Rolle and Related Works

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Richard Rolle, the Yorkshire hermit-visionary-purveyor of spiritual counsel (d. 1349), is the first real ‘author’ in Middle English. And his authoriality was well recognised in the period, for he was widely known by name and, on the basis of manuscript survivals and references, the most popular English spiritual writer of the later Middle Ages. Indeed, during the period, Rolle was ascribed a wider range of religious texts than even a very prolific literary career had managed to produce. If not the first Middle English writer to produce a literal biblical translation and commentary,¹ he was certainly the most important and a model regularly invoked by later writers (see Hudson 1985).

The only real information about Rolle’s biography is provided by the *lecciones* prepared late in the fourteenth century in anticipation of his canonisation. This liturgical office gives at best only approximative information, the actual events now visible only through a hagiographic sheen. In ‘St Richard, [hermit] of Hampole’, his customary denomination, his chosen vocation has obscured his surname, and the variousness of his residences has been subsumed under the name of the south Yorkshire Cistercian nunny where he died and was buried in 1349. (Since the projected canonisation did not occur, this office was never publicly celebrated but communicated for private devotion; see ‘Officium’ and Comper for a translation.)

The Office tells that Rolle was born at Thornton Dale, on the edge of the North Yorkshire moors (perhaps, as Watson compellingly argues, so late as 1310). He was sent to Oxford, under the patronage of Thomas Neville, later an archdeacon of Durham, but a younger son of the prominent Northern family, the Nevilles of Raby (co. Durham). However, at age eighteen, Rolle seems to have thrown over academic life (cf. ‘For sum þat semes wyseste er maste folles, for al þar wysdom þat spyll in covayties and bisynes abowte þe worlde’)² and to have returned secretly to the area of his birth (so as not to alert or anger his father, now living further north in Yafforth).

Rolle then consecrated himself as a hermit. He signified this new life of

¹ One manuscript of the (lightly glossed) ‘Early English Prose Psalter’ (IMEP 114, the printed text does not signal the glosses) may have been copied within Rolle’s lifetime, and this text, as well as two further extensive works of biblical commentary, the prose *Apocalypse* (IMEP 584) and unedited prose *Mirror*, partly dependent upon the *Apocalypse*, most probably predate 1320.

² ‘Form’ 112/142–44; 737–39; my customary form of citation, first page line to Allen’s edition (in Yorkshire language), second Ogilvie-Thomson’s lineation (a better text, from which I have derived bracketed corrections).
devotion by reclothing himself in a parti-coloured habit made from his sister’s castoff clothing. (Such self-creation is not unusual for those feeling such a calling.) He was, the Office says, for a short time patronised as local holy man by the Dalton family of nearby Pickering, but seems to have spent most of his life as a hermit-solitary in variously mobile hermitages in ‘Richmondshire’ (northwest Yorkshire), before retiring to a cell near Hampole.

This choice of residence appears to depend upon Rolle’s relation as spiritual advisor to Margaret Kirkby, who became a nun at Hampole c. 1343 (on such relationships, see Riddy). The one discernible date in Rolle’s life falls in its last year, his composition for Kirkby of the epistle of spiritual counsel ‘The Form of Living’. This work is associated with her leaving Hampole to be enclosed as an anchorite in a cell at East Layton (North Riding; cf. ‘Form’ 122–24, lines that identify the occasion).

Most of Rolle’s writings, indeed all the early materials, are in Latin and had, in many cases, a considerably greater circulation (and more extensive printing history) than even his widely dispersed English ones (see Sharpe). These include not simply a full commentary on the Psalter but two contemplative tracts, *Incendium amoris* and *Melos amoris*, frequently written in an ecstatically mannered Latin prose, and the popular instructional tract, *Emendatio vitae*. (*Incendium* and *Emendatio* were both eventually translated into English, the latter eight times.) The vernacular writings appear to come from the last years of Rolle’s life. Here, although there is a large group of short texts, pre-eminent are a second, English commentary on the Psalter and three prose epistles of counsel, ‘Ego dormio’, ‘The Commandment’, and ‘Form of Living’.

‘Tradition’, in this case represented by the poem prefaced to the copy of the Psalter in Bodl. MS Laud misc. 286, identifies the work as having been addressed to Margaret Kirkby. The poem further alleges that the autograph was preserved at Hampole. However produced, the prose Psalter is an academic text – commentary is a learned clerical genre (one Rolle ceaselessly pursued in Latin), and the work is drawn from a standard Latin authority, the common gloss of Peter Lombard (itself a compendium of accepted patristic readings, cf. ‘In expounyng I folow haly doctours’, 7/97–8). Moreover, the work is preceded by a prologue, a specifically learned and academic genre, here one that takes up, albeit in deliberately parodic and disordered fashion, those topics conventional in academic reading strategies: the title of the work, its author, his intention, the material treated, the type of procedure used in argument, the ordering and parts of the book, its usefulness, the branch of learning to which it pertains (cf. Minnis).

This will indicate an important paradox, especially germane to Rolle’s English writings. Although Rolle writes informally, and frequently alludes to his own experience, this presentation largely represents an act of rhetorical positioning. Whatever his sometime dismissiveness about the value of books, he had either absorbed (or carried about with him) a very large number of them (cf. Bennett). As recent treatments (notably Renevey) show, he alludes to books, often silently but pretty constantly, and his various cells are apt to have featured not just spartan pallets but both book-chests and writing equipment. Merely to note one example, at ‘The Commandment’ 198–213, what appears the rhetorically climactic and earnest entreaty against worldliness in fact cites or adapts closely a short meditation often ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux. This Rolle is most apt to have known from the excerpt in the *Summa iustitiae* often ascribed to Robert Grosseteste.5

Academic commentary is a public mode of writing, and Rolle’s Psalter, especially given its great length, had a very large circulation, a good deal of it in Wycliffite adapted versions (see Hudson 1988). In contrast, the epistles seem a more intimate form of writing. Although the important anthology, Longleat House, Marquess of Bath, MS 29, implicitly presents the three texts as if all were addressed to ‘Margareta de Kyrkby’, their headings in the collection in CUL, MS Dd.5.64 (III) would indicate a more various, but nonetheless originally private, audience. Although Dd identifies ‘The Form’ as ‘scripta . . . ad Margaretam annachoritam, suam diectam discipulum’, it also states that ‘The Commandment’ was ‘scriptus cuium sorori de Hampole’ and ‘Ego Dormio’, ‘cuium moniali de 3edynham’, i.e. Yedingham, a small house of Benedictine nuns just east of Pickering and Thornton Dale.

The manuscript record offers similar difficulties in terms of viewing the epistles as a unified group. These have been obscured by a history of editorial presentation focussed upon witnesses in which all three texts appear together (Longleat and Dd; Bodl. MS Rawlinson A.389, from which are derived most other examples of this presentation, Ogilvie-Thomson’s GSVW). But in the extensive record of these texts, involving something like seventy separate copies, ‘The Form of Living’ seems always to have been perceived as central to spiritual life, and the circulation of the others diffused and a bit hit or miss.

This view would confirm what seems evident on any inspection, that the three epistles address different situations and imperatives. ‘The Commandment’ has certainly been composed for someone in a monastic situation (see 152–60). And while it broaches a number of themes Rolle ceaselessly repeats, it is not involved, as the other epistles are, with issues of the contemplative life. In this emphasis, ‘The Commandment’ follows the text cited at its opening, ‘the greatest commandment of the law’ (Matt. 22:37–40, a quotation of Deut. 6:5), a general prohibition against worldliness in fact applicable to every Christian.
to a few basic issues (best outlined, within the context of the whole English mystical tradition, in Gillespie’s series of articles). Most basic to all the tracts is a simple distinction between the life of the world and that of the spirit. This is predicated on both Jesus’s ‘great commandment’ and upon the claim ‘Qui non diligent, non novit Deum, quoniam Deus caritas est’ (1 John 4:8; cf. 15). Rolle’s favourite word is ‘lufe’, and it always defines a life of devotion, as opposed to one not knowing God, of worldliness, vanity and sin. And as love approaches being the totality of the addressee’s experience, she will approach a rapturous unity with the divine nature.

Implicit in this formulation and in the insistence upon withdrawal from worldly concerns is a dialectical distinction between two ways of living. This Rolle tends to present in both the positive and negative, through the inclusion of satirical attacks, especially upon the detraction the godly might expect from the worldly (e.g. ‘Commandment’ 14–23, ‘Form’ 731–2). In the sometimes more pronounced form of the Latin writings, Watson construes such statements as Rolle’s anxiety about his own authority as spiritual teacher.

If, as Rolle sees it, the world and the social relations it enjoins are all ‘busyness’, the life of love is the strange inaction of solitude, and preferably the solitude of hermetic withdrawal or literal incastration. Rolle grudgingly acknowledges the limitations of his addressee in ‘The Commandment’, ‘If Thou may not drehe to syt by pin ane’ (75/74–5; 58), and, early in ‘The Form’, he instructs Kirkby directly, ‘Thou shalt not be in, thou shalt end in, thou shalt be in all other thy revelation of thy Holy Gaste’ (90/23–4; 138–9). Although withdrawal, in Kirkby’s case the utter physical isolation of incastration, literally dead to the world, seems senseless in conventional terms, the worldly simply do not comprehend:

Men wenes bat we er in pyne and in penance grete, but we have mare iojy and mare verray delyte in a day, pan hai have in he worlde all par lyve. hai se our body, bot hai se nought oure hert, whare our solace es. (89/12–16; 130–33)

(Indeed, ‘pyne and penance grete’ are strikingly absent from Rolle’s thinking, and he tends to deprecate, rather than encourage, ascetic rigour, in favour of opening oneself to love; cf. ‘Form’ 48–86.)

‘Sit’, the powerfully inactive verb Rolle uses to describe the apparent inaction of love, functions as an emblem for the acts of eternity. In that future of full bliss, one gains a seat where full vision and coparticipation with the divine will become all: ‘hai er Goddes trone pat dwelles still in a stede, and er nought abowte remand . . . and I have lufed for to sytt’ (116/258–9; 827–9). Similarly, measured physical pauperisation here opens the way to a higher experience, that of an existence self-sufficient apart from the world, sustained in the presence of God.

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6 The customary Northern sense ‘think, believe’, not ‘expect’.
7 Did calls the tract ‘Forma vivendi’. the pair Vernon/Simeon ‘be fourme of parfuy liuing’.

8 Cf. also ‘mare delyte to be by pin name and speke till bi lufe’ (89/9–10; 128–29); and in ‘Ego dormio’, ‘[to] go [py]n ne to wake [i.e. wake] and pray and thynk [be] joy of beven and [to have compassion] of be possessyon of Ihesu Criste’ (62/54–55; 44–45); ‘euer [be] wil list siti at bat baou be euer louyng [a common Rolle pun, ‘loving’ ‘lowing’ praising] thy Lord’ (245–46; omitted at 70/299).
Yet, such behaviours, essentially the emulation of Rolle’s personal eremitic practise, are far from actionless. Typically, Rolle imagines the solitary as proceeding by degrees, passing through various stages of the spiritual life. While perhaps unsurprising as a conceptualisation, this view is presented in a language learned and appropriated, the triad of insuperable, inseparable, and singular love derived from the writings of the twelfth-century Parisian theorist, Richard of St Victor (cf. the explicit listings of ‘Commandment’ 24–41, ‘Form’ 525–626). But categories are far from a system, and Rolle fills them in variously, depending on the instructional context. At ‘Ego dormio’ 66–138, where they comprise the body of the tract, for example, the states are unnamed, but described as general actions. The lowest is keeping the commandments and avoiding sins, essentially the life of common Christians and that enjoined in ‘The Commandment’; the second, ‘perfite life’, one of withdrawn spiritual occupations leading to the third, contemplative life, direct contact with the heavenly itself.

Advance in this process does not simply reflect an effort at purging worldliness. The solitary life, as Rolle describes it, may not include the worldling’s ‘busyness’, but it certainly relies on work, the traditional monastic devotional order of reading, prayer, and meditation (leccio, oracio, meditacio). Thus, ‘Ego dormio’ initially describes the second state as given over to spiritual things, including ‘thynkyng of his passyon’ (65/152; 121). But as one progresses, ‘pan wil be liste stel bye aleane, to thynk on Criste and to be in mykyng prayynge’ (65–6/158–9; 125–6). And the subsequent description of prayer, ‘when pou ert by aleane, gyf ye mykyly to say ye psalmes of ye Psauter and Pater Noster and Ave Maria’ (6/164–5; 129–30), implies the prior absorption of the written text. This injunction explains why Rolle thought the Psalter important enough to translate for Kirkby’s use and to comment upon twice. In Rolle’s thought, this basic book of biblical devotion enjoins two modes, both the penitential and the faithfully amatory.

But Rolle is far more interested in exceeding these exercises to arrive at contemplacion:

Contempletife lyf hase twa parties, a lower and a heer. ye lower party es meditacion of haly wrytyng, pat es Goddes wordes, and in other gude thoughts and sweete, pat men hase of ye grace of God abowt ye lufe of Jhesu Criste, and also in lovyng of God in psalmes and ympnes, or in prayers, yhe gheer party of contemplacion es behaldying and 3ernynge of ye thynges of heven.

(Form’ 118/35–42; 861–66)

Meditative prayer functions as a springboard to contemplation. Here Rolle is prone to emphasise the love inspired by thought of the Passion and a responsive emulation of the love that Jesus showed in his voluntary suffering. But equally prominent is what one might consider the nonverbal (or the only fragmentarily verbal), the name of Jesus. The tackled-on final paragraph of ‘The Commandment’ (214–24) urges the practise of this devotion, as does ‘Ego Dormio’:

Nathyng pays God swa mykyl als veray lufe of his nam lhesu. If pou luf it ryght and lastandely and never let for nathyng þat men may do or say, pou sal be [avgryst] intil a heghar lyfe þan pou can covete. (66/182–66; 144–47)

And ‘Oleum effusum’, a translated fragment of Rolle’s partial ejsxesis of the Song, offers a thoroughly expansive commendation:

Sothely nathyng slyoks sa fell flawmes, dysstoyes ill thoghtes, puttes owte venemous affecciouns, dos awaye coryous and wayne ocupacyons fra vs. This name lhesu leelely haldyn in mynde drawes by ye rote vyces, setys vertus, inlawes charite, ingetti sau[u]re of heuely thynges, wastys discorde, reformes pese, gyffes inlasande rystye, dose awaye greusenes of fleschely desyris, turnes all ethely thynge to huye, fyllys ye luffande of gastely ioye.

(Lincoln Cath 91, fol. 192v)

The expansiveness of praise, both for the prayer and its referent, expresses itself in the great rush and tumble of serial presentation. This embodies a(n inconsistent) tendency toward palpable English verbal roots, very physical acts, in conjunction with the abstract romance vocabulary of spiritual life. Just as the name of Jesus threatens to escape verbality, so the height of unific contemplation of participation in divinity to which it leads can also be defined only gesturally. Rolle typically describes the height of spiritual experience by a language pointing toward a distinct and complicated variety of sensation, physical terms doing duty as purified spiritual metaphor:

A mans hert þat verraly es byrrand in þe lufe of God . . . hase myrth and ioy and melody in angells sange (‘Ego dormio’ 63/65–67; 53–54)

He gyves hymself till jaimre in swetnes and delyte, in byrnyng of luf and in ioy and melody (‘Form’ 90/29–31; 143–44)"

Here the repeated epithets ‘joy/burning/song’, with their contextual synonyms, provide the English equivalents for Rolle’s favourite Latin triplet, ‘dulcor/calor/canor’. More pregnantly than the English, the Latin alliteration and rhyming terminations re-enforce the unitive experience, both a complex simplicity in the worshipper and in her juncture with the celestial.

Uniquely, Rolle insists upon the enduring quality of this mystic ecstasy. The epistles differ strikingly from most medieval discussions, with their attention to the ‘dark night of the soul’ when God does not return, and their accounts of

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10 Cf. the great definition of love, reminiscent of Herbert’s ‘Prayer’: ‘Luf es perfeccion of letters, verta of prophecy, frute of trouth, he[e]f[e] sacramentes, stabyling of witt and comynyng, rytches of pure men, lyfe of dyad men’ (Form’ 109/30–2; 649–51); for another discussion that might anticipate early modern devotional language, see the elaboration of the perforations of the Passion in Meditation B.

11 Cf. further ‘Ego dormio’ 224–36 (a product of the preceding passion meditation); the opening of the prologue to the Psalter (Allen 4–5/1–15 or so); or, ‘Form’ 551–64 (associated with moving beyond the general description of love, ‘Amore langueto’, to the fully fledged union signalled by the verse ‘Ego dormio’).
ascetic exercises that may hasten His reappearance. For Rolle, burning musical joy never partakes of a repeatable exercise; rather, he assumes that, once gained, the state is preserved and becomes the automatic and ceaselessly available end of the solitary’s endeavour:

han he fire of lufe verrali ligges in þair hert and byrnes þarín . . . and sithen forward þai er contempatife men and ravyst in lufe

(‘Form’ 119/65–68; 885–88)

The accomplished hermit or recluse lives ever in love, in the sweetness of heaven. Her continuous ecstasy poises herself both against and longing for death and the full consummation of love. Hence Rolle is fond of the proverb, that love is strong as death and hell (even in ‘The Commandment’; see 36–41).

These ideas are couched in a prose of often extravagant and certainly various stylistic virtuosity (ably discussed by Copeland). As someone well trained in the trivium, Rolle has a keen sense of a suitably diverse form of literary statement that will parallel the diverse situations and subjects of his writing.

The prose Psalter, whose prologue includes an important stylistic statement (Allen 7/91–7), shows a deliberately greater roughness than any of the epistles. Rolle promises to ‘seke no strange Inglis’, by which he means no language that will alienate or estrange the reader from the Latin. In encouraging the vernacular reader to ‘come to the Latin’, Rolle implies the potential use of the translation as liturgical primer. And the carefully non-English word order of the actual translation, a practise that may have influenced the first Wycliffite biblical translation, is frequently evident:

Auditi meo dabis gaudium et lecticiam; et exultabit osa humilliatam. ¶ Till my heryng þou sall gif ioi and jaynes; and glade sail banes mekid

(Ps. 50:9, Bramley 186)

Such meticulous literalism extends to vocabulary, and Rolle relies especially heavily on calque translation, e.g. payabill/deprecabilis 89:15, vptaker/susceptor 90:2, hundat/venacium 90:3, inras/incursis 90:6. The style of the commentary portions is equally constrained (if somewhat freer), but in this case by standard techniques of glossing, with sentence grammar adjusted to accommodate the biblical lemmata:

¶ Till my heryng with men þou sall gif ioi of remyssyon, sayand, ‘þi syn is forgisen þe’, and jayne of endles life þat I hope. And glade sail banes þat is all þe vertus of my saule mekid, for þai er withouten pride.

The only other fairly persistent example of ‘plain style’ occurs in ‘The Commandment’. Here Rolle does not present the ‘rough style’, the constrained literalism of translation, but rather what one understands as the traditional plain style of moral instruction. The tract relies on the repeated imperative mode, often embodied in a clipped and frequently staccato series of directives.

But in general, the epistles display a considerably more elegant sense of diction and phrasing. One typically elevated example of a ‘middle style’ occurs in a ‘name of Jesus’ passage in ‘The Form’:

And when þou spekes til hyrn and says þesu thurgh custom, it sal be in þi ere ioi, in þi mouth hony, and in þi hert melody. For þe sall thynk ioi to here þat name be nevened, sweetes to speke it, myrth and sang to thynk it. If þou thynk þesu continuly and halde it stably, it purges þi syn and kyndels þi hert; it clarifies þi sawle, it removes anger and dose away slawnes; it wondes in lufe and fulfilles of charit; it chaces þe delvet and puttes oute drede; it opens heven and makes a contemplati man. Have in mynde þesu, for al vices and fantomes it puttes owte fra þe love. And haylyce oft Mary, bath day and nyght. Mikel lufe and ioi sal þou fele, if þou wil do aftyr þis lare. þe thare noght covaye gretyly many boke; halde lufe in hert and in werke, and þou hase al [done] þat we may say or wryte. For fulnes of þe law es charite; in þat hynges all. (108/4–20; 612–25)

As several citations above will have indicated, such serial presentation is endemic in the epistles. Although much of the passage shows that same rush of epiphete I have previously described, the whole is plotted and controlled. Although carefully balanced (and one might note the terminals of ioi/hony/melody at the head as an ‘Englishing’ of the terminal -or’s of the underlying Latin triplet), the balance is varied, both in terms of the number of members in each unit, and in alternations between complete and incomplete repetition of detail within those members. And as in my earlier citation of ‘Oleum’, there is an attractive and deliberated alternation of foreign and native roots. But whatever the degree of carefully expansive balance (Dt emphasises it in this passage, whereas Lt attempts a more serial presentation), the conclusion is drawn plainly and directly. The prose quiets near the end, the members shorten, affective description is replaced by a direct turn to the reader, and the whole is rounded off by plain proverbial biblicism (cf. Alford 1973).

Rolle reserves his truly ‘high style’, in essence a translation of the mannerism of the Latin writings, for specific effects. It is the property of incentative texts and reserved for specific model contexts, notably descriptions, designed to lift the reader toward ecstasy, of the Passion and of the power of the name ‘Jesu’. Here one might single out the pyrotechnics of ‘Meditation on the Passion A’ (Allen 24–25), or of another Passion account, ‘Ego dormio’ 175–211. On such occasions, Rolle writes in rhythmic cadences hanging rather ambiguously between prose and verse (see Smedick), and between the traditional line of alliterative poetry (my preferred way to read it) and septenary verse. In addition to the rhythmic exaltation, the lines are embellished with sporadic decorative alliteration and medial- and/or end-rhyme.

‘Richard hermit’ had an enormous medieval circulation, both real and suppo-
sitions. He was ascribed in manuscript a wide swathe of Middle English literature, including the extensive and widely disseminated Northern instructional poems *The Trick of Conscience* and *Speculum viti*. But in spite of this very great medieval popularity, Rolle seems to have been deselected from the vernacular canon precipitately and at a very early date (c. 1510). Only two English bits, both short excerpts from ‘The Form of Living’, appeared in early modern prints, that in the Latin *Speculum spiritualium* (Jones, not in IPMEP), and that prefaced to de Worde’s edition of an Englished version of William Flete’s *Remedies against Temptations* (IPMEP 528).

Rolle was only re-discovered as a Middle English writer in the nineteenth century. G.G. Parry first signalled the importance of the English work by printing (in EETS 20, 1866) the bundle of short texts found in the Yorkshire miscellany, compiled by the gentrified Robert Thornton, Lincoln Cathedral, MS 91, fols 192–196v. And the English writings were first extensively provided in Horstman’s anthology, complete with elaborate and extended misattributions. Whereas medieval readers were fond of crediting the hermit with extensive Northern verse texts, Horstman’s Victorian expansiveness concentrated on any spiritual prose that appeared remotely proximate to genuine Rolle in manuscript. Hope E. Allen sorted most of the broad problems associated with this misplaced enthusiasm, although as Jones shows, not altogether fully.

Although his sense of its distribution might be questioned, Horstman did correctly see one important mechanism underlying Rolle’s medieval popularity. His work persisted and remained broadly influential throughout a range of Middle English devotional prose. Such writing – including texts such as *The Holy Book Gracia Dei*, the Yorkshire translation of *Vitae patrum* selections (sayings and anecdotes associated with the first hermits, the Desert Fathers), *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, to name prominent examples – does not simply recall Rolle’s themes, but is frequently quotational, recycling Rolle’s own words for new audiences. Far from all examples of this direct indebtedness have been discovered; for example, the ascription of *Speculum viti* to the hermit may rest on a recognition that about two hundred lines of the text verily quite directly ‘The Form of Living’ 329–98.

But equally, such widespread quotational appropriation reflects the state of Rolle’s text itself. For his writings frequently do not circulate in manuscript as authorially promulgated works, but as the products of selective quotation. The two early printings are in a certain way prescient, for most copies of ‘The Form’ are excerpted in some way or another, often following convergent quotational patterns. At some point, the most extensive evidence of his influence, its appropriation by others, becomes indistinguishable from relatively faithful (if selective) handlings of his own text.

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- The prose psalter (IPMEP 271, Wells 23/2, i.e. Lagorai et al.), ed. Bramley; selections ed. Allen, pp. 1–16
- *The Bee and the ‘Stork’ [the bird is actually a ‘struck’ ostrich]* (IPMEP 657, Wells 23/4), ed. Allen, pp. 54–56
- *Desire and Delight* (IPMEP 863, Wells 23/5), ed. OT, p. 40
- *Ghostly Gladness* (IPMEP 253, Wells 23/6), ed. OT, p. 41
- *The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (IPMEP 700, Wells 23/7), ed. Allen, pp. 116–17, in the form intruded as ch. 11 into her base MS of ‘The Form of Living’
- *Ego dormio* (IPMEP 160, Wells 23/9), ed. OT, pp. 26–33
- *The Commandment* (IPMEP 660, Wells 23/10), ed. OT, pp. 34–39
- *The Form of Living* (IPMEP 351, Wells 23/11), ed. OT, pp. 1–25
- Richard Myns’s translation of *Incendium amoris* (IPMEP 92, Wells 23/13), this text and the next ed. Harvey
- Richard Myns’s translation of *Emendatio viti* (IPMEP 652, Wells 23/14)
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The Ancrene Wisse Group

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The Early Middle English religious prose works collectively described here as "the Ancrene Wisse Group" occupy an important but still not fully explained position in the history of Middle English prose. At a time when relatively little was being written in English, and still less written well, this substantial body of prose draws on a variety of stylistic traditions with unexpected skill and confidence; but we do not have enough evidence to establish its authorship, audience, date, or place of composition with any certainty, and there is no scholarly consensus even on the institutional context in which it was produced. Although the early manuscripts give some clues to its origin, palaeographical and linguistic criteria cannot be used as precision tools for dating and localization in this period; and the internal evidence of the works themselves is limited and sometimes ambiguous. Even fragmentary evidence, however, may take on new meaning if it can be identified as part of a larger pattern. Over the past few decades, the focus of research on the works of the Ancrene Wisse Group has shifted from its debt to Anglo-Saxon literary tradition towards its links with contemporary Continental Europe, providing new evidence for its context and suggesting alternative interpretations of the existing evidence.

The phrase 'Ancrene Wisse Group' is one of several terms used by modern scholars to classify this group of works. The assumption that they constitute a distinct group is itself modern; but it is given some plausibility by a shared manuscript tradition, by verbal, stylistic, and thematic parallels, and by a few apparent cross-references.

The longest and most influential work of the Group is Ancrene Wisse, an unofficial 'rule' or 'guide' for anchoresses -- women who had chosen to be enclosed in a cell (usually built on to a church) to lead a solitary religious life. It is made up of a Preface and eight parts (distinctiones). Parts 1 and 8 constitute an 'Outer Rule', prescribing the anchoresses' devotional observances and their external routine; they enclose an 'Inner Rule' of more general moral instruction, with sections on the custody of the senses, the solitary life, the seven deadly sins and their remedies, confession, penance, and the love of Christ.

Ancrene Wisse has no single Latin source; it borrows eclectically from a variety of written and oral traditions. The structure and content of the 'Outer

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1 See further pp. 3–5 below.
2 This title is found in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402; the alternative title sometimes used by editors Ancrene Wisse has no medieval authority (see further Millett 1996: 5)
Rule’ – and, to some extent, of the work as a whole – are influenced by a number of earlier Rules, monastic as well as anchoritic (see Millett in Wada 2003); the ‘Earlier Rule’ draws on Christian Latin writers from the patristic period onwards (particularly Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard of Clairvaux), and also reflects the influence of contemporary developments in preaching and pastoral literature. The anonymous author handles his sources with considerable freedom, weaving them into more extended arguments, amplifying them with additional material, and sometimes adapting them quite radically for their new audience. There is a striking instance of this in the section on penance, where he modifies a sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux to imply that anchoritism and penance (rather than, as in Bernard’s sermon, monasticism and mystical experience) constitute the highest form of religious life. Although Ancren Wisse addresses women leading a contemplative life, it is more concerned with general moral and spiritual advice than with the higher levels of contemplation, what in modern terms would be described as ‘mysticism’; the anchoritic life is presented as essentially penitential, rewarded by union with God in the next world rather than this. The accessibility of the spirituality of Ancren Wisse is matched by the accessibility of its style. Although its prose shows some influence from a native English tradition of rhythmical and alliterative prose, and considerably more from the techniques of Latin rhetoric, it is less formal and ornate than that of the other works of the Group; eloquent, lively, and colloquial, it exploits contemporary preaching methods and materials with professional skill, aiming ‘not to prove but to move’ (Shepherd 1959, lx).

The earliest manuscripts of Ancren Wisse date from the second quarter of the thirteenth century; a passage which was certainly part of the original work, although it survives in full only in one manuscript (BL, Cotton Nero A. xiv, fol. 50r), indicates that it was initially composed for three well-born (gentile) sisters who had withdrawn from the world as young women to become anchoresses. From the beginning, however, the author seems to have had in mind a wider potential audience, both anchoritic and non-anchoritic. At one point he says, ‘Ich write muchel for opere jef nawihet ne rineo ow, mine leue sustren’ (‘I write much for others [i.e., other anchoresses] which does not concern you, my dear sisters’, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 402, fol. 13r); and towards the end of the section on confession, he says, ‘Mine leue sustren, bis fifte dale ... limpeo to alle men ilicke; for-þi ne wundri 3e ow nawt þet 1ch toward ow nomeliche nabbe nawt ispeken i bis dale. Habeþ þah to ower bishowe þis lutele leaste ende ...’ (‘My dear sisters, this fifth part is relevant to everybody alike; so do not be surprised that I have not addressed you in particular in this part. But here is a short final section for your use ...’), Corpus 402, fol. 93r). From a very early stage, the work began to be revised, adapted, and even translated (once into Latin, twice into French) for different contexts, and for different audiences. Some major early revisions were probably authorial. The carelessly copied text in BL, Cotton Cleopatra C. vi was corrected and revised by someone who may have been the author himself (Dobson 1972, xxxiii–cxl); and the much better text in Corpus 402 (now generally used, in the 1962 edition by Tolkien, as the standard version for reference) reflects a fairly extensive updating of the original, incorporating earlier revisions and adding more in a similar style to a larger and more geographically scattered group of anchoresses, ‘twenti nuðe oðer ma’ (‘twenty now or more’, fol. 69r). The work was also adapted and revised for non-anchoritic audiences. The compilation of extracts in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College 234/120 seems to have been modified for a male mendicant community: on p. 59 recluses is replaced by men of religion, and on p. 68 a comment on the shame of having to beg for one’s living and be dependent on others ‘as þe beþ, leue sustren’ (‘as you are, my dear sisters’, Corpus 402, fol. 96v) is modified to address brepren (‘brothers’). An early adaptation for a male religious house (changing, for instance, the prescription of four haircuts a year to fifteen) underlies a number of the surviving texts, although in BL, Cotton Titus D. xviii the adaptation seems to have been partially reversed (the Titus text sometimes has feminine pronouns where the other manuscripts have masculine ones). The Latin translation, which survives in manuscripts from the early fourteenth century onwards, is modified at some points to apply more generally to male and female religious; and the late thirteenth-century ‘Trinity French’ translation, incorporated in a larger Franciscan compilation, addresses a mixed readership of religious and laity. The later fourteenth-century text in Cambridge, Magdalene College, Peps 2498 has been extensively rewritten (probably more than once), with some unorthodox modifications to the doctrine of the original (see Colledge 1939, and Christina von Nolcken in Wada 2003); and the fifteenth-century extracts in BL, Royal 8 C.i have been adapted for a general lay audience. Even texts of Ancren Wisse not revised for non-anchoritic audiences might reach a wider readership. At some point between 1284 and 1289, Cleopatra C. vii was presented to the Augustinian nuns of Canonsleigh in Devon; about 1300, Corpus 402 was acquired by the Victorine canons of Wigmore Abbey in Northern Herefordshire; the earlier French translation in BL, Cotton Vitellius F. vii was presented to Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, by the widow of the Earl of Kent between 1433 and 1441; and the modernized but otherwise faithful text in the late fourteenth-century Vrnon manuscript, Bodl. Eng. poet. a. 1, is part of a physically massive, expensively produced compilation of devotional literature certainly not designed for an anchoritic reader. In all, Ancren Wisse survives in seventeen medieval manuscripts or manuscript fragments (nine of the Middle English version, four of the Latin translation, one of the earlier French translation and three of the later), and borrowings from it also appear in some late-medieval devotional works (see Millett 1996, 31–34, and Nicholas Watson in Wada 2003).

The other works of the Ancren Wisse Group are sometimes subdivided into the Katherine Group and the Wooning Group. The term ‘Katherine Group’ is ambiguous: it has sometimes been used to cover the Ancren Wisse Group as a whole, sometimes all the works of the Group except Ancren Wisse. It is most often used, however, to describe the five works found together in Bodl. Bodley 34: three lives of virgin martyrs (Seinte Kateare, Seinte Margarete, and Seinte Iulienne), a work usually called by its editors ‘Hali Meðbod’ but in Bodley 34 ‘Epistle of meidenhad meidenh freoure’ (‘Letter on virginity for the encouragement of virgins’), and a work on the custody of the soul, Sawles Warde.

The saints’ lives are free translations of earlier Latin sources. They show little
stylistic influence, however, from their Latin originals; their prose is mannered and elaborate, a sequence of mainly two-stress phrases highlighted and/or linked together by heavy alliteration. It is probably indebted to the rhetorical and alliterative sermon prose developed by Ælfric and Wulfstan in the late Anglo-Saxon period; although there are no verbal parallels close enough to demonstrate direct influence from either writer, there are evident similarities in stylistic technique, particularly with Wulfstan’s prose (see Millett 1988, Schaefer 1996). The content of the Latin originals has also been modified: comic, erotic, and sensational elements have been heightened, and the more intellectually demanding passages simplified and clarified. The ‘baroque’ features of the English versions, their ornate style and uninhibited exploitation of the audience’s emotions, have made many critics uneasy (see Millett 1996, 41–42); but they reflect less a provincial coarsening of the originals than a purposeful and assured reworking for a different kind of audience.

Sawles Warde is also a free adaptation of a Latin original, the twelfth-century pseudo-Anselmian dialogue De custodia interioris hominis, which takes as its framework the allegorical image of the body as castle of the soul, recommending the fear of hell and the hope of heaven as a protection against the attacks of the devil. The descriptions of hell and heaven in the original are considerably amplified in the English version; the author at times imitates the rhetorical patterning of his Latin original, but he also draws on the older native tradition of sermon prose, and his description of hell echoes its phrasing as well as its stylistic devices (see Millett 1983).

Epistel of Meidenhad, unlike the other works of the Katherine group, has no single Latin source; it weaves together material from a variety of different sources into a writ (‘treatise’) in praise of virginity, addressed to an unspecified (and probably non-specific) female virgin. Its most striking feature to a modern reader is its vehement denunciation of marriage as inevitably unhappy, and sexual activity (even within marriage) as inevitably sinful. This approach, which sometimes risks overstepping the limits of contemporary theological orthodoxy, has been criticized as intemperate and unsubtle; but the author’s exclusive focus on the woes of marriage, his implication that even marital intercourse is a form of prostitution, and his stress on the practical advantages of virginity are rhetorical strategies which have precedents in a tradition of virginity literature going back to the patristic period (see Millett 1982, xxx–xxxviii).

The works of the Katherine Group seem to have been composed for more than a single audience. Two of the three saints’ lives, Seinte Iulien and Seinte Margarete, explicitly address a general audience of listeners; Seinte Iulien invites ‘alle leawede men þe understanden ne mahen Latines ledene’ (‘all lay-people who cannot understand Latin’, Bodley 34, fol. 36v) to listen to Juliana’s life. It is possible that Seinte Katerine and Sawles Warde (which is more homiletic in form than its Latin source; see Becker 1984) were also designed primarily for delivery as sermons. Epistel of Meidenhad, however, was composed to be read individually by the virgins it addresses, and the other works of the Katherine Group probably also had a secondary function as devotional reading. All of them are concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with the theme of virginitv, particularly female virginitv: even Sawles Warde, where virginitv is not a central theme, replaces a passage in its monastic source on the heavenly reward of monks by a more extended description of the reward of virgins (Bodley 34, fol. 79r), and Seinte Margarete defines its audience as ‘widwen wið pa iweddede, an te meidnes nomeliche’ (‘widows with the married, and especially virgins’, Bodley 34, fol. 18v). The women for whom Ancrene Wisse was written may have been among the readers of some of these other works; its author refers to ‘ower Englishe boe of Seinte Margarete’ (‘your English book of St Margaret’, Corpus 402, fol. 66r), perhaps the Katherine Group version. The works of the Katherine Group, unlike Ancrene Wisse, do not seem to have been widely disseminated; they survive only in Bodley 34 and two other thirteenth-century manuscripts, BL Royal 17 A. xxvii (Seinte Katerine, Seinte Iulien, Seinte Margarete, Sawles Warde), which also includes a fragment of the Woolung Group Oresiun of Seinte Marie, and BL, Cotton Titus D. xviii (Seinte Katerine, Epistel of Meidenhad, Sawles Warde), which also includes Ancrene Wisse and a Woolung Group work, Pe Wuhunge of ure Lauerd.

The term ‘Woolung Group’ was used in W. Meredith Thompson’s 1958 edition to link four prayers and meditations in rhetorical and alliterative prose. Pe Oresiun of Seinte Marie is a free translation of a prayer to the Virgin in Latin verse by Marbod of Rennes (c. 1025–1133). The other three works seem to be original compositions, ‘but original in the medieval sense of free expression within a tradition and a current phraseology’ (Thompson 1958, xiv). The ‘Lofsong of ure Louerd’ (the title is editorial) is an extended prayer to Christ and the Virgin; the Oresiun of God Almihti and Pe Wuhunge of ure Lauerd are meditations, emphasizing the desirability of Christ as a lover and his sufferings to gain the love of humanity. There are some textual indications that the first-person speakers of these three works are archetypes, and it has been suggested more than once that the ‘mediative and emotional rather than logical’ nature of the Woolung Group implies female authorship (see Thompson 1958, xviii–xxii); it is more likely, however, to reflect a clerical response to the pastoral needs of a specific female audience. The works of the Woolung Group are emotive rather than emotional, designed to evoke rather than simply express the love of God; the author of the Wohunge concludes, ‘Prei for me, mi leue suster; þis haue I wrenen þe for-pi þat wordes ofte quemen þe heorte to benken on ure Lauerd...’ (‘Pray for me, my dear sister; I have written this for you because words often sway the heart to meditate on our Lord...’, lines 645–9).

There are complete texts of all the Woolung Group works apart from the Wohunge, together with Ancrene Wisse, in BL, Cotton Nero A. xiv; an incomplete text of Uresiun of God Almihti in London, Lambeth Palace Library, 487; and a fragment of Oresiun of Seinte Marie in BL, Royal 17A. xxvii. The Wohunge survives only in Titus D. xviii. As with the works of the Katherine Group, their dissemination seems to have been relatively limited; but the fourteenth-century rhetorical prose treatise A Talkyng of the Loue of God reflects the influence of two Woolung Group works, the Uresiun of God Almihti and the Wohunge.

It is possible that other surviving works are connected with the Ancrene Wisse Group: it has been suggested that the first five sermons in Lambeth 487 which...
share some stylistic similarities with Ancrene Wisse, should also be included (for further discussion of this manuscript, see p. 11 below).

It has been generally agreed since the late 1920s that the Ancrene Wisse Group originated in the West Midlands, a location suggested not only by the dialect and provenance of the earliest manuscripts, but by the vocabulary (including the Welsh loan-words baban ‘baby’ and cader ‘cradle’) of the works themselves, their use of alliterative collocations also found in later West Midlands works, and references to Shrewsbury and Chester in an address to the larger group of anchoroesses in the Corpus 402 text of Ancrene Wisse (fol. 69r). There has been less agreement about their dating; but two revisions incorporated in the Corpus 402 text, recommending visits to the anchoroesses by Dominican and Franciscan friars, have been accepted as offering at least an approximate ‘anchor-date’. They place the Corpus text after 1224, when both orders had settled in England, and probably no earlier than the 1230s, when both had established houses in the West Midlands (see below, p. 10); but also, since they qualify the pessimistic assumption of the original that no clerical visitor could be trusted (‘Worltliche leueð lut, religiuse get leas’ (‘Trust seculars little, religious still less’), Corpus 402, fol. 16v), indicate that the original was written before regular visits by the friars were a practical possibility. Beyond this area of consensus, how far is it possible to pin down the origins of the Group?

The theory that has been most generally accepted was argued in detail by E.J. Dobson in his 1976 study, The Origins of Ancrene Wisse. J.R.R. Tolkien, in an influential article of 1929, had drawn attention to the unusually systematic West Midlands scribal dialect shared by Corpus 402 (‘A’) and Bodley 34 (‘B’), which he called the ‘AB’ language; D.S. Brewer in 1956 had noted parallels in Ancrene Wisse to the regulations of the independent congregations of Augustinian canons, and suggested that the connection of Corpus 402 with the house of Victorine canons at Wigmore (see p. 3 above) might be significant. Dobson’s cross-disciplinary study pursued both lines of research further, arguing that Wigmore Abbey must have been the centre at which the ‘AB’ language had been developed and the works of the Ancrene Wisse Group produced: ‘To assign Ancrene Wisse and its group to any other house would be to ignore either the evidence of their language or that of their Augustinian origin; to assign them to a priest (or a series of priests) unconnected with any religious house would be to ignore both Ancrene Wisse’s evidence that its author was a member of an order and the obvious fact that only an organized community could have produced a number of authors and scribes trained in a single distinctive but somewhat old-fashioned orthography. Only Wigmore Abbey fits’ (Dobson 1976, 172). But the premises underlying this theory, the Victorine origin of Ancrene Wisse and the need to assume the existence of an ‘AB centre’, can both be questioned, and recent research has suggested alternative possibilities.

Although Dobson’s own research in monastic rules and customaries reinforced the evidence for Augustinian influence on Ancrene Wisse, it did not point conclusively to Victorine authorship; he identified more numerous and extended parallels with the regulations of two other orders following the Rule of St Augustine, the Premonstratensian canons and the Dominican friars, than with the Victorine constitutions (Dobson 1976, ch 2). The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 had prohibited the foundation of new orders, requiring any new religious houses to adopt the rule and customs of an existing order; in 1216, the newly founded Dominicans adopted the Rule of St Augustine and the Premonstratensian statutes, which they modified for their own use. Within the Premonstratensian/Dominican legislative tradition, Dobson found the closest parallels in the Dominican constitutions; he also noted some apparent parallels with the regulations provided by the Dominicans in 1229 for the new women’s house of St Sixtus in Rome. He argued that these parallels reflected legislative traditions which must have been shared by the Victorines; but later research has not supported this view, and the evidence now seems to be pointing increasingly towards Dominican rather than Victorine origin (Millett 1992, 2000).

The premise that the ‘AB’ language must have been developed in a religious house seems to have been universally taken for granted, but it is not a necessary assumption. The twelfth century had seen an increase in the intellectual activity and influence of cathedral schools, the multiplication of other local schools, and an expansion in the number of commercial scribes (usually clerics in minor orders). The library of Hereford Cathedral, which was run by a college of secular canons, includes a number of twelfth-century manuscripts produced locally; R.A.B. Mynors notes, ‘There are a number of records of professional scribes, painters (though not necessarily of books) and parchmenters working in Hereford during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries . . . Surely it was to men such as these, commercial scribes operating in the town, that the Cathedral turned when it needed books made.’ It could also be argued that there were fewer incentives for the development of vernacular writing in an enclosed religious community than in a milieu where the clergy worked closely with the laity.

More radically, Merja Black, Margaret Laing, and Jeremy Smith have recently questioned Tolkien’s claim that the ‘AB’ language constituted a distinctive West Midlands written standard, ‘a cultivated and taught medium’ (Black 1999, 157), and suggested an alternative reading of the evidence: we are dealing not with a “standard” surrounded by deviant usages, but rather with various local attempts to reorganize the traditional spelling of the area, resulting in ‘a variety of similar but distinct usages, derived from the same basic conventions’ (Smith 2000, 130, 131). ‘AB’ as defined by Tolkien is found in only two manuscripts, one (Bodley 34) written by a literatim copyist who, when he changes to another exemplar for the first four folios of Seinte Margarete, ceases to follow ‘AB’ conventions consistently (see Benskin and Laing 1981); Black notes further that the Bodley 34 scribe’s own orthography, judging by his variant forms and corrections, seems to have differed significantly from ‘AB’ (Black 1999, 164–5). This raises the possibility that ‘AB’ may have been a scribal idiolect rather than a dialect, the unusually, but not uniquely, systematic

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3 See Joseph Goering, William de Montibus (c. 1140–1213): The Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care, Studies and Texts 108 (Toronto, 1992), pp. 42–57, and the further references p. 18, fn. 57.
usage of a single scribe (see further Smith 2000, 129–30). Black also questions the assumption that the archaic features of ‘AB’ orthography indicate a continuous scribal tradition going back beyond the Conquest, either to Late West Saxon or to a hypothetical Mercian written standard; instead, she suggests the continuing influence of Late West Saxon spelling-conventions in an area where pre-Conquest vernacular works were still being studied and modernized in the early thirteenth century.6

The recent work summarized above reopens the questions about authorship, audience, date, and place of composition which Dobson had aimed to resolve. But it also suggests other possible ways of interpreting the surviving evidence, which might in turn involve a reassessment of the position of the Ancrene Wisse Group in the history of English prose.

For much of the twentieth century, literary historians focused primarily on the continuity of this group of works with the pre-Conquest tradition of English prose writing. There was a critical tendency, particularly in the period between the two World Wars, to see the Ancrene Wisse Group as a ‘well of English undigested’, protected (not unlike the anchorites it addressed) from potentially corrupting outside influences by its physical and cultural isolation. R.W. Chambers, in his 1932 essay on ‘The Continuity of English Prose’, saw Ancrene Wisse as a key link in a chain of religious works extending through the Middle Ages, reviving and sustaining the native tradition of vernacular prose writing threatened by the Norman Conquest:

We begin with the greatest and noblest of all English kings [Alfred] building up (upon what foundations we do not know) a King’s English. We see the civilization of which this English prose was the instrument developing for nearly two centuries; then suffering sudden and catastrophic overthrow; then fighting a losing battle steadily but hopelessly, until, two centuries after the Conquest, the glories of romance and the niceties of the law had become the province of the French tongue, history and theology of the Latin. Yet, when we might expect to find the English tongue surviving as a mere peasants’ speech, and English prose ceasing altogether, we see it consecrated in a series of noble books, written for or by those who had withdrawn to cloister or hermitage in search of a peace which they could not find in feudal England . . . And so the cadences of the English tongue were preserved. (cclxxii–clxxiii, clxxiv)

Similarly, J.R.R. Tolkien characterized the ‘AB’ language as ‘an English . . . that has preserved some of its former cultivation . . . and has contrived in troublous times to maintain the air of a gentleman, if a country gentleman’ (Tolkien 1929, 106).

From the 1950s onwards, however, this stress on the ‘Englishness’, even the provincialism, of the Ancrene Wisse Group gradually began to be replaced by a recognition of its stylistic heterogeneity. One aspect of this tendency was a greater emphasis on the influence of Latin rhetoric on the works of the Group, either as a general stylistic model (e.g. Shepherd 1959, lxix–lxxiii, and Clark 1977, on Ancrene Wisse) or through direct adaptation of their twelfth-century and earlier Latin sources (e.g. Millett 1983, on Epistel of Meidenhad and Sawles Warde). Another was an increasing readiness to look outwards as well as backwards for stylistic influences, particularly to current developments in preaching in Continental Europe. Shepherd 1959, xxviii–xix, noted the close similarities of approach between the author of Ancrene Wisse and the Paris master Peter Cantor (d. 1197), who with his followers played a key role in the development of popular preaching in the late twelfth century; G.V. Smithers in 1966 claimed that the main stylistic debt of Ancrene Wisse was not to Anglo-Saxon models but to the preaching methods being developed in the emergent universities, and that the ‘dogma’ of its central position in the continuity of English prose was therefore ‘a major error of literary history’ (Bennett and Smithers 1966, 224). Later research has confirmed the influence on Ancrene Wisse — and also some other works of the Ancrene Wisse Group — of Continental preaching techniques of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The Epistel of Meidenhad bases its structure partly on two model sermons from the Summa de Arte Praedicatoria of the Paris master Alan of Lille (d. 1203), a work which probably also influenced Ancrene Wisse (Millett 1982, 1996b); De Wohunge of ure Lauerd uses a extended sermon-topos, a list of the conditions which make Christ an eligible lover, found in a very similar form in mid-thirteenth-century Paris sermons (Bériou and d’Avray 1994); and the treatment of confession in Ancrene Wisse reflects early thirteenth-century Continental developments in preaching and pastoral writing (Millett 1999).

What still needs to be developed is a ‘unified theory’ of the origins of the Ancrene Wisse Group which would account for this combination of stylistic influences. To explain its mixture of old and new, of native English and Continental elements, it may be necessary to go beyond the search for a single point of origin and look at the broader historical context within which the Group was produced.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council initiated a major programme of pastoral reform. Canon 21 of the Council required all Christians, on pain of excommunication, to confess to their own priest at least once a year, complete the penance imposed, and take communion at Easter. Canon 10 instructed bishops, again under the threat of severe penalties, to recruit suitably qualified assistants to support the increased workload of preaching and hearing confessions involved; and within a few years the newly founded mendicant orders, Dominicans and Franciscans, were being actively recommended by the Papacy to fill this function. Marion Gibbs comments on the commitment of bishops trained in the schools to this process of reform:

Learned bishops made especial efforts to recruit for services in their dioceses learned seculars and friars, men of their academic acquaintance, canonists and theologians from the schools. Again, some magistri, on becoming bishops, made earnest attempts to enforce canon law in face of opposition, were foremost among the episcopate in the instruction of clergy by issuing synodal

constitutions or articles of visitation, and strenuous in visiting, preaching, and reforming throughout their dioceses.  

In the period following the Fourth Lateran Council, a number of bishops were active in pastoral reform in the West Midlands area: William of Blois, Bishop of Worcester (1218–36), and his successor Walter Cantilupe (1237–66); Hugh Foliot, Bishop of Hereford (1219–34), and his successor Ralph of Maidstone (1234–9); and Alexander Stavensby, Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield (1224–38). All but one (Hugh Foliot) were magistri; all but one (William of Blois, a protégé of Stephen Langton) were linked in one way or another with a more well-known reformer, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (1235–53), who earlier in his career had worked in the diocese of Hereford under Hugh Foliot.  The earliest mendicant houses in the West Midlands were founded in this period, Franciscans in Worcester (1227) and Hereford (1228), and Dominicans in Shrewsbury (before 1232) and Chester (before 1236); Alexander Stavensby, in whose diocese the Dominican priories were founded, had taught St Dominic and his earliest followers at Toulouse in 1214, and remained a committed supporter of the Dominicans.

It is possible that these bishops acted as catalysts for a revival of vernacular preaching and devotional literature in the West Midlands, introducing Paris-trained preachers familiar with new techniques and themes, but also encouraging the repackaging of older native preaching resources for new purposes. There has been a tendency among scholars to assume that the relationship between older and newer preaching traditions, and between monastic and mendicant culture, would necessarily be one of opposition rather than collaboration; but there is some evidence in the surviving manuscripts that this was not always the case.

Christine Franzen has recently noted the close similarity (though not identity) of the language and orthography of the scribe who wrote the text of Ancrene Wisse in BL, Cotton Nero A. xiv (which also includes three of the works of the ‘Woong Group’), to that of the ‘tremulous hand’ which annotated ninth- to twelfth-century manuscripts of Old English works in the cathedral library of Worcester (Franzen 2003). Worcester Cathedral, whose library included an exceptionally large collection of pre-Conquest vernacular works, and whose surviving manuscripts suggest a continuing interest in both Latin and vernacular preaching, was served by a priory of Benedictine monks; Franzen suggested in 1991 that the ‘tremulous scribe’ might represent the last stirrings of an older tradition of monastic preaching as opposed to the newer preaching methods of the friars, but the similarities between the two hands may suggest that both traditions were current in the same milieu.


8 See Gibbs and Lang, Bishops and Reform 1215–1272; and, on Grosseteste’s association with the diocese of Hereford between 1195 and 1220, Southern, Robert Grosseteste, pp. 65–69.


A more striking illustration of their rapprochement can be found in London, Lambeth Palace Library 487, an early thirteenth-century compilation of sermons and other pastoral material of various origins, copied by a West Midlands scribe whose dialect has been localized by Michael Samuels to the same area (Northern Herefordshire or Southern Shropshire) as that of Corpus 402. This compilation includes some modernized pre-Conquest material: a sermon by Wulfstan incorporated in Sermon 2, two sermons (9 and 10) by Ælfric, and another passage borrowed from Ælfric in Sermon 11 (see Sisam 1951). But some of its material reflects the influence of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Continental developments in preaching and pastoral care. Four of the five sermons it shares with the late twelfth-century collection of homilies in Cambridge, Trinity College B. 14. 52 (the ‘Trinity Homilies’) make use of distinctiones, a preaching technique developed in the Paris schools in the second half of the twelfth century, in two cases (Sermons 13 and 17) using them as a structuring device in a way which anticipates the fully-developed ‘thematic sermon’ of the early thirteenth century. It is also possible that Sermon 3 reflects the embedding at parish level of the prescriptions of the Fourth Lateran Council on annual confession and communion (see p. 9 above). Warning against confessing for the wrong reasons, it dramatizes the penitent’s dubious motives: ‘How wulle gan to write for some, alswa doð oðer men – 3gif ic forlete, pe prest me walde esken on Ester De; hwa me scriue er he me þe þefe husul – ec for monne weorodes ðing’ (‘I will go to confession to avoid embarrassment, as other people do – if I neglected to do it, the priest would ask me on Easter Day who confessed me before he gave me communion – and also because people would talk’, Morris 1868, 25). Celia Sisam suggests, because Lambeth 487 shows little sign of use, that it reflects the ‘last flicker’ of an older pastoral tradition (Sisam 1951, 110 fn. 2), but its combination of older and newer material, sometimes within the same sermon, implies a more collaborative relationship between the two traditions – as does the addition in a later hand of an incomplete copy of one of the works of the ‘Woong Group’, the Ureisun of God Almihit.

If the Ancrene Wisse Group formed part of a wider West Midlands programme of pastoral education, we may not need to think in terms of a single ‘centre’, either of manuscript production or of literary production. The early manuscripts of the Ancrene Wisse Group vary quite widely in their scribal dialects, the technical skill with which they are written, and the freedom with which their text is treated; we cannot assume that they (or even their lost precessors; see Laing and McIntosh 1995) were copied in the same place, or by the same kind of scribe. The place of composition of the works of the Group may similarly be more difficult to localize than has sometimes been assumed; the friars in particular were itinerant by profession, and might be transferred from

one priory to another, or be seconded to a bishop's household, rather than working from a single base.

It is also possible that we should be thinking in terms of more than one author, or even more than one type of author (only Ancrene Wisse provides enough internal evidence to suggest a specific institutional origin). Although there are resemblances between the works of the Ancrene Wisse Group, there are also differences, especially of style. At one extreme, the saints' lives of the Katherine Group follow a native tradition of rhythmical and alliterative prose, showing almost no influence from the style of their Latin sources; at the other, Ancrene Wisse is written in a style whose closest affinities are with contemporary Continental Latin pastoral literature, particularly the works of Odo of Cheriton and James of Vitry. Although there is no conclusive evidence to rule out common authorship, it may not be necessary to assume 'one busy author and universal provider of devotional literature' (d'Ardenné 1936, xiii).

The internal evidence of the works of the Group certainly suggests that we should be thinking in terms of more than a single audience. It is possible that the texts which have survived to us reflect only one aspect of the post-1215 programme of pastoral instruction for 'all lay-people who cannot understand Latin', the recording of Middle English religious works in writing. The contents of Lambeth 487 suggest one possible group of readers, the clerics (whether friars, cathedral clergy, or parish priests) entrusted with the basic religious education of the laity through the vernacular; the anchories addressed in Ancrene Wisse and De Wohunghe ure laver represent another, relatively new, type of literate user. The internal evidence of Ancrene Wisse indicates that they were 'lay-anchorites' rather than 'nun-anchorites': that is, women who had entered the anchor-house directly from the world rather than, as was the recommended practice in the early Middle Ages, entering it only after an extended apprenticeship as a nun in an enclosed community. These 'lay-anchorites' were supervised directly by the local bishop; their numbers increased sharply in thirteenth-century England, as a decline in the rate of foundation of women's religious houses and the prohibition by Canon 14 of the Fourth Lateran Council of new religious orders limited the opportunities for women to follow a religious vocation in other ways. The literacy of such anchories might vary considerably, from complete inability to read to a good reading knowledge of Latin, but the anchories addressed in Ancrene Wisse seem to have been literate in English (and, at least in some cases, French) rather than Latin (see Millett 1993). In some of the works of the Group, these literate women are the primary audience; but even Ancrene Wisse itself was not designed solely for them, and most of the works of the Katherine Group seem to have been intended primarily for delivery to a wider audience of lay listeners. Much of the Ancrene Wisse Group is multi-purpose, offering approachable forms of spiritual instruction in the vernacular for both readers and listeners.

This theory of the origins of the Group has implications for its position in the history of English prose. The West Midlands bishops who implemented the programme of pastoral reform initiated by the Fourth Lateran Council were in a position to draw on both existing local resources (including the surviving records of an earlier English tradition of vernacular preaching) and the assistance of the friars for the religious education of 'all lay-people who cannot understand Latin'. The works of the Group may represent less the 'continuity of English prose' than the deliberate revival of an earlier tradition in a new situation; and their stylistic variety reflects the convergence of the native English tradition of religious prose with the newer preaching techniques developed in the Paris schools of the late twelfth century. The Ancrene Wisse Group may have emerged from a context which was more urban, more institutionally heterogeneous, and more responsive to international developments than has generally been assumed.13

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For a bibliographical survey of work on the Ancrene Wisse Group up to the end of 1993, with full annotations of individual items, see Millett 1996a; this is supplemented and updated (to 1995) by Dahood 1997.

The list below is therefore not comprehensive: it covers most post-1995 publications on the Ancrene Wisse Group, a few earlier items not included in the bibliographies above, and all publications on the Group mentioned in the article itself.

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13 I am grateful to Dr Brian Golding and Professor Malcolm Parkes for their generous advice and help when I was working on the early stages of this chapter; all remaining errors, and the views expressed, are solely my responsibility.
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