Reading the Books of Margery Kempe and Alice Pyett: Attachment and Feminist Restoration in Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst*

Abstract: This article examines reading, attachment, and the restoration of female voices in Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst*, a 2019 novel inspired by the fifteenth-century mystic and author, Margery Kempe. The article foregrounds and analyses the author's own response to the novel and to Paver's comments about Kempe from the perspective of Rita Felski's work on art and attachment (2020) and in the context of Carolyn Dinshaw's reading of Hope Emily Allen's championing of Margery Kempe (2012). Underpinned by a framework that draws on medievalism studies (particularly Katherine Brown's concept of 'restoration'), the article explores the ways in which Paver's two readers in her novel (editor Edmund Stearne and his daughter Maud) respond to the discovery of Alice Pyett's "Book" (the fictional book based on *Book of Margery Kempe*) in increasingly polarized ways: Stearne's identification leading to madness and Maud's to increasing autonomy and independence as a woman of her time. The article argues that in Paver's dramatization of Maud's developing reading practice, Kempe-as-Pyett inspires a feminist reclamation of women's voices and stories that encourage the modern academic reader to similarly reflect on their own response to Kempe's status, in both scholarly and popular culture.

Keywords: Margery Kempe, Wakenhyrst, Michelle Paver, medievalism studies, water studies, feminism, reading, attachment

In 1941, the editor of *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Hope Emily Allen, wrote in a letter that "Margery gives me hope."[1] For Carolyn Dinshaw, writing more than eighty years later, this "hope" represents the "complicated mirroring and reflexivity of Allen's readerly experience" of *The Book* and expresses "the hermeneutic promise of present understanding of a text and author that exceeds the past's."[2] Indeed, in a further letter Allen writes that she, "hope[s] Margery comes to her own in our life-time."[3] Allen's hope for Margery began to be fulfilled in her life-time thanks to her own efforts and, as the twentieth century progressed, those of the scholars who followed in her footsteps. For Dinshaw, Margery's "story in the book is the story of her constantly looking for a champion" and that "latter-day champion of sorts" was Allen.[4] This desire to take up the baton on Kempe's behalf shows no sign of diminishing and, since the publication of Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe* in 1994, novelists as well as critics have begun to turn to Margery and her *Book* both as inspiration for their own literary creations and because they were moved by their own "readerly experience" to

---

My thanks to Laura Kalas, Rachel Delman, Johannes Wolf, and, in the rewriting process, Liz Herbert McAvoy, Emily M. Harless, and Robert Shearman. One strand of this article is about the bonds between women and the ways in which they support and stand up for each other, especially in difficult times. In this spirit, I dedicate this article to my Margery Kempe 'partner in crime' Laura Kalas, whose support in recent years has been invaluable and deeply appreciated.

[1] Quoted in Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 120.

[2] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 120.

[3] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 120.

[4] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 120.

intervene creatively and affectively in what we now call Kempe Studies.[5] One such recent example is Michelle Paver, in whose 2019 gothic novel, *Wakenhyrst*, Margery Kempe appears in the guise of fictional mystic Alice Pyett, who is also the author of a book, this time entitled “The Book of Alice Pyett”. In this novel, which provides the main focus of the present article, while Alice's corresponding male editor, Edmund Stearne, has a troubled relationship with his object of study, his daughter, Maud, proves herself to be champion material– and for more women than just Alice herself.

The idea of the book as a catalyst for readerly transformation chimes with the argument made by Rebecca Krug in her recent monograph *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader*, that Kempe herself deliberately aimed to create a community of engaged, self-reflective, and like-minded readers around her text. Krug argues that Kempe's *Book* is "the product of a no-longer-lonely reader, that is, one who, as both an individual and a member of a larger community, is both hopeful about the future and critical of the present state of affairs."[6] Margery Kempe wrote the book that she wanted – indeed, needed – to read in order to continue that deeply necessary process of *becoming*, as a devout laywoman and a textual exemplar who might inspire others. Krug's formulation applies equally, I argue, to Michelle Paver's vision in *Wakenhyrst* and it stems from Paver's experience of reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* empathetically. As Rita Felski defines it, empathy as both a "feeling *with*" and a "feeling *for*," is intimately connected to “the acknowledgement of suffering: responding

[5] Robert Glück, *Margery Kempe* (London: High Risk Books, 1994).

[6] Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 2.

to the pain of others."[7] Paver's response to Margery's pain, as I shall explore below, is part of her critique of the "present state of affairs," to return to Krug's formulation, and in *Wakenhyrst* this critique is centred upon the subjugation of women's bodies in pregnancy and as a result of patriarchal dominance, which Paver depicts in *Wakenhyrst*'s "Book of Alice of Pyett"; but it also manifests in the novel's present-day characters of Maud's mother and Maud herself. Hand in hand with its critique, however, *Wakenhyrst* is a hopeful novel that suggests that if we read attentively and empathetically, we can access the voices of the past and they can enable us to speak optimistically about the future.

This is achieved, the novel proposes, by a process of self-reflective reading, as demonstrated by Maud but, in striking contrast, resisted and evaded by her father, Edmund Stearne, Alice Pyett's editor. The distinction between the increasingly receptive female reader-turned-writer and the misguided, indeed dangerous, male editor offers the modern reader of *Wakenhyrst* a stark choice between positive and negative exempla and we are encouraged, as Kempe's original readers were, in Krug's words, to "read [ourselves]" into the novel "as active agents participating in the same process of reflection, revision, and self-creation in which Kempe, as both author and reader, engages."[8] As I will show, Maud Stearne engages in precisely this process within the novel and she invites the modern reader, and academic, to join her. Indeed, this article stems from, and examines, my own self-reflection as a reader of *Wakenhyrst,* in particular a reader who is attached, intellectually and emotionally, to "Margery Kempe", both as an author, a figure within her own *Book*, and the

[7] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 105. I am very grateful to Emily M. Harless for recommending this book to me.

[8] Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader*, 3.

icon of academic Kempe Studies in the twenty-first century.[9] I invoke attachment here as formulated again by Felski, who argues that "attachments involve thought as well as feeling, values and judgments as well as gut response. And they are, of course, often ambivalent, fraught, or vexed."[10] Attachment, in all its complexity, is the tie that binds me to Margery Kempe, to Michelle Paver, and to her novel's characters; and, crucially, attachment "faces towards the future as well as the past."[11] An attachment, as Felski suggests, "may turn into a commitment" and, for me, that commitment began as soon as I finished reading *Wakenhyrst*: a commitment to unravel the "feelings, values and judgments" that the novel, and Michelle Paver's own readerly response to Margery Kempe, inspired in me – and why.[12]

Academic, Amateur, and Fictional Desire for the Past

The "heart of the story" of *Wakenhyrst* belongs to Maud Stearne (390), a young girl growing up in an isolated manor house in the twentieth century, whose mother has died in childbirth and whose father, Edmund Stearne, is a medieval historian obsessed with

[9] Felski suggests that "what critics care about […] is not just a historical author or a self-contained work but an 'author-text' composite'" that includes, amongst other elements, literary style, the textual world, knowledge of the author's biography, scholarship on the text, and so on. I invoke this deliberately "hybrid" identity when I refer to "Margery Kempe" here. See Felski, *Hooked*, 116–17.

[10] Felski, *Hooked*, ix.

[11] Felski, *Hooked*, 127.

[12] Felski, *Hooked*, 129.

discovering the missing manuscript of early sixteenth-century mystic, Alice Pyett. To the medievalist, it is clear at a glance that Margery Kempe is Paver's inspiration for Pyett. Alice is married with seventeen children (three up on Margery) and, after a period of mental instability, she converts to a religious life that is characterized by a gift of divine tears and dialogues with Christ. Alice's community, like Margery's, doubts the authenticity of her mysticism and suggests that she might be mad or possessed by the devil. Encouraged to write down her revelations by God, Alice dictates her "Book" to a male scribe, but this text is lost for centuries until it is rediscovered in a country house. So far, so Margery. But Paver does not merely lift the fifteenth-century mystic and the modern rediscovery of her *Book* and drop her into the narrative frame of her Gothic novel: the increased number of Pyett's children and the slightly later dates given to her life (1451–1517) are evidence of that. Instead, Paver transforms Margery Kempe, foregrounding particular episodes and preoccupations from her *Book*, bypassing others, and recasting the impact of the text both to suit the plot of her novel and to reflect her own emotional experience of reading the *Book*.

Paver, like many academic readers of Margery's *Book*, identified strongly with the text, expressing this in her "Author's Note" at the end of *Wakenhyrst*, and, at first glance, her attitude towards Margery reflects the fraught ambivalence that Felski pinpoints as a component of identification. Happening upon a copy of the *Book* in an Oxfam shop, Paver writes that, "I'd never heard of the fifteenth-century mystic, and her writing struck me as bizarre, narcissistic and oddly pitiable. Her voice brought the times she lived in vividly to life" (387). Her surprisingly critical response to Kempe's writing seemed to me so at odds with current trends in Kempe Studies and my own personal attachment to Margery that I immediately felt the pull of a strong desire to write this article. Given Paver's own mixed feelings – she did nevertheless recognise the power of Kempe's voice – I began to wonder what role Margery Kempe might play in a novel that was described in one review as having a

"modern feminist sensibility."[13] Furthermore, I wondered what Paver's response to Kempe, and use of her life as the inspiration for the fictional Pyett, might tell us about Kempe's place in popular culture and as a source for twenty-first century fiction, particularly in contrast to her now-cherished position among medieval scholars. In Paver's novel, "The Book of Alice Pyett" is discovered and identified by a male historian but his translation of the text is typed up by his daughter, for whom it is to prove transformative and restorative, not only for her growing understanding of her place in the world as a woman but also as a catalyst for her own actions in the novel. Those actions culminate in the reclamation of female voices and experiences in the novel's denouement, so perhaps Kempe's example might have been more transformative than Paver claimed.

Nicholas Watson argues that all study of the past has "emotional designs on its object, whether the emotions are of love, anger, guilt, or anything else" and we see these complex emotional entanglements in *Wakenhyrst*'s representation of academic study and readerly experience, both within the novel and in Paver's transformation of her own affective response to Margery in the representation of her surrogate, Pyett.[14] Researching this article and delving further into the novel, it became clear to me that my own initial feelings of outrage that Paver could describe Kempe's writing as "bizarre, narcissistic and oddly pitiable" were an opportunity to interrogate popular, creative, and my own personal responses to Kempe in a

---

[13] David Sexton, "Wakenhyrst by Michelle Paver – Review: Some sinister emanations from the dark side of Suffolk," *Evening Standard*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/books/wakenhyrst-by-michelle-paver-review-a4103256.html>, last accessed March 26, 2020.

[14] Nicholas Watson, "Desire for the Past," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999): 59–97, at 61.

way that takes account of her status as a "touchstone for the concerns of contemporary feminist and medieval scholarship," as Deanne Williams argues, but also to recognise the ways in which she might still appear as a strange and unaccountable creature to the non-academic or "amateur" reader.[15] Carolyn Dinshaw identifies the "amateur" reader as having the ability to "make the professional mainstream itself more open, more multiple": such readers "can help us to contemplate the different ways of being, knowing, and world making."[16]

Examining *The Book of Margery Kempe* through the lens of *Wakenhyrst* thus enabled me to reassess my own sense of Kempe's twenty-first century reputation and Paver's approach foregrounded aspects of *The Book* to which I realize I had become inured, in particular the reality of the number of children that Margery carried and birthed. In my reading experience of *Wakenhyrst*, I recognized, and embraced, my status as the "aca-fan," the "fan" of the object of my scholarship, Kempe, whose cause I immediately wanted to champion when I read Paver's "Author's Note." [17] Alicia Spencer-Hall argues that recognising our own status as

---

[15] Deanne Williams, "Hope Emily Allen Speaks with the Dead," *Leeds Studies in English* 35 (2004): 137–60, at 137.

[16] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 24.

[17] I first encountered this term in Alicia Spencer-Hall's *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 191. Spencer-Hall discusses Kempe's own "fanfictions" on 167–92, and in her use of "aca-fen" and "aca-fandom," she draws on the work of fandom studies scholars such as Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), xvii–xxxviii, and Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4 and 12.

"aca-fen" (plural) enables us to "interrogate how and why we create such intimate affective bonds with the past," including the ways in which those bonds are entangled with the "structures, biases, and concerns that most influence us" within the academy.[18] Watson, for example, has identified Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* as exhibiting a desire to "*redeem* the past, with its institutions, beliefs, and stories, for feminists" and this resonated with my own desire to see whether the academy's present perception of Margery Kempe's feminist potential was realized by Paver in her novel – and I found that to some extent it was, but not in the ways that I was expecting.[19] A complex picture emerges when unravelling the transformation of Kempe into Pyett. Where Kempe refused to be silenced and relied on her own wits to combat her detractors in her *Book*, for example, Alice Pyett takes her community's criticism to heart and allows herself to be silenced:

> [A]fter this creature had been threatened with burning, she spoke no more of the Gospel. And she began to fear that what people said was true, and that she had been deceived by an evil spirit, so that all her visions and cryings came not from God, but from the Devil (233).

However, where Alice does not have the inner strength to stand up for herself and her own experiences, Maud Stearne gradually does – and as a direct result of reading and reflecting upon Alice Pyett's "Book".

---

[18] Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints*, 191-92.

[19] Watson, "Desire," 64.

The remainder of this article, then, will think about the feminist potential of Margery Kempe *relationally,* in the generative connections that are made when female readers, in particular, are receptive to the mystic's words and allow those words to inspire the recovery of other, silenced female voices. Such networks of female reading, writing, and inspiration have their roots in Hope Emily Allen's example cited above, but they also chime with the collaborative and compassionate community that is currently gathered around Kempe, affectionately known on social media as #TeamMargery.[20] While Paver's work does not explicitly demonstrate an awareness of the critical history of Margery's *Book*, or indeed Allen's role as its champion, this article will show how her response to Kempe's life does, nevertheless, resonate with Allen's increasingly feminist conception of Margery's spirituality, as well as current scholarly arguments for the supportive female networks that *The Book* sustains and encourages.[21]

---

[20] On Allen's supportive female networks, see Marea Mitchell, "'The Three Daughters of Deorman': Scholarship and Community," in *The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community, and Criticism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 35–54, and Laura Varnam, "#TeamMargery: Collaboration, Compassion, and Creativity," <https://drlauravarnam.wordpress.com/2018/04/29/teammargery-collaboration-compassion-and-creativity/>, last accessed May 27, 2020.

[21] Allen's work, and her feminism, do feature prominently in Wikipedia entries, however. She is described as "instrumental in the publication of the second modern edition of the text" in *The Book*'s entry, whereas Meech is only mentioned in a footnote, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Book_of_Margery_Kempe>, last accessed December 22, 2020. In the entry for Allen herself, Meech is described as "mistreating Allen" and his "misogynistic attitude" is cited as the reason for the breakdown in their collaboration.

Recovering the Past through Reading in Wakenhyrst

Within *Wakenhyrst*, Maud Stearne is able to reflect upon her mother's death in childbirth and her own position as a woman, and later as a potential writer, as a direct result of her work on the medieval female mystic. Maud's father asks her type up his translation, exploiting her free labour, and she is frequently reminded that intellectual work is not the preserve of women; but, just like Margery Kempe in her own time, Maud persists. It is as a result of her detective work, reading Edmund's notebooks which record his response to Pyett's *Book*, that a past sin of his – the secret at the heart of the novel – comes to light: that is, the truth about the death of his sister, Lily Stearne. Lily drowned in the fens as a result of being tied to a boat that went adrift during a game of make-believe that went tragically wrong when the young Edmund

---

Importantly, this entry also includes the subheading "scholarly career and feminism," which identifies medieval scholarship and feminism as Allen's "lifelong goals," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope_Emily_Allen>, last accessed December 22, 2020. In addition to this online material, easily available to Paver, the manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* was displayed in 2016 in the "This is a Voice" exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in London, alongside Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*. This exhibition garnered significant press coverage, such as Alison Flood's "Books by earliest women writers in English on display together for the first time," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/18/books-by-earliest-women-writers-in-english-on-display-for-first-time>, last accessed December 22, 2020. On supportive female networks, see Laura Varnam, "'A Booke of Hyr Felyngs': Exemplarity and Margery Kempe's Encounters of the Heart," in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Laura Kalas and Laura Varnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 140–59.

was too cowardly to call for help to rescue her. At the end of the novel, Maud declares that "Lily died a dreadful, lonely death. She doesn't deserve to be forgotten" (373) and we realize retrospectively that it is in Maud's narration that Lily's story has been rescued from obscurity and her memory restored. Thus, while the novel is named after the imaginary village in which the events occur, it could equally be retitled "The Book of Maud Stearne," not only to reflect the crucial narrative perspective of the protagonist but also to recognize that, like *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the text is deeply concerned with the importance of the female voice and the recovery of women's stories in a male-dominated world.

Wakenhyrst is, I argue, just as concerned with examining the present impact of reading *about* the past as it is with the past itself, and the importance of reading is foregrounded from the opening of the novel, which begins in 1966 with the framing device of a newspaper article, "The Mystery of Edmund Stearne". Here we discover that, in 1913, sixteen-year-old Maud watched from the window as her father went out of their manor house, Wake's End, wielding an ice pick and a hammer, and committed the apparently inexplicable murder of under-gardener Clem Walker (with whom it is later revealed Maud has had a relationship). Stearne is committed to an asylum where, like the Victorian painter, Richard Dadd, who inspired Paver's character, he paints three extraordinary images of "grotesque, bewitching, even evil" creatures that surround the figure of a mysterious woman (7), revealed at the end of the novel to be his sister Lily.[22] The rediscovery of the paintings years later by the academic, Dr Robin Hunter (who features briefly in the novel's frame narrative, and to

[22] In her "Author's Note", Paver identifies as an inspiration the Victorian artist, Richard Dadd, who painted "obsessively detailed canvases of tiny, otherworld creatures" while incarcerated in Broadmoor for the murder of his father (387). For more on Dadd, see Nicholas Tromans, *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011).

whose significance I will return), leads the latter to contact Maud, who is now living alone in the house and whom the salacious newspaper article suggests is a witch. The first outsider to visit Wake's End in fifty years, the journalist describes a "yellow typescript" sitting on Edmund Stearne's desk: "*The Book of Alice Pyett (1451-1517), Mystic, Translation and Exegesis by E. A. M. Stearne, DPhil, Cantab*," (8), but there is no sign of the "fabled notebook" (7) in which, it is implied, the true reason behind Stearne's descent into madness and murder is contained. The key to the novel's Gothic secrets are shown to lie in textual discovery and empathetic reading; the tabloid newspaper article pitted against the academic desire to uncover the true story.[23] Initially Maud refuses to have further contact with outsiders and she threatens to burn her father's notebook, but after a storm damages the roof of Wake's

[23] There is no space in this article to fully investigate the novel's use of the Gothic in its narrative structure, feminism, and representation of Wake's End house. However, it should be noted that *Wakenhyrst* relates both to the feminist and theological turns in contemporary gothic fiction, for which see Gina Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings, and Vampire Kisses* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Simon Marsden, *The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction: Holy Ghosts* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Lucie Armitt argues that "the female Gothic plays a continually key role in the dissemination and interrogation of feminist debates to and by a diverse readership from 1960 to the present" and I would argue that this applies to the representation of Maud's reassessment of her own position as a woman within the novel: see Lucie Armitt, "Gothic and the Rise of Feminism," in *The Cambridge History of The Gothic: Volume III, Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Dale Townshend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 242–61, at 244.

End, she sends a curt request to Dr Hunter to discuss "the sale of my 'story'" (17), highlighting the revelatory, and potentially commercial, value of Maud's perspective, which dominates the main body of the novel. But Maud's "story" turns out to offer more than just a daughter's view of her father's horrific crimes.

The narrative of *Wakenhyrst* then quickly rewinds sixty years earlier, to when Maud is nine, focusing on her mother's repeated pregnancies and eventual death in childbirth and then her father's dual discoveries of “The Book of Alice Pyett” and the "Wakenhyrst Doom," and the chaos that their intersection unleashes in Stearne's mind, in contrast to his daughter's increasing intellectual independence.[24] Stearne's translation of Alice's “Book” becomes intertwined with his increasingly paranoid anxieties about a devil in the painted Doom and, when he reads about the unconfessed sin of Alice Pyett, he is compelled to confront the repressed secret of his boyhood: his responsibility for the death of his sister. Maud is determined to discover the reason for her father's erratic behaviour and her narrative in the novel in interspersed with her clandestine readings of her father's notebook as they relate to nine excerpts from his translation of Pyett's “Book”, foregrounding the role that the reading experience plays in stirring up her father's past and shaping both Maud's life and her subsequent decision to reveal her own story to Dr Hunter. As Maud becomes a more proficient reader and interpreter, Stearne conversely slips further into the grips of madness,

[24] A "Doom" is a painting of the Last Judgement found on the chancel arch in a church, depicting Christ sitting in judgement with sinners going to hell, tormented by devils, on his left and the saved entering heaven, accompanied by angels, on his right. In her "Author's Note" Paver explains that the "Wakenhyrst Doom" was inspired by the Wenhaston Doom (387), about which she read in Carl Watkins, *The Undiscovered Country: Journeys among the Dead* (London: Vintage, 2013).

convinced that the discovery of the Doom has released a demon from the fen to torment him, and he turns to another medieval source, the life of the early medieval St. Guthlac (referred to in the novel as 'St. Guthlaf'), in an attempt to exorcize the demon. The connection between the Wakenhyrst Doom and Alice Pyett is then finally revealed.[25] In an episode that is not directly inspired by Margery Kempe, Paver has Alice's husband pay for the Doom to be installed and for prayers to be said over a local man to prove that he, rather than Alice herself, was possessed by a demon. Convinced that these prayers were an exorcism, Stearne concludes that a demon was trapped in a bottle that had been secured behind the Doom before it was released in the recent restoration of the church.[26] That demon, Stearne believes, is now

[25] Again, there is no space here to examine the representation of St. Guthlac or to explore the depiction of fenland spirits, such as ferishes and jack-o'-lanterns. On folklore and East Anglia, see Paver's own acknowledged sources: Camilla Eveline Gurdon, *County Folk-lore: Printed Extracts No 2. Suffolk* (London: D. Nutt for the Folk-lore Society, 1893); Enid Porter, *The Folklore of East Anglia* (London: Batsford, 1974), cited by Paver (392-93). See also Kevin-Crossley Holland and Shirley Felts, *The Dead Moon and Other Tales from East Anglia and the Fen Country* (London: André Deutsch, 1982); Karl Bell, "Supernatural Folklore and The Popular Imagination: Re-Reading Object and Locality in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Norfolk," in *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: From Prehistory to the Present*, ed. T. A. Heslop, Elizabeth Mellings, and Margit Thøfner (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 240–52 (especially 244 on witch bottles); and Jonathan Woolley, "Hounded Out of Time: Black Shuck's Lesson in the Anthropocene," *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2018), 295–309.

[26] No such exorcism takes places in *The Book of Margery Kempe* although in Chapter 62, after a friar has been preaching against her in Lynn, her detractors "seyd that sche had a devyl

at large in the fens and it is this belief that leads him to commit not only the murder of Clem Walker but also the murder of local fen-dweller, Jubal Rede, from whom Maud hears Lily's story for the first time.[27] The fens, therefore, are fundamental to the symbiotic relationship between past, present, and future in the novel; always shifting, never fixed or stable, Maud's attachment to the fens represents an open-minded receptivity to the stories of the past, without subjecting them to her will.[28] For her father, however, determined to ignore his past sins and their present impact, the fens become a profane space which cannot be contained or safely shut outside. The ambivalence of this landscape – as nourishing as it is dangerous –

---

wythinne hir, and summe seyd to hir owyn mowth that the frer schulde a drevyn to develys owt of hir" (296–97). This suggestion of exorcism is presented as a slander by *The Book* ("thus was sche slawnderyd," 297), and no exorcism is described. In *Wakenhyrst*, Alice's husband "wishing to save her from the people's false blame, paid twelve pence for a new candlebeam in Wakenhyrst Church" (the Doom that Stearne later discovers) and for prayers to be said over the true victim of the demonic possession, the carter (246–47).

[27] This first murder could, in fact, have resulted in the loss of Lily's story, had Maud not listened to Jubal's confession first.

[28] On the textual and cultural significance of the fens from the medieval period to the present day, see Justin T. Noetzel, "Marsh Men and Trackless Bogs: A Cultural History of the English Fens," (unpublished PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2014). On East Anglia as a landscape with Gothic potentialities, see Helena Bacon and Adam Whybray, "The Lies of the Land: The Alluvial Formalities of Gothic East Anglia," *Gothic Studies* 23, no. 2 (2021): 217–32.

embodies the perils of any attempt to "touch the past," to invoke Dinshaw's evocative notion, by readers who are not prepared to face their own personal reckoning.[29]

As this brief summary suggests, five centuries of history, religious belief, and folklore saturate the fens of *Wakenhyrst*, and the novel is overflowing with ideas, characters, and imagery that would provide fertile ground for a medievalism studies approach.[30] My aim here is to examine the novel's representation of the impact of Alice's "Book" on its primary readers, Maud and Edmund Stearne, as well as to chart the feminist restoration project that Kempe-as-Pyett inspires in the novel as a result of Maud's reading practice. Before turning to the novel's representation of the Stearnes' polarized readings of the late medieval female mystic, however, the next section of this article will deepen the framework for my analysis.

Margery Kempe and a Fluid Medievalism Studies

While Kempe has been an inspiration for modern adaptations since the late 1970s, *Wakenhyrst* is the first novel in which Margery has been the basis for the invention of an

[29] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 206.

[30] My analysis also responds to Richard Utz's recent call for an increased focus on religious texts in medievalism scholarship in "Medievalism Studies and the Subject of Religion," in *Studies in Medievalism XXIV: Medievalism on the Margins*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 11–19.

entirely new fictional character.[31] Kempe currently features as herself in four modern novels (Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe*, Elizabeth MacDonald's *Skirting Heresy*, Mary Sharratt's *Revelations*, and Ffiona Perigrinor's *Reluctant Pilgrim*); she is the subject of two poetry collections (Sarah Law's *Ink's Wish: Poems for Margery Kempe* and Pattie McCarthy's *Wifthing*); and she has appeared in a number of dramatizations of her famous encounter with fellow mystic Julian of Norwich (including Dana Bagshaw's *Cell Talk*, to which I will refer briefly below, and most recently Victoria MacKenzie's 2023 novel, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain*).[32] Kempe's popularity as a subject of academic study and an icon

---

[31] In his novel, *Pilgrims* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020), published the year after *Wakenhyrst*, Matthew Kneale based his character Matilda Froome on Margery Kempe.

[32] Glück, *Margery Kempe*; Elizabeth MacDonald, *Skirting Heresy: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014); Mary Sharratt, *Revelations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021); ffiona Perigrinor, *Reluctant Pilgrim: The Lost Book of Margery Kempe's Maidservant* (Oxford: Anglepoise Books, 2021); Sarah Law, *Ink's Wish: Poems for Margery Kempe* (Amethyst Press, 2017; first published Gatehouse Press, 2014); Pattie McCarthy, *Wifthing* (Berkeley, CA: Apogee Press, 2021); Dana Bagshaw, *Cell Talk: A Duologue between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Radius: London, 2002); and Victoria MacKenzie, *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy On My Little Pain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). For critical discussion of the Margery and Julian plays, see Jacqueline Jenkins, "Playing Julian: The Cell as Theater in Contemporary Culture," in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post–Medieval Reception*, ed. Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 113–29, and Tara Williams, "Recreating and Reassessing Margery and Julian's Encounter," in, *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Kalas and Varnam, 278–96.

of medievalist feminist scholarship has increased significantly in the twenty-first century, beginning with the publication of John Arnold and Katherine Lewis's *Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* in 2004, which cemented her now-canonical status in medieval literature.[33] More recently, *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe* includes essays on creative responses to *The Book* and on Margery in comparison with the modern performance artist Marina Abramović. [34] In the contemporary church, however, as Fiona Tolhurst has argued, Kempe's reputation and following remain less significant than that of Julian of Norwich:

> Julian receives veneration as a "saint" from clergy and laity alike, while Margery receives qualified praise from Christians as an example of lay piety along with exaggerated praise from academics as "our sister Margery." Although Margery gives university professors a colourful and eccentric example of medieval life, they should keep in mind that the prominence of Margery's medieval afterlife in university classrooms is out of step with her

[33] John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004). These interventions build on medievalist feminist scholarship initiated by volumes such as Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury's *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), and Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson's *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[34] Sarah Salih, "Writing Performed Lives: Margery Kempe meets Marina Abramović," in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Kalas and Varnam, 259–77.

> marginal position in mainstream religious life in twenty-first-century England.[35]

Tolhurst focuses here on Margery's cult status within the Church, although, as Laura Kalas discusses, Margery is commemorated annually in the *Calendar of the Church of England* (November 9), and, in 2018, a commemorative bench was unveiled in the Saturday marketplace near St. Margaret's church, King's Lynn, in her honour.[36] Nevertheless, Margery does not have the long history of popular approval that Julian does. Indeed a brief glance at the increasingly positive reviews of *The Book* on Amazon still reveals examples of the kinds of prejudice that Kempe received when the Early English Text Society published the first edition.[37] When Michelle Paver picked up a second-hand copy of *The Book*, she admitted that she had "never heard of Margery Kempe," and her description of her writing as "bizarre, narcissistic, and oddly pitiable" represents that all-too-common popular response to Margery as a strange and self-centred creature (387). And yet Paver did feel compassion for Margery,

---

[35] Fiona Tolhurst, "Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe as Contemporary Culture Figures," in *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 187–99, at 197.

[36] Laura Kalas, *Margery Kempe's Spiritual Medicine: Suffering, Transformation, and the Life–Course* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 219–20.

[37] One review from 2017 is entitled "this chicks [sic] crazy" and asserts, "had to buy it for school but wouldnt [sic] recommend it as a quality read though, unless you enjoy the ramblings of a madwoman," <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Margery-Kempe-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/0199686645>, last accessed January 16, 2020. On the history of *The Book*'s reception see Mitchell, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

even if her pity appears somewhat double-edged at first. On the one hand, it seems condescending, in the modern sense of the verb "pity," but, on the other, it does represent an emotional response that touched Paver and inspired her to base her fictional character on Margery. As I have argued elsewhere, pity, in its medieval sense of compassion and fellow-feeling, is an emotion that is crucial to Kempe's spirituality and that, through imitation, enables her to form affective bonds not only with Christ but also with her fellow Christians.[38] Paver's pity may appear to distance her from Margery initially but in fact her response to Margery's situation angered her and spurred her into action: to return to Felski's formulation of empathetic reading, she responded to Kempe's pain and suffering. In her "Author's Note," Paver declared that Margery gave birth to an "unconscionable" number of children (389) and she represents Margery's conversion to the religious life as a deliberate attempt to regain control over her own body. In an interview, Paver commented:

> What interested me was I knew that I would have a female protagonist and themes about women [in *Wakenhyrst*] and there was this poor woman [Margery] who had had all these children, and in the medieval times women

[38] Laura Varnam, "The Crucifix, the Pietá, and the Female Mystic: Devotional Objects and Performative Identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41, no. 2 (2015), 208–37. For the modern and medieval meanings of the word "pity," see Laura Varnam, "A Revelation of Love: Christianity, Julian of Norwich, and Medieval Piety in the Harry Potter Series," *Studies in Medievalism XXIX: Politics and Medievalism (Studies)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 155–82, at 164–65.

> had a pretty rough time. And that was her way out, was to feel that she was chosen by God.[39]

Paver is not alone in reading Kempe's spirituality and conversion as an expression of female independence. As John Hirsh has shown in his biography of Hope Emily Allen, in her work on Kempe's devotional context, Allen saw "an element of protest: women were, in their devotions, articulating a degree of freedom of expression that had been denied them in the social circumstances in which she lived."[40] That freedom is less evident in the extracts from Pyett's "Book" that are included in *Wakenhyrst* but it is articulated by Maud Stearne who, as a direct result of reading Pyett, begins to ask questions about female independence related to education and childbirth, and to assert a measure of intellectual freedom away from her father's misogynistic influence. Even more importantly, however, without the discovery of Pyett's "Book", the secret of Lily Stearne's death would never have been brought to light and her story would have remained tragically forgotten.

Both Maud's rescue of Lily and Paver's pity for Margery can be understood as part of the novel's "restoration", to use Katherine Brown's term, of female experience that is inspired by, but goes beyond the Middle Ages. In addition to restoration signifying "the reuse or rewriting of previous sources [...] in a way that both renews and transforms the source,"

---

[39] Michelle Paver, "Michelle Paver interview: Suggestion is always more powerful than in-your-face horror," interview by Peter Meinertzhagen, *Sublime Horror,* April 1, 2019, <https://www.sublimehorror.com/books/michelle-paver-interview-wakenhyrst/>, last accessed March 26, 2020.

[40] John C. Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1988), 152.

Brown argues that the term is especially useful because it "emphasises similarities among works as it also implies a temporal or historical dimension of making present again past texts and the events they describe, even as they are transformed."[41] Brown goes on to suggest that, given that medievalism studies is itself "predicated on renewing aspects of the Middle Ages," such scholarship also enacts "this very process of restoration, its *materia* being any characteristic of the Middle Ages that it seeks to restore and validate." This is precisely how the transformation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* operates in *Wakenhyrst*.[42] When Paver's pity was activated by the "unconscionable" number of children to whom Margery gave birth (and the mothers of both Pyett and Maud suffer profoundly in childbirth in the novel), she began a process of restoration that validated the medieval mystic's conversion to religious life as a mode of escape while, simultaneously, critiquing and challenging the marital norms that allowed for the repeated subjugation of women's bodies in pregnancy, even in the present day.

The "Author's Note" at the end of the novel also reveals that, for Paver, this affective response is an especially personal one, stating that parts of Maud's story were inspired by "the reminiscences of my Belgian mother and aunt" (390). Paver reveals that her great-grandmother "had a very hard life with an abusive husband, frequent pregnancies, and three children lost to illness" and that her mother consequently had a "pretty tough childhood" (390-91). She mentions a male relation who was "such a womaniser that not even his own daughter-in-law was off-limits", a family doctor who suggested that another male relative

---

[41] Katherine A. Brown, "Medieval Restoration and Modern Creativity," in *Studies in Medievalism XXV: Medievalism and Modernity,* ed. Karl Fugelso with Joshua Davies and Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 11–18, at 12.

[42] Brown, "Medieval Restoration," 18.

should not have intercourse with his wife every single night, and moreover, recalls that her grandmother “almost never signed her own name, but instead wrote Epse P. Van Mensel” (meaning “epouse [wife]”, 391). These details are reflected in the life of Maud’s “Maman”, whom Edmund refers to as Dorothy rather than her real name of Dorothée (127), demonstrating linguistically her loss of identity due to patriarchal oppression. Paver concludes that these examples of female subjection occurred “well within living memory" and that "it makes me particularly glad to live where and when I do” (391). In *Wakenhyrst*, Paver both exposes this reality and offers an alternative outcome in Maud, whose autonomy and freedom are celebrated at the end of the novel, as we shall see.

The term “restoration” is especially relevant to this article because of its use in Kempe’s *Book* to refer to the restitution of mental health after pregnancy-related illness. The Proem explains that Margery endured “grett bodyly sekeness, wherthorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace *restoryd* her ageyn” (42). This refers to Margery’s illness after the birth of her first child, and the verb is used again in Chapter 75 when Margery prays for a woman who was “newly delyveryd of a childe and sche was owt hir mende” (328). The “sayd creatur preyid for this woman every day that God schulde, yyf it were hys wylle, *restoryn* hir to hir wittys ageyn” (329). It is God’s grace that restores the women in both cases, and this is reinforced by the third use of the word when it is declared that the “compassyfe deth of owyr Savyowr” is the means “be the whech we arn alle *restoryd* to lyfe” (168). Restoration, then, encompasses the regaining of health and sanity, and the return to a state of grace, most especially for women, and this sense of rehabilitation works well in the context both of *The Book*'s efforts to recuperate Margery's reputation and Paver's interest in the recovery of the stories of lost or marginalized women, from her own family and fictional characters to Margery Kempe herself.

Exemplifying the theoretical definition of restoration as a "making present," Brown acknowledges her deliberate use of the phrase because of its "allusion to the Mass that makes present the real body and blood of Christ."[43] This approach to time applies particularly effectively to Kempe's religious experiences because, as Dinshaw has shown, Kempe makes present the time of Christ in her own body through her visions and devotional performances. Margery exists in a "capacious now," according to Dinshaw, in which "past-present-future times are collapsed"; Margery is "a creature not merely in another time but rather with another time *in* her."[44] Dinshaw goes on to suggest that "reading the book's multiple temporalities opens up temporal avenues for post-medieval readers in turn," and, in *Wakenhyrst,* those multiple temporalities stretch from the early medieval St. Guthlac to the sixteenth-century Alice Pyett, from the Stearne siblings' Victorian childhood to Maud's narrative time, and are merged in a "capacious now" that is sustained and embodied by the space that the novel occupies: the marshy fens of East Anglia.[45]

Margery Kempe is, of course, in her element in East Anglia, the very landscape that nurtured her spirituality and that, in Paver's novel, is awash with water – just like Margery's own tearful body and book. *Wakenhyrst* is saturated with stories as well as with water, and the historical and contemporary events of the novel, from Guthlac's battle with the demons of the marsh to Lily's tragic drowning, merge and coalesce in the fens, a place that Justin T. Noetzel argues is a powerful repository for "imagination and memory" in the region.[46] In addition to functioning on the level of plot and imagery, however, water also can also provide

[43] Brown, "Medieval Restoration," 12.

[44] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?,* 107.

[45] Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?,* 108.

[46] Noetzel, "Marsh Men and Trackless Bogs," 27.

a useful theoretical tributary in a medievalism studies approach to the novel. James L. Smith and Hetta Howes have recently set out a manifesto for medieval water studies, arguing for the importance of thinking "*with* rather than just *about* water."[47] They note that medieval water studies "finds itself in a situation similar to that of the study of medievalisms," where it is no longer desirable merely to "catalogue instances of the medieval in literature, film, politics or wider popular culture without an incisive observation of how this knowledge benefits our understanding of the 'continuing process of creating the Middle Ages.'"[48] In addition to the concept of restoration, then, I invoke here the uninhibited flow of liquid from Kempe and Allen to Alice Pyett and Maud Stearne in order to enact an approach to medievalism studies that, to borrow Smith and Howes' formulation, "delight[s] in its drifts and swerves" and "pay[s] attention to, rather than gloss[ing] over, its acts of resistance."[49] Water is the common element that flows between Kempe's Middle Ages and Maud's twentieth century, but it is an

[47] James L. Smith and Hetta Howes, "Medieval Water Studies: Past, Present and Promise," *Open Library of Humanities*, 5, no. 1, 35 (2019): 1–13, at 4, <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.443>, last accessed March 26, 2020. See also Rebecca Pinner's article in Smith and Howes' special issue on the importance of water to the religious landscapes of East Anglia, with reference to St. Guthlac, "Thinking Wetly: Causeways and Communities in East Anglian Hagiography," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2, 3 (2018): 1–27, at 6–8, <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.229>, last accessed March 26, 2020.

[48] Smith and Howes, "Medieval Water Studies," 3.

[49] Smith and Howes, "Medieval Water Studies," 10.

element that does not always flow easily in the fens – or in its literary representations.[50] It stagnates and pools, it seeps and oozes, and can ensnare the unwary in its slimy depths, as Edmund Stearne discovers all too well, and it serves as an apt metaphor for the difficulties that women face in finding their own way through the mire of misogyny, both medieval and modern, to enable their voices to be heard.

In fact, the "ooze" of the marsh becomes part of the language of *Wakenhyrst* through *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery famously tells her husband that "the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the *wose*, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng" (62). In the first extract from Alice Pyett's "Book" she frames her desire for chastity by asserting that, although her husband enforces the "debt of matrimony," she "would rather have licked the ooze in the gutter" than sleep with him (126). The Middle English "wose" or ooze means a "glutinous mud, slime" on the ocean floor, the bed of an estuary, or the "miry or marshy stretch" at the edge of a body of water.[51] This ooze is stomach-churning but, to both Margery and Alice, it is preferable to sexual intercourse in their newly converted states. There is disgust and danger in the oozing marsh of *Wakenhyrst*, and it bleeds into the characters' language and conception of their own mental and physical health: they think "with" rather than just "about" the ooze. The eczema with which Maud is troubled is described as "oozing and swollen" (73), and Edmund Stearne's fear of irrationality is portrayed as "seeping" into his mind. When he fears that something has been "let loose" in the fens, he comments: "It's

[50] Noetzel argues for the essential ambivalence of the fen landscape, as a place of "conflict and hybridity" that destabilizes the relationship between sacred and profane in "Marsh Men and Trackless Bogs," 29–35.

[51] MED s.v. "wose" (n) (1a and b).

rather like the experience of worrying about something when one is half-awake: no matter how often one reasons away one's disquiet, it always seeps back" (217). Edmund's mind is all too permeable to what he sees as irrational anxieties, and he describes his conception of medieval religion in similar terms: "I begin to understand why Pyett's was the age of wonders and demons. I begin to grasp how swiftly unreason, like an unclean flood, seeps into the deepest crevices of the mind" (165). For Stearne, opening his mind to the medieval beliefs and culture of Alice Pyett leaves him vulnerable, but for Kempe's first editor, Allen, fluidity offered a slim possibility for escape and emergence. While unfortunately Allen was unable to complete her promised second volume of *The Book*, she did not despair, and Dinshaw quotes one of Allen's letters in which she referred to the advice of a friend who had "sent word that she expected me somehow to 'ooze through' what I set out to do and I am optimist enough to agree with her."[52] The phrase "ooze through" reminds us of the difficulty of Allen's task, wading through the growing research that she had amassed, but its use here suggests that she herself might be able to slowly seep through it. Just as liquid has the ability to flow "as if through pores or small openings," according to the OED definition of "ooze," Allen remained optimistic that she would gradually emerge on the other side of her immersive task.[53] In *Wakenhyrst*, Maud feels at one with the fens and, rather than trying to control or resist them (as her father does), she respects their shifting, non-human form, and as a result, the story of Lily Stearne is finally able to ooze its way to the surface.[54] This porous

[52] Allen, quoted in Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 122.

[53] OED s.v. "ooze" (v. 1), 3.

[54] "The fen was nothing like what she'd expected. It didn't care about her. It didn't want her. She knew that." (50).

attachment, whether for good or ill, also stands as an apt figure for our critical work as scholars. As Felski puts it, critical attachments

> are often heightened by the labor of interpretation, fueled by the time and effort that goes into poring over and explicating works of art [...] Through ongoing exposure and unflagging attention, the particles of a painting or novel or film get under the skin or *seep* into the bloodstream; they become an integral part of who we are.[55]

In what follows, I will show how the medieval mystic and her book "seep" into the plot and significance of *Wakenhyrst* through the process of reading and "poring over" her story. The process of identification changes the characters in *Wakenhyrst*, both reinscribing and challenging the gender relations at work in Kempe's *Book* and our modern world, and for the female characters, in particular, offers the possibility of a much-desired freedom and personal autonomy.

Reading "The Book of Alice Pyett" as a Mirror

In their book *Affective Medievalism*, Thomas A. Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg argue that in attending to the voices that we hear from the past, we must “understand that the voices we hear won’t necessarily be saying just one thing.” They continue:

[55] Felski, *Hooked*, 133.

> As Larry Scanlon has pointed out, "the basic question for the historian is 'what happened?' For a literary scholar, the basic question is 'what is a particular text trying to say?'" We would go further and say that whether one is a literary critic or historian, to attend to the voice or voices of a text, one needs to engage affectively with a text, and the way in which those voices are heard.[56]

Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst* is fundamentally concerned with dramatizing and evaluating its characters' affective responses to voices from the past, on multiple and interconnected levels. Within the novel, both Maud and Edmund Stearne read and respond to Alice Pyett's "Book", and for Maud this also includes reading Edmund's notebook which acts as an affective reading record of his developing identification with Alice's narrative. Metatextually, we read the novel's plot from Maud's perspective, as the frame narrative makes clear, and this experience is shaped by Paver's own reading of Margery Kempe, as we discover in her "Author's Note." These intertwined reading experiences embody many of the characteristics of identification discussed by Felski and explored above, but they also enact the process by which identifying with a text changes the reader. Felski argues that a text "does not simply entrench a prior self but may enrich, expand, or amend it […]. [I]n the act of identifying, we may come to reassess or question our previous views."[57]

---

[56] Thomas A. Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg, *Affective Medievalism: Love, Abjection and Discontent* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 110.

[57] Felski, *Hooked*, 83.

Identification does not always lead to self-improvement or positive reassessment, however. Felski describes “ironic identification”, which operates on the basis of a “sense of estrangement and disassociation in the connecting tissue that binds character and reader” and this estrangement can be seen both in Edmund Stearne’s response to Alice’s “Book” and, to an even greater degree, in the reader, and Maud’s, response to his private notebooks which detail his increasing madness.[58] Stearne’s conscience is pricked when he reads of Alice’s unconfessed sin (inspired by Kempe's own and discussed below) but he experiences misplaced consolation when Alice’s equilibrium is restored after her torment by demons. He claims, “I take comfort from Pyett’s recovery, as it mirrors my own” (190). This consolatory mirroring recalls Dinshaw’s reading of Hope Emily Allen’s symbiotic relationship with Margery Kempe in her reading experience, with which I began this article; and, furthermore, it echoes Christ’s declaration to Margery that “I haue ordeyned the to be a merowr amongys hem, for to han gret sorwe, that thei schulde takyn exampil by the for to have sum litel sorwe in her hertys for her synnys, that thei myth therthorw be savyd” (338–39). But Alice Pyett’s example does not function as a fully-developed devotional mirror for Stearne. He sees the reflection of his own secret sin in her “Book” but he is unable to truly atone and “therthorw be savyd,” as Christ promises the truly repentant sinner. In fact, he even confesses that as a boy he used to go to great lengths to avoid looking into the well at Wake's End, "for I dreaded seeing my reflection in the water" and similarly would "avoid catching sight of myself in looking-glasses, particularly at night" because of a "childish fear that I might glimpse some monster behind me" (219). As this section will show, Maud and Edmund’s responses to Alice’s *Book* become increasingly polarized as the novel progresses, with Edmund’s inability to discern the truth of his past and his responsibility for it leading him to a mental breakdown

[58] Felski, *Hooked*, 111.

that is embodied by the increasing presence of demons and devils in the novel as representations of his irrationality and avoidance of blame.

I deliberately use the term "discern" here because it relates to a driving concern with Margery Kempe's *Book*: *discretio spirituum* or "the discernment of spirits." Discerning whether a mystic's visions came from God or the devil was crucial for the establishment of religious authority in the Middle Ages and, as Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa has shown, the practice of *discretio* became a "highly gendered issue," with women being at particular risk of accusations of demonic possession (and Margery Kempe is no exception here).[59] In *Wakenhyrst*, however, Paver reverses this gendered distinction and in a major change to Kempe's *Book*, she increases the presence of devils in order to reinforce Edmund's sin and to promote the susceptibility of the unstable *male* reader to demonic possession.[60] It could be argued that Paver creates an uncomfortable parallel between Margery Kempe and Edmund Stearne in her use of the motif of Kempe's unconfessed sin but a comparison of the structure of both texts suggests that Kempe (or Alice's) example operates as a test that Stearne fails. Although the details of Margery's sin remained undisclosed to her readers and her own period of mental instability ensues, this incident occurs in Chapter 1 of her *Book* as a catalyst for and

[59] Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*: The Issue of *Discretio Spirituum* Reconsidered," *English Studies* 92, no. 2 (2011): 119–37, at 120.

[60] Kempe is tormented by devils "rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng hir bothe nygth and day" before her conversion (54) and Alice is similarly "pawed and hauled" by devils (175). Stearne insists that Alice's "*Book* teems with demons and evil spirits" (187) but Kempe's *Book*, in contrast, does not. While her detractors often accuse her of having a devil inside her (for example, 94, 252), she is more often described as surrounded by angels (for example, 193, 328).

prologue to her conversion. Stearne, on the other hand, does not take the opportunity afforded by reading Alice's "Book" to confront or atone for his behaviour – this is left to his daughter, Maud, to effect within the frame narrative. Maud's reading of Alice's "Book" educates her on the plight of women, both in the medieval past and her own contemporary present, and she gradually liberates herself from her father's control. But for Edmund, his affective and irrational response to Alice's sin is his downfall, demonstrating, as Felski notes, that "felt affinity" with fictional characters can be "underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects."[61]

The nine passages from "The Book of Alice Pyett" quoted in *Wakenhyrst* are prefaced with the phrase "transl. & exegesis by E. A. M. Stearne" but we find the true exegesis in Maud's developing interpretation of what she reads. Maud's first impression of Alice Pyett, like Paver's response to Kempe, is far from positive but, when her father offers her the opportunity to help him with his work, she sees this as a sign of his confidence in her abilities (whereas in fact it is a test of her competence as a secretary).[62] Maud finds Pyett's noisy, tearful mysticism "faintly ridiculous" at first and thinks that the mystic "didn't seem quite worthy of Father's attention. Surely she might simply have been mad?" (94). Maud's assessment echoes both Paver's reaction to *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the doubts of Margery's detractors about her authenticity within the *Book* itself, both within *The Book* and

[61] Felski, *Hooked*, 81.

[62] John Hirsh notes that in fact "the actual task of transcription was done by Meech's wife, Ruth, who typed directly from the rotographs; after dinner she and her husband would sit down and proof-read her work," *Hope Emily Allen*, 118.

in its popular reception.[63] But when Alice's "Book" is discovered, Maud is immediately motivated to "do everything to help" her father (100) and she fantasizes that the text's success would enable her to become her father's intellectual equal:

> She saw herself – much slenderer, and free from eczema – accompanying him on lecture tours. Not even in her imagination could she make herself pretty, but she fancied that in a well-cut tunic-jacket and narrow skirt she might achieve a certain distinction. They would travel the globe together, Father giving lectures to learned societies, and she seeing to his every need. On trains and in hotels they would have long intimate discussions about *The Book*, and he would listen respectfully to her ideas. "Such a bond between them," people would murmur admiringly. "He thinks the world of her, you know." (100)

Unfortunately, Maud's fantasy of her father listening "respectfully" to her ideas proves to be just that, and throughout the novel Stearne expresses misogynistic views aimed at undermining Maud's intelligence and increasing intellectual freedom. He tells her that her "knowledge of Scripture is impressive but you mustn't show off. Intellectual conceit is unattractive, particularly in females" (34), which reminds us of the controversy courted by

---

[63] See Eluned Bremmer, "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 117–35, and Fiona Tolhurst, "The Radical, yet Orthodox, Margery Kempe," in *Sacred and Profane in Chaucer and Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honour of John V. Fleming*, ed. Robert Epstein and William Robins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 179–204.

Kempe when she speaks openly of God. In a diary entry, however, Stearne regrets that Maud was not born a boy, for she is “much more intelligent” than her brother, Richard (39). When Maud begins to ask questions about Pyett’s “Book” as she types up her father’s transcription, he attempts to close her down. When she asks him to explain “the debt of matrimony,” he replies dismissively, "my dear, you're not an historian. I'd rather you simply transcribe what I give you without trying to understand the medieval idiom" (126). But as Maud learns more about Pyett and, concurrently, about her father's past from his diaries, she becomes bolder in her verbal sparring. When she asks him whether Pyett "may simply have been mad," suffered from a "hysterical illness" as a result of her seventeen children, or been "deranged by the memory of her sin" – all accusations levelled at Margery Kempe – the following exchange takes place:

> He looked at her. “I’m afraid, Maud, that being female you lack the imagination to understand a visionary like Pyett. May I trouble you for the marmalade?”
> “Oh I’m sorry, Father. Here it is. But if women lack imagination, then why did God choose Pyett to be a mystic?”
> He sighed. “Precisely *because* she lacked imagination. She was merely a vessel into which He poured His grace. For the same reason, women were believed to be more prone to demonic possession, being weaker and therefore more prone to sin.” (194–95)

Stearne’s attempt to reinforce his patriarchal authority at the breakfast table is subverted by Maud’s quick-witted reply, reminiscent of Kempe’s retorts to priests and clerics in her *Book*, and, as the novel progresses, it is Stearne himself who reveals himself to be “prone to

demonic possession" rather than any of the female characters, medieval or modern. Significantly, this exchange occurs directly after the extract from Alice's "Book" in which her husband tells her to "be quiet as other wives are, and card and wool and spin" (193). The image of the silent women performing stereotypically gendered tasks seems to act as a provocation to Maud, stimulating further questions which Stearne rejects as "curiosity" (195). But it is precisely that curiosity that underpins the recovery of women's lived experience in the novel.

Maud's initial response to the opening pages of Alice's "Book", for example, foregrounds the way in which reading the text provides a mirror for her to reflect upon her own and her mother's positions as women:

> As she typed, she found herself thinking about Maman. Like Alice, Maman had been married young: in her case, at sixteen. Like Alice, Maman had never been allowed to *do* anything; she'd always had things done *to* her. She had been "given in marriage" and "permitted" fine clothes – although only if Father approved of them [...] Like Alice, she had continued to pay the debt of matrimony. Maud wondered if it had been as distasteful to Maman as it had been to Alice. And whether Father had cared (127–28).

Maud's "distaste" for sexual intimacy (mirroring Margery and Alice's preference for "ooze" over intercourse) is established early in the novel when the Stearne's servant, Ivy, reveals to Maud the facts of life, when she sees two dogs mating: "Maud glimpsed a sharp red sausage between its hind legs with a cloudy droplet at its tip. She felt prickly and hot. *People* did that? Father did *that* to Maman?" (69). This newfound knowledge makes Maud feel ashamed and

she experiences intrusive thoughts of male genitalia that are reminiscent of the "fowle thowtys and fowle mendys of letchery and alle unclennes" with which Margery Kempe is plagued (281). Margery is tormented by "horybyl syghtys and abhominabyl" of "mennys membrys" and the devil tells her that she must be "comown to hem all" (282), in the form of a prostitute. In Margery's *Book* this vision threatens her chastity but in *Wakenhyrst*, Maud's repulsion comes to be associated with her fear of death because her father's unfettered desire leads to the pregnancies that endanger, and ultimately end, her mother's life. This is reinforced when Maud overhears the doctor encouraging Stearne to refrain from intercourse and she interprets her mother's plight as a direct result of his choice to satisfy his own desires rather than safeguarding his wife ("Father could have spared her all that – but he'd chosen not to," 72) and indeed when her mother's life is in the balance, Stearne instructs the doctor to save the child (79), thereby choosing to allow his wife to die. The "debt of matrimony" is represented as a significant barrier to female autonomy in both *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Wakenhyrst* but, in Paver's novel, the very real consequences of male desire for the woman who cannot refuse is death.

Maud's reconsiders her mother's lack of freedom during afternoon tea at the rectory where the only other woman present is the vicar's unmarried sister, Miss Broadstairs, whom Maud views with contempt: "*I'm not like you*, she wanted to snarl. *You may be content with sorting dirty jumble and riding your bicycle for an hour on a Saturday afternoon but don't ever try to make common cause with me*" (italics original, 128). Maud fears turning into Miss Broadstairs, and, so, decides to do something about it by "secretly" reading her father's newspaper, in which she learns about "Class Warfare and the Suffragist Movement": "most of it she didn't understand, but she longed to bob her hair and become a New Woman − whatever that meant" (129). The proximity of Maud's discovery of contemporary drives for female emancipation to her reading of "The Book of Alice Pyett" is striking. Her recognition

of Alice's entrapment in her marriage enables her to perform an exegesis on her mother's life and, in turn, her own, beginning a process of intellectual development and independent action that is crucial to the novel's overarching shape. While recognising that Miss Broadstairs does not present a utopian alternative, Maud yearns to be a "New Woman", carving out a space for herself just as the mystics Kempe and Pyett did; and, importantly, Maud's newly developed personal autonomy and curiosity enable her to reveal her father's secret and reclaim Lily Stearne's story, restoring a woman from the recent past and reinserting her in the present timeline.

The second passage included from Alice Pyett's "Book", on the other hand, demonstrates Edmund Stearne's troubled – and troubling – relationship with the text. When Stearne reads of "the thing on [Alice's] conscience that she had never revealed in all her life", for which she would be "damned", he rushes out of the house, leaving his desk in disarray, overcome by "the strangest sensations of guilt and fear − especially fear." This emotional response is accompanied by a haunting image of "something submerged: I think it was hair − or perhaps weeds" and a powerful feeling that "there was something under the ice. Something alive, fighting to get out" (145). In Kempe's *Book,* the precise details of the unconfessed sin are never revealed but scholarly consensus often assumes that it was sexual.[64] In *Wakenhyrst*, as we have seen, the secret submerged in the fens is Edmund's responsibility for his sister's

[64] Liz Herbert McAvoy suggests it is "highly likely" to be "one of sexual temptation," "Spiritual Virgin to Virgin Mother: The Confessions of Margery Kempe," *Parergon* 17, no. 1 (1999): 9–44, at 19; Robert Stanton concurs in "Lechery, Pride, and the Uses of Sin in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 36, no. 2 (2010): 169–204, at 178. Rebecca Krug argues, conversely, that the secret sin was the temptation to suicide, see *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (London: Cornell University Press, 2017), 62–65.

death (aged ten) from drowning during a game in which he had tied Lily up in a boat on the mere, naked, and was too ashamed to ask for help when the boat was cast adrift. Lily "ordered" Edmund to fetch help (and in this short scene related via Jubal Rede's reminiscences, her character comes across as feisty and dynamic), but Edmund replies that "I *can't!* […] They'll see you with no clothes on and I'll get thrashed" (242).[65] In the game, Edmund was playing Perseus, saving the princess Andromeda from the dragon, but his actions cause her death when the game goes wrong and he is too afraid to admit his part in it. Jubal expresses his discomfort at seeing Lily naked when he reveals the secret to Maud and he admits that he, too, did nothing to save Lily because he assumed that Edmund had run away to the house to fetch help. The male gaze on the young female body is troubling here, hinting at a sexual component to the apparently innocent game, and this undercurrent is also present when Stearne discovers Pyett's book. His representation of his reading experience is misogynistic and uncomfortable, betraying an obsession with the female body as much as the female text: "Pyett will prove a coy mistress, very hard to read, but already she is yielding riches. It will take months to lay bare all her secrets. I can hardly wait" (111). When Alice's unconfessed sin pricks his conscience, however, Stearne's attitude changes and he displaces his blame and guilt onto her:

> I had never imagined her as being capable of any sin, let alone sin of such gravity that it would weigh on her conscience for years. It is *this* that shook me. That's why I experienced such an intense reaction today. I've become so engrossed in my

[65] Lily only agrees to the game on the proviso that Edmund gives her his "shut-knife with the tortoiseshell handle" and she berates her brother for being a "coward" and believing in folktale creatures such as ferishes (239–40).

> translation that in some unaccountable way I seem to have associated her sin with myself. That's why I felt guilty and ashamed − when in fact the guilt is hers. I must guard against becoming excessively involved with my work, it can't be healthy. (146)

Stearne's dogged refusal to take responsibility for Lily's death gradually consumes him as the novel progresses and, once his visions of demons in the fens take hold, he becomes (surprisingly) ever more convinced of his own innocence. In a later diary entry, he suggests that the "malign influence" of a demon must have been at work when he was a boy, "clouding my judgement and making me panic and flee", and even argues that he had "believed that God would save her. That's why I didn't tell anyone where she was" (297). He concludes ultimately that "what happened when I was a boy *was not my fault*. I didn't kill Lily. It was the demon" (298). In the frame narrative at the end of the novel, it is this self-deception and betrayal of Lily that drives Maud to reveal the truth to Dr Hunter. She explains that in the paintings that her father later produced in the asylum, "he painted [Lily] as a grown woman. That was unforgivable" (373).

> 'Why do you think he did that?' 'To make her easier to blame, I should imagine. Somewhere in the ledger he says it was her fault. That's what he did all his life: it was Lily's fault, or the demon's. Never his own.' 'Perhaps he couldn't bear the truth.' Maud twisted her hands in her lap. '*He* was the devil in the corner. He left Lily to drown. That was what he could never bring himself to face.' (373)

When Stearne sees his own sin reflected in Pyett's mirror, he is unable to truly recognise his guilt and atone appropriately for it. He claims that "Pyett has helped me see that *the turmoil*

came from God" and that he "must atone for my sin" but when he asks himself how to do this, he declares "I'm not a Catholic, I can't make confession; nor would God wish me to" (235). However, confession is, in fact, precisely what is required, as the frame narrative of *Wakenhyrst* makes clear. Maud, whose name means "strength of battle" (398), has the strength of character to tell not only Lily's story but also to reveal the missing piece of her own story to the reader, as part of her "long atonement for Clem" (36), as I explain below. Stearne, on the other hand, believes that it is sufficient to become personally "aware" of his own sin. He writes in his notebook that "Pyett's *awareness* of her sin *proved her special virtue* […] One can only be saved *if one is aware of one's own sin. Therefore* it follows that if one *is* aware of one's sin, *one is saved*. So it is with me" (italics original, 192). This certainty proves to be entirely misguided as Stearne continues to read in a self-serving and self-deceptive fashion, eventually abandoning Alice's "Book" in favour of seeing himself (erroneously) as the victorious demon-fighting St. Guthlac instead. Alice's "Book" operates as a test in the novel – of personal and moral self-reflection; and it is a test that Edmund Stearne does not pass, with tragic consequences for his victims as well as himself.

Nicholas Watson has argued that *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a similarly testing work. He suggests that the text "invites us to struggle with it in order to be edified by it", continually "tempt[ing] us into refusing [Margery]" should our "faith and trust not be supple enough to understand" her life and work.[66] The two primary readers in *Wakenhyrst* – Maud and Edmund – represent two sides of a similar struggle, rooted in a gendered reader response: on the one hand, the open-minded, outward-looking female reader and, on the other, the

[66] Nicholas Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434, at 424.

trenchant, self-serving, and misogynistic male reader. If we, as readers, can align ourselves with the former rather than the latter, we can begin to implement a hopeful and restorative reading practice that takes in not only *Wakenhyrst* and *The Book* but also extends outwards into our interactions in the world. This is crucially reinforced in the return to the frame narrative at the end of *Wakenhyrst*, on which I will now focus by way of conclusion. Here, Dr Hunter's influence allows Maud to finally embrace the truth of her own story.

Conclusion: The Restoration of Female Experience "in her typescript and in her book"

The Book of Margery Kempe famously opens by describing itself as a "schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort" and, furthermore, declares that the "grace that [God] werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth, yf lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce" (41). As we have seen, "lak of charyte" certainly inhibits Edmund Stearne from "profiting" from the example of Alice Pyett but, for Maud, “The Book of Alice Pyett” proves transformative, both for herself and for others. In the final extract of "this her book", the reader is told that Alice had a friar write down her "tribulation" so that readers will "be encouraged not to resent their troubles but to thank God for them" and the extract ends powerfully with an assertion of Alice's authority: "And everything in this book is true. And people should believe the words of this creature, for they are the words of God" (247). The concept of truth is fundamental to *Wakenhyrst*, which concludes with two chapters that return to the frame narrative in 1967 in order to finally reveal the additional truth that Maud has been concealing, the death of her and Clem's child. The two chapters reaffirm Maud's restorative practice not only as a reader but as a writer, in conversation with the academic Dr Hunter. When asked whether she still hates her father, Maud explains:

> "Writing it all down has been a trial. At times I've hated it. But I no longer hate him. I think I feel sorry for him." With her eyes she followed the trail of a fox. "Sometimes," she said, "on quiet nights, I fancy I can hear her crying." "You mean Lily?" Raising her head, Maud squinted at the sky: "I've decided to publish." Robin audibly gasped. "Do you mean that?" "I said it, didn't I?" "What made you decide?" "Lily. I want people to know the truth." (378–79)

Writing her account has enabled Maud to reassess her feelings towards her father. She feels compassionately towards him, even charitably, to return to the reading model proposed in Margery Kempe's *Book*. But nevertheless, at the forefront of her decision to publish (despite no longer needing to do financially) is Maud's determination to reveal the truth about Lily. Maud's feelings are, however, even more complex than she reveals to Dr Hunter. "Writing her account had forced her to re-live everything: the grief, the guilt. Especially the guilt" (376) and that guilt is partly her own role in Clem's death but partly another secret submerged in the fens, the death of her child. Regarding her father's murder of Clem, Maud feels a responsibility for "plant[ing]" *The Life of St Guthlaf* in her father's books (377). She had hoped to "scare him" with a book about demons but had "never *imagined*" that it might cause him to believe that a real demon was at large in the fens (377), thereby leading to the murders. Dr Hunter argues that "no one could have foreseen" Stearne's response to the text but Maud's revelation in the frame narrative has an additional purpose because she finally admits to the loss of her and Clem's child. Lily is not the only child that Maud fancies she hears crying in the fens at night:

> In her typescript and her book, Maud had written that as her courses had come unexpectedly, she had squatted by the Mere and rinsed the blood off her hands. That wasn't true. Her courses hadn't come for the past three months. It wasn't menstrual blood she had washed off her fingers. It was the pathetic lump of flesh which had been her child and Clem's. Their daughter, as she liked to think of it; although thanks to Biddy Thrussel's herbs, one couldn't really tell. Maud had wrapped it in a pillowslip and committed it to the Mere. Shortly afterwards, Jubal had found her there and told her about Lily. "Of course, I keep my window open," said Maud, giving the bog oak a little pat. "How could I ever shut her out?" (384–5)

The revelation of this final secret is framed as an editorial correction; what she had written "in her typescript and her book […] wasn't true" and it is important to Maud that she sets the record straight. Alice Pyett set down the truth of her experience and her “Book” inspires Maud to do the same. Maud's miscarriage as a result of a local wisewoman's potion takes place at the Mere, which links her daughter's loss to Lily's drowning but crucially, Maud's secret is not represented as a sin.[67] In the context of the novel's representation of the dangers

[67] In Dana Bagshaw's dramatized version of the conversation between Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, Margery's "secret sin" is also revealed to be the loss of a child but this loss, and its cause, is presented in a much more disturbing fashion. Bagshaw invents an episode in Margery's life in which she becomes pregnant at fourteen as a result of rape and Margery tells Julian that she visited an "old wife," said locally to be a witch, and she drinks a preparation of herbs to abort the baby. The child appears to be born alive, although it is described as "horrible and ugly and blue," and Margery describes "wrapping it [...] until it stopped squirming" (*Cell Talk,* 13) and then burying it in the churchyard. Bagshaw's Julian

of childbirth and the patriarchal control of women's bodies, Maud's solution, both to her condition and to the fact that she is unmarried, is understandable. Indeed, in exercising her right to choose not to carry the pregnancy to term, Maud reinforces her development of personal autonomy throughout the novel and this autonomy, crucially, remains deeply rooted in empathy and kindness as Maud's admission that she keeps the window open for her daughter's spirit to return implies.

That empathy even, finally, extends to the Stearnes' servant, Ivy, who remains with Maud in Wake's End, bound together by their respective parts in the story, and the revelation of the truth in the frame narrative has unforeseen consequences for both Ivy and Maud. "Once the truth was known, Ivy's hold on her was over" (381), but Maud, surprisingly, reflects upon more complex feelings for Ivy than she had expected:

> It wasn't only relief that Maud had felt. It was shame. How was it Ivy's fault that she was what she was? In all her life she'd never been out of Suffolk. She would have said that she didn't want to thank you very much; but she'd never been taught any different. From childhood she'd had to fight to get enough food, while fending off the groping attentions of men. Later she had used her good looks to get what she wanted. She and

---

offers a compassionate response, declaring that "it is possible, Margery, that you did not kill the baby, / that even the old wife did not harm the baby. / God wills such losses sometimes / when things go wrong" (14). The visit to the local wisewoman and the unwanted sexual intercourses relates to Paver's concern in *Wakenhyrst* for women whose rights are denied.

> Maud had both had to fight to survive. Ivy had used sex, Maud had used her brain. Why could they not have found some common ground? (381)

Despite the fact that Maud was not able to achieve any kind of reconciliation with Ivy, the recognition of their similarity in their "fight" for survival reflects Maud's growth in the novel into a "champion of sorts" of women's rights. She is able to empathize with Ivy who used her body where Maud was lucky enough to use her brain to assert herself within the patriarchal atmosphere of Wake's End. And more importantly, Maud is able to ask with genuine regret, "why could they not have found some common ground?" Part of the answer to that question relates to class and Ivy's status as a servant in the household; part of it to Ivy's place in Maud's father's life after the death of her mother and Maud's discomfort around sex in the novel. But it is the education that has been provided by Alice Pyett's “Book” that enables Maud to have the imaginative capacity and empathy to ask this question in the first place. The truth at the heart of the novel is the restoration of compassion and subjectivity that the reading of Alice's “Book” enables for Maud and, consequently, for the reader. Through Maud and through Alice, women such as Lily Stearne, Maud's mother, and Ivy are able to re-emerge from the sodden wetlands as women in their own right with their own struggles – and, potentially, their own voices. When Ivy leaves the house at the end of the novel, we hear that she is “in talks” with the tabloid journalist from the opening of the novel about “a memoir of her life at Wake's End.” Maud reflects, “Well, let her do her worst. Astonishing how the truth really did set one free" (382). Maud's disclosure of *her* truth makes it possible for Ivy to tell her own story in turn, even if the narrative voice implies that that story will be sensational and to Maud's detriment. Indeed, the reading group questions at the end of the novel encourage the reader to reflect upon Ivy’s situation, asking “what do you think of Ivy?

[…] do you think she is treated fairly?" (399), showing that Paver's sympathies extend also to the minor female characters of the novel.

The focus on freedom at the end of the novel can also be found in the final extract of Alice's "Book". Whereas Paver's use of Margery Kempe's *Book* concentrates on Margery's temptations and visions rather than her famous travels, in the final extract she depicts Alice longing to go on pilgrimage: "Her husband gave her permission to go, so she went on pilgrimage to North Marston, then to York, Canterbury, Santiago and Rome. And she was gone many years" (247).[68] Although Alice does not get as far as the Holy Land, as Margery does, there is an understated satisfaction in the statement that "she was gone many years." Maud, by contrast, remains sequestered in Wake's End with Ivy until, after meeting Dr Hunter, she is able to gain the freedom for which she yearned. Initially, she finds that the academic lives up to name, making Maud feel hunted "like a cornered beast" (373), but ultimately Dr Hunter represents the potential for academic education to lead to female liberation: "She envied Dr Hunter, who was clever and self-possessed, and who – while belonging to a class decidedly below Maud's own – had achieved everything she had not: a university degree, an occupation. Freedom" (376).

Paver's representation of Dr Hunter in the frame narrative also recognises her deep attachment to her academic work and to finding out the truth about Stearne's paintings. When she writes to Maud, she "*begs*" her not to burn her father's notebook and she expresses her

---

[68] North Marston is Paver's own addition to the pilgrimage locations because it was the site of the shrine of "the well-known pseudo-saint, John Schorne, who is said to have imprisoned the Devil in a boot" (280). See Francis Young on the folk-tale aspects of this narrative in *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 93–94, at 94. Thanks to Jim Harris for first introducing me to the cult of Schorne.

astonishment at her new insight into the paintings, saying "*please* don't ignore this letter. I'm desperate to know what you think" (italics original, 15). Paver captures here the academic's investment in their work and reflects Felski's argument that "against the usual portrayal of academia as an affect-free zone, I would venture that affective ties are often *stronger* in academia than elsewhere, because more is at stake; the ties are thicker and woven out of more diverse strands."[69] The scholar who has written a book or article about a work of art like Dr Hunter, Felski persuasively suggests, "is bound to her work"; the study has become "a defining part of a scholarly identity and professional persona, a cornerstone of a chosen life path".[70] This article is for me a crucial part of acknowledging and owning the intersection of personal, affective, and professional attachments that I bring to bear in my work on Margery Kempe. I may not have empathized with Paver's initial readerly response to Kempe but at the end of her novel, when Dr Hunter sends Maud a postcard from a conference – of a crane because "sometimes, for reasons no one understands, a single crane dances alone" (385) – I feel uplifted by the example of singularity and persistence that Margery Kempe has inspired.

Reading *Wakenhyrst* and Paver's "Author's Note" was, for me, a challenging process and as part of that process I recognised that I needed to turn the mirror of *this* text back on myself, just as Margery's original *Book* encourages us to do. I needed to cultivate a more charitable frame of mind and to appreciate that the impulse to "champion" Margery can, and must, come from collaboration with "amateur" and creative readers too. As Marjorie Housley writes, "even when medieval texts invite us to insert ourselves into the past," as I would argue that Kempe's *Book* does, "attending to these attachments and at times deconstructing or

---

[69] Felski, *Hooked*, 28.

[70] Felski, *Hooked*, 28.

reconstructing them is necessary."[71] In the course of writing and rewriting this article, *Wakenhyrst* has caused me to do just that. In an essay on the East Anglian wetlands, the landscape that preserves the memories at the heart of the novel, Rebecca Pinner notes that it is often the case that "fenland equals demon-land, equals testing-land and proving-land". As such, *Wakenhyrst* has been a testing ground for my own attitudes as "aca-fan" to Margery Kempe and has provided an opportunity to think more broadly and compassionately about what charitable reading might mean when approaching adaptations of Kempe and her *Book*, especially when those adaptations are inspired by ideas which might not align neatly with our own scholarly desires and biases.[72]

[71] Marjorie Housley, 'Uneasy Presences: Revulsion and the Necropolitics of Attachment,' *postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (2020): 434–41, at 435.

[72] Pinner, “Thinking Wetly,” 8.