizai Zhang, Ying Wang, Huilan Yue, Zede Wang, and Songling Qian. 2021. "The Relationship Between College Teachers' Frustration Tolerance and Academic Performance." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12: 564484. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.564484.

Sidhu, Nicole Nolan. 2016. *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Simpson, James. 2010. "'Not Just a Museum?' Not So Fast." *Religion and Literature* 42 (1/2): 141–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23049474.

Staley, Lynn, ed. 1996. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications.

Stuelke, Patricia. 2021. *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sutton, R. E. 2004. "Emotional Regulation Goals and Strategies of Teachers." *Social Psychology of Education* 7 (4): 379–98. doi.org/10.1007/s11218-004-4229-y.

——. 2007. "Teachers' Anger, Frustration, and Self-Regulation." In *Emotion in Education*, edited Paul A. Schutz and Reinhard Pekrun, 259–74. Burlington, MA: Academic Press.

Suzuki, Shunryu. 1970. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill.

Thompson, Ann. 2001. "Research-Led Teaching? Or Teaching-Led Research?" *English Subject Newsletter* 1: 7. https://web.archive.org/web/20151024172940/http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue1/thompson.htm.

Varnam, Laura, and Laura Kalas. 2021. *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Watson, Nicholas. 2004. "Desire for the Past / Afterword." In *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, edited by Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, 149–88. Turnhout: Brepols.

Watt, Diane. 2004. "Critics, Communities, Compassionate Criticism: Learning from *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, edited by Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, 190–210. Turnhout: Brepols.

Winnicott, D. W. 1953. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena; A Study of the First Not-Me Possession." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34: 89–97. doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271367.003.0034.