

[An Anchorhold of Her Own: Female Anchoritic Literature in Thirteenth-Century England](#)

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For all its extremes, anchoritism among medieval English women cannot be dismissed as an eccentric and inconsequential movement.¹ In addition to its distinctive popularity, female anchoritism should be noted because it produced a significant and distinctive body of literature, written by men for these women in the thirteenth century, and written by a woman in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Julian of Norwich will not be discussed here. This essay focuses on the body of literature, written by men for women, known as the "AB" texts for the dialect they share, which includes the *Ancrene Wisse*, "Guide for anchoresses"; and five texts known as the Katherine Group: *Sawles Warde*, "Soul's Guardian"; three saints' lives, of Katherine, Margaret and Juliana respectively; and a tract on virginity, *Hali Meidenhad*.²

The texts are believed to have been written in 1215 in Herefordshire for three anchoresses living in an anchorhold in the Deerfold near Wigmore Abbey, although they quickly became popular among larger groups.³ From the perspective of literary history, it is significant that the needs and circumstance of a specialized group of women played a pivotal role in the development of vernacular literature. These texts introduce features that become increasingly important in Middle English literature as it turns to address less educated audiences and that become particularly prominent in women's literature of later periods. Like these later works, the AB texts focus on emotions rather than intellectual argument, use concrete rather than abstract imagery and emphasize the personal and contemporary rather than the general and historical.

Given the quality of medieval married life, it does not seem un-reasonable to think that women might find the religious life, either in a convent or an anchorhold, an attractive alternative to marriage. Nuns at first had had educational opportunities unavailable to women elsewhere.⁴ They could even write religious works themselves. They carried out such tasks as manuscript illumination, gardening, sewing and weaving. There had been a golden period, in the early Anglo-Saxon church, when the standards for women in convents were high indeed, as can be seen in the correspondence of St. Boniface's circle. However, the status of convents rapidly diminished following the Conquest, Eileen Power noting that 63 of 138 nunneries housed less than ten nuns and that most of these convents had less than ten pounds a year. Abbesses, who had previously enjoyed independence and authority, as in the case of Hilda of Whitby, were now subject to the control of Norman bishops who severely restricted their powers and who dissolved the Anglo-Saxon double monasteries, which had housed both genders.

An anchorhold was a more attractive alternative for the thirteenth-century ascetic. An anchorhold offered a woman a medieval version of Virginia Woolf's room of one's own because in that place a woman could find privacy, autonomy and a chance for intellectual development unavailable in any other sphere. Because an anchoress was supported by grants from the nobility and alms from local inhabitants, she also had minimal financial concerns. There are, of course, limitations to a view of the anchorhold as a positive option for women. The anchorhold was a place defined and strictly controlled by men. Anchoresses were subject to frequent visits from priests and bishops - visits riddled with danger as the *Ancrene Wisse* tells us.⁵ The intellectual freedom an English woman had within the confines of an anchorhold was also limited by her lack of Latin training. Finally, the anchoress' intellectual explorations were in general conditioned by her Christianity, a religion that is both liberating and oppressive to women.⁶

While in some ways to be an anchoress was the antithesis of being a pilgrim, both modes offered to women an autonomy, an independence from the marriage debt (provided the husband, if the woman were married, consented). Both were marginal, liminal modes, where women - and men - made vows, setting themselves apart from everyday society. The pilgrim went through the ceremonies related to the expulsion, then reconciliation of penitents, lying on the church floor in the shape of a cross, being garbed in pilgrim dress of staff, scrip and scapular of animal skin - like Adam and Eve clothed with the skins of animals by God at their Expulsion from Eden. The anchoress went through a similar ceremony, the mass of the dead being said, then her being bricked up in her anchorhold - which was frequently built against the wall of a church, with one window looking in on the altar, one window out to the world, with a curtain, and perhaps a small garden, and room for a servant.

Paradoxically, those who had chosen to become dead to the world were often those who became most alive to its temptations. Ailred of Rievaulx, in his letter to his sister on the reclusive life, objects to the anchoress' involvement in activities other than contemplation.⁷ He tells us indirectly that the anchoress often was busy with a variety of chores not directly related to contemplation. He forbids the anchoress to weave, embroider, make her own clothes, grow her own food or to make money by selling her handiwork. That women pursuing the anchoritic life frequently failed to maintain the strict and isolating rigor it demanded is suggested by Ailred's letter. He warns his sister not to behave like the contemptible anchoresses he describes who became local gossips and business dealers, or were absorbed by their interests in spinning, food, drink or even the company of men.⁸ Quite clearly their problem was boredom. Even women following the less ascetic routine of convent life were sorely tempted to abandon chastity. The nun of Watton whose scandalous pregnancy was the result of her affair with a monk who shared her double monastery is an outstanding

example of what what have been a not uncommon occurrence.\9 Anchoresses therefore were in need of religious guides to mitigate against the dangers of distraction.

The one occupation that was encouraged as an alternative to daily prayers was reading, and books must therefore have played an important part in the life of the anchoress. The daily reading of the anchoress likely consisted of the rule she followed, the Psalter, saints' lives (*legenda*), sermons and other such religious tracts. Her choice of reading was limited by her language knowledge for, as most evidence suggests, English women of the thirteenth century could rarely read more than a smattering of Latin. In 1277, for example, Bishop Cantilupe wrote to the nuns at Limebrook in Herefordshire in Latin, but expected the nuns to find a translator: "you are to cause this our letter to be expounded to you several times in the year by your penancers in the French or the English tongue, which ever you know best."10 Among the limited number of vernacular texts available to women were the popular French romances, the medieval Harlequin romances. That anchoresses were at least familiar with these earlier-day popular romance is suggested by the Wisse author's reference to them.11 However, the anchoress needed to read vernacular texts other than romances. Because of her lack of Latin literacy, the anchoress had created a demand for vernacular religious literature. Because it was written by men in the image of what they thought women should be it was a literature that focusses on domesticity, on the petty daily pressures of the anchorhold, and on the deadly sins writ small.

From *Hali Meidenhad*, for example, we learn of the anchoress' regret for not marrying and having children. From the homily, *Sawles Warde*, we learn of the difficulty the anchoress faces balancing fear and hope in her daily life. From the saints' lives we learn of the female contemplative's isolation and sense of abandonment as well as her desire for the comfort and support provided from women by mother, father, husband, child or friend. From the *Ancrene Wisse* we learn of the anchoress' temptation to grumble or to snap at servants, to complain about food, or to long for fine clothes and luxury. Such pressures, the texts tell us, are ultimately the pressures of the seven deadly sins: lust, avarice, gluttony, wrath, sloth, envy and pride.

This literature, the first written in English to be specifically adapted to women in the religious life derives from the writings of Anselm and Ailred. These two writers, living in England, though writing in Latin, contributed two approaches. Anselm examined the emotions evoked in women by contemplation and Ailred on the problem of transforming the anchorhold into an arena for devotion. Anselm was one of the major twelfth-century writers to contribute significantly to the shift in literature away from the social to the personal and introspective.12 One fact about Anselm that is insufficiently stressed is that much of his writing was for women. R.W. Southern correctly states: "He also wrote to meet the increasingly articulate needs of lay people,

especially of women in great positions who had the time, inclination and wealth to adopt the monastic life. Such women were among the earliest recipients of his prayers, and one of them, Countess Mathilda, was one of the main agents of their dissemination."¹³ A distinctive feature of Anselm's letters and prayers for women is their focus on the heart. Anselm recognized that women untrained in the intellectual tradition might find it difficult and uninteresting to concentrate attention on long passages of complex theological discussion. He therefore argued that the most important book for the female contemplative was herself, and that what she needed was a method for disciplining the heart rather than the mind. She must look inward and find expression through a "language of self-revelation."¹⁴ At least he writes in Latin. But he goes on to say that she should read only if it helps inspire in her the appropriate emotions. As he writes in his introduction,

Orationes sive meditationes quae subscriptae sunt, quoniam ad exitandam legentis mentem ad dei amorem vel timorem, seu ad suimet discussionem editae sunt, non sunt legendae in tumultu, sed in quiete, nec cursim et velociter, ad paulatim cum intenta et morosa meditatione. Nec debet intendere lector ut quam libet earum totam perlegat sed quantum sentit sibi deo adivante valere ad accendendum affectum orandi vel quantum illum delectat. Non necesse habet aliquam semper a principio incipere sed ubi magis illi placuerit.

[The purpose of the prayers and meditations that follow is to stir up the mind of the reader to the love or fear of God or to self-examination, They are not to be read in a turmoil, but quietly, not skimmed or hurried through, but taken a little at a time, with deep and thoughtful meditation. The reader should not trouble about reading the whole of any one theme, but only as much as by God's help she finds useful in stirring up her spirit to pray, or as much as she likes. Nor is it necessary for her to begin always at the beginning, but wherever she pleases.]\sup>15

The reader must enter, as Anselm says elsewhere, "the secret inner chamber of the heart."¹⁶

The prayers themselves examine a wide range of emotions - pity, fear, love, hope, horror. In each prayer, the experience of the emotion is as important as the praise which is its theme, and each prayer recreates emotional processes to be experienced by the contemplative. Central to the process is a celebration of the virgin's intensely personal and passionate relationship to Christ. The *sponsa christi* motif found in the prayers is of course a feature of many contemplative pieces - the moving commentaries on the Song of Songs being perhaps the most notable - but as John Bugge points out, this motif is one that is considered particularly appropriate for women.\sup>17 This literalization of Christ as a bridegroom - a feature that is central to the AB texts - is in part the result of Anselm's other work, in particular *Cur Deus*

Homo. As Bugge writes "the portrayal of Jesus as the rival with other men for the affections of holy women was a unique by-product of the Anselmian atonement."¹⁸ While Anselm's prayers have meaning for both men and women, they are clearly especially poignant for women.

Ailred of Rievaulx considers the needs of the female contemplative in greater detail than Anselm by addressing the anchoress' problem of maintaining her passionate relationship to Christ specifically within the confines of the anchorhold. Ailred recognizes the dangers of enclosure, "membra tantum intra parietes cohibere satis esse putant, cum mens non solum pervagationem dissolvatur," ["they think it enough to confine the body behind walls while the mind roams at random"].¹⁹ Following Anselm's suggestion of the need for inner discipline, Ailred abandons the idea of an exterior rule and stresses instead the importance of an inner rule of the heart. He claims, however, that "certam tibi regulam tradere curabo, pro loco et tempore quaedam adiciens, et spiritualia corporalibus, ubi utile visum fuerit interserens," ["I shall add some details suited to your particular circumstances of time and place and whenever it seems helpful, blend the spiritual with the corporeal"] (p. 637, 1.13-16). Ailred here goes beyond Anselm in turning his attention to the particulars of the female recluse's experience, but Ailred never in fact succeeds in fulfilling this claim because he keeps the spiritual and corporeal separate in both structure and theme: the work considers first the corporeal in a rule for daily life and then turns to the spiritual in a guide to meditation that transcends daily experience.

Ailred's consideration of the relationship of daily experience to spiritual goals is finally then a negative one. Many of his precepts, for example, like Jerome's, are simply prohibitions against inappropriate behavior. For example, he warns the anchoress against the gossips, "quae ante inclusae fenestram discumbentes, praemissis valde paucis de religione sermonibus, ad saecularia devolvuntur. Inde subtextere amatoria, et fere totem noctem in insomnem ducere," ["those who install themselves at her window, and after a pious word or two by way of introduction, will settle down to talk of worldly affairs, interspersed with romance, and so spend a sleepless night"] (p. 640, 4.93-5). Yet he does suggest that daily experience can help the anchoress in her meditative goals. For example, he urges the anchoress to consider food in this way: "sedens igitur ad mensam decorem pudicitiae mente revolvat et ad eius perfectionem suspirans cibos fastidiat, potum exhorreat," ["as she sits at her table, let her then meditate on the beauty of purity; in her longing for its perfection let her have no appetite for food"] (p. 651, 15.504-6).

However, Ailred restricts meditative attention by and large to sacred objects alone. Not surprisingly as a Cistercian, Ailred urges the recluse to remove physical objects and decorations from the anchorhold. White linen altarcloths, a simple representation of Christ on the cross and a picture of the Virgin Mary and John the disciple are

suitable adornments for the cell. These sacramental objects are the physical objects upon which the anchoress should focus her attention. Sometimes these sacred objects are linked with secular objects that can help the anchoress understand their meaning. For example, Ailred urges the anchoress to contemplate the altarcloth in this way: "Cogita quo labor equibus tusionibus terrenum in quo crevit linum colorem exuerit. Cum terreno colore omnes nascimur," ["Consider what toil, what poundings it took to rid the linen of the earthy color in which it grew up. We are all born with the color of earth"] (p. 657-8, 26.718-21). Aptly for an audience that should be experienced in fulling, spinning, weaving and laundering, Ailred compares the process of preparing linen to the purification of the soul: the steeping of linen to fasting, the pounding of linen to temptation and the refining of linen to confession. In this example, the secular world is referred to only to illuminate the contemplative's understanding of a sacred object. In the AB texts, we will see, secular objects themselves can lead directly to Christ.

Ailred's final concern is that the anchoress leave this world behind and focus instead upon inner meditation. Ailred offers his readers three meditations drawn from the past, present and future of the life of Christ. The goal of these meditations is union with Christ achieved through emotion:

Ut meditatio affectum excitet, affectus desiderium pariat, lacrymas desiderium excitet, ut sint tibi lacrymae tuae panes die ac nocte, donec appareas in conspectu eius, et suscipiaris ab amplexibus eius, dictasque illud quod in Canticis scriptum est: Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi.

[Meditations will arouse the affections, the affections will give birth to desire, desire will stir up tears, so that your tears may be bread for you day and night until you appear in his sight and say to Him what is written in the Song of Songs, "My beloved is mine and I am his."]\20

As in Anselm, such emotions are especially apt for women who can meditate upon their literal betrothal to Christ.

The AB texts' concern for psychologically complex aspects of female contemplative experience thus are indebted more to Anselm and Ailred than to the Patrologia. However, the AB texts go even further than Anselm and Ailred by exploring not only the feelings raised specifically by contemplation, but by exploring the emotional aspects of practically all of the anchoress' daily experience as it relates to contemplation. While Ailred only discussed daily experience in order to exclude it from the contemplative experience, the AB texts focus on that experience in order to draw it into the contemplative arena. In contrast to all previous contemplative guides for women, the AB texts teach the anchoress to make every waking moment filled

with religious meaning. The texts achieve this effect in different ways. This will be discussed with each text in turn.

The *Ancrene Wisse*, which has been discussed in some detail by Janet Grayson and Linda Georgianna,²¹ and which is the best known of these texts, clearly follows Ailred's suggestion that the spiritual should be blended with the corporeal in the contemplatives' lives. Just as modern writers like Tillie Olson or Sylvia Plath utilized household objects such as an iron or an onion, so did the *Wisse* author consider the restricted environment of the anchorhold as full of potential meditative objects and events: the common sparrow outside her window as an image of herself; spiralling to heaven she always returns to earth (p. 70); the anchorhold's small and curtained window as a symbol for the entrance for sin through the eye (pp. 29-35). These objects are mentioned not as merely to be avoided as in Ailred - who warns the anchoress of the dangers that can enter the anchoress' life through the window, and so urges her to avoid it - but as to be incorporated into her life. The fact that the anchoress will inevitably look out the window is used positively as a way to lead her back into her heart. Every experience she has, as well as object she encounters, is so used. While eating she is to think not generally on the concept of purity, but concretely of the gall Christ drank on the cross (p. 55). If she is tempted to grumble at Slurry, the cook's boy, she is urged to consider the broader dangers of anger.

The *Ancrene Wisse* not only transforms the environment of the anchorhold and the daily events of anchoritic life into a meditative focus, but also transforms thoughts considered likely to occur to women - especially their desire for a husband or lover - into thoughts that can reinforce a female ascetic's betrothal to Christ. The most outstanding example of this is the famous Christ Knight allegory in which images common to popular romance are used to inspire the anchoress's commitment to Christ (pp. 202-3). The virgin is rescued from her besieged castle by the Christ Knight, who is celebrated not as an alternative to earthly lovers, but as the most appealing suitor heaven and earth can offer. The idea that Christ can fulfill desire is not uncommon in Anselm's work. In a passage named in fact as the source of the language of the Christ Knight allegory, he writes that in heaven "There is whatever you desire. If beauty or swiftness, or strength, or long and lasting life, or intoxication, or melody or pure delight, or wisdom, or friendship or concord, or honor or riches, or true security, the love of God can supply all of these."²² What the *Wisse* author does that Anselm does not is to associate these qualities with those a woman might expect from a courtly lover and then to define the best courtly lover as Christ. In the *Wisse*, the Christ Knight asks, "Nam ich thinge feherest. nam ich kinge richest. nam ich hest icunnet. nam ich weolie wisest. nam ich monne hendest. . . . wult tu castles. kinedomes, wult tu wealden al the world? Ich chulle do the betere. makie the with al this. cwen of heoveriche." ["Am I not fairer than any other? Am I not the richest of kings? Am I not

of the noblest kindred? . . . Would you have castles, kingdoms? Would you have the whole world in your power? I will provide more for you, make you queen of the kingdom of heaven?"] (202-3).

As a religious rule, the *Ancrene Wisse* is decidedly unconventional. The remaining AB texts are apparently conventional in the ways the *Ancrene Wisse* is not. They follow the standard forms for homilies, saints' legends and religious tracts, and their alliterative patterns are so similar to Anglo-Saxon prose that some have viewed them as simple throwbacks to that era.²³ But the remaining texts share not only the dialect but also the distinctive theme of the *Wisse*. The five works can be seen as accompanying the guidebook, the *Wisse*, each one exploring in detail different aspects of the rule provided more generally by the *Wisse*.

The first of these texts, *Sawles Warde*, is a homily on the protection of the soul through contemplation of hell and heaven. It is based on a homily attributed to St. Anselm, "De Custodia Interioris Hominis."²⁴ The homily is based, in both cases, on Matthew 24.43. But, in contrast to the Latin version, the English one is specifically addressed to women. Among other things, the work introduces numerous feminine pronouns, adds several descriptions of the rewards awaiting women in heaven, and adds to the allegory of the household an unruly wife. It concludes differently by returning to a discussion of the household of the soul. It draws allegorical figures from everyday reality, such as the anxious, hysterical Fearlac, or the unruly, irresponsible wife of the household, Will.

For the anchoress, as the *Wisse* had warned, the greatest dangers are the fear of her own inadequacy that leads to the deadly sin of despair, or her potential complacency at her asceticism, an attitude that could easily lead to pride. This English homily provides a guide to overcoming the very problems to which an anchoress - like a monastic - is especially susceptible - acedia, sloth. The English work also suggests that women are trained in their relationship to religion in a different way than are men. The Latin work emphasizes heaven in a way that is suitable for an audience of monks, giving an abstract and hypothetical consideration of judgement day. Women readers - especially anchoresses - were evidently not expected to envision their position in the Christian hierarchy abstractly. Hence the concrete depictions of such figures as Will, the fully drawn woman character who mirrors - presumably - the women readers of this text in being seen as inherently willful and narrow minded, unable to rise above daily experience to perceive abstract truths.

The three saints' lives of the *Katherine* Group focus more specifically on problems encountered by women anchoresses. The *Ancrene Wisse* had recommended that anchoresses read female saints' lives and had specifically recommended "ower engliche bok of seinte Margarete," ["our English book of St. Margaret"] (p. 125).

Hali Meidenhad advises its readers to think of St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Agnes and St. Cecilia (p. 676). The lives themselves tell us that women are supposed to pay special attention: "Hercneth alle the earen and herunge habbeth widewen with ã iweddede & te maidnes nomelich," ["Hearken all who have hearing and ears, widows and married, and especially maidens"] (4.7-9), says the opening of Margaret's life. A woman should read saints lives because it would strengthen her faith. Margaret asks, "thet ich him overcume mahe swa thet alle meidnes eaver mare thurh me the mare trusten on the," ["May I overcome him [the devil] so that all maidens evermore because of me will trust in you the more"] (16.19-21). But the paradox is that it is a male author twice over who grants that strength. Teochimus, the supposed author of Margaret's life, prays to Christ to save anyone who reads the life or even holds the book in his or her hand. The male translator in turn repeats that prayer. The power of simply handling a book may be an indirect reference to the anchoress' illiteracy in Latin. She may have had access to Latin saints' lives that she could look through but not be able to read.

Women are shown in these legends that despite their physical weaknesss and even their limited education, they have the physical and intellectual strength to overcome the devil and his representatives. One is a woman who encourages the anchoress in romantic pursuits, another, a priest who leads her into pride through excessive praise, yet another a fellow contemplative who claims to wish to be near her because of her holiness and yet another who claims to have more expert knowledge than the anchoress. The *Life of St. Katherine* emphasizes that a female contemplative through knowledge of the Bible can overcome her tormentors. Katherine overcomes fifty philosophers with her skill, and they who had scorned to "motin with a meiden," ["argue with a maiden"], comment on her success: "schawde seodden suteliche the deopschipe & te derne run of his deathe on rode al wat awei ure wordliche wit," ["she showed manifestly the depths and hidden mysteries of his death on the rood so that all our worldly wit has fled,"] (1331-5). This intellectual model reminds the anchoress that, despite the limits of her education, she can withstand the arguments of more learned counselors who may visit her. But it also looks back to the earlier and more robust paradigm - when women could be scholars which, by the thirteenth century, was no longer so.

Perhaps the most contemporary of the texts of the *Katherine* Group is the *Hali Meidenhad*. This work, known for its harshness and "deliberately unpleasant descriptions of married life" celebrates the female contemplative's choice of the celibate life by showing the extreme discomfort and disadvantages of the alternative, secular marriages.²⁵ Though it is odd to focus attention on a choice of life the anchoress has now denied, it is important to remember that many anchoresses either had been married before they chose the anchoritic life, or were continually urged to

marry by their families. Christina of Markyate, for example, was not only encouraged but forced to consider marriage for years after she had decided to pursue the virgin life. Margery Kempe had been married, and responsibility to her marriage when her husband fell ill forced her to leave her anchorhold.

Hali Meidenhad, by examining the nature of secular marriage in detail and by substituting for it a more satisfying marriage to Christ, is based on a number of conventional treatises on the virgin life.²⁶ The work opens with a discussion of the celibate life as that of an exile on earth (the *vita angelica*) based on Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. It turns then to a scathing condemnation of the life the virgin has left behind, using the woes of marriage theme (*molestiae nuptiarum*) common from Jerome to the more contemporary Hildebert. And it then celebrates the ascetics' more fulfilling relationship to Christ, clearly drawing on the *sponsa christi* literature of Anselm, Bernard, Alanus de Insulis and the like. The text concludes with an analysis of the virtues and vices as spiritual offspring, drawing on a metaphor developed by Origen.

What is new about this work is that it draws all these motifs together into an arrangement that mimics an emotional process that the anchoress herself would frequently re-experience. The text works through negatives, showing the anchoress what she must not have, but in fact offers a confirmation of a spiritual marriage by showing how that marriage fulfills as well as transcends the alternatives available in secular life. The reader moves from a generalized spiritual model through the harrowing details of earthly experience to a much more resonant sense of spiritual reality. The work's concentrated focus on the feminine experience contributes to the development of a new kind of spirituality, utilizing temptation to the advantage of the contemplative and utilizing the misogyny of much of the patristic tradition. The realism of the images in this work is so distinctive that this is worth consideration in some detail. The author recreates the thoughts of the anchoress. He posits her comments about secular life:

Ah monnes elne is much wurth ant me bihoved his help to fluttunge ant te fode. Of wif ant were gederunge worldes weole awakeneth ant streone of feire children the gleadied muchel the aldren."

[But a man's vigor is worth much, and I need his help for maintenance and food; of a woman's and a man's copulation, worldly weal arises, and a progeny of fair children, that gives much joy to their parents.] (Pp. 375-8)

These assumptions are then shown to be poorly founded. What appears to an anchoress as enviable security, the text argues, is often a fragile alliance. Love is rarely found, and when it is the loved one is often lost. Even possessions bring more

care and worry than pleasure - especially for the woman who is responsible for caring for them. Her husband will often beat her. If the woman finds a man she loves, she then faces the fear that he not love her as much as she loves him. Better to avoid secular marriage altogether than face the stress of a relationship without love. The author's negative, almost Dickensian, portrait of the medieval housewife is this:

Thet wif stone, hire bearn schreamen, the cat et te fliche & ed te hude the hund; hire cake bearnen o the stan & hire kilk suken; the crohe eornen i the fur & te churl chideth"

[The wife stands, her child screams, the cat is at the flitch and the hound at the hide. Her cake is burning on the stove and her calf is sucking all the milk up; the pot is running into the fire and the churl is scolding.] (Pp. 557-60).

The author has a harsh view of marriage, but certainly not an implausible one.

The images in the AB texts express a distinctive spirituality, one very much rooted in domestic quotidian experience. Because this spirituality is one that confronts squarely the particulars of female anchoritic experience, it can be called distinctively feminine. However, that spirituality is one that is created by men, and we must therefore recognize the underlying assumptions about women that inform the spirituality envisioned by the male authors of the AB texts. The concept of spirituality expressed by these texts is double-edged. On the one hand it transforms those experiences and circumstances that are particular to female experience into a rich and far-ranging meditative arena. Yet that arena is very much circumscribed by the assumption that women can only experience spiritual transcendence through the mundane and bodily. This physicalization of spirituality, its carnalization, so evident in the concretized *sponsa christi* motif that dominates so many of these texts, allows women to experience what is unavailable to men. At the same time, it limits women's spiritual experience to the physical, and denies her a mental and abstract realization of the nature of God. Like Virginia Woolf's room, the anchorhold offers women literally and metaphorically both liberation and imprisonment. The ways in which women can manipulate to their own advantage the assumptions that underlie this circumscribed spirituality is another matter. If we turn to the works of Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe, for example, we would find that they adopt, expand and ultimately transform male assumptions about female spirituality into their own powerful tools. But female concepts of female spirituality as opposed to male concepts of female spirituality are the subject of another essay.

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Notes

- 1 Rotha M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (1914; rpt. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968), p. 28, first points out the popularity of anchoritism among English women. Edward L. Cutts, *Scenes and Characters of the Middle Ages* (London: Virtue, 1902), pp. 120-156, gives account of the ceremony of the recluse's being walled in, the anchorhold of an anchoress usually being built against the side of a church. For a detailed discussion of English anchoritic experience, see Ann Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- 2 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Ancrene Wisse and Hali Meidenhad," *E & S*, 14 (1929), 104-126. My discussion of the AB texts will be based on the following editions: *Sawles Warde*, ed. R.M. Wilson (Leeds, 1938) *Leeds School of English Language Texts and Monographs, III & IV*; *The Life of St. Katherine*, ed. Eugene Eickenel (Oxford, 1884; Millwood, New York: Kraus, 1978), EETS OS 70, with reference to *Seinte Katerine*, ed. S.T.R.O. D'Ardenne and E.J. Dobson, EETS, SS 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Seinte Marharete*, the meidan ant martyr, EETS OS 193 (1934; rpt, London: Oxford University Press, 1958); *Hali Meidenhad*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS OS 18 (Oxford, 1922; rpt, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), with reference to *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS OS 284 (London: Oxford University Press, 1982); *The liflade ant te passiuin of seinte iulienne*, ed. S.T.R.O. Ardenne, EETS 248 (Liege, 1936; rpt, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); *The Ancrene Wisse, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 402*, EETS 249 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Translations of this text are taken from *The Ancrene Riwle*, trans. M.D. Salu (London, 1955; rpt. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956). All subsequent references will be taken from these edition and line or page numbers cited in parentheses within the body of the essay. Quotations from the *Katherine* group are generally taken from editions of MS Bodley 34 unless otherwise indicated. Abbreviations are spelled out, editorial emendations in italics in editions are included silently, and punctuation regularized when necessary to establish the sense.
- 3 E.J. Dobson, *The Origins of Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 174-311.
- 4 Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 237-284.
- 5 *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 34.
- 6 For a discussion of Abelard's twelfth century defense of Christianity as a positive force for women see Mary M. McLaughlin, "Peter Abelard and the Dignity of Women: Twelfth Century 'Feminism' in Theory and Practice," in *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le vénérable: les courants philosophiques, littéraires et artistiques en Occident au milieu du XIIe siècle* (Paris: CNRS, 1975), pp. 310 ff.
- 7 Ailred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione Inclusarum in Opera Omnia*, ed. A.D. Hoste and C.H. Talbot (Turnholt: Brepols, 1971), 638, 2, 17-18; *Aelred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), EETS 287.

- 8 P. 640, 4, 93-5.
- 9 Giles Constable, "Ailred of Reivaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 205-226.
- 10 Power, p. 248.
- 11 *Ancrene Wisse*, pp. 202-3.
- 12 For a discussion of Anselm's influence see R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953; rpt, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) and *St. Anselm and his Biographer* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963).
- 13 Forward to *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. Sister Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 9-10.
- 14 Southern, *St. Anselm and his Biographer*, p. 44.
- 15 *St. Anselm, Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1946), p. 3, 1.1-4. Translations are taken from Sister Benedicta Ward.
- 16 *St. Anselm, Proslogion*, ed. and trans. M.J. Charlesworth (1965; rpt, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 110-111.
- 17 John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), Archives internationales d'histoire des idées, series minor 17, p. 78.
- 18 P. 83.
- 19 Ailred, p. 638, II, 17-18. Further citations will be given in body of text.
- 20 P. 681, 33.1523-7.
- 21 *Structure and Imagery in the Ancrene Wisse* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1974); *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the Ancrene Wisse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- 22 *Ancrene Wisse: Parts Six and Seven*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1959), rpt, ed., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), fn. 23.
- 23 See, for example, Dorothy Bethurum, "The Connection of the Katherine Group with Old English Prose," *JEGP*, 34 (1935), 553-64.
- 24 For the Latin source of *Sawles Warde* see *Memorials of St. Anselm*, ed. R.W. Southern and F.S. Schmitt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), Until this edition, the source was believed to have been a homily by Hugh of St. Victor.
- 25 E.J. Dobson, *Origins of Ancrene Wisse*, p. 156.
- 26 Millet discusses the patristic tradition that lies behind *Hali Meidenhad* in her edition, pp. xlv-llii.