The five prayers of the Wooing Group have always been studied as a subset of the Ancrene Wisse Group led, and indeed dominated, by Pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd, the text for which the Wooing Group is named. Yet, the other four prayers were composed earlier than Wohunge; it is dependent upon them, rather than the other way around. In fact, the four earliest Wooing Group prayers pre-date Ancrene Wisse itself, and can be shown to have had a significant influence on its author. And, although the Wooing Group prayers are clearly identifiable as a group, they seem to have circulated independently; none of the other prayers of the Wooing Group are found in London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus D.xviii (henceforth Titus), which contains the sole surviving copy of Wohunge. Rather, they are found together in a group in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.xiv (henceforth Nero) where a second scribe adds On god ureisun of ure lefdi (UUL), On wel swuðe god ureisun of God almihti (UGA), Þe oreisun of seinte Marie (OSM) and On losfsong of ure lourerde (LUL) to the manuscript following Ancrene Wisse (originally its only contents).1

When taken out from under the shadow of their better-known namesake, the four earliest prayers of the Wooing Group have much to tell us about the development of thirteenth-century vernacular devotional literature. Indeed, if studied as the ‘prelude’ to Wohunge, rather than as its lesser sister texts, the ‘other’ prayers of the Wooing Group emerge as singular texts in their own right, and as a distinguished group when gathered together. The history of their composition reveals that Wohunge was the product of a long and complicated process, as anchoritic sensibility and the needs of anchoritic readers developed and merged with evolving lay piety.2

It has long been acknowledged that Ancrene Wisse marks a significant transition in vernacular spirituality. Although the text itself claims to have been written for three individual anchoresses, sisters in body and soul, and then revised for a larger community of ‘twenty or more’ anchoresses, the author clearly envisioned a wider audience right from the beginning. Ancrene Wisse quickly became a devotional handbook for lay and religious alike – and, as Bella Millett has reminded us, for those, like the anchoress, who
live on the margins of both worlds. Ancrene Wisse thus stands at the beginning of a significant movement in vernacular devotional literature that would affect the forms and structure of the wave of vernacular texts that would follow in the next two centuries.

Yet, the development of vernacular devotional literature owes as much to the rise of Passion meditation as the grounding of prayerful contemplation as it does to the literature of guidance represented by Ancrene Wisse. While Part 7 of Ancrene Wisse sets Passion meditation firmly in the penitential and structured life of the anchoress – or, for the lay reader in the integral counsel and direction of the text – prayers like those of the Wooing Group provide stand-alone prayers and meditations that could be read in unpredictable contexts, without the grounding of the ‘inner rule’ or the service of the ‘outer rule’.

The four earliest Wooing Group prayers are shorter and simpler than Wohunge, although the latest of them, UGA, is a masterpiece of its genre. We know little of the early circulation of these texts, although the incorporation of both UGA and Wohunge into the fourteenth-century A Talkyng of the Love of God suggests that they must have circulated together, although they do not appear together in any surviving manuscript. Yet, the fact that UGA did circulate with Wohunge at some point in its history is another indication that the dissemination of these prayers was wider than the surviving manuscript evidence shows. Unlike Ancrene Wisse and the texts of the Katherine Group, however, the short Wooing Group prayers likely originally circulated on scrolls or individual leaves. Even Wohunge itself is not long – it fills only five and a half double-columned folios in the Titus manuscript. The Nero prayers are even shorter: UUL is approximately two and a half folios; UGA is three and a half folios; OSM fills three folios; LUL three and a half folios.

That prayers such as those of the Wooing Group circulated individually is consistent with the information on the anchoress’s prayers found in Ancrene Wisse. In the mixed audience for whom Ancrene Wisse was written, some of the anchoresses were fully literate; in Part 1 the author refers to the Hours that the anchoress has written down, and in Part 8 he explicitly forbids his readers to teach children or to write anything without leave, although the text suggests that they are allowed to write and to send or receive letters with the permission of their religious advisor. Not all anchoresses could write, however; elsewhere, the author refers to prayers which had been written out for them. The anchoresses also shared and exchanged scrolls and booklets. The author assumes this as part of the devotional culture of his time; for example, he tells his readers, ‘Þe ureisuns þet Ich nabbe buten ane imerket beoð iwriten oueral . . . Leoteð written on a scrowe hwet-se ȝe ne kunnen’ (‘Copies of the prayers that I have only referred to briefly . . . are available everywhere. Have any that you do not know by heart copied on to a scroll’). This suggests that prayers and meditations like those of the Wooing Group circulated far more widely on scrolls or individual leaves and in booklets than the more sturdy surviving manuscripts can bear witness to.

As noted above, Nero is the work of two scribes: the first (Scribe A) copied Ancrene Wisse, and the second (Scribe B) copied the Wooing Group prayers, an English version of the Creed and two brief Latin texts. The additions made by Scribe B date to the 1240s, as does the manuscript itself. The inclusion of the four shorter Wooing Group prayers as a group in Nero presents a unique view into the way in which later authors/scribes viewed the needs of their readers and the guidance that they sought to provide for the devotion of the individual soul, sometimes reading against the grain of new developments in vernacular spirituality in favour of a more conservative approach.
History of composition

The early thirteenth century was a time of great spiritual upheaval in response to the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), and a time in which the church was paying particular attention to the needs of the laity. The four earliest Wooing Group texts thus come at a time when vernacular devotional literature was undergoing significant change. These are prayers that are finding their way between the old and the new.

Written by an anonymous monk, On God Ureisun of Ure Lefdi (UUL) was likely the earliest of the Wooing Group prayers to be composed. UUL is often omitted from the ranks of the Wooing Group, most notably by Thompson (who considered its rhyme and metre, as well as its content, to be too different from the other prayers), and Savage and Watson (who felt that its association with the other prayers and, particularly, its anchoritic nature, had not been sufficiently established).[^14] The most often-cited argument against the inclusion of UUL is that it is male-voiced. Wohunge is a powerful and moving direct address from the soul to Christ, and the speaker is specifically an anchoress. It has generally been assumed that the other Wooing Group prayers are (or should be, in the case against UUL) also female-voiced. And, indeed, the two shorter prayers that address Christ directly are explicitly female-voiced: in LUL the speaker characterizes herself as a virgin (*meiden*, l. 88, cp. l. 115); in UGA the speaker is a woman who has renounced the world (ll. 42–52).[^13] But OSM, addressed to the Virgin Mary, is gender-neutral; although it has usually been understood to be female-voiced, there is nothing in the prayer to suggest the gender or identity of the speaker. So, all of the Wooing Group prayers are not female-voiced – only the ones addressed directly to Christ. OSM is also closer in date to UUL (also addressed to the Virgin Mary); indeed, if UUL is included as the earliest of the Wooing Group prayers, OSM acts as a transitional text between it and the other prayers. The male-voiced UUL is not as out of place, in terms of the gendered voice of its narrator, as has always been assumed.

Indeed, UUL is not only appropriate for inclusion in the Wooing Group, it provides a crucial example of the context in which the author of *Ancrene Wisse* instructs his readers that the Virgin Mary is a model for all women, but particularly for anchoresses. UUL embodies the formal veneration of the cult of the Virgin Mary, an earlier form of devotion than that found in the later Wooing Group prayers.[^16] Yet, as it reflects upon and integrates the imagery found in the later anchoritic texts, UUL provides a fitting introduction to the Nero prayers. In addition, UUL is an integral part of the structure of Scribe B’s addition in Nero. As Charlotte Allen suggests, ‘once “On God Ureisun of Ure Lefdi” is seen in its proper context as the first of four brief prayers in English to Christ and Mary copied into the Nero manuscript, a certain artfulness in their arrangement can be discerned’.[^17] The texts form two balanced pairs: an *Ureison to ure Lefdi* (UUL), followed by an *Ureison to God* (UGA), and *Pe oreisun of seinte Marie* (OSM) followed by a *Lofsong to ure Louerde* (LUL).[^18]

*Pe oreisun of seinte Marie* is also early. The inclusion of a fragment of OSM in London, British Library, MS Royal 17 A.xxvii (henceforth Royal), which is dated to c.1225–30, indicates that it was probably written before 1225. OSM is on the last folio and breaks off mid-sentence at the end of the leaf, which is also the end of a gathering, indicating that an entire gathering (or more) is missing from the original manuscript. The fact that Royal contains all of the Katherine Group texts[^19] except *Hali Meiðhad* suggests that it was copied before *Hali Meiðhad* was written.[^20]
On losson of ure louerde was probably a source for a passage in Hali Meiðhad, suggesting that it, too, should be dated early, likely before 1225. This would make UUL, OSM and LUL among the earliest of the Ancrene Wisse Group, pre-dating both Hali Meiðhad and Ancrene Wisse itself. These three Wooing Group prayers thus come very early indeed in the production of vernacular devotional texts in the thirteenth century.

On wel swuðe god urieson of God almíhti is more difficult to date. It is unlikely that it belongs to this early stage of production; in tone and content it is closer to Wohunge and probably represents a transitional stage. In fact, UGA was almost certainly a source for Wohunge, which dates from the late 1230s–40s, and possibly for Ancrene Wisse itself. Both Scribe B’s additions to Nero and the fragment of UGA added to the end of London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 487 date to the 1240s. There is thus no manuscript evidence that it was composed earlier than the late 1230s. The fact that the two versions of the text differ enough to suggest different exemplars does, however, indicate that by c.1240 there were at least three or four copies in circulation. The inclusion of all four of the Wooing Group prayers in Nero also indicates that by the 1240s they were circulating together and were considered, at least by Nero’s Scribe B, to be a coherent group. The fact that Nero does not contain Wohunge may indicate that Wohunge had not come to the attention of Scribe B, either because it had not yet been written or because it was circulating independently at the time of Scribe B’s activity.

The Wooing Group prayers and the development of affective devotion

The earliest poem, UUL, is a prayer to the Virgin Mary, intended to express the speaker’s devotion to her and expressed in the terms of the cult that had arisen around her. Written in rhyming couplets (unlike the other Wooing Group prayers), in style it reflects the ‘newest’ or most ‘modern’ poetic form. The monk who composed UUL identifies his prayer as a ‘lai’ or song, deliberately choosing a secular genre popularized by Marie de France, and signalling a French courtly influence.

The first part of the poem, ll. 1–82, praises the Virgin Mary using the language of the romance lyric, rich in feudal imagery. The Virgin is presented both as the great courtly lady of courtly love rhetoric and the feudal lord; Mary reigns in heaven over a court composed of angels and her worshippers, whom she rewards with rich gifts. The joys of heaven are described in detail; games, dances and music abound in an idyllic setting of flowers in full bloom and a temperate clime where no harsh weather ever comes.

In the second part of the poem, ll. 83–172, the speaker appeals to the Virgin Mary as an intercessor for her loving servants. In her compassion and mercy, she prays for those who toil on earth, easing their worldly cares as well as rewarding their devotion in heaven. Both as the model of virtue and purity and as Christ’s loving mother, she is well situated to intercede for her devotees. Her pure intercession can help her servants turn from sin, and her appeal to the five wounds of her beloved son can help heal the wounds of the human soul. But her most important qualification, which overrides both her purity and her motherhood, is her status as the Queen of Heaven, and the object of courtly love.

The speaker of the poem presents himself as both lover and servant in terms drawn from the courtly love lyric. He asserts his absolute devotion to and dependence upon the Virgin Mary, offering the service of his love. He labours and sighs for his love, forsaking
all that was dear to him and voluntarily entering into the bondage of love. But he also acknowledges the great distance between them, lamenting that his sinfulness is a barrier and promising to do penance. He expresses his love-longing for her in terms of love wounds and lovesickness that can be healed only by her mercy. In the end, he prays for her intercession on his behalf, hoping that she will be merciful to himself and his brethren, since he has composed and sung this lay in her honour.

UUL thus combines the practice of devotion to the Virgin with the imagery of courtly love. The poem clearly sets out the basics of the cult of the Virgin Mary, providing a useful summary for a reader who wished for a model of prayer. In form and imagery, it draws upon the romance lyrics that would have been familiar to aristocratic readers of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, suggesting that it may have been intended for a wider audience than a community of monks – perhaps even written for a lay patron(ess) in the same manner as Anselm wrote for aristocratic women in the early twelfth century.23

OSM is an altogether different kind of poem. Rather than a celebration of the cult of the Virgin Mary, it is a form of confession couched in the terms of penitential devotion later seen in Ancrenwe Wesse.24 The prayer acknowledges the ungendered speaker’s sin by moving through a formal structure that provides mnemonic devices for cataloguing both the sources and the forms of sin: the three enemies of the soul (the world, the flesh and the Devil); the five bodily wits or senses, and the seven deadly sins.

The speaker then turns to a petition for the Virgin’s intercession. However, unlike UUL, OSM grounds Mary’s ability to intercede on behalf of the soul not primarily in her status as Queen of Heaven, but in her motherhood. She is the vehicle of the Incarnation, and the loving mother of the one who suffered and died to redeem humankind. The prayer for intercession thus focuses on the sufferings of Christ’s life and Passion, rather than the joys of the courts of heaven or the sufferings of the love-sick suitor. OSM thus incorporates the Passion meditation that will characterize the rest of the Wooing Group (without, however, the affective force of UGA and Wohunge). The focus of the text remains fixed on confession and repentance. Christ’s Passion is the means by which the soul is redeemed; meditation upon it is intended to stress the magnitude of Christ’s gift and inspire feelings of guilt for sin. Yet, compassion for Christ’s sufferings is borne by his mother, and forms the basis of the soul’s appeal to her. Finally, OSM firmly roots the speaker’s confession and appeal in the context of the church and its sacraments, the vehicles through which forgiveness is transmitted to the believer.

LUL moves the reader into a more affective, personal devotion. Rather than appealing for intercession through a third party (the Virgin Mary), LUL is a direct address from the female soul to Christ. The prayer opens with a rehearsal of Christ’s works, initiating the reader into a brief history of salvation, beginning with Christ’s deeds on earth – his birth, his teachings, his sufferings, his death – and continues with his resurrection and ascension, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the final Judgement. It then moves on to the founding of the church, with its sacraments, as the agent of Christ’s action in the present. Having grounded salvation firmly within the realm of church and sacrament, LUL takes the reader through an examination of her own sin which is rooted in an agonized meditation on Christ’s sufferings in the Passion. While it draws upon the familiar imagery of the battle of the soul with its three deadly foes (a battle taken on by Christ upon the cross) and the wounds of the five senses (healed by Christ’s five wounds), LUL takes the reader far beyond the simple rehearsal of sin found in OSM. This is a passionate, and personal,
meditation upon the great act of suffering love that redeems the individual soul, ending
with the hope of spiritual union with Christ on the cross through penitential imitatio
Christi in a direct appeal to Paul’s words in Galatians 2: 20: ‘ich liuie / nout ich, / auh
crist liued in me’ (‘I live – / not I, / but Christ liveth in me’ ll. 66–8).

The language of the poem is steeped with the affective imagery of the Song of Songs,
popularized in the Cistercian tradition with the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux. The
speaker acknowledges the great distance between herself and her beloved in a series of
contrasts that emphasize his worthiness and her own lack thereof. But these contrasts
also emphasize his generosity and love: if she forsakes the false counsel of the world, he
will give her his wisdom; if she forsakes the false comfort of worldly things, he will give
her the comfort of heavenly joy; if she forsakes the love of unworthy things, he will
bestow his great love upon her. The final contrast, between the bitterness of the world
and the sweetness of Christ’s love, introduces a section that describes the rewards of
making the correct choice in passionate terms of sweetness, fire and comforting love.

Acknowledging that her debt of sin has been paid with the free gift of Christ’s love, the
reader cries out: ‘Hwat mote ich milyfule louerd to þe?’ (‘What can I do for you, merciful
Lord’, l. 175). The answer is that she can only rely upon him, who wills what is best for
her and has the power and the love to accomplish it.

If LUL introduces the reader to the passionate world of affective devotion, UGA en-
velopes her in it. After a passionate opening invocation addressing Christ in the language
of love, UGA begins with a consideration of the attributes of Christ which make him
beloved: his fair face, upon which the angels gaze in delight; his cosmic brightness, which
shadows the sun; the fire of his love, which transforms the sinful heart into a bower fit to
receive him.25 The reader is then drawn into a consideration of the choice between worldly
and heavenly love and the necessity of turning from one to the other, in a complete trans-
formation of heart and soul. The difficulty of such a turning is expressed in terms of the
divine embrace. Christ hangs on the cross with his arms outstretched to embrace the
speaker, and if she wishes to be embraced by him in heaven, she must accept the embrace
of suffering; more, she must throw herself between his arms spread out on the cross.26 It
is only through sharing his suffering that she can share in his joy.

The transient nature of union with Christ on earth is again expressed in a series of
contrasts, as sin creates a barrier between the soul and her beloved. The bitterness of the
world is contrasted with the sweetness of Christ’s love, and the estrangement of the soul
is countered by his wooing. But UGA does not simply repeat the imagery of LUL: the
author reconstructs and enlarges it. For example, the familiar imagery of the five wounds
of Christ which heal the wounds of the five senses is expanded as Christ’s wounds become
wells which provide a healing and cleansing bath for the soul. The final goal of indwelling
union with Christ on the cross is, again, expressed in the words of St Paul.

The speaker does pray to the Virgin Mary as intercessor, but while her honour and
status as both maiden and mother are acknowledged, the appeal is based more on the
need of sinners, both for Christ’s Incarnation and death, and for Mary’s intercession on
their behalf. Her power to intercede is expressed in the regal image of Christ standing
upon the cross as if on a royal dais, with one arm outstretched towards her, and his head
bowed in accession to her will and in acknowledgement of her worthiness.

The image of Mary standing beneath the cross moves the speaker from acknowledging
her as intercessor to remembering her as model. Here, Mary is not a model of virginal
purity but of suffering love, as she stands beneath the cross with St John the Evangelist, exhibiting a degree of sorrow not to be matched in the human heart. As the speaker learns to behold these three ‘standings’ (Christ on the cross, the Virgin Mary and St John beneath it), her gaze becomes the vehicle of transformation, kindling the fire of love in her heart and driving out the coldness of sin as she recognizes the cross as her only refuge.

I have described the affective movement of the prayer in the indicative affirmative; however, the prayer itself more often expresses both the speaker’s love and desolation in a series of rhetorical questions and exclamations. Her love, in particular, is often expressed in the negative – ‘why do I not . . .?’ – emphasizing that the goal of spiritual indwelling is not only difficult but as yet unachieved. Even if, through prayer and meditation, the reader does find transient moments of blissful union, it is an indwelling which cannot endure, and which will never be fully achieved on earth. Nevertheless, the goal of transforming the heart into an abode worthy of Christ is not hopeless, and the reward is not infinitely delayed. Through prayer and meditation, the reader can experience fire of devotion and the sweetness of love, however imperfectly.

UGA masterfully combines modes and motifs from the three other prayers: the cult of the Virgin; Mary as intercessor; Mary as model; Passion meditation, and affective devotion to Christ. This combination suggests that the author of UGA knew the other three prayers, or that these motifs were so common as to be pervasive. Verbal echoes in the text tend to confirm that the author knew at least LUL. At the same time, UGA moves beyond the other three prayers in its focus on the Passion and the deeply affective imagery with which the reader meditates upon it, transforming the individual motifs of the other prayers into an integrated stand-alone Passion meditation and prayer. UGA thus represents the height of affective piety at the time of its writing, to be outdone only by its successor, Wohunge.

Studied in the order in which they were written, then, the four earliest prayers of the Wooing Group show a progression of vernacular spiritual writings in response to the rising affective devotion of the early thirteenth century. The prayers demonstrate a movement away from devotion rooted in church and cult towards a more affective and individualized devotion, rooted in meditation on Christ’s Passion and the role of such meditation in the anchoritic life. The texts also reflect a movement away from veneration of the Virgin Mary as intercessor towards an affective response to the Virgin Mary as model – and, indeed, away from devotion to the Virgin Mary herself towards devotion to Christ in his Passion, where she plays a smaller role.

The history of the composition of these four prayers thus shows a clear development in the affective piety of the early thirteenth century. Significantly, the prayers also show a response by their authors to an increasingly Christ-centred devotion on the part of women religious, such as anchoresses. The earliest prayer, focused on the cult of the Virgin Mary, is male-voiced (UUL). Then comes OSM, again addressed to the Virgin Mary, which is gender-neutral. Finally, LUL and UGA, the most affective poems, addressed to Christ in his Passion, are explicitly female-voiced. The prayers thus show the movement from the male monastic milieu to the female anchoritic milieu, completed by Wohunge, where the speaker is an anchoress.

Yet, the prayers are accessible for readers of both genders, as the metaphor of the soul as the bride of Christ was firmly entrenched in the tradition of affective devotion by the early thirteenth century. That Nero’s Scribe B found the prayers effective for the devotions of both male and female readers is suggested by his addition of these prayers to the
manuscript as a group. However, as we shall see, the order in which the texts are found in Nero suggests a different kind of structure and progression than the historical movement traced above.

The Nero manuscript

As noted above, the Wooing Group prayers in Nero were added by Scribe B to the work of Scribe A, who copied Ancrene Wisse. Savage and Watson suggest that ‘Nero adds three of them in a few spare folios to its copy of Ancrene Wisse; they therefore seem to have been regarded, relatively speaking, as ephemera.”29 However, as noted above, the Wooing Group prayers most likely had a far wider circulation than their survival in extant manuscripts suggests, circulating individually on single sheets or scrolls; indeed, it is possible that this is the form in which Nero’s Scribe B found them. And, while it is certainly possible that Scribe B was, as Savage and Watson suggest, merely filling up the blank leaves at the end of the manuscript, the collation suggests otherwise; there is another full gathering following the one in which UUL begins. This gathering seems to have been assembled from loose leaves and folios, sometime after Scribe A copied Ancrene Wisse, intending it to be the sole contents of the manuscript.30 This suggests that the Wooing Group prayers were intentionally added as a group by a scribe who did not have access to enough vellum to construct a formal gathering yet was determined to combine these prayers together for a specific purpose.

A more detailed look at the ordering of the prayers in Nero reveals a careful and deliberate programme of guidance for the reader. Rather than the historical progression seen above, Nero’s Scribe B presents a specific devotional model, reintegrating personal devotion into devotion rooted in church and sacrament. The mindful arrangement of the four Wooing Group prayers indicates that Scribe B deliberately added them as practical material to guide his readers in their private devotions. By alternating prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary with those addressed to Christ, the manuscript integrates the role of Mary as intercessor with her role as a model for the devout life, both in her chaste purity and in her affective response to the Passion.31 Significantly, the prayers also alternate the male-voiced or gender neutral prayers with the female-voiced devotions, suggesting that the texts were meant for a wider audience, including readers of both genders.

It is possible that the Wooing Group prayers were added when the Nero manuscript moved from the hands of an anchoress to a lay owner. This might explain the hurried nature of the final gathering, constructed, as noted above, of loose leaves and folios. In any case, Scribe B provides a carefully constructed set of prayers which enable the reader to put the teachings of Ancrene Wisse into practice in his or her daily life.

The prayers begin with the male-voiced UUL (the first of the texts to be written), celebrating the Virgin Mary as the mother of Christ, whose obedient assent inaugurates the process of Incarnation, death and resurrection that enables the salvation of the soul. Scribe B then moves directly to the female-voiced UGA (the last of the four texts to be composed), with its impassioned meditation on and celebration of Christ’s love displayed and rooted in the Passion. These first two texts, then, open the sequence with devotion that is expressed in the language of love and desire, drawing from the language of secular love lyrics and focussing on union with Christ. UUL celebrates the cult of the Virgin
Mary; UGA, however, quickly moves the reader to meditation upon the Passion and the affective language of the Song of Songs, conveying the culmination of the textual and devotional process outlined above.

The opening two prayers are followed by OSM, a purely confessional text addressed to the Virgin Mary. With its careful structure and its detailed rehearsal of sin, OSM is an example of a typical form of confession, enabling the reader to prepare for the sacrament of confession to a priest, but also to confess his or her sin privately to the Virgin Mary and pray for her intercession. Yet, the order of the texts here roots this confession in the Passion meditation which precedes it (UGA), rather than presenting it as a stand-alone prayer to the Virgin. The more rudimentary Passion material in OSM, therefore, appears not as an historical prelude to the more sophisticated Passion meditation of UGA, but as its textual sequel, assuming (and affirming) the depth of affective devotion of the preceding prayer.

Finally, Scribe B moves the reader into LUL, which, as we have seen, combines the confessional mode of OSM with the affective devotion to the Passion of UGA, highlighting the transformation of the soul by which union with Christ in love and death can be accomplished and maintained. Ending the prayer sequence with LUL emphasizes that the ecstatic joy and love expressed in UUL and UGA is not an end which can be fully achieved in earthly life, but a state which will alternate with the grief and sorrow of sin. Union with Christ can only be fully accomplished in heaven; on earth it is necessary to maintain a careful vigilance against the sin that will invariably enter the heart and threaten to cast Christ out. The constant interplay between sorrow and joy, sin and penance, isolation and union characterizes the life of the enclosed or lay reader, and the texts are set up in a way that will enable him or her to maintain the cycle of meditation upon his or her own unworthiness and Christ’s great love. The final lines of LUL, however, end the prayer cycle on a note of confident assertion of Christ’s love:

Hwat mote ich milfule louerd to þe þat alle þing meiht,
ant const,
ant wult wel don,
ant wult al þat god is,
al þat me euer is neod?
Ich biseche þe,
Godd of alle godd ful wið þeos þreo wordes:
ase þu meiht,
ants const,
ant wult (ll. 175–84)

(What can I do for you, merciful Lord, who may, and can, and will do all things well, and who wills all that is good, all that I ever need? I beseech you, God full of all good, with these three words: as you may, and can, and will.)
Conclusion

The Wooing Group prayers were composed and circulated in the first instance as part of the process of compiling a body of literature to supplement the devotion of anchoresses such as those to whom Ancrene Wisse was addressed. But the Wooing Group prayers were not only used and read by anchoresses. Wohunge itself is found only in Titus, which contains a version of Ancrene Wisse that has been altered for an audience that includes men (and partially altered back again); the Titus version clearly shows that the readers of anchoritic literature had evolved very quickly – indeed, within twenty years of its original composition it has undergone at least two alterations for new audiences (the Titus exemplar and Titus itself). The survival of Wohunge in Titus suggests that it, too, had been adopted by a varied readership.

The Wooing Group prayers are thus not only part of the development of anchoritic literature, but also of the movement of this literature from an anchoritic audience to a lay audience. This is nowhere clearer than in the process of the composition of the Nero manuscript. The original manuscript contained only Ancrene Wisse, copied by Scribe A. Yet, at some time very early in its existence, Scribe B felt it not merely useful, but necessary to add four of the Wooing Group prayers. And, as we have seen, Scribe B’s work shows the deliberate arrangement of what might have been, in the first place, a collection of individual prayers circulating on loose sheets into an ordered programme enabling the reader to enact the devotional teachings of Ancrene Wisse in daily devotions that might, for a lay reader, be necessarily less structured than the prayers and devotions set out for the anchoress in Part 1.

The importance of the Wooing Group in providing individual prayers for individual devotees cannot be underestimated. Scribe B’s addition of the Wooing Group prayers and, especially, the order in which they were copied, made the manuscript appropriate for a new class of readers: simple, devout laypersons. As we have seen, the history of the composition of the texts shows a gradual movement away from monastic liturgy and cult towards individual (and female) devotion in vernacular prayers. In response to this, Scribe B has ordered the texts in a way that reintegrates personal devotion into devotion rooted in church and sacrament. Perhaps recognizing the potential dangers of the vernacular movement seen in the history of the composition of the Wooing Group prayers, Scribe B presents his (mixed-gendered) readers with a careful and deliberate programme of reading, based on a specific devotional model intended for readers who do not have the foundation of professional religious training or, perhaps, the time to concentrate their lives around the devotional world represented in Ancrene Wisse. Scribe B intuits the need for a book suitable for lay use which encourages individual devotion but grounds it firmly in the liturgy and practice of the church. The Nero manuscript thus reflects the movement of the audience of vernacular prayers from women recluses to lay readers; it also reflects the ‘politics’ of that movement, as Scribe B orders his material to quietly counteract the historical movement of individual devotion away from church and cult.
Notes

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1 The reader will notice that I have not used the older abbreviations employed by Geoffrey Shepherd, which are based on translated titles (Ancrene Wisse: Parts Six and Seven (1959; Exeter: Short Run Press, 1985) p. xiv). I have chosen instead to use the abbreviations introduced by Bella Millett in her recent edition of and commentary on Ancrene Wisse (Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 402, with Variants from other Manuscripts, vol. II, EETS OS 326 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. lvii). Millett’s clearer, more accessible abbreviations will, I hope, become standard with the publication of her edition. Millett has not included On God Ureison of Ure Lefdi in the Wooing Group; however, following her lead, I have used the abbreviation UUL. See below for my reasons for including this prayer in the Wooing Group.

2 For the development of lay spirituality and its relationship to Ancrene Wisse, see Cate Gunn, Ancrene Wisse: From Pastoral Literature to Vernacular Spirituality (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).


4 Savage and Watson (trans.), Anchoritic Spirituality, p. 29. See further Ralph Hanna, ‘Lambeth Palace Library, MS 487: some problems of early thirteenth-century textual transmission’, in Cate Gunn and Catherine Innes-Parker (eds), Texts and Traditions of Medieval Pastoral Care: Essays in Honour of Bella Millett (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2009), pp. 78–88. Hanna argues that rather than ‘the designed product of an “AB community”’ suggested by Dobson’s ‘Wigmore texts’ and the theory of a coherent group based on the study of Bodley 34, the Wooing Group and the Katherine Group were likely ‘a much less centralized and organized group of texts, available only fitfully and sporadically to book producers and the readers they served’ (pp. 87–8). Hanna notes that Titus, like London, Lambeth Palace, MS 487 (hereafter Lambeth), which includes a fragment of On wel swuðe god urieson of God almihti, is ‘a gathering of separable fragments’, combined in quires that were copied as the exemplars became available (p. 86). He argues that ‘the quiring evidence, like that of Lambeth, would suggest that this manuscript [Titus] developed as a series of accretions’, consisting originally of only Ancrene Wisse (like Nero) (p. 86). He also argues that Wohunge (bracketed by Hali Meðhad and Seinte Katerine) is, nevertheless, from a completely different source from the Katherine Group texts contained in the manuscript (pp. 86–7). This supports the conclusion that these texts originally circulated in small pamphlets or scrolls containing a single text, or, as in the case of Wohunge and UGA, two short texts. For Hanna’s analysis of Lambeth’s gatherings, see pp. 80–5.

5 The text of Wohunge runs from the top of col. 2 on f. 127r, to 132v, col. 2, thus taking up eleven columns.


7 Millett I, 1.4.86, p. 9.

8 Millett I, 8.25–6, p. 161.
9 Millett I, 1.28, p. 18.
11 Millett I, 1. 353–8, p. 17; all translations are from Bella Millett (trans.), Ancrene Wisse/ Guide for Anchoresses: A Translation based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), where the page numbers are the same as the edition. The fact that the author suggests that copies of the prayers are ‘available everywhere’ suggests that Hanna’s conclusion that such prayers were available to copyists only sporadically might need to be re-evaluated. Or, perhaps, there were two cultures of circulation available in the early thirteenth century: one, an informal circulation of scrolls and pamphlets amongst anchoresses (and perhaps the laity) who lived at the margins of institutional religion; another, more formal but less abundant, circulation of manuscripts amongst monks within the formal structures of institutional religion, for whom the vernacular prayers were indeed available only sporadically. Ironically, this might imply that vernacular prayers were more readily available through the former, informal, culture of textual dissemination than within the institution which, formally at least, attended to the instruction of those who read these prayers.
13 See also Millett II, p. xi and n. 10. All references to the prayers of the Wooing Group are from my forthcoming edition and translation, Be Wohunge of Ure Lauerd and Related Texts: Thirteenth-century Passion Meditation (Peterborough: Broadview Press).
15 ‘Thirteenth-century English religious lyrics’.
16 I have argued the case for the inclusion of UUL in detail in my forthcoming edition, Be Wohunge of Ure Lauerd and Related Texts.
17 I.e. Sawles Warde, Seinte Katerine, Seinte Margarete and Seinte Juliene.
18 Savage and Watson (trans.), Anchoritic Spirituality, p. 333, n. 12.
20 Lambeth, ff. 65v—67r. See Hanna, ‘Lambeth’, p. 81. Lambeth itself is dated to the first quarter of the thirteenth century, or earlier. It also contains the ‘Lambeth Homilies’, including five of the ‘Trinity Homilies’ (a collection of sermons found in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B. 14. 52). Millett notes that ‘Lambeth is linked to the Ancrene Wisse Group both by language and manuscript tradition’ and suggests that it was ‘designed primarily for a listening audience’ (Millett II, p. xxvi).
21 The tradition of clerics writing prayers and meditations for aristocratic patrons is a longstanding one. Anselm was noted for his writings for aristocratic women, and his Prayers and Meditations provide interesting models for texts like the Wooing Group. See Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm with the Proslogion, ed. and trans. Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin, 1979). See also S. N. Vaughn, St. Anselm and the Handmaidens of God: A Study of Anselm’s Correspondence with Women (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003).
22 See especially Part Four on Temptation, Part Five on Confession and Part Six on Penance.
Bella Millett discusses the kind of list found here and in *Ancrene Wisse* Part 7 and *Wohunge*, in ‘The “conditions of eligibility” in *De Wohunge of ure Lauerd*’, in Susannah Chewning (ed.), *The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 26–47.

For a study of Christ’s embrace upon the cross and medieval attitudes towards the visual representation of Christ on the crucifix, see Sara Lipton, ‘“The sweet lean of his head”: writing about looking at the crucifix in the high Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 80, 4 (October 2005), 1172–1208.

See the more detailed discussion in my forthcoming edition, *De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd and Related Texts*.

UGA and *Wohunge* are late enough to have been influenced by the Dominicans, who arrived in England in 1221 and founded their first house in the West Midlands c.1232 (although Millett has suggested that the author of *Ancrene Wisse* ‘could have been seconded to a local bishop’s household even before the foundation of Dominican households in the West Midlands’ (Millett (trans.), *Ancrene Wisse*, p. xxiii; see also Millett II, pp. xvi–xix). They are also late enough to have been influenced by the affective piety of the Franciscans, who were brought to England in the early 1220s under the patronage of Stephen Langton and Loretta, countess of Leicester, who was an anchoress in Kent, near Canterbury, but who was also the daughter of William de Braose, one of the most powerful Marcher lords in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries: see Catherine Innes-Parker, ‘*De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* and the tradition of affective devotion: rethinking text and audience’, in Chewning (ed.), *The Milieu and Context*, pp. 96–122. The Franciscans founded a house in Hereford in 1228. For more on the Franciscan influence on the Titus manuscript, see Savage and Watson (trans.), *Anchoritic Spirituality*, pp. 15, 29.

Ibid., p. 29. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that their appreciation of the texts is confined to a note.

Similarly, the prayers and devotions in Part One of *Ancrene Wisse* are dominated by prayers to the Virgin Mary, particularly those in English (i.e. those that the anchoresses – and a lay reader – would have clearly understood); yet, devotion to the Passion is so thoroughly fused with her daily prayers that the two are difficult to separate.