CHAPTER 3

MYSTICAL DESIRE, EROTIC ECONOMY, AND THE WOOING GROUP

The very magical privacy of the bed, the penesle, may itself only be bought with money.
—Angela Carter, The Sadeian Woman

My readers may find it odd that mysticism, that most obvious source of devotional eroticism in the Middle Ages, has been only tangentially discussed in chapters 1 and 2. If we take the term “mystical” loosely, as designating a direct experience of the divine, or “union with God,” then the monastic and anchoritic texts I have examined certainly have mystical elements. Christ I’s concentric analogies play with the idea of being “inside” divine bodies, even if the possibility of unmediated experience of those bodies is foreclosed. More directly, the Bernardine tropes of the Ancrere Wisse center on the motif of the Sponsa Christi, the “bride” of Christ, bound to the divine in a spiritual—physical union. But few would consider either of these texts to be examples of mysticism at work. First, there is the obvious issue of genre, especially in the case of Ancrere Wisse. As a guide to anchoritic ritual, the Wisse’s mission is not to witness spiritual union, but to outline the means by which to achieve it. When compared to the writings of later English mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, the Wisse lacks the mystic’s personal testimony and consequent visionary authority. Second, and perhaps more important, neither Christ I nor the Wisse aim at producing “transcendent” spiritual experience. As we have seen, both encourage their readers to remain in constant awareness of their material surroundings, to use the church, refectory, or anchorhold as visual and spatial tools for belief. This is in striking contrast to Julian’s thinking, which distinguishes “spiritual sight” from “actual vision,” and to her ecstasy, which transported her so far “out” of her anchorhold that all of creation appeared to her “the size of a hazelnut.” Written in the
fourteenth century, Julian's work is an example of "later" English mysticism, but works more contemporary with those I've discussed, such as the twelfth-century biography of Christina of Markyate, offer similar glimpses of mystical priorities. Christina's biography, unlike the Wisse, highlights the reclusive's visions of ascendance and ecstatic indifference to her surroundings, sketching a devotional experience more like Julian's or that of Julian's contemporary, Richard Rolle.3

Clearly, neither the monastic nor the anchoritic works are easily identifiable with the particular tradition of English mysticism said to effloresce in the fourteenth century, primarily in the North and East, and most familiar from the works of Rolle, Julian, and Margery. There is, however, a subset of the AB texts—that group of devotional works sharing the Wisse's Western dialect and manuscript history—that is regularly considered part of this tradition.4 The four, very similar texts of the "Woos Group" have as much in common with the mystical as they do with the anchoritic. Rhythmic prose prayers, they neither focus on pragmatic advice about choosing a spiritual career (as does the Wisse's companion text Halit Meethad) nor offer schedules and "rules" for daily life once that career has been undertaken (as does the Wisse itself). Instead, they are wholly given over to providing a textual cue for meditative exercise focused on Christ's Passion, furnishing the reader with visual imagery and incantory verbal structures for that purpose. Although they occasionally make references that could be applied to the material conditions of life in an anchorhold, the mapping of anchoritic space is of lesser concern than it is in the Wisse. Indeed, the texts of the Woos Group are often said to transform anchoritic space in a more profound way, by leaving behind the sense of material environment for complete immersion in ecstatic, transportive contemplation. Written in the first person, they also offer a glimpse of what could be an almost completely interiorized, and thus experientially, "individual" devotion, which is again consonant with mystical detachment from the material.

Yet, as I stated in chapter 2, rhetorical disavowal of the material World often masks a heightened consciousness of its presence, and the "interior" is often—perhaps always—impossible to articulate without the "exterior." Studies of mysticism, as Sarah Beckwith has shown, have tended to occlude the material conditions of its practice; the idealism of modern interpretations, Beckwith argues, has led to a re-presentation of medieval mysticism as "radically individualistic... putatively asocial and transcendent," immune from history.5 Some years after her critique, study of English mysticism remains frequently author-centric and psychological, focused on the "exceptional" individual, despite the abundance of convention in mystical writing and the evidence of contact between writers, such as Margery's well-known recollection of her visit to seek Julian's advice.6 This is often true of scholarly work on Continental mysticism as well; however, recent work on the holy women of Liège and discussion of the visionary community of nuns at Helfta (both groups roughly contemporary with the AB texts) have demonstrated the importance of social environments for fostering mystical experience.7 Rosalyn Voaden notes that the erotic union with Christ, though achieved in personal visions by such Helfta luminaries as Mechtilde of Cadzand, Mechtilde of Hackeborn, and Gertrude the Great, was nonetheless an experience common to the "sweet fellowship" of the community.8

It is with an eye to the Wooing Group's dialogic engagement with its affiliated communities that I wish to discuss its texts here. The spiritual program of the Anarene Wisse, even though it confronts the experience of solitude, nonetheless emerges through intense negotiation of the physical and social conditions of the anchorhold and with a consciousness of historically particular habits of reading. Though usually seen as transcendental, the Wooing Group texts, too, draw attention to their practice of reading and to the dependence of the anchoritic reader's "inner" world upon the social relations organizing the secular life she is said to have left behind.

The Wooing Group undoubtedly expands the repertoire of the erotic in anchoritic literature: the prayers crystallize and condense the amatory relationships that ground the Wisse (and, in their anticipated perversion, haunt that work). Indeed, the group offers some of the most direct, intense expressions of erotic yearning in all of Middle English literature. Its texts also allow for different critical approaches to anchoritic's gendered subject positions, as has been recognized in recent work by Susan Elizabeth Taylor.9 The work begun by these scholars and others takes us up the challenge of reuniting the Wooing works with their larger context, a project that revises earlier tendencies to separate study of the "mystical" Wooing prayers from that of the more pragmatic of the AB texts.10 My selection of the Wooing prayers for a chapter of this book acknowledges their usefulness in filling out our understanding of anchoritic's particular blend of the devotional and the erotic and our understanding of this blend in thirteenth-century writing as a whole. Yet here I think it necessary to note that although recent discussion of Wooing Group texts has critiqued the untenable critical (and editorial) separation of the Wooing Group from the rest of the AB texts, this separation has reappeared in the methodological choices made by scholars of this material. In particular, the Wooing Group's texts have attracted criticism that is distinctively psychological in focus, with a pronounced emphasis on reconstructing an interiorized, individualized devotional experience.11 Even Beckwith's groundbreaking article on the material, social character of
anchoritic “mysticism” in the AB texts switches, without explanation, from materialist analysis to Lacanian psychology when considering The Wooing of Our Lord. Since Lacanian theory asserts that social practices constitute the “symbolic order” of the psyche, this switch should not effect a rupture between the “social” and the “psychological.” Yet, in practice, the change of method when dealing with the Wooing texts evokes such a divide or leaves the connection between specific material practices and psychic structures obscure.

In the rest of this chapter, I argue that these more visionary tracts are just as noteworthy for the ways in which they return the anchoritic erotic to a wider, more visible economic context. A particularly noteworthy feature of the prayers is their conceptual reliance on systems of exchange: they stage an erotic “commerce,” in a more literal sense than has been acknowledged and in a more focused way than we see in the other AB texts. Imaginatively, they ask their anchoritic readers to consider the “value” of love and, further, how value can be assessed in the exchange of wealth, persons, and texts. These representations of gifts and purchases knit together anchoritism’s metaphors with its materiality, as they are both analogies for the love of God and performative descriptors of the economies that support it.

The Group: Boundaries and Intertexes

Four stylistically similar prayers in rhythmical prose constitute the Wooing Group: On Uretsam of God Alcmi, On Orretun of Selte Marie, On Lesbun of Ure Lacerde, and On Wohunge of Ure Lacerde. The most substantial of the works, On Wohunge, is an impassioned soliloquy addressed to “Jesu, sweete Jesu, mi druf, mi derling, mi drehtin, mi healand, mi hunter, mi halwe.” (Jesus, sweet Jesus, my dear, my darling, my Lord, my Savior, my honey drop, my balm), which envisions Christ as suitor and then as crucified Savior. The Lesbun and Uretsum of God similarly meditate on Christ’s “sweetness” and “softness,” anticipating His embraces but also invoking the reader’s pity for His suffering. Contemplation of the Passion, and especially Christ’s wounds, is a key feature of all the prayers, even of Seinte Marie, in which prayer to the Virgin frames a chanted list of Christ’s trials on earth, largely those of the Crucifixion. The Virgin is herself a fundamental presence in all the prayers, especially as an aid to meditation on Christ’s bodily mystery. Cheving has argued that the worshipper’s desiring gaze oscillates between Mary and Christ as Beloved. Certainly, Mary is offered as a figure for identification, a means of evoking the imagery and emotion of the Passion. When the reader of the Wohunge is to imagine herself peering into Christ’s wounds, for example, the prayer turns to Mary as helpful mediatrix: “Lavedi moder & meiden, þu stod here ful neh & seh at this sorhe wro þi deorwurde sure” (Lady, mother and maiden, you stood here very close, and saw this sorrow come upon your precious son).

Since we have seen, in chapter 2, how eroticism is bound up with the practice of imitatio, this identification certainly has its anatomic dimensions, although the relationship is not explicitly represented as that of lovers.

All the prayers clearly expect a dramatic, rather than passively absorbing, reading. Their use of the first person foregrounds the performative character of the texts, as does the envoi of the Wohunge, which instructs the reader to “carpe toward isso & seiise pise wordes” (talk to Jesus and say these words). As Savage and Watson have noted, the Group’s scripting of devotional drama for anchors is reminiscent of Ælfric of Bicluva’s instruction to his anchoritic sister to reenact scenes of Christ’s life as though she were a participant. Whereas this performance gives a sense of the immediacy of spiritual experience to the texts’ targeted readers, the prayers are in other ways rather impersonal. They are highly conventional—indeed, their language is almost interchangeable—and were doubtless intended from the first to be devotional aids for any number of readers, rather than documentation of a singular experience or advice tailored to a unique individual. They are specifically appropriate to anchoritic devotion, being consonant with both the liturgical program outlined in Part I of the Ancene Wisse and the thematic emphases of the AB group as a whole. But their less epistolary character (when compared to the Wisse) obscures any sense of more particular reader-relations. Our glimpse of these relations is largely confined to the Wohunge’s envoi, addressed to “mi lene suster,” which may refer to a close relationship between author and intended reader, but may just as suitably pertain to one between a scribe and his or her reader, being general enough to fit a number of textual exchanges. Like the envoi, the prayers themselves seem intimate, but no more so than the practices described in the Wisse.

Savage and Watson suggest that the texts of the Group may have originally circulated as ephemera on unbound parchment, making copying and redistribution among a number of readers more likely. This more mobile form may explain their less substantial manuscript history also. Unlike the Wisse, the Wooing Group works each exist in only one or two manuscripts; together they are distributed over four. Their inclusion in key anchoritic manuscripts, however, undeniable associates them with the audiences for the AB texts. All except the Wohunge are to be found in BL, Cotton Nero A.xiv, where they accompany one of the Middle English copies of the Wisse. Seinte Marie is also found in BL, Royal 17 A.xxvii, together with the Lives of Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret and Sawles Varde (most of the Katherine Group). The Wohunge, though not sharing a manuscript with the three other texts of the Group, is found in BL Cotton Titus D.xviii, the
most complete collection of works associated with anchoritic reading. Dating of the Wooing texts is uncertain, but Savage and Watson are of the opinion that the Wohunge, at least, was probably written shortly after the other AB texts, putting its composition between 1220 and 1240, close to the writing of the Titus manuscript itself (which they date 1125–1250). The incorporation of the Wohunge and On Ureison Un Leuorde into a longer, fourteenth-century meditation, A Talkynge of the Love of God, attests to both a continued association of Wooing Group material with anchoritic texts after the thirteenth century and also the distribution of these texts to wider audiences. The “Vernon” and “Simeon” manuscripts (Oxford, Bodley MS 3938 and BL, Additional 22283) contain the extant copies of the Talkynge, collected together with a copy of Ancrene Wisse (in Vernon) as well as an astonishing array of other devotional and secular works. The Talkynge makes reference to its reader’s participation in “his holy ordre” and uses masculine pronouns to describe him, indicating that, sometime before the completion of the Vernon and Simeon codices, the Wooing Group works had been rewritten for a male, monastic audience.

It is the Talkynge, in fact, that has solidified the Wooing Group’s association with English mysticism. The Talkynge circulated during the late fourteenth century—many of the time of insular mysticism’s most energetic scripting: the Vernon manuscript itself contains Rolle’s Form of Living, and Rolle’s own Meditations on the Passion have notable similarities with the Wooing/Talkynge material. In this context especially, the Talkynge has generally been seen as evidence of English mysticism’s simultaneous movement away from devotional specialization and yet toward a more private, individualized spirituality. As I’ve noted, the Wooing material, with its undoubtedly anchoritic provenance was appropriated by at least one new audience in the Talkynge (male monastics) and possibly others as well, if we want to consider the Vernon codex as the property of a wealthy lay household. Rolle’s Form, the Talkynge’s manuscript companion, exemplifies a similar pattern of circulation for mystical tracts. Written for the anchorites Margaret Kirkby in 1348–49, it quickly “reached a far more general public within a half-century of its composition—monks and nuns, the secular clergy, the devout laity.” Watson has argued that the literature of late medieval English mysticism, Rolle’s included, is, when compared to anchoritic texts, “relatively unspecialized, making little distinction between the solitary, the monastic, and the secular life.” Institutional affiliation has been deemphasized, in this view, in favor of individual inclination. Such a view is generally extended to the Talkynge, with the implication that the Wooing material is part of a transition from anchoritic particularity to mystical generalization.

Understanding the Talkynge as part of the Wooing material’s development and transformation also emphasizes, despite the prayers’ performative, the Wooing Group’s role in the evolving articulation of an interiorized piety, one highly subject to the whims of the devotional reader. Though the bulk of the Talkynge is, like the Wooing texts, a soliloquy riddled with invocation and exclamation, its greater length, later date, and explanatory introduction suggest a different kind of reading than the quasi-liturgical one likely for the Wooing prayers. Much has been made (and rightly so) of the Talkynge’s tantalizing introduction. I quote from it at length:

| his tretyes. Is a talkynge of his love of God. And is mad for to sture. hem hat hit reden; to louen hem hat more. And to synode lykyng. and tett in his love. Hid falles for to reden hit. eylliche and softe. So as men may met in Inward felynge. and deplich penkyng. souer feyned. And hat not beo done. But bi gynen and leten in what pass. so men se. But may for to time gysen most lykyng. And whon men haç conceyved. hèm mutes wyl regulyng. Inward penkyng. and depe-lich seyching. wipouten any regulyng uppon hèm selve mutes. and of such opere hèt god wol senden. Hese wole sechen. schal gysen in ward seyng. and felynge in sole. And sweeten wonderful. gif preyerere fowre. ...Men scul synen likliche hèt tretyes in Cadence. Afer hèt bigynnynge. gif hit beo nill poyntet. & Rymed in sum stode. To beo more lounes. to hem hit reden. |

| (This treatise is a discourse on the love of God and has been made to stir those who read it, to love Him the more and to find delight and enjoyment in His love. It is proper to read it calmly and slowly so that one can best find delight in inward feeling and deep thinking. And that not right through, but begin and finish at such a pace that, as one sees, can for occasion give most delight. And when one has understood the matter by reading, then earnest thinking and deep searching—without any reading—of the same or other similar subjects that God will send, if our classes so seek, will give inward sight and feeling in the soul and wonderful sweetness, if prayer follow. ...One will readily find that after the introduction this treatise is set in metre, if it is correctly punctuated, and that it rhymes in some places, to be more pleasing to those who read it.) |

The explanation of reading technique is more careful than any found in the AB texts and suggests that the material is being re-presented to an audience unfamiliar with commentaries on meditation. The emphasis is clearly on “inward thinking and deep seeking,” in which quiet reading apparently pauses frequently for silent moments to “let in what passeth.” Commentary is eschewed and the reader’s pleasure, rather than any precise sequence of intertexts, determines the content of this inner meditation. For some critics, this looseness of reading, combined with the Talkynge’s exaggerated, “overflow of what can only be called erotic emotion” evidence the ultimate medieval devotion of affective piety from its monastic origins. Comparing the Talkynge to its more distant predecessor, the “Prayer to Christ” in Anselm’s Orationes sive Meditationes (and positioning the Wooing texts as midpoints...
in a process of adaptation), Benedicta Ward argues that, in this case, “to translate is to betray.” Ward finds that the emotion of Anselm’s meditation is “isolated” and “distorted” in the Talleyng, resulting in a narcissistic and histrionic work that forgets the “fulfillment of all human qualities in the shared vision of God” found in the monastic work.31

Although the Wooning Group texts are undeniable related to both monastic sources and “generalizing” adaptations, they are nonetheless perfectly consonant with the anchoritic themes of the other AB texts: enclosure, asceticism, love, and reading. A representative passage from the Wooninge serves to illustrate these:

Iesu swee iuu tus fat for me agauns mine sawle fan. Iuu me deerneddes wið like, & makened of me wreche þi leofman & spuse. Broht tu halve me fra þe world to bur of þi burðe. steaked me i chambre. I mai þe þwe swetel kisst & clappend. & of þi luce hauve gasti lingen. A swee iuu mi lues luce wið þi blod þu haues me boht. & fram þe world þu haues me broht.

(Jesus, sweet Jesus, in this way you fought for me against the enemies of my soul. You vindicated me with your body, and made of me, a wretch, your lover and spouse. You have brought me from the world to the bower of your birth, locked me in a chamber. There I may sweetly kiss and hold you, and in your love take pleasure, spiritually. Ah, sweet Jesus, my life’s love, with your blood you have bought me, and from the world you have brought me.)32

The Wooninge persona is besieged by worldly enemies and rescued by Christ, placed in chamber/bower, a space where he may give and receive love. Chevning has pointed out the sexual connotations of “clapp’” usually translated as “hold” or “embrace,” but also a euphemism for sexual intercourse.33 Though risqué, this erotic language is legitimated by the metaphor of the Sponsa Christi, as we have seen in chapter 2. The “lover and spouse” of Christ has here been legitimately “bought” by her Suitor and can rightfully enjoy His love in the space set apart for it. That space is private (though not necessarily unique to an individual), feminine, and erotic, as it is elsewhere in the Wooning prayers (especially in the Ureisun of God) and elsewhere in the AB texts.

We have seen how fundamental representation of enclosure is to the Wisse’s goals, and I have briefly discussed the metaphor of the “house” in another advisory, quasi-epistolary AB text, Hali Matibad.34 But comparison with the more narrative AB texts, the saint’s lives, is also helpful here. Like annoresses, the saints Katherine and Margaret are also locked in cells, imprisoned by their masculine and pagan persecutors. Indeed, when Katherine languishes in the “death-house” (cwalm hus) of jail, awaiting her contest with the philosophers hired by her enemy Maxentius, she begins a prayer with an invocation almost identical to those that begin most of the Wooning texts: “Christ goddes sune. Swete sofie iuu alre smelle swotes. þu alwealdende god þi faderes wisdom” (Christ, God, Son of God, sweet soft Jesus, sweetest of all aromas, you all-ruling God, the wisdom of your Father).35 The “death-house,” though a prison, is actually a preferable trade for Katherine’s former secular “chamber” where we first encounter her. For the ascetic prison becomes filled with Christ in his sensual majesty: Maxentius’s soldiers are afraid to look at the cell because a brilliant light and a “singular sweet smell” (swiðe swotnesal) issue from it.36 Inside, Katherine’s gashed body is touched and healed by angels with “sweet ointment.” The space is penetrated and animated, as is Katherine’s body. It is exactly this experience of enclosure that the Wooning prayers (themselves alluded to in Katherine) ask for. The persona of the Ureisun wants Christ to “gif mi bur brithnesse. & briehtte mine soulu þec þu set. make hire wurpe to þine swee wuninge” (Give me chamber brightness, and brighten my soul, which is dirty, and make her worthy to be your sweet dwelling).37 Further, the Wooning texts, in their focus on Christ’s own wounds, evoke the interpenetration of bodies: the persona of the Wooninge even peers through His Wound, into His Body, wherein she “for to cnawre witerlich & in to reden trewue luwe lettres” (may know it inwardly and read inside it true love-letters).38 The chamber of the Wooning texts, then, draws on the ascetic and erotic discourses of anchoritism, spatially contextualizing the Wooning readers and providing a key image for enclosed reading and its goals.

That reading is sensual and “sweet.” Like the Ancrene Wisse, the Wooninge and the Ureisun imagine meditative experience as a sensual pleasure in the body’s interior or at its boundaries. After hailing Christ as “mi hunter, mi halwet” (my honeydrop, my balm) the Wooninge’s speaker declares, “sweeter is mungenge of þe þen mildeu in muðe” (sweeter is the meaning of you than honey in the mouth), and the Ureisun describes its meditation on the Passion as licking honey off of thorns.39 The source of the sweetness is Christ, but the sensuality adheres to reading process itself, something also noted in the Talleyng’s explanation of how the Wooning material should be read—“seryliche and softe. So as men may met in Inward felying. and depile þenkyng. sayor sunder.” The Talleyng’s introduction also notes that the rhetorical style of the Wooning prayers serves the reader’s meditative pleasure; they are “zith poyned; & rymed in sum stude. to beo more lousomes. to hem pat hit reden.”

As we have seen in relation to the Ancrene Wisse, however, pleasurable reading often raises the suspicions of spiritual directors. The Wisse itself is ambivalent about its own appeals to its readers’ senses, torn as it is between a desire to be arousing and a concern that its readers’ arousal might not be
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controllable. And the suspicion of an aesthetic approach to reading, though deftly navigated by Bernard of Clairvaux and other “affective” writers, runs
deep in the Latin traditions from which the AB texts draw. Augustine saw
rhetorical “sweetness” (suavitas) as a “pernicious,” material distraction from
the true, spiritual object of contemplation. And surely the producers of the
Wooing material would have been familiar with something like the opinion
offered by Alain de Lille, the twelfth-century author of the Summa de Arte
Preedictatoria (Art of Preaching): “Preaching should not contain . . . that melo-
diousness and harmony which result from the use of rhythm or metrical
lines; they are better fitted to delight the ear than to edify the soul.” Yet
the Wooing texts revel in rhythm and harmony, sweet sound and sensual
image, and they betray little if any of the Wisse’s anxiety about the use of
these in the enclosed, feminized space of the unsupervised anchorhold.

The Wohunge’s small evocis, the only direct address to a reader appended
to any of the Wooing Group texts, gives few clues as to why the texts are
comparatively unconcerned with their potential misuse. Given that the
Wisse’s anxiety accrues around the eroticized female body, it makes sense
here to look next at the performance of gender staged by the Wooing texts.
For gender already suggests itself as an outcome of the Wooing Group’s
poetic form and stylization. The research of Rita Copeland and Claire
Waters has alerted us to the patrician characterization of texts—especially
texts that are noticeably rhetorical or ornamented—as feminine. Copeland
argues that the metaphor of penetration and the binary logic of active/passive
= male/female shaped the representation of hermeneutics in this tradi-
tion, so that allusive, figurative texts (such as scripture) were metaphorically
rendered as female bodies needing to be “penetrated” by an active,
“masculine” reader. Waters argues further that “external beauty, ornament
and superficiality” were signs of the feminine in texts as well as
bodies. In the latter case, the decorative femininity is “dangerous” in the
ways imagined by Augustine: pleasurable and distracting, focused on the
material world rather than on the Spirit that animates them. Even the men
who voiced eloquent texts could be feminized, said to present the worshipper
with the same temptations as a beautiful woman. With the Ancrum Wisse,
we looked at a “masculine” text written by a man (or men) suspicious of this
very aspect of its own rhetoric. What does it mean when an anchoress
encounters “feminine” texts like those of the Wooing Group? When she
needs to penetrate both their figures and their ornament?

Gender and the Reader’s Choice

The reader’s engagement to Christ organizes the Wohunge of Une Leared’s
imagery, and the resulting images pervade the other Wooing Group texts. But
recent work on the Wooing Group, and on the Wohunge in particular, has in
fact suggested that the texts’ staging of gender is more complex than the
metaphor of Sponsa Christi might at first suggest. I have already shown in my
discussion of the Ancrum Wisse how the metaphor is entwined with the parallel
but not identical agenda of imitatio Christi (so that the Beide of Christ is and
is not the copy of Christ). The “marriage” dramatized by the Wohunge (and
alluded to in the other Wooing texts) blurs the distinction between categories
of identity, especially masculine and feminine, to a greater degree. In the
process, the romance motif that underlies the elaboration of Sponsa Christi,
while still prevalent in the Wooing Group, get reworked in notable ways.

The Wohunge is the only AB text to dramatize Christ’s “wooking” of the
anchoress in full. It does so using the mix of present and past events typical
of prayers. On the one hand, the persona recalls Christ’s past gifts to her, on
the other, her decision to choose Christ as lover and spouse is written as a
present-tense affirmation. Every time the anchoress reads the Wohunge then,
the marriage is reenacted, affirmed anew. I quote a representative passage:

[Text continues]

(Then in I will love anyone for their generosity, I will love you, Jesus Christ,
more generous than anyone. For other generous men give all kinds of other
things; but you, sweet Jesus, so gave yourself for me that you did not know
how to withhold your heart’s blood. Lover never gave a richer love-gift.
And you, who first gave me your whole self, my beloved, you have
promised me—in exchange for the gift of my whole self to you—to rule on
your right hand, crowned with you. Then who is more generous than you?
Who is more worthy to be loved for generosity than you, my life-loving? Ah,
Jesus, sweet Jesus, grant that love of you be all my pleasure.”

Christ’s past gifts are recalled, but their measuring happens in the present
tense. Further, the anchoress-reader is called upon to choose Him instead
of other suitors.

The Wohunge thus represents spiritual union as a superlative form of
marriage, but one nonetheless comparable to other matches. Indeed, after
its opening invocation, the Wohunge begins with a list of criteria for evalu-
ating potential spouses:

Ah, lwa ne mej luwe je luweliche isu? Fowidz je ane am alle je pinges
igerder 8 euter muen maken ani mon luweurti oeder. firnemes & lusum
When taken together, the qualities of this list profile the ideal suitor, one clearly modeled on the romance hero. He combines strength and military prowess with gentle manners, a discerning mind, and beauty. Yet, with its portioning out assets to “some,” this survey also implies a need for comparison. Individual suitors, it suggests, will excel in some qualities but not others. Thus the survey must establish a standard, or scale, to determine equivalent qualities, so the reader can see that generosity, for example, might make up for a lack of beauty, or wit for a lack of strength.

Of course, Christ is the ideal Suitor, lacking in nothing as the Wohunge will go on to demonstrate. But the opening list represents the persona, and through her the reader, as actively, presently engaged in a decision-making process. To emphasize this point, the persona’s vow to make Christ “al mi likinge” is reiterated after each consideration of His possession of a particular quality, as we see in the quote on generosity (above). This is not to say that the persona isn’t the pursued rather than the pursuer in the wooing; she does occupy the position typical of the sought-after romance heroine. Christ has wooed her with his heroism (most evident in the Passion) and promise of support, protection, and pleasure. And, as in the parable of the lover-knight in the Ancrane Wisse, the deck is stacked. Christ’s perfection obviates any choice; only the “hard-hearted” lady could refuse his affection. But in the Wohunge, and in the Ureisun as well, the persona bargains on her own behalf. The Wohunge, after considering the “wealth” that Christ offers, determines a profit motive for the persona, who declares, “Ne mai
they suggest a complication not only of romance narratives but also of the "feminine" position of the woode persona and of the reader thereby.

For if we are to keep romance conventions as a frame of reference for the Wooing Group's representations, we have to acknowledge that those conventions overwhelmingly define woman as traded (in marriage) rather than trading. Leaving aside (for the moment) the literature's complex relationship with other social practices concerning marriage and sexuality, twelfth- and thirteenth-century English and Anglo-Norman romances largely conform to Luce Irigaray's classic account of gender division in a patriarchal culture:

The exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other "wealth" among groups of men. The economy—in both the narrow and broad sense—that is in place in our societies thus requires women to lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities.51

While Irigaray is writing about contemporary European cultures ("our societies") and her language is derived from the critique of capitalism, her formula crystallizes a long history of romance narrative in which women are "in short, chattels who are valued according to their usefulness to their lovers, husbands, or male relatives, who put a high premium on their virginity." In Anglo-Norman works such as the Lai d'Harol, Amadas et Ydoin, and King Horn, heiresses are married by their families against their will.52 Similarly, in those most romance-like of devotional works, the Lives of saints and holy women, the formula is repeated, though some heroines, such as Christina of Markyate, manage to escape their predicament and others, such as Audrey of La Vie Sainte Andree, maintain their virginity while married as a form of protest.53 In romances and hagiography alike, the feminine character is one who can be exchanged by men and the families they represent.

The Wooing texts themselves connect trade with masculinity, as we can see in the Urscusan's example of the foolish merchant, represented as a "he." The disorienting switch of pronouns here suggests the text's difficulty in naming woman as an economic agent. The name of "whore" was perhaps the only other readily available descriptor for identifying the woman who trades, especially appropriate because here the persona is trading her sexual body. In keeping with the construction of the whore, the Wooing texts insist on representing the persona's love as "bought," rather than given: "A deore cheap heidis tu on me. Ne was neuer unwurdi ping chepet swa deore" (Ah, you had an expensive buy in me! Never was an unworthy thing bought so dearly"), and, being abandoned by her kin, she alone is negotiating the price.54 Applied to the reading of the Wooing prayers, the meaning of "whore" is bifurcated. The persona is a whore because, in the represented past, she has had a cupiditious relationship with the secular world, whereas Christ has been her steadfast Lover: "be world to make me pewe. Mi fles; to make me hore" (the world . . . [fights] to make me a slave, my flesh to make me a whore).55 Yet, in the present-tense dramatization of the prayers, she accepts Christ as Spouse precisely through exercise of a certain mercantile cupidity. In this quality, moreover, she has both a "feminine" susceptibility and a "masculine" agency.

My discerning a "mixed" genders for the persona complements similar conclusions reached by Innes-Parker and Chewning, though using different criteria. Innes-Parker argues that active and passive roles do not coincide easily with masculine and feminine in the Wohunge, and Chewning proposes that, whereas the male mystic must undergo a process of feminization to be selected as Christ's lover, the anchoress readers of the Wooing Group, having no masculine subjectivity to surrender, must be "immasculated" first. (Immasculation, as Patrocinio Schweickart has theorized it, is a reading practice wherein female readers identify with a text's masculine agenda and point of view.)56 Such crossing of gender categories recalls the "virago," or man-like woman, praised by the early Church fathers, and female transvestite saints, such as Euphrosyne, whose Life circulated in an early-thirteenth-century Old French text, La Vie de Sainte Euphrosyne.57 Closer yet, Christina of Markyate herself, possibly being styled after Euphrosyne, is represented as cross-dressing and adopting "manly" habits in her Life.58 That such transvestism might have had special iconographic significance for anchoresses is further suggested by wall-paintings in anchorites at Taulin Crawford (Dorset) and Faversham (Kent).59

This mixing of gender roles of course raises questions about the sexual politics of the Wooing Group. The challenge to binary gender paradigms might be seen as transgressive, even "queer" in the sense of exposing gender categories as provisional, incomplete, and politically motivated. When, under certain conditions, like those offered by the Wooing prayers, a woman can be a man, the category of "woman" is obviously not monolithic. Karma Lochrie has, in fact, argued that "mystical sex" of the kind imagined by the Wooing Group encompasses performances in which "female mystics could queer the heterosexual and masculinist structures governing mystical desire." Lochrie focuses on the "aggression, violence, [and] masochism" in the visions of female mystics and on the feminization of Christ's body via devotion to His vagina-like Wound, both of which are central aspects of the Wooing texts' representations.60 In the Wohunge, for example, the masculine/feminine persona mediates on the graphic tortures of the Passion and then gazes into Christ's body through the Wound, so that she can read
the "true love-letters" therein. The remnant and conduit of violent desire, the Wound violates representational conventions that insist on the male body as impenetrable and furthers the imagination of the persona and reader as penetrating texts and bodies. 61

But Sarah Stanbury has cautioned against reading woman’s adoption of a masculine gaze as necessarily transgressive or liberating. Acting like a man may be to inhabit “a phalanx of masculinization at cross-purposes with itself,” that is to say, female subjects’ movement between gender categories may leave intact those categories—and the values attached to them. 62 Lochrie herself acknowledges that truly “queer” expression needs to be more than a “reverse-discourse that reinstates the very terms and categories it seeks to overcome.” 63 The Wooing Group may quite simply be offering token women, it’s anachronistic readers, a brief, titillating, and perhaps illusory, glimpse of a masculine role in an exchange economy. They are, after all, still being defined by their place in the social network of marriage arrangements. And it is sobering to recall here that the repeated performance of marriage that the prayer stage may have been perceived as necessary to protect readers (intended anchors, for instance) from the dynastic designs of their families, many of whom were not above abducting unmarried women to complete an advantageous secular marriage. 64

One way to assess the politics of the Wooing Group’s erotic discourse further is to connect its representations more precisely with the practices of commerce that inscribe sexual difference and manufacture social hierarchies.

Though Luce Irigaray’s paradigmatic statement about the trade in women broadly describes feminine roles in the influential corpus of English and French romance literature, it leaves quite a bit of room for refining, and we can provide a more historically sensitive context for the literary representations of this trade. Certainly, her claim is appropriate for the study of feudal society, where the exchange of women, via arranged marriages, is a primary means of consolidating or redistributing private property. 65 But the “exchanges of wealth” identified by her as the basis of the European sex/gender system have differing forms even amongst feudal societies. Our assessment of the gendering of erotic meditation must take these forms into account. Doing so can offer precision not only about how gender is realized through exchange, but also about the relative importance of economic criteria (versus, say, descriptions of the body) in the anchor’s inhabitation of sexual roles.

**Giving, Trading, Buying**

Language describing God’s “purchase” of souls through Christ’s Incarnation and Passion has both scriptural sources and a long history of theological and literary use. The very naming of Christ as Redeemer invokes economic models, and scriptural passages such as the Parable of the Vineyard (famously addressed by the West Midlands poem Part) and the Parable of the Talents were widely used by both devotional and secular literature to theorize the “economy of salvation.” But even the most conventional of metaphors acquires specificity from its articulation in a particular time and place. The “buying” of souls may itself be emphasized or minimized in devotional representation and the meaning of purchasing changes with the economic landscape.

I have already argued that the Wooing Group offers its adventurous readers a dramatization of themselves as trading subjects, engaged in processes of barter, acquisition, and profit. I think it worth noting just how emphatically the Wooing texts reference this role. In the Wolung’s 658 short lines, forms of the verb “huggen” appear no less than seven times, usually accompanied by the adjectives “cheape” and “deore,” and always as the center of an extensive remark about value and its measuring (such as those quoted above). The Unisiun and Lasong are similarly punctuated with pithy observations about loss and gain, payments and profits, deals and debts. The Wooing texts’ language brings a commercial vocabulary to erotic description, making new complexes of association. The term “sweinger bigete” (sweeter profit), for example, combines devotional sensuality of the Ancene Wisse’s variety with the promise of gain through trade. “Feir” and “feinesse” refer to the pleasurable beauty of Christ’s body and face—drawing from Old English conventions of imagining aristocratic bodies as “hvit” (white) and “schene” (shining)—but also, in the context of the Wooing Group, forge associations with just or fair trade. In fact, the Wooing Group’s language appears to be part of an expanding vocabulary related to trade in the early-thirteenth-century vernacular. Their word for profit, “bigete,” for example, although not new to English, acquires new meaning in the AB texts and in a few other contemporary Middle English texts. Whereas the Old English precedent, “begitun,” simply means to get, usually in the sense of taking, “bigete” in the Wooing Group, and in other contemporary religious writing denotes acquisition through exchange, as well as gaining of advantage. Further, use of the term “bigete” actually appears concentrated in devotional literature in late-twelfth and early-thirteenth Middle English writing. 66 This suggests that the Wooing texts made a concerted effort to provide language adequate to the description of the trading relationships they dramatize.

This new language doubtless reflected and contributed to a growing body of writing about commercial exchange, especially that involving money, in the thirteenth century. Though scholars have rightly objected to totalizing characterizations of thirteenth-century Europe as witnessing the
"rise" of capitalism or even mercantilism, monetary transactions and new practices of exchange, investment, and accruing surplus were increasingly making their way into written records of various kinds. Though their impact was neither universal nor continuous, the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries did experience the expansion of trade routes, the growth of market centers, a rise in the circulation of coin, currency fluctuation, and what Marc Bloch has termed the increasing "nominalism" of coinage.56 Faced with a new diversity of economic practices, canons, confessors, and sermon writers assessed the morality of monetary transactions, especially those in which merchants made a "shameful gain" (turpe lucrum) by buying cheap and selling dear or by loaning at interest. Theologians attempted a formulation of the "just price" and a condemnation of "enormous discrepancy" (leasio enormis) in profit. Legislators addressed the issue of monopoly. Court records enumerated and defined mercantile frauds.69 A new genre of poetry even coalesced around the subject of money, "the poem of the coin," which mediated on the origins and loci of value.69

Much of the writing about mercantile practices came from scholastics and theologians, the latter attempting to measure these practices against Church doctrine. As Jacques LeGoff has argued, the two were often not easy to reconcile: "Christianity traditionally placed God in opposition to money. How could it vindicate wealth, or at any rate ill-acquired wealth?"70 When the Church chose to condemn rather than vindicate, its language was borrowed from more conventional rhetoric against older sins—sexuality provided a rich domain of analogies. For example, usury was likened to unnatural reproduction, making coins "give birth" to coins. A mockery of God's commandments about procreation, it was "a sin against nature."71 But trade and profit did not just get the attention of theologians writing about money; its representations also found their way into writing about God. Peter Abelard, for instance, used the metaphor of minted money to explain the Trinity.72 Closer to the issues raised by the Wooing Group, the thirteenth-century Franciscan, Bonaventure, asked "whether God had loved mankind more than Christ, on the basis that if someone gives one thing for another, he values what he receives more than what he gives; only a fool would exchange a more valuable for a less valuable thing."73 Of course Bonaventure dismissed the idea that God was a foolish merchant, but salvation theology here had encountered the structure of profit, putting the Wooing Group's handling of the subject in sophisticated company.

One particular area in which devotion and trade were inextricable from one another was intercession: prayer performed on behalf of another. Intercession was spiritual service work, valuable labor that could be provided charitably or in exchange for remuneration of various kinds. LeGoff finds the idea of intercession, aided by an increasing reliance on the concept of Purgatory (in which the otherwise damned could work—or be helped—toward salvation), to be deeply influential in the thirteenth-century discourse about acquired wealth. He cites an exemplum from 1220 in which a "certain usurer of Liège" is helped through Purgatory by the devotions of his wife, who "had a house made for herself, in which she shut herself up and by alms, prayer, and fasting and by watching day and night strove to please God for his soul's sake."74 The anchoritic overtones of the wife's commitment are unmistakable. Like her, anchoresses were locked in houses, dead to the world, praying and fasting on behalf of their patrons and their communities. Anchoresses, however, could not always claim a purely charitable donation of their services, since their prayers were offered in return for financial support (Ann Warren, the most thorough historian of anchoritis, sees financial security as its "sine qua non"). Further, the public visibility of anchors, despite their practice of a privatized form of devotion, must have made their work somewhat difficult to imagine as part of an economy of pure charity.75 As Marc Shell has argued, unlike the public acts of largesse that so often sealed political allegiances, charity demands privacy; the truly charitable act expects no public accolades or witnesses of expected returns.76

The AB texts address their readers' involvement in these quasi-charitable exchanges of spiritual services, most pointedly in the works' depictions of their own role in this exchange. The exchange of prayer for material support is nowhere more directly illuminated than in the envois of the Wooinge and the Ancrene Wisse, which comment on their writers' provision of the texts to their intended audiences:

Prei for me ni leue suster. þis haue i writen þe for þi þe worde of þe quemen þe heorte to þe nken on ure lauer. And for þi hwen þu ar on eise carpe toward iuwe & see þis wordes. & þenc as þu heng biside þu blodi up o rode. And he þurh his grace opne þin heorte to his hau & to reownd of his pine. (Wooinge)

(Pray for me, my dear sister. I have written you this because words often allure the heart to think on our Lord. And so, when you are at ease, talk to Jesus and say these words. And imagine that he hangs beside you, bloody, on the cross. And may he, through his grace, open your heart to his love, and to pity for his pain.)

Of þis boc redeþ þu hit schal beon ow gef þe hit redeþ ofte; swide biheue; þurh gode mulche grace. elles ich heftel mele bitohte mi mulche hewle. Me we leouere gode hit wite do me toward rime þen forte biginnen hit eft forte done. . . . Asc ofte as ge habbed ied earwifht her
The commentary makes clear that the anchoresses’ prayers are the payment for the writers’ labor. The clarity of the expectation, however, belies the ambiguity of the relationship it establishes. Prayers would be meaningless if not given with charitable intentions, as the envois acknowledge in their encouragement of their readers to model their intentions toward the writer after Christ’s charity on the Cross in redeeming mankind. Given this context, the envois certainly can’t demand or enact a contractual obligation. Yet, a kind of payback is expected, the emphasis on the labor involved in writing is anything but subtle in its depiction of the readers’ debt.

The double-sided character of textual exchange here is not unique to anchoritic texts, but, rather, a common feature in the proems and envois of medieval English literature. The prologue to Robert Mannyng’s Chronicle provides a fine example: “For this makynge wyll no mede / Bot gude prayere whan ye it rede. ... Pray to God he gyft me grace, / I trayveled for your salace” (I desire no reward for this poem, except your good prayers when you read it. ... Pray to God that He give me grace, I worked for your benefit). Mannyng’s statements both claim the work as an act of charity, a gift that requires “no mede,” and remind the reader of labor that has not yet been compensated but that nonetheless calls for attention. An attempt to be both charitable and paid, prolegonia such as Mannyng’s suggest that both outcomes may be somewhat uncertain. They also point to a widespread construction of textual production as part of a gift economy, rather than a commercial one. As Sarah Kay has argued in relation to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century contexts for romance: “in a gift economy ... the movement of goods is primarily seen as an index of relationships between persons. ... in a commodity economy ... what is chiefly at stake is the relations such exchanges establish between things.” At a time when monetary transactions are increasing (contributing to the commodity economy), neither romances nor other works are represented as objects with established prices. Their self-reflections imply, rather, that their writers will be rewarded by a beneficial relationship with a person, the patron, granted social recognition or supported in ways that do not necessarily require money.

On the other hand, the texts’ representation of themselves as gifts demanding some kind of reciprocation is a common medieval topos, what is particularly striking in the Wooing Group’s handling of the subject is its relation of the giving of texts to the exchange of the bodies of Christ and the anchoress in mystical marriage. The Wohunge’s envoi, for example, is not just appended to the rest of the prayer but stakes an analogy with the most fundamental transaction dramatized by it: Christ’s purchase of the anchoress’s love with His Passion. As the envoi records the giving of the text to the reader, it recalls Christ’s giving of the “true love letters” within his body. In that prototypical gift, the distinction between text and body is difficult to draw and brings to mind a similar passage from the parable of the lover-knight in Annece Wisse:

On ende he com him scolen. & broght þe godepel as lestres ipoent. & wret wiþ his alone blod salaz to his leofman. Luwe gretunge. Forte wohin hire wiþ. & hire lue wealden. Herto faleð a. tale; a wile foranske.

(In the end he came himself, and brought gospel like letters patent, and wrote with his own blood, salutations to his beloved, love greetings with which to woo her and win power over her love. Hereby hangs a tale, a parable with hidden meaning.)

Giving texts that are themselves interchangeable—the love letters, the gospel letters, and the tale with its hidden meaning—Christ gives his entire body in a gesture of ultimate sacrifice. The amatory nature of the “letters” emphasizes their charity, or caritas, and the various genres listed in the Wisse’s description recall the Wohunge itself: it is simultaneously a love letter, a representation of an event portrayed in the gospels, and a meditative prompt asking the reader to look into Christ’s interior and imagine what she sees. Thus, the two textual exchanges (Christ/anchoress, writer/anchoress) overlap and characterize each other. By doing so, however, they also complicate the anchoress’s role as an agent of exchange.

So far, we have seen that the anchoritic readers of the Wooing texts are positioned at the intersection of several different types of overlapping exchanges. Though they are represented as barterers, negotiating on their own behalf and using the language of commercialism, they are also constructed as recipients of gifts. Christ “buys” the anchoress’s devotion, but he does so with gifts, such as texts, which have no fixed price and establish a relation between the anchoress and His person, rather than a relation between commodities. Yet the anchoress is also “bought,” like a thing more than a person, and Christ himself has thing-like qualities in his circulation as text. Further, the anchoress is the recipient of another gift, one
modeled after Christ's, the gift of the Wooing text she reads. Here we do not see her bargaining, but rather indebted to the giver. Christ's gift to the anchoress is act of supreme charity, one that is offered as a model for the anchoress when returning the textual gift with a gift of prayer. But, since the textual gift is given with an expectation of return, it cannot be truly charitable, and the anchoress's "countergift" cannot be either. Finally, since the textual gift and Christ's gift are analogous, this raises the question of whether the anchoress's devotional commitment is itself an expected return on Christ's investment in her. If so, this required reciprocation would seem to cloud the understanding of charity.

Gift exchanges constrain as much as they benefit; they are "largesse" rather than "charity." Largesse is (public) giving with the expectation of returns, as in the classic example of the feudal lord who gives lands or brides to his peers or tenants with the expectation that those lords will then provide military and political support. Shell has noted that the constraints of largesse were not lost on thirteenth-century writers, who observed that: "the large giver...cupidously demands a countergift, or is assumed by the recipient to expect a countergift; largesse...is merely a species of cupidity." Kay has further demonstrated that, in thirteenth-century chansons de geste, the genre most given to representing largesse, gift-giving is as much an expression of hostility as it is of generosity, since it can force the recipient into unwanted obligations.

I am not suggesting here that the anchoresses' obligations to God are unwanted. But I will suggest that the anchoress-reader's trade with Christ is not easy for the Wooing texts to represent, either through the grammar of commerce or the discourse of gift-giving. As an analogy to dramatize the anchoress's mystical marriage, commercial exchange presents several difficulties. The most notable of these is the inequality of the exchange, raising the specter of unjust prices, uncontrollable profits, and God's seemingly irrational offer of everything for "nought." Also a problem is the lack of a characterization of the female merchant in devotional literature or romance. But figuring the marriage enacted through an exchange of gifts is also difficult, since that way the all-important representation of charity becomes haunted by its opposite, cupidity. Further, the textual trade that supports the anchoress's devotion is caught in this representational bind as well, whether we see the imagination of the textual gift as following from that of the anchoress's trade with Christ or we see the textual gift itself as the exchange through which the trade with Christ is understood.

Still, the networks of exchange represented in the Wooing Group are ultimately closer to those of a gift economy than a commercial one, despite the texts' mercantile rhetoric. In this respect, the Wooing texts have as much in common with the chanson de geste, a genre preoccupied with largesse, as they do with romance, which scholars such as Shell, Kay, and Howard Bloch argue is more entwined with commercial ideologies in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Kay argues that the chansons of this period actually voice a resistance to romance's concentration on the commodity. They do so by reinstating largesse, but in a way that explores the "potential for irony and ambiguity in a gift economy." Gifts in the chansons, she notes, "can mystify the distinction between 'persons' and 'things,' [and] this confusion is further heightened by the swapping over of roles between 'gifts,' 'givers,' and 'recipients.'" The chansons' female characters, in particular those who, like the "Saracen princess" character, engineer their own marriages, are the agents of this irony. Frequently referred to as a "whore" by other characters (although she is "sexually reticent"), the Saracen princess of the chansons acts against the wishes of her family by giving her own hand in marriage. When the traditional givers (men) are disabled, the traditional gift (the princess) takes charge of the process. Thus, while reinstating the economy of the gift, the Saracen princess also "shows up the process of male conferment as mere trompe-l'œil." Obviously, there are many parallels between the "whorish" women of the chansons and the self-described "whores" of the Wooing texts. Both act independently of their male relatives, giving themselves to the suitors of their choices. Both display supposedly "masculine" behaviors, confusing gender roles and also confusing the places of "gifts, givers, and recipients." Yet both also enable a return to an economy of the gift, in which they are traded as well as trading. These women certainly do occupy an ambiguous position in the representation of exchange and the sex/gender system. And, I agree with Kay that there is the potential for irony and even a kind of subversive humor in this ambiguity. But the Wooing texts are not given to humor, and their personae and their readers are, I think, more constrained than the exotic Saracen princesses who plunder the West for the knights of their choice. As recipients of gifts themselves, the Wooing personae and the readers whom they figure, are obligated to make countergifts; they become traders only to find themselves, like men, responsible to the rules of largesse, giving back an equivalent to what they have received. And though this may only be a limited amount of prayer in the case of returning the gift of the text, no amount of devotion could ever fully return Christ's gift.

Conclusions

In chapter 2, I discussed the thirteenth-century "thematization of erotic reading" that subtly but profoundly influences the scripting of anchoress devotion in the Ancrene Wisse. The Wooing Group subset of Wisse-related texts for anchor demonstrates the presence of another theme, that of gift
exchange, which, though long-standing in early medieval epic poetry like the Old French chansons de geste and Old English works, was nonetheless newly galvanized by thirteenth-century attempts to theorize exchange relationships in the face of new monetary transactions. Practices of gift exchange, as they are represented in the Wooing Group, are inseparable from the texts’ performance of the anchoress-reader’s “marriage” to Christ and the erotic tropes connected with it. Further, the conception of gift exchange in relation to monetary exchange impacts the very provision of the texts that support the anchor’s erotic reading.

The treatment of exchange here exposes the connections between the mystical, ecstatic Wooing texts and economic practice. This is not to say the Wooing Group is any less “mystical” for it. Its prayers still dramatize the Christian believer’s “union” with God and record the sensory, sensual experience of this union from a first-person perspective. But the Group does demonstrate the materiality of mysticism, and recall that fantasies of liberation from social, economic, and sexual constraints (summarily depicted as “your father’s house,” by Hal Meilbaid) are generally reconfigurations of those constraints rather than transcendence. Indeed, while the Wooing texts construct a mixed gender for their readers—the whore, the female trader, the transvestite, the woman who “reads like a man”—they remind the anchoress that, as the recipient of a disproportionate gift, she is indebted rather than free.

I have selected the Wooing texts for my analysis of the economics of devotional eroticism because their pointedly commercial language has sometimes been noted in passing but never discussed at length and because their brevity and directness focuses the reader’s attention on exchange relationships in a way that the longer AB texts do not. But analysis of these relationships in the rest of the Wise-associated works would doubtless help the understanding of gender and sexuality in thirteenth-century anchoritic literature as a whole. The Ancre de Wise itself employs the language of exchange in much the same way as the Wooing works, as I have briefly touched upon here. And the AB saints’ lives (Katharine, Margaret, and Juliana) offer many rich descriptions of their heroines as both potential recipients of gifts and traders, as well as meditations on the question of value. Understanding these representations fully will contribute not only to a history of devotional sexuality but also to the illumination of English devotional literature’s dialogue with other genres of writing.

CHAPTER 4

THE “POPULARIZATION” OF THE AFFECTIVE?:
FRIAR THOMAS OF HALES AND HIS AUDIENCE

Throughout this study, I have attempted to understand erotic discourse within the context of the religious institutions that specifically shape its forms and functions. In the case of Christ I, monastic liturgical practice demands an erotics that supports communal participation in the sacred events marked by the monastic calendar. The isolating spatial practices of anchorites, in contrast, give rise to an erotic identification with the cell that is privatized and perceived as both dangerous and necessary. In the monastic and anchoritic works discussed so far, then, an understanding of institutionally specific practices—practices that comprise a material tradition of worship—illuminates the ends of eroticism. It suggests, that is, how erotic discourses are played out in the world of the texts’ readers.

When we turn to look at eroticsim as it is played out in mendicant texts, however, we find that the institutional profile of mendicant orders, and specifically of the Franciscans, has already assumed a dominant role in readings of mendicant-authored works with an erotic cast. Indeed, eroticsim has an acknowledged place in what has been recognized as a “Franciscan aesthetic,” and it is in relation to this order-wide sensibility that erotic elements of Franciscan texts are nearly always explained.1 Franciscan literature “typically” appropriates the tropes of affective piety, including the metaphor of the Sponsa Christi, for a “more direct and intense representation of human events” than affectivity supported in monastic writing.8 Such representational and stylistic preferences are commonly seen as having an institutional basis; that is, they are said to result from the distinctly evangelical practices of the mendicant order.

The recognition of a “Franciscan aesthetic” does help us navigate our way through texts with a Franciscan provenance. Such a rubric not only makes it possible to identify the textual features that are especially reflective of