De Wohunge of ure Lauerd and the Tradition of Affective Devotion: Rethinking Text and Audience

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De Wohunge of ure Lauerd represents a rare moment in Middle English devotional literature. Aside from Ancrene Wisse, it is the first instance of a Middle English devotional text which incorporates both the Anselmian prayer and meditative techniques which had become so influential in the religious milieux of the twelfth century, and the affective devotion to the divine spouse which the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux had popularized among male and female religious alike. But the Wohunge also looks forward: it is the first instance of an affective, meditative text in the English vernacular, anticipating the popular Franciscan devotion of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Finally, it is the first ‘stand-alone’ Passion meditation in Middle English, and thus the first of a genre which would come to dominate the vernacular theology of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Like Ancrene Wisse, then, the Wohunge occupies a transitional position in the literature of devotion. But so, too, does its audience, which occupies a medial position between religious and lay, literate and illiterate.1 The Wohunge was the last of the anchoritic texts to have been written, post-dating Ancrene Wisse in both its original and, probably, its revised form. It is important, therefore, to recognize the influence of the evolving anchoritic audience, and not simply to identify the Wooing’s audience with the original audience of Ancrene Wisse (even that of the revised Corpus version). And although this audience was, in the first instance, an anchoritic one, the Wohunge almost certainly found its way into lay hands.
In what follows, I would like to re-examine the audience of the Wooing Group, and the Wohunge itself, and consider what this reconsideration of audience implies for our reading of the Wohunge. I propose that we must resist some of the assumptions that characterized the reading of the Wohunge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (including my own). It is generally assumed that the readers of the Wohunge were young, naive women, whose experience of love was limited to reading romances and dreaming of the ideal husband – an audience similar to that posited by the author of Hali Meðhad as his ‘ideal’ or ‘intended’ audience. The assumption of a maidenly, sheltered anchoress leads to two related difficulties. First, there is a tendency to read the affective devotion of the Wohunge almost entirely through the lens of the contemporary romance tradition. Second, there is an assumption of immaturity that belies the sophistication and multi-valence of the Wohunge. In the reconsideration of the audience and context of the Wohunge which follows, I will argue for two things: that the audience of the Wohunge had a maturity of outlook and experience that is often ignored; and that the context and content of the Wohunge looks forward to the Franciscan devotion of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as much as it looks back to and incorporates the imagery of romance and the Bernardine tradition.

Unlike Ancrene Wisse and the texts of the Katherine Group, the Wohunge, and the prayers which together form the Wooing Group likely originally circulated on scrolls or individual leaves. Wohunge itself is not long – it comprises only 5½ folios in the Titus manuscript. The other prayers, found in Nero, are even shorter: On God Ureisun of ure Lefdi (UrLe) is approximately 2½ folios, On wel swuðe God Ureisun of God Almihti (UrG) is 3½ folios, On Lofsong of ure Lefdi (LLe) 3 folios, and On Lofsong of ure Louerde (LLo) 3½ folios.

Written for a monastic audience, the male-voiced On God Ureisun of Ure Lefdi (UrL) was likely the earliest of the Wooing Group prayers to be composed. A fragment of On Lofsong of Ure Lefdi (LLe) is found at the end of Royal 71.A.xxvii, one of the earliest of the Katherine Group manuscripts (c.1225–30), which does not contain Hali Meðhad. LLe may, therefore, have been copied before Hali Meðhad was composed. On Lofsong of ure Louerde (LLo) was probably a source for a passage in Hali Meðhad. This would make these three prayers among the earliest of the anchoritic texts, pre-dating both Hali Meðhad and Ancrene Wisse. These earliest three Wooing Group prayers (and possibly UrG as well) thus come very early indeed in the process of the gathering together of textual support for the anchoritic life of their female readers, possibly at the request of the
anchoresses themselves, who needed prayers to supplement the Hours which they had written out by hand.

The Wohunge itself, on the other hand, was composed very late in the process, and perhaps this accounts for the many differences between its profound affective theology and the stiffer, more ‘conventional’ tone of the earlier prayers. We know little of the early circulation of the Wohunge, although it must have circulated with On wel swuðe God Ureisun of God Almihti (UrG) at one time, since both are incorporated into the fourteenth-century A Talkyng of the Love of God.\(^{12}\) It is, however, clear that the Wohunge was the last of the group to be written, post-dating the revision of Ancrene Wisse.\(^{13}\)

The Wohunge itself survives only in Titus, which, although one of the latest of the Ancrene Wisse manuscripts, is nevertheless a crucial witness, providing evidence of the adaptation of Ancrene Wisse for a broader audience even than the ‘20 or more’ anchoresses of the revision – in the ten to twenty years since the first suggestions of revision in Cleopatra, the text has circulated beyond the confines of the anchoritic community, and been altered for a mixed audience that included male readers (the Titus exemplar) and a mixed audience of lay readers (Titus itself).\(^{14}\) It seems clear, then, that coming at the end of this long and complex textual tradition, the Wohunge represents not the young and virginal audience implied by Hali Meiðhad (or, indeed, texts like Thomas of Hales’s Luv Rone),\(^ {15}\) and assumed by many scholars of Ancrene Wisse’s original version. Instead, the Wohunge’s audience would be more like the broader audience of Ancrene Wisse’s revision, which included an entire community of anchoresses who came from various backgrounds.

Anne Savage’s recent re-examination of the process of revising Ancrene Wisse suggests important considerations for the later composition and audience of the Wohunge.\(^{16}\) Savage argues that Ancrene Wisse was composed, not only near the end of the textual process (followed only by the Wohunge), but also at the height of the anchoresses’ careers, rather than at the beginning. It is often assumed that, at the request of the original three sisters, Ancrene Wisse was written shortly after their enclosure, while they were still ‘in the flower of their youth’. This assumption is based on the oft-quoted passage in Nero (‘Muche word is of ou hu gentile wummen 3e beoð. vorgodleic & for ureoleic i3irned of monie. & sustren of one ueder & of one moder. i ne blostme of ower 3uweðe uorheten alle wor[l]des blissen; & bicomen ancren’),\(^ {17}\) and reinforced by Salu’s 1955 translation, which reads:

There is much talk of you, how you are women of gentle birth, sisters, with the same father and the same mother, once much sought after on account of your
goodness and beauty, having now, in the flower of your youth, renounced all the pleasures of the world and become anchoresses.\textsuperscript{18}

Wada’s interpretation is fairly typical: she quotes Salu and continues, ‘the sisters had led a secular, high life recently, since \textit{Ancrene Wisse} includes many examples from worldly affairs …’ (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{19} Robertson’s translation is better:

There is much talk about what noble women you are, sought after for your goodness and generosity, and sisters of one father and one mother. In the blossom of your youth, you forsook all the bliss of the world and became anchoresses.\textsuperscript{20}

This reading reflects the original author’s indication that his readers had become anchoresses ‘in the flower of [their] youth’ but does not add the assumption that they are still young and inexperienced (which the original does not imply). Thus, \textit{Ancrene Wisse} need not have been written in response to the urgent need of newly enclosed anchoresses for a guide to their new lives. Rather, as Savage argues, \textit{Ancrene Wisse} was more likely written (and revised) when the original audience had matured in the anchoritic life enough to become models for other anchoresses – or, as Savage puts it, the lives of the three sisters were not modelled upon \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, but rather, \textit{Ancrene Wisse} was modelled upon the lives of the three sisters. Thus, ‘[f]rom the anchoritic sisters, “Begging their director for a rule for a long time” is clearly driven by something other than ignorance of how an anchoress should conduct her life.’\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, ‘the writer insists that he is not writing this book for its apparent audience.’\textsuperscript{22} Savage argues that \textit{Ancrene Wisse} was not written as an instructional manual for the three sister- anchoresses who appear to have comprised its original audience/readership, and then the larger group of solitaries following their example; I propose that while a wider range of sources provided its basis, it was written both about and with these anchoresses; that a very great part of its intention was to take the founding sisters and their lives as models for the others who had followed their example by the time of writing, and others who would in the future become anchoresses … They conveyed their needs, desires and situation in a way that requires our attention in any question of authorship here – by any combination of written revisions, speech, and most forcefully of all, by living the perilous anchoritic life successfully in the writer’s eyes.\textsuperscript{23}

Savage concludes that the necessity for \textit{Ancrene Wisse} was not, in the first instance, the enclosure of the three sisters, but the growth of the
‘community of solitaries’ whose existence had expanded even further by the time the Corpus manuscript was written.\(^{24}\) Indeed, she suggests that ‘the women who used it were, directly or indirectly, significantly responsible for the organization and recomposition of this material’.\(^{25}\)

Composed after this revision, the \textit{Wohunge} would have been written for this wider ‘community of solitaries’ in order to fill the need for a more detailed, and more demanding, devotional exercise than that provided either by the Passion meditation in \textit{Ancrene Wisse} VII or in the Wooing Group prayers. And if, as Savage argues, the anchoresses themselves had input into the revision of \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, they might well have also had some influence on the content and form of the \textit{Wohunge}, written to fill a gap in their devotional reading. The \textit{Wohunge}, then, was likely written not only for, but with this community of anchoresses. Perhaps it is even not beyond the realm of speculation that it was written by one of them, although of course there is little evidence either way. At the very least, this audience would have influenced the \textit{Wohunge}’s composition simply by creating the demand for such a text, but their influence may have been even more direct.

\textbf{Text and Audience: Rethinking the Anchoress}

In the early thirteenth century a growing movement of lay devotion sparked an increase in the demand both for a place for lay men and women in religious orders and for devotional texts in the vernacular. The fact that the demand for a devout life far outstripped the availability of spaces in religious orders led to the growth (especially on the Continent) of religious confraternities, Tertiary Orders, lay movements like the beguines and laypeople working in hospitals or almshouses in a ‘semi-religious’ life.\(^{26}\) In thirteenth-century England, however, for women at least, there were few alternatives to the convent, and the rising demand for the contemplative life led to an increase in women seeking the life of the anchoress.\(^{27}\)

Much of this expansion may have been due to the desire of aristocratic widows for a life of religious seclusion. Like the secular widows who retreated to convents or hospitals in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, widows in the thirteenth century sometimes withdrew to the anchoritic cell. In the case of anchoresses, however, their dedication to the life of prayer and meditation was characterized by solitude and withdrawal from the world, rather than the exchange of one community (the active, secular world) for another (the life of the convent or hospital). While Millett has argued that enclosure might not always have been by choice, it was also
often freely chosen and clearly thought out.28 This seems particularly true of two women who were connected with the region (and time) in which *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Wohunge* were written, Annora de Braose Mortimer and her sister, Loretta, Countess of Leicester. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Annora and her sister(s) were the original audience for *Ancrene Wisse* or, indeed, any of the anchoritic texts. There is no evidence of a direct connection between the de Braose sisters and *Ancrene Wisse*, although Dobson has suggested that the French translation of *Ancrene Wisse* may have been composed in the first instance for Annora.29 And, indeed, we do know that one copy of *Ancrene Wisse*, Cleopatra, did belong to another powerful Marcher lady, Matilda de Clare, in the late thirteenth century.30 The de Braose sisters do, however, provide an example of the kind of audience for which the anchoritic texts, and the *Wohunge* in particular, might have been written – wealthy, aristocratic, highly placed and well-educated women who sought the anchorhold in their widowhood, and whose concerns are reflected in the practicality, imagery and complexity of the *Wohunge*.

The de Braose family were amongst the most powerful of the Marcher nobility in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.31 They were also notable patrons of religious houses: Annora and Loretta’s parents, William de Braose and his wife Maude (or Matilda) de Braose, were patrons of Glastonbury and other religious foundations in the border marches, and Maud’s family, the St Valerys, were patrons of, amongst others, the convent at Godstow, near Oxford. The elder de Braoses’ patronage and religious connections clearly extended into the next generation. Annora and Loretta’s sister, Flandrina, was a nun (and later abbess) at Godstow; their brother, Giles, was bishop of Worcester; and another sister, Margery de Lacy, founded a convent at Aconbury.32

The lives of the de Braose sisters were not characterized by ease and security. Their mother Maud, along with their eldest brother William, was condemned to death by King John in 1210 after their father had fled to France (where he later died in exile). Giles was also exiled at the time of his mother and brother’s imprisonment (1208–13) and went to Paris, where he befriended Stephen Langton, the exiled archbishop of Canterbury. Loretta’s lands were seized and she, already a widow, may have gone into exile with her brother and father in Paris.33 Annora was imprisoned from 1210 to 1214. The imagery of enclosure as penitential suffering, imprisonment and exile would surely have resonated with these two women.

There were, of course, many reasons to seek out religious seclusion in widowhood. A noble widow was subject to the demands of remarriage, and
may also have been seen as a potential threat by her husband’s heirs or competition by their wives. In the cases of Annora and Loretta, both childless, the heirs to their husbands’ estates would have had even less reason to welcome them than if they had been their own sons or daughters. More important, for both women religious seclusion also provided a form of political sanctuary, away from the teeming intrigues of their parents for which Annora had suffered imprisonment, and Loretta exile. Loretta’s return to England and the restoration of her lands (1214/15) seem to have been permitted under the condition that she would not remarry, and she was enclosed at Hackington, Kent (near Canterbury) in 1220 or 1221, after settling her financial affairs.\textsuperscript{34} Annora, widowed in 1227, similarly settled her finances, ensured adequate provision for her life as an anchoress and entered the anchorhold at Iffley (near Oxford) in 1232. For both women, the anchorhold offered political and social shelter, as well as religious seclusion.

It is, however, important not to discount the obvious reason for withdrawal to the anchorhold – a sincere desire to seek the devout life of prayer and meditation, and to prepare the soul for the afterlife, while at the same time interceding for the souls of family and friends, living and dead. It is unlikely that a wealthy aristocratic widow like Annora de Braose Mortimer or the Countess of Leicester would have chosen an anchorhold over a convent simply as a political or social refuge. Both the de Braose sisters had the means to enter a convent of their choosing, and they had familial connections to at least two: Aconbury (founded by Margery in 1218, before either were enclosed), and Godstow (where Flandrina was already a nun).

Nevertheless, relations between the de Braose family and the religious houses under their patronage were not always peaceful. For example, at the time that Annora would have been arranging for her enclosure, Margery was engaged in a heated debate with the Hospitallers (to whom she had entrusted the foundation of her convent at Aconbury), which ended with her refounding the establishment under the Austin Friars. Flandrina was, indeed, created abbess of Godstow in 1241 (about the time of Annora’s death), but was deposed in 1248 by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln. There is no evidence of why she was removed from office, or, indeed, of her life at Godstow in any form, apart from these two events. But Godstow and Aconbury would not have been the only convents available to the de Braose sisters, had they sought refuge in a community of nuns. One must, therefore, consider that their choice of the anchorhold was prompted by a true desire for the secluded life of the anchoress, rather than the communal life of the nun.\textsuperscript{35} And, indeed, Loretta’s later patronage of the Franciscans
suggests that personal devotion may well have been a motive for her enclosure.

Indeed, the anchorhold may have been attractive precisely because it was not a convent, and therefore its inhabitant was not subject to the vows or rule of the convent life. A woman who, in her widowhood, desired to withdraw from the secular world and pursue a devout life, had few options in the early thirteenth century: essentially, she was limited to the extremes of the solitude of the anchorhold or the communal life of the convent. The anchorhold would have offered the kind of seclusion without religious vows appropriate for a lay widow who wished to retire to a life of devotion but not to take on the formal life of the convent. And the anchorhold would have provided some degree of independence. Indeed, although, as Millett suggests, Ancrene Wisse betrays its audience’s anxiety about their liminal status, neither lay nor religious, bound by no rule, yet identified with no order, that very marginality may have been part of its attraction.

The picture that emerges of the audience for a text like the Wohunge is thus complex. The original readers would, to be sure, have been anchoresses; but they would also likely have been aristocratic, literate and intelligent women, who had led active, and perhaps powerful, lives in the lay world before retiring to the anchorhold. They may have been the widows of powerful and influential men – indeed, like Annora and Loretta, they may have retired to the anchorhold to minimize any residual effect of that influence that others may have perceived as a threat. They may have been seeking refuge as well as seclusion. And they would have brought with them the influences, experiences and some of the accoutrements of the world which they had left behind. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that wealthy aristocratic women like the de Braose sisters would not have brought at least some books and devotional images with them to the anchorhold, however austere their cell might have, in theory, been.

Having chosen such a life, however, the devout laywoman (widow or maid) required a literature to support it. Warren has charted the details of women’s efforts to secure the institutional and financial support which were necessary to enter into the life of the anchoress. But a literary context was also necessary for a life that was grounded in the withdrawal from the world, yet not governed by any ‘rule’. Literature for monks abounded: rules, sermons, meditations and theological treatises of all kinds could be drawn upon to support the monastic life. Nuns could and did read and benefit from the same literature, and were also able, to some extent, to develop a literary tradition of their own, as witnessed by the nuns of Barking in the late twelfth century. For anchoresses, however, there was little literary
support for the lifestyle they had chosen. Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De Institutione Inclusarum*, or *Rule for a Recluse*, one of the sources upon which the author of *Ancrene Wisse* drew, was among the first literature written exclusively for anchoresses; Goscelin’s *Letter* to Eve of Wilton was another. The addressees of these texts, however, had come to the anchorhold via the convent. This had important implications. As professional religious, both Aelred’s sister and Eve of Wilton were literate in Latin and could draw upon the devotional and meditative literature of their time to structure their devotional lives and to supplement the instruction contained in their ‘Rules’. Indeed, they were already supplied with a rule and a literature that had structured their lives in the convent. Both Aelred’s *Rule* and Goscelin’s *Letter* were supplements to an already existing body of literature, intended to build upon a form of religious life that had already been mastered as they instructed their readers in the higher form of solitude which they had undertaken. Thus, the texts written by Aelred and Goscelin would have been used to focus their readers on the ways in which the solitude of the anchorhold augmented and deepened the devotional lives that they already led. Rooted in the life and literature of the convent, for Aelred and Goscelin’s readers, the anchorhold was the extension and pinnacle (albeit a rare and demanding one) of a life that they had chosen and trained for from youth, and, moreover, a life that had opened to them an entire literature of devotion.

For the anchoresses to whom *Ancrene Wisse* was addressed, and for women like Annora and Loretta, however, the anchoritic life was arrived at by a quite different route. These women moved directly from the lay world into the anchorhold, whether in their youth (as with the three sisters to whom *Ancrene Wisse* was originally addressed), or in their widowhood (as with Annora and Loretta). For these women, literate in the vernacular(s) but not in Latin, the Latin literature of monastery and convent would have been inaccessible (and, indeed, inappropriate). But before *Ancrene Wisse*, there were no guides or ‘rules’ for the anchoritic life in the vernacular, and little literature to support the life of prayer and meditation which these women had undertaken. It is in this context in which the anchoritic texts must be seen: not only as the beginning of a flourishing movement of vernacular theology, but at a pivotal moment in time, when the demand for vernacular theological writings was growing, but when there were no texts available to meet that demand. Addressed to an audience of women who occupied the shadowy perimeters of both the religious and secular worlds, anchoresses who were neither true ‘religious’, belonging to no order or conventual context, nor truly ‘lay’, having taken vows of seclusion and...
entered into an anchoritic cell which cut them off, metaphorically if not literally, from the secular world which lay just outside their windows, the Wohunge must also be seen in the context of the increasing desire of lay men and, particularly, women to participate in the devotional life of prayer and meditation. Yet it is not merely an adaptation of complex theological and devotional material for an audience that prefers emotion to intellect, romance to theology. It is addressed to an intelligent, literate and aristocratic audience, capable of appreciating its complex structure and nuanced layers of metaphor. How, then, did the needs of anchoresses and other readers in the ‘margins’ between the lay and religious worlds shape the development of the texts written for them and, specifically, the composition and use of a text like the Wohunge?

The Anchoress’s Reading Material: the Wohunge as a Response to Demand

Ancrene Wisse itself is a true compendium, ideally suited to its readers’ needs: it leads the anchoresses through their daily devotions, counsels them on the details of the enclosed life (what could they eat? what should they wear? could they keep a cow?), and, most importantly, develops the inner spiritual lives to which their solitude would be devoted. Yet, as the author himself acknowledges, this ‘guide’ alone is not enough. The spiritual life, and the prayer and meditation upon which it is grounded, is best built through devotional reading. The author of Ancrene Wisse cannot conceive of the life of prayer unsupported by devout reading, and even counsels his beloved sisters to pray less, that they may read more.

However, the anchoresses for whom the Ancrene Wisse author wrote did not have a wide stock of vernacular texts to draw upon to feed their spiritual lectio. We know from Ancrene Wisse itself that the original recipients owned several books in English and French, among them an ‘English Book of St Margaret’ (perhaps the Life of St Margaret included in the Katherine Group), a book which sounds very like Hali Meðhad, and possibly Sawles Warde. In the early thirteenth century, such vernacular books of devotion were rare, yet the rising popularity of the anchoritic life amongst aristocratic women clearly created a demand for such works, in both English and French.

Women entering the anchorhold would have brought with them their past reading, if not the books themselves. In their secular lives they would likely have read, if not owned, Psalters, saints’ lives, and contemporary
romances. Even the texts of the Katherine Group reflect some of the worldly experiences that a devout widow might have brought to the anchorhold. Using the allegory of the noble household, *Sawles Warde* reminded the reader of her responsibility to rule her body and mind, and the eternal consequences of success or failure. Saints’ lives provided models for perseverance in temptation and adversity, for dedication to prayer and meditation, for confidence in Christ’s intervention (even in the prison/anchorhold when life was at its bleakest), and sources of inspiration and intercessors to turn to in time of need. In some cases, saints’ lives may also have provided for the possibility of adventure and romance, transformed from the secular romance of court and castle to the religious romance of the court of heaven.\(^45\) The combination of courtly romance and the *imitatio Christi* of the saints’ lives would have been an ideal background for a text such as the *Wohunge*. Only *Hali Meiðhad* was addressed specifically to virgins, but even this could provide an aristocratic widow with encouragement in the maintenance of the life of chastity, and a reminder that the secular life had its own difficulties and dangers.

A pressing need which remained unfulfilled by these texts was a way to structure daily prayers and devotions. Like the devout layperson of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these women would have had enough Latin to recite the basic prayers of the canonical hours, the Credo, the Ave, and the Pater Noster.\(^46\) Anchoresses may have brought a Psalter with them to the anchorhold, but they would have written their ‘Hours’ on pamphlets or scrolls,\(^47\) and they were instructed to have whatever else they needed (such as prayers, graces or hymns) written out for them.\(^48\) The anchoresses would also have listened to the Hours of the priest in the church adjoining their cell. However, ‘the anchoresses are also encouraged to use their own devotions’\(^49\) and by far the most important reading material, therefore, is that which structures individual prayer and meditation, focusing the mind and senses on the One whom the reader seeks in her cell, and for whom she has withdrawn from the world. The author of *Ancrene Wisse* continually advises his readers to flee to the Cross through prayer, meditation and holy reading. Indeed, the encouragement of *Hali Meiðhad* to persevere in the chaste life, the models of the saints of dedication to their divine Beloved through torment and adversity, and *Sawles Warde*’s promise of eternal bliss with the heavenly Bridegroom are all predicated on the same goal: devotion to and union with Christ, consummated in heaven, but prefigured on earth through prayer and meditation.\(^50\)

It is here that the texts of the Wooing Group would have entered into the equation. The earliest four Wooing Group prayers may have been
composed and copied to fill the anchoresses’ need for vernacular prayers in the Anselmian manner. Yet the most effective means of union with the heavenly spouse is found in the affective participation in his Passion through meditation upon the great love evident in his suffering and death, and the prayerful response of love which that meditation evokes. Nearly two centuries later, the author of *The Tree and the Twelve Fruits of the Holy Ghost* was more fortunate in his resources: the spread of Franciscan devotion meant that vernacular theology was widely available, and he could recommend meditation upon Christ’s Passion in general as a genre with which his readers would be familiar, and the *Stimulus Amoris* (long available in Middle English translation as *The Prickynge of Love*) in particular as a text to which they would have had ready access. The author of *Ancrene Wisse*, however, has no body of literature to which to refer his readers, and must include his own version of Passion meditation in the parable of the Christ-knight in the penultimate and climactic Part 7 of his text. In this light, it is significant that although structurally the four shorter prayers of the Wooing Group found in Nero provide a balance between devotion to the Virgin Mary and to Christ (providing two prayers to each), the main focus of the prayers themselves is the Passion. Even *On Lofsong of Ure Lefdi* (LLe) is essentially a form of confession followed by a request for the Virgin’s intercession based on the elements of Christ’s Passion, a short outline of a Passion meditation similar to those that accompany the later Arma Christi images. And while the author of *Ancrene Wisse* holds the Virgin Mary up as a model throughout the text, it is meditation upon Christ’s Passion that is most often recommended to his readers. Yet, in the end, the readers of *Ancrene Wisse* are ultimately left without the kind of ‘stand alone’ meditation that could guide them through their contemplation of the Passion and the appropriate responses.

The *Wohunge* fills this gap admirably. While it draws upon the parable of the Christ-knight in *Ancrene Wisse* 7, it expands that parable into a full-fledged meditation on Christ’s suitability as the reader’s beloved spouse, the Passion which displays his love so eloquently, and the inevitable response of grateful love which the reader must find in her own heart. In so doing, the *Wohunge* combines the Anselmian pattern of prayer, characterized by the metaphorical withdrawal into the chamber of the heart (here figured by the anchoress’s literal withdrawal into the anchorhold) with the Bernardine affective devotion to the heavenly bridegroom in a vernacular text which makes such devotion available to any literate reader.

Anselm’s *Orationes sive Meditationes* (Prayers and Meditations), many of which were written for devout laypeople, were, as Savage and Watson...
(1991) point out, an ‘important ancestor of the whole of the Wooing group’. They continue, ‘The tone distinctive to Anselmian meditation is that of the impassioned soliloquy, as a speaker argues, exclaims, prays and uses highly patterned language to induce in herself or himself a deeper realization of Christian truths; this is just the tone which Wohunge also strives to achieve for the same purpose.’\textsuperscript{53} The true achievement of the Wohunge, however, is in its combination of Anselmian prayer with the bridal imagery of Bernard of Clairvaux and the continental women mystics.\textsuperscript{54} In so doing, the Wohunge draws together threads from the looms of both secular and religious devotion to weave a new text for readers who lived in margins between the life of the secular world and the world of the professional religious.

But the Wohunge is more than ‘just’ an anchoritic text. It is the first text in Middle English which provides a meditation on Christ’s Passion, its purpose and function in the life of the reader, and the appropriate devotional response. It thus stands at the beginning of a tradition of texts which become the most popular genre of vernacular writing in late medieval England.\textsuperscript{55} Pre-dating the flowering of Franciscan literature which, it has always been assumed, ‘prompted’ the growth of such affective meditation on the Passion amongst the laity in late medieval England, the Wohunge must, nevertheless, be studied in the same context. In fact, the Wohunge should be seen as a link between the Anselmian and Bernardine meditations of the twelfth century and the Franciscan devotions of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, just as it is a link between the worlds of lay and religious devotion. Written shortly after the establishment of the first Franciscan and Dominican houses in England, the Wohunge ought to be seen as part of the movement which brought Franciscan devotion to the vernacular reader. Indeed, Loretta, Countess of Leicester, was an important patron of the early Franciscans, and the Wohunge is precisely the kind of text which might have been commissioned by or written for an anchoress with a Franciscan spiritual adviser.

\textit{Passion Meditation in the Wooing Group}

Having reconsidered the audience of the Wohunge and considered, however briefly, its place in the tradition of devotional reading, it is time to turn to the ways in which the Wohunge’s Passion meditation suits the needs of such an audience: devout, likely aristocratic, literate in the vernacular, intelligent, and, perhaps most important, experienced – likely widowed, rather
than virginal, having come from the lay world later in life, and bringing its experiences with them. Such an audience, with experience of the world gained before entering the anchorhold, is quite different than the young, virginal women whose experience of the world comes from reading romance and dreaming of the ideal husband. In this light, one is forced to reassess both the author’s ‘intent’ and one’s own reading of the text. The opening lines, which consist of the consideration of the ideal spouse, cannot be read as portraying the ‘fantasy’ ideal which would appeal to young women whose experience of life and marriage is limited. Instead, they must be read as an appeal to the practical, experienced and aristocratic lady, whose experience of marriage may not have been ideal, but is certainly realistic; for women such as Annora and Loretta de Braose, the ideal may well have been read in contrast to their own experience of their father (if not their husbands). The attributes of the ideal spouse are, above all, practical: wealth, generosity (to his spouse), wisdom to use wealth and power well, bravery and the skill to keep and hold his lands and wealth, nobility of birth and character, gentleness and high kindred. Although spiritualized, the considerations are the practical realities of a noble marriage, and although love underlies each, the attributes are presented as the purchase price of the narrator’s love, in a clear assessment of their ‘market value’.

After cataloguing Christ’s superiority to any human spouse, the narrator asserts that over all these, Christ’s painful death on the Cross ‘telles riht in al mi luue, / calenges al mi heorte (rightly claims all my love, challenges all my heart). Moving from the language of the market-place to the language of rightful ownership, the narrator asserts that the Passion makes Christ worthy of the reader’s love, and his rightful claim is presented as a challenge to her – a challenge to recognize, and respond to, the absolute worth of Christ’s love.

The Wohunge thus combines aristocratic dignity with practical reflection on the ideal spouse in its opening lines. But the opening lines are far more than mere reflection on the ideal spouse. They are the introduction to a complex and layered Passion meditation which, like the opening, draws heavily upon the imagery of enclosure which dominates Ancrene Wisse and which structures the anchoress’s meditation upon Christ’s life and death as a series of enclosures paralleling the anchoress’s own: in Mary’s womb, on the Cross and in the tomb. In so doing, it requires a close and careful reading.

The Passion meditation which follows retains, however, the practical and aristocratic tone of the earlier passages. The Passion is presented as a battle, where Christ fights the three foes of the world, the flesh and the devil with the three weapons of poverty, shame and pain. Here, as in the list of the
attributes of the ideal spouse, Christ is presented not as the courtly knight of romance, but as the epic hero of Anglo-Saxon battles, fighting the beasts of battle with, literally, one hand tied behind his back or, as the narrator puts it, ‘wið þi deorwurðe hond nailet on rod’, with your precious hand nailed on the cross), plundering hell’s house and binding its dogs, and saving the soul from torment and shame.

Christ’s weapons, too, are presented in a very practical light. Christ’s poverty teaches the narrator not to fear (or regret) the poverty of the world – and, in the case of an aristocratic widow, not to fear giving up the comfort and wealth that she has lived with all her life. The restrictive walls of the anchorhold are nothing compared to Christ’s poverty at birth, when he could find only the shelter of ‘a waheles hus imiddes þe strete’ (a wall-less house in the midst of the street); its privations cannot compare to his hungers and wanderings. And even within the anchorhold, the anchoress has warm, practical clothing, where Christ had nothing to cover his body on the Cross. Christ’s free choice of poverty is the model for the free choice of poverty in the anchorhold over the wealth and status of the aristocratic life.

Christ’s second weapon, shame, is similarly compared in a practical way to the anchoress’s experience – just as Christ was condemned without guilt, and willingly suffered the multiple shames of the Passion, the anchoress learns to suffer ‘schome of wicke monnes muð for uten mine gulte’ (the shame of wicked people’s mouths when I am without guilt). One is reminded of the passage in Ancrene Wisse where the anchoress is told: ‘Ah ȝe ahen unnen þet na word ne beo of ow, ne mare þen of deade, ant beon bliðe iheortet ȝe þolieð danger of Sluri þe cokes cneaue, þe wescheð ant wipeð disches i cuchene’ (f. 103r; (Millett, 2005, p. 143) (Indeed, you ought not to allow that any word be spoken of you, no more than of the dead, and be joyful in your heart if you suffer the contempt of Slurry the cook’s boy, who washes and wipes dishes in the kitchen) translation mine). Once again, Christ’s example is not merely the model for the choice of the anchorhold, but also for the willing forfeiture not only of wealth, but also of rank and status.

Finally, Christ’s torment on the cross is not only his ultimate weapon against the devil, but his blood shed on the cross is also the ultimate purchase price of the soul: ‘A, deore cheap hefdes tu on me / ne was neauer unwurði þing chepet swa deore’ (ah, you had a costly purchase in me – never was such an unworthy thing purchased at such cost!). And, again, Christ’s earthly life of labour, and his betrayal, binding and beating are all models for the anchoress’s life.
With the Passion Meditation proper, the text switches from the deliberate (and often heavy) tone of the battle to the affective, emotional tone of devotion to the divine spouse. At the same time, the subject matter changes from the practical considerations of the attributes which make Christ a worthy spouse to the consideration of his love, expressed in the Passion which demands a response that is equally passion-ate, displaying an equally suffering love. As the anchoress contemplates the Crucifixion itself, she sees Christ’s weapons displayed in his suffering – his torment, his thirst, his shame and his cold, naked body. And, at the height of her emotion, she sees the final blow – Longinus piercing Christ’s side when he is already dead.

It is this final, gratuitous, act of violence which moves the anchoress most deeply, as the tone changes again, to the language of romance. With this final wound, Christ opens his heart to the eyes of the soul, ‘for to cnaue wið[en]liche in to reden trewe luue lettres, / for þer i mai openlich seo hu muchel þu me luuedes’ (to know it surely and to read within it true love letters, for there may I openly see how much you loved me). With this, the anchoress moves from Christ’s actions of love to her own response: ‘Wið wrange schuldi þe min heorte wearnen siðen þat tu bohtes herte for herte’ (Wrong would it be for me to refuse you my heart, since you have bought heart for heart). For all that Christ has done to purchase the anchoress’s love, it is the gift of his wounded heart that finally brings her to the appropriate response of suffering love. And while the anchoress turns to the Virgin Mary for a model of grief and love, in the end she returns to the language of the anchorhold (and the battlefield) to proclaim her own means of expressing that love:

Ihesu swete ihesu þus tu faht for me aðaines mine sawle fan,
þu me derennedes wið like,
& makedes of me wrecche þi leofmon & spuse.
Broht tu haues me fra þe world to bur of þi burðe,
steked me i chaumbre.
I mai þer þe swa sweteli kissen & cluppen,
& of þi luue haue gastli likinge.
A swete ihesu mi liues luue wið þi blod þu haues me boht,
& fram þe world þu haues me broht.

(Jesus, sweet Jesus, in this way you have fought for me against the foes of my soul: you claimed me with your body, and made me, a wretch, your lover and spouse. You have brought me from the world to the bower of your birth, enclosed me in a chamber. There I may so sweetly kiss you and embrace you and of your love have spiritual delight. Ah, sweet Jesus, my life’s love, with your blood you have bought me, and from the world you have brought me.)
Here, the language of romance is not merely the language of the bower, but also the language of the body. With his body, Christ has both purchased and redeemed the anchoress’s body, and her response is as bodily as his own demonstration of love in the Passion. Her love is expressed in her bower, and with her body, hanging beside Christ on the Cross in her enclosure, which becomes a daily *imitatio Christi* as the metaphor is literalized.58

Yet still, the anchoress is aware that bodily suffering is not enough: ‘Bote swete ihesu hwat mai mi bodi aʒaines tin?’ (But, sweet Jesus, what might my body be against yours?). She remembers that the piercing of Christ’s body is, most significantly, the opening of his heart, and so she concludes:

*And ʒet ich haue an heorte unwrest & unwurði & westi & poure of alle gode þeawes & tat swuʃ as hit is,*
*taʃ hit to þe nu leue liʃ wið treowe luuenesse, & ne þole me neaue ðan oðer þing aʒain þi wille luuie,*
*for ne mai ich nowhwier mi luue bettre sette þen o þe ihesu crist þat bohtes hit swa dere.*
*Nis nan swa wurði to beo laued as tu swete ihesu þat in þe haues alle þing hwer fore mon ah beo luuewurði to oðer.*
*þu art best wurð mi luue þat for mi luue deidest.*

(And still I have an infirm, and unworthy heart, destitute poor in all good virtues, and that, such as it is, take it to you now, beloved life, with true love, and never suffer me to love any other thing against your will, For I may nowhere set my love better than on you, Jesus Christ, who have bought it so dearly. Nothing, then, is so worthy to be loved as you, sweet Jesus, who have all things in you for which a man might be worthy of another’s love. You who have died for my love are most worthy of my love.)

It is ironic that, after this impassioned assertion of the worthiness of Christ, and his fulfilment of the most stringent of all the conditions for the ideal spouse, the narrator returns, albeit briefly, to the issue of the purchase price of the soul. In a final moment of extreme practicality, she considers that even with all Christ has given, her loving response will ensure one final gift: a crown in heaven to rule beside him for ever. Each of Christ’s three ‘weapons’ is, of course, spiritualized, just as the attributes of the ideal spouse are. Christ’s poverty purchases wealth in heaven; his shame purchases honour, and his blood purchases salvation. Christ’s modelling of the anchoress’s enclosure thus also models her reward in heaven. Yet, common as this theme is, it would also resound in the minds of aristocratic widows
like the de Braose sisters: for all the wealth, rank, prestige, comfort and power they have renounced in entering the anchorhold, there is a heavenly reward that surpasses it all – but which can be expressed and understood in the language of their own lives and experiences.

The re-examination of the audience of the Wohunge (and, perhaps, all of the anchoritic texts) forces the twenty-first-century reader to re-examine her own assumptions about both the genre and the content of this impassioned text. The Wohunge is no mere ‘dumbing down’ of affective devotion for readers who might have been more familiar with romance than theology. The lover-knight is no moonstruck gallant whose love has overcome his reason (like Chrétien de Troyes’s Lancelot), and the lady-soul is no wide-eyed ingénue, waiting in her tower to be swept off her feet and carried off into the sunset. The anchoritic readers who are instructed by the author of Ancrene Wisse to treat the inner rule as a lady and the outer rule as a servant had direct experience of the complexities of running an aristocratic household, and the Wohunge’s female narrator who meditates on the choice of a spouse to defend and maintain the castle of the soul is well aware of the qualities she seeks. And, while she may be motivated by devotion, there is also an element of self-preservation – she needs a defender who is strong, brave and wealthy as much as she needs a lover who is handsome, generous and debonair.

Having experienced the life of a thirteenth-century aristocratic lady and (possibly) widow, many of the Wohunge’s readers would understand the meditation upon Christ’s sufferings and death with a depth that we, perhaps, could not imagine. Christ’s poverty would be compared not only to their own situation as anchoresses, but to their previous situation as affluent ladies, relinquished for his sake; his ability to save them from the enemies of their souls not only to their spiritual isolation and temptation, but to the worldly power that they have abdicated, recognizing its inadequacy in the battle for the soul; his pain and suffering not only to their ascetic life in the anchorhold, but the life of comfort renounced for his love. We must assume a maturity of outlook far removed from what we have come to think of as the ‘reader of romance’, the maidenly anchoress or the inexperienced girl, cloistered and sheltered from the world. Rather, we should think of the readers of the Wohunge as sophisticated, educated, aristocratic and awe-inspiring women, who, after experiencing a full, rich and, possibly, rewarding life in the world, have turned away from all that life has to offer and chosen the solitude of the anchorhold – bringing with them all that they have learned from the world, and fully understanding what they are leaving. Yet we must also keep in mind that the anchoritic texts quickly found
their way into lay hands, and that the Wohunge itself was likely also read by lay women. For these women, still enmeshed in the world and its cares, their withdrawal would be limited to the solitude of the chamber of the heart – no less resonant for being a withdrawal from which they must emerge daily to cope with the demands of their earthly lives.

In other words, we must beware of underestimating the audience of the Wohunge. Devotionally literate, likely well read in the vernacular, and knowledgeable about the ways of the world, these women would have brought formidable talents and a strong will to their reading. And the Wohunge, with its sophisticated imagery, layered and nuanced spirituality, and impassioned language, is a text worthy of such a readership. Religious or lay, these are women who would have responded in kind to the scribe/author’s final words:

Pray for me, my dear sister. I have written this for you, because words often inspire the heart to think on our Lord. And therefore, when you are at leisure, speak to Jesus, and say these words, and imagine that he hangs beside you, bloody upon the cross. And he through his grace will open your heart to his love, and to pity for his pain.)

Notes

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1 Like later texts originally addressed to religious women (such as Hilton’s Scale of Perfection and Rolle’s Form of Living), Ancrene Wisse was adapted and adopted by a wider lay audience, moving rapidly from the narrow context of the anchorhold into the broader context of lay devotion. Indeed, Hilton, Rolle and other vernacular writers of spiritual guidance and devotional literature inherit and draw upon the tradition founded by the author of Ancrene Wisse, whose text stands at the beginning of several important genres of later vernacular theology. The importance of Ancrene Wisse as a testament to the development of lay spirituality in England has recently been the subject of a number of studies: Bella Millett has outlined its relationship to later Books of Hours; Robert Hazenfratz has written about its influence on lay asceticism; and Cate Gunn has written about its influence on sermon litera-
ture. Gunn also comments on the parallels between the anchoress’s devotions in Part I of *Ancrene Wisse* and the development of the Rosary, a parallel which finds echoes in the function of the *Wohunge* as Passion meditation. *Ancrene Wisse*’s influence on later penitential manuals, treatments of temptation, guidance literature for nuns and the figure of the Christ-knight have all been commented on. All of these studies have noted the historical position of *Ancrene Wisse* at a pivotal moment in the development of vernacular theology. It is in this context that the *Wohunge* must be studied. See Bella Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402*, with Variants from Other Manuscripts. EETS os 325, ed. Bella Millett (London: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert Hasenfratz, “‘Efter Hire Euene’: lay audiences and the variable aestheticism of *Ancrene Wisse*”, in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 145–60; and Cate Gunn, ‘Beyond the tomb: *Ancrene Wisse* and lay piety’, in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, pp. 161–71.


3 BL Cotton Titus D.xviii. Titus is written in double columns; the text of the *Wohunge* from the top of col. 2 on f. 127r, to 132v, col. 2, thus taking up 11 columns.

4 BL Cotton Nero A.xiv.

5 So titled in the Nero manuscript, ff. 120v–123v. I have listed the texts in the order in which they appear in Nero, and included abbreviations to help avoid confusion between texts whose titles are frustratingly similar. I have, however, used different abbreviations from those used by Shepherd (1959), whose abbreviations are based on translated titles. Following Allen (2006) I have treated the texts in Nero as forming two balanced pairs: an *Ureison to Ure Lefdi* (UrLe), followed by an *Ureison to God* (UrG), and a *Lofsong to Ure Lefdi* (LLe) followed by a *Lofsong to Ure Louerde* (LLo).

6 *On God Ureison of ure Lefdi* (UrLe) is often not included in the *Wooing Group* of texts as, unlike the others, it is written in the male voice (and is not, for this reason, translated by Savage and Watson). However, it is included at the head of the *Wooing Group* texts in Nero, suggesting that it circulated with them (and may, indeed, have been a model for them). Charlotte Allen, in an unpublished paper (4–7 May 2006, 41st International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI), has argued that the four texts as they are presented in Nero also form two distinct and balancing sets of prayers addressed to Christ and Mary. This suggests that Savage and Watson’s comment that they were simply added to Nero to fill ‘a few spare folios’ of the manuscript following *Ancrene Wisse*, and that ‘they therefore seem to have been regarded, relatively speaking, as ephemera’ (p. 29) needs to be reassessed. Savage and Watson affirm that ‘all the surviving *Wooing*-group works are carefully constructed and well-written compositions in a genre, that of Anselm’s *Prayers and Meditations*, which was taken highly seriously in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Nonetheless, each individual work could easily have been written quickly, to meet some particular need …
there is ... little evidence that the works in the Wooing group were regarded as forming the kind of collection Bodley and Royal preserve of the Katherine-Group works’ (pp. 335–6, n. 30). This may be so, but the scribe of Nero clearly felt that the four Wooing Group works he included in his text formed a coherent and well-ordered group of prayers, suitable for the readers who would use his copy of Ancrene Wisse.

7 So titled in the manuscript, Nero, ff. 123v–126v. A fragment is also found in Lambeth Palace MS 487, ff. 65v–67r, which Thompson (1958) calls Ureisun of ure Louerde. Savage and Watson (1991) translate this text as ‘An Orison to God Almighty’.

8 Nero, ff. 126v–128r, without rubric or title; the title is Thompson’s (1958). A fragment also survives in BL Royal MS 17.A.xxvii, where it is titled Pe Oreisun of Seinte Marie. Savage and Watson (1991) have used this title, ‘An Orison to St Mary’, for their translation of this text.

9 Nero, ff. 128r–131r, with no rubric or title; the title is Thompson’s (1958). Savage and Watson (1991) translate this text as ‘A Song of Praise to Our Lord’. In order to avoid confusion, however, I have retained Thompson’s title, using Ureisun for the two first texts in Nero, and Lofsong for the second pair. I have also included abbreviations to help avoid confusion between texts whose titles are frustratingly similar.

10 The Lofsong or, as Royal calls it, Orison is on the last folio and breaks off mid-sentence at the end of the leaf. Shepherd points out that this text is an alliterative prose paraphrase of a Latin verse prayer by Marbod of Rennes (1959, xiii). Savage and Watson suggest that since Royal does not contain Hali Meiðhad, it may have been copied before that text was written. This would make this prayer (and whichever other prayers Royal might have contained) among the earliest of the anchoritic texts (p. 333, n. 12).


13 It is generally agreed that Ancrene Wisse was originally written sometime after 1215 (the Fourth Lateran Council) and (based on a passage referring to the friars) revised sometime after 1225, when the first Franciscans arrived in England. If Millett is correct in her argument that the original author was Dominican, however, then the original composition must be moved forward to after 1221, when the first Dominicans arrived in England, and the revision must have taken place later. The revision of Ancrene Wisse occurred after the copying of the Cleopatra manuscript (probably in the early 1230s) which contains the author’s notes which are incorporated into the Corpus revision. The Wohunge would have been composed sometime between the copying of the Cleopatra manuscript and the Titus manuscript (in the 1240s). See Millett, Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition, pp. xiii–xxiv and Millett, Ancrene Wisse, The Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group, pp. 7–13.

14 As Savage and Watson point out, the context and structure of the Titus manuscript itself deserve attention, as it is carefully structured to guide the reader through a
series of devotional texts. Titus, they write, ‘attempts to be a one-volume library of the anchoritic works, gathering into a single, well-organized collection Ancrene Wisse, the three most important Katherine-group works [HM, SW and SK], and one work from the Wooing group, The Wooing of Our Lord itself’ (p. 12). They suggest that Titus may have been written in the Franciscan house in Hereford, founded in 1228, whose friars were later confessors to the nuns at Limebrook. Allen (2006) comments that in the Titus version of Ancrene Wisse, ‘the occasional use of the word servaunt instead of spuse’ emphasizes that ‘the reader need not be literally a bride of Christ but anyone who wished to attain the passionate … attachment to Christ’s person’ found in the Wohunge.

15 In this context, it is interesting to compare the Wohunge to the (only slightly later) Luv Rone of Thomas of Hales. Hales is clearly addressing a nun and, unlike Ancrene Wisse and, I will argue, the Wohunge, his text is not adaptable for a lay audience. As well, Hales looks back to an older tradition of meditation, employing the abi sunt theme familiar from Anglo-Saxon poetry, and stressing the importance of virginity. The Wohunge, as I shall argue, looks forward to a new vernacular tradition of devotional texts, which are adapted and adopted for lay audiences.


19 Salu, p. 84.


23 Savage, p. 49. Certainly, the author’s many assurances that he is not writing about his ‘dear sisters’ but for ‘other anchoresses’ when he warns of the temptations to which they are liable or the behaviours which he would discourage suggests that, indeed, his three ‘dear sisters’, the original addressees, were not his only (or indeed primary) audience.

24 Savage, p. 46.

25 The author describes this community as solitaries who nonetheless wish to live ‘as if’ they were in a convent, all ‘pulling in the same direction’, and living in individual cells which seem to have been within a day’s walk – they were able to share books through the mediation of their servants, suggesting that the servants could easily travel between their cells bearing books and news. As the community expanded even further, to the ‘twenty or more’ anchoresses mentioned in Corpus, word of their ‘convent’ spread to other areas of England, for which the original community became ‘like’ a mother-house (Corpus, f. 169r; see Millett, Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition, pp. 96–7 and Savage and Watson, pp. 140–1).


As Warren has shown, entry into an anchorhold was (at least in theory) tightly regulated, requiring permission from a bishop, and evidence of both a strong vocation and financial support. Indeed, for many women, the time between their decision to enter the anchorhold and their actual enclosure extended over several years, while they settled their estates and financial affairs. Under such circumstances, there would have been plenty of time to consider their choice (and, presumably, to withdraw if doubts arose).


See The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle, B.M. Cotton MS Cleopatra C.VI, EETS os 267, ed. E. J. Dobson (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. xxv–xxvi. The connection between Matilda de Clare and the Cleopatra manuscript deserves further study, not only because it is one of the few indications of early ownership that survives, but also because Cleopatra is such an important manuscript in tracing the prehistory of the Corpus revision, containing as it does the notes of the original author.


Interestingly, the patterns of religious participation amongst the de Braose women seems to have followed matrilinear lines, as the daughters turned to their mother’s family context for their reclusion and religious patronage: Flandrina entered Godstow, under the patronage of her mother’s family; Margery’s convent at Aconbury (near her own home at Ludlow) was founded in her mother’s memory; and Annora was enclosed at Iffley, near Oxford (and Godstow). In light of William de Braose’s abandonment of his family at the time of his exile, the death of his wife and eldest son, and the exile or imprisonment of his other children, the matrilinear bias of his daughters’ religious patronage may be quite understandable.

These connections would put Loretta in a similar intellectual milieu to the author of Ancrene Wisse and, indeed, we know that she later became an early patroness of the Franciscans in England, along with Simon Langton, archdeacon of Canterbury, and brother of Stephen Langton.
Although there are no records which indicate why she might have chosen this location, her brother Giles’s connections with Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury, and her own later connections with Simon Langton would suggest that their influence was of some importance.

It is interesting to note that Iffley, where Annora was enclosed, is within walking distance of Godstow (albeit a long walk) and may thus have offered Annora the added attraction of offering a community of nuns that included her sister, close enough for contact, but far enough away to allow her a measure of independence. Similarly, for the three sisters to whom Ancrene Wisse was originally addressed, it seems that a patron and the availability of a cell close to their patron’s hall had at least some part in their decision to seek the anchorhold rather than the nun’s cell.


There are several instances where the author of Ancrene Wisse implies that his readers might once have been in charge of an aristocratic household. For example, in Part 2, there is a long passage comparing the frivolous anchoress to the lady of a house (Millett, Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text, pp. 42–3, ff. 28v–29r); and in Part 6 the author refers to the benefits his readers may derive from enduring the contempt those who in ‘other circumstances’ might have been


41 Continental examples include Hildegard of Bingen’s writings for her nuns, and Heloise’s demand that Abelard adapt the Benedictine Rule for her convent of the Paraclete.

42 The author of *Ancrene Wisse* tells us that his audience could read both English and (Anglo-Norman) French.

43 Millett, ‘*Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours’, pp. 21, 28 and 31.

44 Although generated in the context of the anchorhold, these texts rapidly found their way into lay hands. Indeed, the manuscript in which the *Wohunge* survives may have been written for a lay audience.

45 In at least two centres, the demand for vernacular devotional material was being met in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries: the nuns of Barking were producing Anglo-Norman texts designed for the literate religious woman, and in the West Midlands, the texts of the Katherine Group and, later, the Wooing Group were composed for an audience of literate laypersons and religious – including anchoresses.

46 In spite of the fact that *Seinte Katerine* applauds the fact that Katherine did not read romance, but focused on devout and scholarly works, *Seinte Margarete* and *Seinte Iuliene* both employ the motifs and imagery of romance to great effect.

47 Indeed, as Millett has shown, the programme of prayers and devotions set out in Part 1 of *Ancrene Wisse* parallels the later Books of Hours which became the ‘breviaries of the laity’ (‘*Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours’, p. 32). However, as Millett points out, lay ownership of Books of Hours was rare in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (p. 25).

48 *Euchan segge hir Ures as ha haueð iwriten ham* (Corpus 402, f. 6r, Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text*, p. 9). Millett points out that ‘the word-order haveð iwriten ham (rather than haueð ham iwriten) shared by all the English MSS running, suggests that in this case the anchoresses did their own copying rather than having it done for them (‘*Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours’, p. 36, n. 26).


50 Millett, ‘*Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours’, p. 23: ‘Each one should say what her heart most urges – versicles from the Psalter, readings from English or French, holy meditations, your kneelings.’

51 And, of course, the *imitatio Christi* modelled by the saints in their martyrdom could be sought by both religious and lay, in the ascetic life of the anchorhold or in sickness and tribulation.

52 The popularity (and wide circulation) of vernacular Passion narratives and meditations is generally attributed to the explosion of vernacular translations and adaptations of Franciscan devotional writings in the mid- to late fourteenth century, and, in particular, the works attributed to Bonaventure. Texts like the *Stimulus Amoris* provided guides to Passion meditation, but simpler meditations upon the
Passion itself also abounded. Chief amongst these is, of course, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, the most well-known adaptation of which is Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. There are, however, numerous shorter texts, such as Bonaventure’s *Lignum Vitae* (which survives in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English translations adapted for lay readers), *The Privity of the Passion* and Rolle’s *Meditations on the Passion*, which enabled less complex prayer and meditation, allowing the reader to place herself at the foot of the cross and experience the sufferings and death of Christ as a direct observer.

The prayers and devotions in Part 1 of *Ancrene Wisse* are dominated by prayers to the Virgin Mary, particularly those in English (i.e. those that the anchoresses would have clearly understood); yet devotion to the Passion is so thoroughly fused with her daily prayers that the two are difficult to separate. The anchoress’s day is punctuated by prayers recalling the Passion, and meditation on the Passion permeates *Ancrene Wisse* from the anchoress’s meditation upon Christ’s body in the eucharistic host, separated from her by ‘only a wall’, to her fleeing to the Cross for shelter or wielding it as a weapon against the Devil. However, there is no specific text or prayer to guide her through such meditation, as the *Wohunge* does.

The affective devotion of the *Wohunge* has much in common with the more restrained of the continental mystics, and further study may reveal some connections. For now, though, it is interesting that the region of the AB language has strong Flemish associations, which suggest that some connection with the Low Countries is not impossible.

Similar meditation was also facilitated by images of the Passion, ranging from complex illuminations in Books of Hours to prayer scrolls and indulgences illustrated with the Instruments of the Passion (the *Arma Christi* texts and illuminations), to simple images such as the crucifix which an anchoress could view through the window of her cell, hanging over the altar of the church. It is possible that aristocratic widows who sought the refuge of the anchorhold may have brought such images with them. However, the vast majority of Passion meditations are not illustrated, and texts like the *Wohunge* offered textual guidance to the kind of meditation that was rooted in the contemplation of such visual images, and which the *Ancrene Wisse* author recommends to his readers. As Smith has argued, the ‘devotionally literate’ layperson of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries would be familiar enough with the iconographic representations found in their Books of Hours to interpret the complex associations and imagery found there. This is true largely because the medieval reader (lay or anchoritic) was surrounded by such images: on the walls and windows of churches, above the altars etc. See Kathryn A. Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England: Three Women and their Books of Hours* (London: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2003); for the concept of devotional literacy and the influence of the Franciscans on the imagery of the Passion, see also Vincent Gillespie, ‘Strange images of death: the passion in later medieval English devotional and mystical writing’, in *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance*
All quotations from the *Wohunge* are from the edition and translation which I am currently preparing for Broadview Press.

Such a close reading is needed not only of the meditation which it contains, but of the text upon which much of its imagery is based. Its survival in the Titus manuscript, along with *Ancrene Wisse*, suggests that at least some readers would have been intimately familiar with *Ancrene Wisse* itself, a familiarity based on long, thoughtful, and repetitive reading, which, as Savage and Watson suggest, a modern reader can never hope to imagine, let alone achieve (p. 32).

As Savage and Watson put it, 'where Bernard is always conscious that the idea of the soul’s marriage to Christ is a metaphor, the reader of *Wohunge* is encouraged to choose Christ as a lover in a literal, one might even say a physical, way, and to argue over his suitability as a husband as though this is exactly what he is, or is to become.' Thus they conclude, ‘the work’s most important source is the nonliterary one of the anchoresses’ real situation, as they saw it: married to Christ and crucified with him by their enclosure, and needing only to ratify that marriage and transform that crucifixion by passionately assenting to both in their hearts’ (p. 246).