I would like to begin this essay on the Wohunge of ure Lauerd at its own beginning – the given title: ‘Her biginnes þe wohunge of ure lauer[d]’.

Although the obvious term to contest may be wohunge, with its erotic and romantic implications, I am more interested in the small and neglected of. The Oxford English Dictionary records twenty-nine different uses for this preposition, whose rise to prominence really began with the collapse of the genitive case in Anglo-Saxon and its conflation with the French word de. The word of in this phrase can mean both by or about. Both meanings were prominent in the early Middle English represented in the Wohunge. How we read of in the title can affect how we read the entire meditative piece that follows. Is Christ the object or the subject of the wooing done here? While most scholars have read the speaker as the Wooer, and thus Christ as object of the Wooing, the speaker is also the recipient of the courtship, and Christ the subject. I would like to suggest here that the slipperiness of the term of is intentionally meant to blur the boundaries of speaker and hearer, subject and object in the Wohunge, ultimately creating the presence of Christ in the absence of the anchorhold.

Much vernacular devotional literature of the Middle Ages was written for oral delivery and to be heard rather than read, but the texts of the Wooing Group seem uniquely suited to have been both ‘heard’ and ‘read’ by the same solitary speaker. It is intended as a meditation practice that, as Denis Renevey has argued, leads the speaker to ‘share the experience’ of Christ’s Passion. The text is meant to produce a mystical experience for the anchoress who holds it in her hands. This is not unique to the Wohunge,
which participates in a small but discrete tradition of poems, rules and meditations written for anchoresses and religious women in medieval England. Bella Millett has noted about these texts that ‘we see not only the recording in writing or works originally intended for oral delivery, but the development of something still closer to our modern concept of “literature”, vernacular works composed with readers rather than hearers in mind.’ The writers of the texts for anchoresses – those in the Wooing Group, the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse – had a challenge in that they were writing both for the spiritual edification and as a kind of companion to their readers.

The anchoress’s cell can be a lonely place, indeed, is meant to be, and its often solitary occupant most likely relied on these meditative practices to fill the anchorhold with presence and voice. In writing the Wohunge, the author needs to create a dialogue where there is none, both for the edification (and sanity) of the anchoress, as well as for the purity and preservation of her position. Patricia Rosof has written that the greatest temptation for an anchoress is doubting one’s decision for enclosure, spurred on by the imposed isolation. This intentional ambiguity of wooer and wooed in the Wohunge, linked with mnemonic techniques and rhetorical strategy, culminates in a kind of literal Jesus-made-word and word-made-Jesus for the recluse, where she can call up Christ at will as spouse and companion.

The Wohunge carries this ambiguity of wooer/wooed throughout the prose-poem in its allusions, word choice and structure. Many scholars have recognized this fluidity and the different ways it manifests itself throughout the text. For example, Susannah Mary Chewning has argued that the ambiguity extends to the gender of both speaker and subject:

The speakers of these texts seem to speak with similarly erotic and devotional language about Christ, their bridegroom, and about Mary, their bride or mistress, thus shifting the gaze from a masculine Other to one that is, or seems to be, feminine. This further complicates the question of sexual identity for the speakers (and readers) of these texts: if the gender of the wooed can shift, then is the same true for the gender of the wooer?

The gender-identities of both subject and object are malleable, shifting seamlessly back and forth throughout the text. This is an intentional collapse. Not only does the subject and object change, they are interchangeable. This effectively creates a dialogue out of a monologue, reinforces the spouse/bride-of-Christ relationship, and eventually leads the speaker/reader to a place where she is Christ, indistinguishable from him. It also leads the mystical reader to her place of self-abnegation, dissolving into the absent
space of the anchorhold until all that remains is the presence of her spouse, lover and lord: Christ.

Like Chewning, Michelle M. Sauer has also recently looked at the interplay of gender in the Wooing Group, suggesting that the male author has created a space where he could perform – or ‘cross-dress’ – as a woman, allowing for a different kind of affective piety than usually permitted for men. She posits that ‘the male author appropriated female words without altering the situations, thrusting his male character into a feminized position. The struggle for subjectivity is illustrated through the continual changing from pursued to pursuer.’ Through the lens of S/M theory, Sauer sees a struggle in the text between author and reader, wooer and wooed, with its genesis in the gender confusion that arises when a male author is writing not only for a female audience, but from a female point of view. Like the dynamics of a real relationship, the power constantly moves from one participant to the other.

I would like to suggest, here, that these elements of confusion, blurring and collapse which both Chewning and Sauer have recognized in the language of the Wohunge are intentional linguistic choices by the author of the poem. Like the of in the first line, the text is deliberately ambiguous, bringing the reader from wooer to wooed, speaking and spoken to, making the line between her and her spouse, Christ, completely unfixed. Rather than simply stating that the reader should imitate Christ, imagine herself in him, the writer has written in such a way that this identification is de facto. The anchoritic reader loses herself in the text and through this loses herself in the world (moving her again towards a moment of desired self-immolation) and achieves a mystical union with Christ through the language, as we shall see.

The Wohunge opens in the tradition of the Song of Songs, an allusion to which it returns throughout the text, and it is worth briefly examining the contested role the Song held in medieval Biblical exegesis both before and after the Wohunge author put words on vellum in order to recognize how it may contribute to this vagueness of subject and object. Its highly erotic language – structured as a love poem between a bridegroom and bride – could only be understood as religious when allegorized. All of the great commentators of the Bible from Origen to Gregory to Bede approached the Song and what it must mean, since something of such an erotic – and secular – nature could not otherwise exist within the Bible.

Other medieval commentators acknowledged that the Song of Songs had a literal meaning, one that includes erotic love, but that the allegory of the lovers was where the actual worth resided. The lovers not only became the
Christ/Church dichotomy that Augustine proffered, but also the individual Christian and Christ. The Glossa Ordinaria names the bride in the Song to be first the Church, but could and should be interpreted as the individual Christian soul, as well, as it traces the evolution of the exegesis. The mystical writers, though, soon take up this secondary interpretation and place it at the forefront of their commentaries and references to the Song of Songs. Eventually, the bride-as-soul image becomes virtually the only interpretation that commentators follow, leaving the allegories that Augustine and Origen espoused obsolete.

The Song of Songs was used by mystical writers throughout the Middle Ages in order to emphasize the relationship between the individual and Christ in an affective way. The Middle English writer and mystic Richard Rolle is particularly noted for doing so, both writing about the Song in his own sermon and utilizing its imagery in his vernacular poetic meditations that reflect in many ways the language examined here. What Ann Astell writes about Rolle, certainly applies to the anonymous author of the Wohunge:

As Rolle matures, he enters into a conscious relationship with his own anima by appropriating the words and attitudes of the Bride in the Song of Songs. In doing so, he opens himself, in the whole and holy way common to the great mystics, not only to the feminine principle within his own soul and to the women in his life, but also to God himself as the Bridegroom and Source of Song. In this matter of affective integration, which is closely related to that of mystical development, Rolle’s commentary on his own life cannot be separated from his biblical exposition.

Like Rolle, the writer of the Wohunge has blurred the boundaries between male and female, speaker and listener, wooer and wooed. The writer renders himself indistinct from his speaker and from his prayer. Rolle used the language of the Song when writing for women, as did many other medieval male authors. The writer of the Wohunge clearly saw in the image of the bride a natural metaphor to offer their women readers. As Bella Millett points out in this volume, the author is entering a dialogue along with many contemporary devotional authors where the possibilities for co-opting this kind of metaphor, used thus far mainly in theological texts and in the monastery, for the laity are suddenly clear.

In addition to the imagery of the Song, male medieval writers adopted certain stylistic techniques for their women readers. In her study on women and devotional prose in the early Middle Ages, Elizabeth Robertson outlined the style of writing that arose in response to its female audience:
Because these audiences had little contact with Latin intellectual centers and because the members of such audiences also were assumed to be rooted in the experiences of the body, literature written for them abandoned logical, teleological, and abstract argumentation and focuses instead on the particularity and fluctuation of everyday experience. That focus inspired the use of particular stylistic techniques, including affective syntactic devices such as parataxis, climax, and alliteration; concrete description; and figures of speech, including metaphors, similes, and analogies, in which the bases of comparisons were drawn from everyday experience.10

Like Rolle, especially, the writer of the Wohunge moves beyond metaphor. The image of the Bride is a particularly useful analogy for the writer of the Wohunge. Writing with an anchoress in mind, the author is dealing with a woman who has given up in an extreme way a worldly life, yet he still reaches for the earthly images which he imagines women can understand. The ‘everyday experience’ that metaphorically ruled most women’s literature is limited for the anchoress to an imagination for the world outside of her anchoritic cell. To this end, it is easy to see why a writer would choose an image like the bride that would govern a woman’s life from birth (to either be bride to man or bride of Christ) and that plays such a prominent role in biblical exegesis.

The verse from the Song picked up by the Wohunge author links its feminine figure with a sensual experience of taste: ‘I come to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. Eat, O friends, and drink: drink deeply, O lovers!’ (Canticles 5:2). While not overtly sexual, the elements of wine, spice, honey, combine to suggest a kind of sexuality. These elements, along with the alliteration mentioned by Robertson, are clearly and deliberately reflected in the opening lines of the Wohunge:

\begin{quote}
Iesu swete iesu . my druð . my der
ling . mi drihtin . mi healend
mi huniter . mi haliwei . Swet
ter is munegunge of þe þen / mildeu o muðe’. 11
\end{quote}

(‘Jesus, sweet Jesus – my dearest, my darling, my Lord, my Savior, my nectar, my healing balm. Sweeter is the memory of you than honey in the mouth’.)12

The honey of the Song of Songs is clearly mirrored in the words huniter and mildeu. However, the ambiguity of subject and object is also highlighted in this explicit link to the Song. While this part of the Song shows the bridegroom singing of the bride’s sweetness, the speaker of the
Wohunge is directing this to Christ. The subject of taster and tasted has been reversed. Even though it seems clear thus far that the speaker is the Wooer, singing her love song to her bridegroom, the obvious biblical allusion reminds the reader that this is in response to a bridegroom’s love-talk to his bride. The Song of Songs has given the writer his vocabulary, but he has intentionally blurred the gender of the speaker. Although this certainly lends itself to the questions of homoeroticism and cross-dressing raised by Chewning and Sauer, it is also a seemingly intentional ambiguity on the part of the writer to emphasize the union of reader and Christ and his presence there, in her cell.

Later the writer again uses the imagery of the Song in order to describe Christ’s Passion. The use of the biblical metaphor allows the writer (and speaker) this very ambiguity encoded throughout the text; the speaker can be bride of Christ, mother of Christ through the image of the Virgin, or the soul. As Renevey has shown, this use of the Song, and the slipperiness of subject and object that it encourages, opens up the text for a specific kind of affective engagement. The reader is given an array of roles with which she can choose to identify, but all require a deeply felt emotional connection to Jesus.

The writer begins by setting up the structure for the entire first part of the prose-poem with an entreaty to her spouse, preparing the reader for both revelation and mystical experience:

Hwa ne mei
luue þi luueli leor? Hwat her
te is swa hard þat ne mei to mel
te iþe munegunge of þe? Ah hwa ne mej luue þe luueli-
che iesu? For inwið þe an earn
alle þe þinges igedered þat eauer
muhen maken ani mon þu-
uewurði to oðer

(Who could not love your lovely face? What heart is so hard that it could not melt with the memory of you? Wherefore, who could not love you, lovely Jesus? For within you alone are all the things that ever might make any person love-worthy to another.)

The questions, of course, are rhetorical, positing a sceptical listener whose heart may not have been yet turned towards Christ in general or an anchoritic life specifically. But these second-person questions also suggest a response from the lover-spouse. Unlike many of the other texts associated with the Wooing Group, such as Ancrene Wisse where the repetition of ‘þe
ancren’ throughout its preface and text remind the readers who they are and who is writing for them, the reader here is not merely passively receiving the words, but actively saying them.

The speaker continues on to describe the attributes of the perfect worldly husband, such as handsomeness, wealth, braveness and generosity.\textsuperscript{16} Ann Savage and Nicholas Watson point out, in the introduction to their 1991 translation of the \textit{Wohunge}, that this reinforces twofold to the reader: what she has given up and what has come to her as a result of relinquishing the worldly life.\textsuperscript{17} She may not have the earthly suitor with these qualities (although the text is careful to point out, no such man exists), but instead she has the perfect celestial spouse:

\begin{verbatim}
feirnesse &
lufsum neb . flesch hwit under
schrud makes moni mon beo
luued te raðer . & te marre . Sum-
me gold & Gersum & alhe of
þis werlde makes luued & he-
ried . Sume fredom & largesce
þat leuer is menskli to ʒīven
þen cwedli to wið halde. Summe
with & wisdom & ʒapschipe of
werlde . Summe maht & streng
ðe to beo kid & kene iʃiht his
riht for to halde . Summe no-
blesce . & hehnesse of burðe .
Summe þeaw . & hendelec & laste-
lese lates . Summe menske &
mildeschipe & debonaire of
herte & dede . And ʒette ouer al
þis kinde makes sibbe frend
euchan to luuen 00er.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{verbatim}

(Fairness and a beautiful countenance, along with white flesh under clothes, make many men beloved all the more readily, and all the more. For gold and costly goods and possessions of this world are some loved and lauded; some for generosity and largesse, as in those whose desire is to give generously rather than to basely withhold; some for wit and wisdom and worldly prudence; some for might and the strength to be renowned and keen in battle to protect the just cause; some for nobility and highness of birth; some for virtue and courtesy and flawless manners; some for honor and mildness and gentleness of heart and deed. And yet, over all this, nature makes friends who are related love one another.)
Like the parable of the knight-lover in *Ancrene Wisse* (Part 6, ll. 59–97), the speaker uses the image of the perfect lover to demonstrate to the reader how Jesus fulfils that role. The enticement of marriage is built up for its readers only to be eventually deconstructed. Here, the speaker outlines the many things that attract someone to their beloved: appearance, wealth, generosity, wisdom, strength, nobility and mildness.

Within the ensuing seven sections (in modern editions broken into paragraphs), the speaker enumerates how exactly these qualities are already fulfilled by Christ. When ultimately faced with the choice of the earthly lover or the heavenly one, the anchoress has been wooed convincingly by Christ; she chooses the heavenly spouse. Catherine Innes-Parker writes that while many scholars have read the anchoress in both the *Wohunge* and *Ancrene Wisse* as passively accepting Christ, this act of choosing necessarily makes them active participants in their own devotion. By necessitating a choice within the confines of the text, the writer has again underscored the dialogic nature of the piece and the dependence upon the reader’s active engagement with it.

The structure of this first part of the text also serves as a mnemonic device for its readers. The writer of the *Wohunge* has virtually set up an outline for the first half of the meditation, but has also – in the first lines of the prose-poem – set up a mantra to be repeated at intervals throughout the text and to signal a change in the meditative practice: ‘Iesu swete iesu’. Mary Carruthers, in her two-book study of medieval memory, *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought*, has outlined how medieval memory, meditation and prayer worked for medieval writers and readers. In both of these works we find clues as to the *Wohunge* author’s structural process. Carruthers writes that the mnemonic strategy of a medieval author begins with an emphasis on the title of the work:

The mnemonic requirement for a firm starting-point also gives a practical context for the critical importance given in medieval commentary to the title of a work, an emphasis that often seems to us bizarre … everything else both in the text itself and its accompanying commentary will be linked in an order from this point.

If we take the given title of the piece, ‘Her beginnes þe wohunge of ure lauerd’, as a kind of generic marker – much as the other pieces in the Wooing Group are called ‘Ureisuns’ or ‘Lofsongs’, the first line, ‘Iesu swete iesu’ (Jesus, my sweet Jesus), becomes the mnemonic starting-point Carruthers discusses. The repetition in itself suggests a kind of poetic device.
This first line reiterates in various patterns, closing sections of the poem and serving as a mantra throughout the poem recurring as ‘A iesu swete iesu leue þat te luue of þe beo almi likinge’ (Ah, Jesus, my sweet Jesus, grant that the love you be all my delight) in lines 55–6, 77–8, 105–6, 117–18, 158–9, 194–5, 215–16, 251–2 and 364–5. In these last two instances, the scribe has shortened the phrases to ‘A iesu swete iesu leue þat te ’ etc., indicating his knowledge and his reader’s expectation that this is a refrain which functions as a dividing point at key moments in the text. Rachel Fulton posits in a recent article about medieval prayer that ‘the best prayers … would be divisible into small, “memory-sized” chunks so that the mind would not be fatigued or overwhelmed in trying to recollect them.’ The repetition of this memorization-sized groupings of words acts as the divisions between these ‘chunks’, in the Wohunge, as well as becoming a locus of the prayer – the meditation on Jesus, his body and his relationship to the speaker. If there is any doubt to whom the speaker is directing her prayer, the constant repetition will remind her. It also consistently invokes Jesus’ presence in the anchorhold; it does not allow the slippage of the speaker into herself but rather into Christ.

The link between repetition, mantras and mysticism – most clearly imagined today in Buddhism and other eastern religions – was firmly rooted in the medieval mind and practice of affective piety. For example the etymological root of many terms used for fringe religious groups and heretics in the Middle Ages came from words meaning ‘to stammer’ or ‘to mumble’. Walter Simons, in his major study about the beguines of the Low Countries, noticed these commonalities:

All of these terms, beguina, papelard, and lollaert, originally stood for a person in private prayer, so private in fact that his or her speech cannot be understood. Its pejorative connotations were clear from the start: the individual claimed to be devout, but was she really praying? She gave the impression of chanting devoutly, but we have only her word for it, because we do not actually recognize the sounds; hence the notion that she may be a hypocrite … To call someone a beguine or papelard or lollard was more than to question her sincerity: she spoke another language that defied comprehension. The alliteration and repetition throughout the Wohunge will lead to a meditative state, but may also lend itself to the kind of ‘other language’ to which Simons refers. Carruthers also notes Fortunatianus (a fourth-century rhetorician) and his advice for memorizing: ‘reciting in a low voice or murmur is also a very useful technique’. In this case, the sotto voce prayer leads to a kind of private conversation between the speaker and Jesus, rein-
forcing the dialogic nature of the wooer with the wooed. In a nearly empty cell, surely the whispered voice is heard just as clearly as a loud one.

Each of the seven sections that enumerate the qualities of a perfect husband embodied in Jesus ends with a form of the mantra ‘Iesu swete iesu’, performing the duty of dividing the text into memory-sized pieces. Carruthers likens these patterns as part of a mental topography or network:

Medieval cognitive pattern-making ‘locates’ knowledge, but within and in relation to other ‘things’. The locational networks – finer even than the filaments of as spider’s web – are rich devices of thinking, constructing patterns or ‘scenes’ within which ‘things’ are caught and into which they are ‘gathered’ and re-gathered, in innumerable ways, by individual human minds.25

The reader of the Wohunge recognizes the repetition as a kind of road-map to the piece, knowing that they signal a change in the pattern of the poem. These words work like the refrain of a song, identifying the closing of each section describing each marital quality.

When this first section of the Wohunge ends, an interesting transition takes place. The writer sums up the preceding seven sections (the marital qualities of Christ) in one sentence, both verbally and mentally reminding the reader what has just been argued:

Þenne
þu wið þi fairness . þu wið ri
chesce . þu wið larges
ce . þu wið wit & wisdom . þu wið
maht & strengðe . þu wið nobles
ce & hendeleic . þu wið meknes
se & mildeschip & mikel debo
nairte . þu wið sibnesse . þu wið
alle þe þinges þat man mai lu-
ue wið bugge; haues mi luue
cheper.26

(So then: you with your beauty, you with your wealth, you with largesse, you with wit and wisdom, you with power and strength, you with nobility and courtesy, you with meekness and mildness and much graciousness, you with family connections, you with all the things that one may purchase love with … you have procured my love.)

Structurally the poem has thus far given an outline, described each section of that outline, and now summed it up. For a reader or memorizer, the poem could not be easier to break down into manageable sections. Like a rhetorical
pathway, the reader has been led from point to point and told when she has arrived at her destination.

By the time that the speaker has reached this section, she has been more wooed than the wooer. Even though it is she describing Christ’s qualities, and seeming to be the active participant here, it is Christ who possesses them. He has effectively proved himself the ideal husband, and in the process of recognizing these elements, the speaker has been wooed. The effect here is to create action where there is passivity and voice where there is silence – Christ has wooed the speaker of the Wohunge simply by being, and it has happened in the course of the piece itself.

The Wohunge then shifts to the next part of the narrative where the poet again sets up an outline, sectioning the text into the small parts that are to follow:

\[
\text{Þu biddes me } \\
\text{bihalde hu þu faht for me: þat i } \\
\text{pouerte of worlde ne schome of } \\
\text{wicke monnes muð for uten } \\
\text{mine Gulte. ne secnesse of mi } \\
\text{bodi. ne flesches pine drede. hwen } \\
\text{þat i bihalde hu þu was poure for } \\
\text{me. hu þu was schent & schomet } \\
\text{for me. & atte laste wið pineful } \\
\text{deað henged orode.}\]

(You bid me behold how you fought for me, so that I would not dread the poverty of the world, no shamefacedness from wicked people’s mouths when I am without guilt, no sickness of my body, nor the flesh’s pain; then I beheld how you were poor for me, how you were mistreated and shamed for me, and, at last in painful death, hung on the cross.)

The writer is clearly spelling out the dialogue that the speaker is to be having with her spouse Christ, here (‘þu biddes me …’). In addition, the sections that follow again address the points outlined, so that the reader begins by discussing Christ and the poverty of the world (ll. 350–414), followed by the shame Christ endured (ll. 414–58), and moving into a Passion meditation that takes the speaker from Pontius Pilate (ll. 458–88) through to Christ’s death (ll. 532–46).

While Christ is addressed in the second-person pronoun ‘þu’ throughout the piece (reinforcing the lovers’ discussion and relationship between subject/object, wooer/wooed), there is a curious change of person at the moment of Christ’s death in the description of his Passion:

\[
\text{þu biddes me } \\
\text{bihalde hu þu faht for me. þat i } \\
\text{pouerte of worlde ne schome of } \\
\text{wicke monnes muð for uten } \\
\text{mine Gulte. ne secnesse of mi } \\
\text{bodi. ne flesches pine drede. hwen } \\
\text{þat i bihalde hu þu was poure for } \\
\text{me. hu þu was schent & schomet } \\
\text{for me. & atte laste wið pineful } \\
\text{deað henged orode.}\]
A þat luuelike body þat henges swa rewli swa blody & swa kalde. A hu schal i nu liue for nu deies mi lef for me up o þe deore rode? Henges dun his heaued & sendes his saw-le. Bote ne pince ham nawt ðet þat he is ful pinet. ne þat rewfule deade body nulen ha nawt friðie. Bringen forð longis wið þat bra-de scharpe spere. he þurles his side cleues tat herte. & cumes flo-winde ut of þat wide wunde. þe þlod þat bohte. þe water þat te world wesch of sake & of sunne. 28

(Ah, that lovely body that hangs so dolefully, so bloody, and so cold. Ah, how shall I live now? For my love now dies – for me – upon the precious cross; he hangs down his head and sends forth his soul. But yet, they do not think at all that he is adequately tortured, nor will they leave that pitiful dead body in peace. They bring forth Longinus with his broad, sharp spear, and he pierces that side, cleaves that heart. And flowing out of the wound comes the blood that bought, and the water that washed the world of strife and of sin.)

The speaker who addresses Christ in the second person in all parts of the Wohunge – both immediately before and immediately after this paragraph – has switched to a third-person description of Christ at the moment of his death in her ‘memory’ of the Passion. It is as if the moment itself is too present, and thus painful, for the speaker to place herself in the intimate dialogue with Christ that she has been having. She needs to distance him from herself and place this scene as if she is the observer, no longer a participant. It is also the moment when there is no object, no person to dialogue with the speaker – both before and after Christ’s death he is available to woo and speak, but at the moment of his death, he is merely a boy, outside the piece. This sharp change is also part of the mnemonic technique of the poem. It closes the second section of the piece, Jesus’ Passion, and the switch is surprising and changes the tone. Carruthers writes: ‘The cogitating mind tires easily, is easily bored, easily distracted. So the craft of memoria requires energizing devices to put it in gear and to keep it interested and on track, by arousing emotions of fear or delight, anger, wonder, and awe.’ 29 The moment of Christ’s passion is the pivotal moment in the Wohunge, and the writer’s switch of person indicates this both explicitly and implicitly to the
reader. In the moment when the most affective response is demanded from
the reader, she is divorced from the one-ness and dialogue with Christ that
she has had to this moment, feeling both the pain of his death and the literal
separation from him.

The last section of the Wohunge literally links the speaker to Christ,
repairing the fissure that the Passion provoked, and moving from the two
separate figures outlined in the first part of the piece to an idea of oneness,
the complete dissolution of the anchoress into the person of Christ:

A swe
te iesu þu oppnes me þin herte
for to cnawe witerliche & in to re-
den trewe luue lettres . for þer
i mai openlich seo hu muchel
þu me luuedes . Wið wrange sch-
uldi þe pe min heorte wearnen
siðen þat tu bohtes herte for herte.30
(Ah, sweet Jesus, you open your heart to me, so that I can know it indeed, and in
it read true love-letters. For there, I may openly see how much you loved me.
Only unjustly could I deny you my heart, since you redeemed heart for heart.)

This section satisfies many functions for the text of the Wohunge as a
whole. For one thing, it validates that this is not a one-sided speech from
the speaker directed to Christ. In fact, he is responding through the ‘luue
letters’ of his heart, an open book within which the speaker can read his
love. In addition, the speaker gives over her heart to Christ in exchange for
his (‘herte for herte’). It is here, after his death, where this bargain is made –
not in the early ‘wooing’ section of the text where Christ’s husbandly qual-
ities are spelled out. Finally, the metaphor of the heart – both Christ’s and
the speaker’s – are essential to our understanding of the rhetorical strategies
of this poem.

The writer of the Wohunge has used a metaphor with two separate pur-
poses and fused them into the particular needs of this piece. Eric Jaeger
explains the major ways the idea of ‘book of the heart’ has been used in the
Middle Ages:

Sermons and poems liken the heart to a book where the believer writes God’s
commands or where Christ writes the story of his own Passion. In the secular
lyric and romance a different passion inscribes itself on lovers’ hearts, sometimes
by way of love letter and usually anticipating the bodily writing of sexual inter-
course.31
The Christ of the Wohunge fulfils both of these functions – he has written the story of his Passion for the believer to read and feel, but he is also the lover who has written on his spouse’s heart, proclaiming his love over her mind and body. In addition, though, the heart is also the location of intellect and memory. Not only is Christ known to the speaker through her heart; so is the text of the Wohunge – a reminder that these are words committed to her memory and placed there for a reason. It is no coincidence that the term ‘by heart’ means ‘by memory’.

In order to reinforce the unity of bride and spouse, wooer and wooed, the speaker turns to her own enclosed body and links it to Christ’s passion. This startling passage completely blurs the boundaries of subject and object in the Wohunge:

My bodi henge
wið þi bodi neiled o rode. sper-
red querfaste wið inne fowr
wahes & henge I wilde wið þe
& neauer mare of my rode cu
me til þat i deie. For þenne sch-
al i lepen fra rode in to reste .
fra wa to wele & to eche blisse
A . iesu swa swet hit is wið þe
to henge. forwhen þat ise o þe
þæt henges me biside ; þe mu-
chele swetnesse of þe rea-
ues me fele of pine.

(May my body hang with your body nailed upon the cross, enclosed transversely within four walls! And I will hang with you, nevermore to come off my cross until I die. For then shall I leap from the cross into rest, from woe into rapture and into everlasting bliss. Ah, Jesus, so sweet it is to hang with you! For when I see you, who hang beside me, the vast sweetness of you frees me from a great deal of my pain.)

This passage stresses the merging of Christ and the speaker; even the very sentence structure and grammar reflect this blending. In the first phrase here, ‘My bodi / henge wið þi bodi neiled o rode’, it is unclear whose body is nailed to the cross, this phrase can modify either ‘my bodi’ or ‘þi body’. Similarly the phrase, ‘sper- / red querfaste wið inne fowr / wahes’ can also modify either the ‘þi body’ that it follows, or the ‘I’ that follows it. These rhetorical and grammatical choices by the writer further blend the subject and object for the wooer. Significantly, this ambiguity would not happen in
Latin, so the author is playing with the vernacular here and the ability to shift subject and object that are afforded by its use.

This section also emphasizes, as Chewning has pointed out, a celebration of the anchoress’s mimicked death along with Christ’s actual one. While the body of Christ is nailed to the cross, it is also suspended between the four walls of the anchorhold. Simultaneously, the anchoress is both inside the anchorhold and on the cross. This moment represents the culmination of the the Wohunge, the point where wooer and wooed are fused into one both textually and literally. If the piece is meant to both provoke and mimic a mystical experience, it is at this point in the meditation where such a moment occurs. The anchoress no longer exists; there is only Christ.

Following this moment, and closing the meditation, the writer (and speaker) are brought back to the beginning of the meditation. Again, reinforcing the ‘first line’ that Carruthers notes is so essential to medieval meditation and prayer:

```plaintext
A iesu swete iesu mi luue . mi lef . mi lif . mi luue leuest þat swa muchel luuedes me þat tu deides for luue of me & fra þe world haues broht me . & ti spuse haues ma ked me . & al þi blisse ha- ues heht me ; leue þat te luue of þe beo al mi likinge.
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(Ah, Jesus, sweet Jesus, my love, my beloved, my life, my dearest love, who has loved me so much that you died for love of me, who brought me from this world, and who has made me your spouse, and who has promised me all your bliss, grant that the love of you be all my delight!)

The mantra and refrain return here, after an absence during the depiction of Christ’s Passion. It is essential that the meditation return to the beginning because the wooing, and the dialogue surrounding it, will never end. This, too, reinforces the idea of enclosure: the enclosure of the anchorhold and the envelopment of Christ’s love surround the anchoress just as the words of the text do. She ends where she began, whether wooed or wooer.

Indeed, the writer steps outside of the meditation at its close and reminds the reader the purpose of the text and how it should be used. Acknowledging the powerful force of spoken words and how they both address and conjure Christ in the anchorhold, the writer allows the modern reader to see exactly how the piece was meant to be employed by its recipient:
This have I written for you, inasmuch as words often enchant the heart, to think on our Lord. And therefore, when you are at ease, talk to Jesus and say these words, and envision that he hangs beside you, bloody upon the cross. And may he, through his grace, open your heart to his love and to grief for his pain.

The writer’s emphasis on ‘talking’ and ‘saying’ the words of the piece reinforce that they are intended to be spoken out loud, filling the anchorhold with the sound of the Wohunge. The ‘envisioning’ demonstrates that through the power of these spoken words, Christ is meant to be there – in the anchorhold – talking back to the anchoress. Finally, her heart is ‘enchanted’, it has been marked with the words and image of Christ’s passion.

This remarkable meditation has within it all the structure and tools for its eventual memorization, and although it eventually leaves the anchorhold to find its place in monastic libraries, its initial purpose is clearly one of companionship and presence. The anchoress has given up the earthly spouse, but the heavenly one is waiting for her and is far more that simply an idea. Through the mantra and language of the Wohunge, he is there, a wooer, a companion and a presence.

Notes

1 Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, p. 20.

2 The former definition is represented in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) under of, usage 15.a: ‘expressing the relation of agent (doer or maker)’. The earliest OED example is 1225 from Ælfric’s homily De Initio Creaturae. The latter definition is demonstrated in usage 25 ‘concerning, about; with regard to, regard-
ing’. The OED’s earliest example of this usage is early eleventh century in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

3 Renevey, ‘Enclosed desires’, p. 58.
4 Millett, p. 99.
5 Rosof, p. 133.
7 Sauer, ‘Cross-dressing’, p. 159.
8 Astell, p. 112.
9 Millett, p. 253.
10 Robertson, p. 179.
11 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 1–5. The alliteration here is clearly intentional, and may have even been a stretch for the writer of The Wooing. The word druð, for example, does not appear anywhere else in the AB texts (Laing and McIntosh, 253).
12 I am grateful to Michelle Sauer for lending me her forthcoming translation of Þe Wohunge to use in this article. The book is still in production, so there are no page numbers, but the reference is as follows: Þe Wohunge Group and A Talkyng of the Loue of God: Translated from the Middle English with Introduction, Notes, and Interpretive Essay, Library of Medieval Women (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2009).
13 Renevey, ‘Enclosed desires’, p. 56.
14 For more on how meditation and mystical experience intertwine throughout the Wohunge and its analogues within the Wooing Group, see Renevey, ‘Enclosed desires’.
15 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 5–13.
16 As Millett’s article in this volume shows, these elements were elsewhere attributed to both earthly and spiritual spouses in thirteenth-century continental texts, but the author does not seem to expect such familiarity from his readers.
17 Savage and Watson, pp. 25–6.
18 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 13–32.
19 For a fascinating comparison of the knight-lover in Ancrene Wisse and Þe Wohunge, see Catherine Innes-Parker’s article ‘Ancrene Wisse and Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd’.
20 Innes-Parker, p. 143.
21 Carruthers, Book of Memory, p. 86.
22 Fulton, p. 708.
23 Simmons, pp. 122–3.
24 Carruthers, Book of Memory, p. 86.
26 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 252–62.
27 Ibid., ll. 308–17.
28 Ibid., ll. 532–46.
29 Carruthers, The Craft of Thought, p. 117.
30 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 546–53.
31 Jaeger, p. 1.
32 The OED puts the first usage of heart to mean intellect or memory in the tenth century, and the phrase ‘by heart’ to mean ‘by memory’ at Chaucer (see heart, n, definitions 12 and 32).
33 Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 590–602.
35 Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerd, ll. 635–44.
36 Ibid., ll. 646–58.