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ROMANCING THE ANCHORHOLD: ROMANCE MOTIFS IN *ANCRENE WISSE*, "GUIDE FOR ANCHORESSES"

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ABSTRACT

Sweeping economic and social developments in the twelfth century gave rise to a series of intellectual and spiritual changes which laid emphasis on exploring and cultivating the self via personal experience and refining one's virtues, which became the pivot of the romance genre. In the religious sphere, such tendencies gave rise to the emergence of new forms of religious life. One of these was anchoritism, striving to replicate the *vita apostolica* of the first followers of Christ. *Ancrene Wisse* was composed to provide spiritual guidance originally to three sisters from one noble family who devoted their lives to God as anchoresses. The text of the guide typically uses secular imagery, including romance motifs, for spiritual ends. This article discusses which romance motifs can be discerned in the text of *Ancrene Wisse* and assesses their function. It concentrates on comparing the romance topos of the lady in the bower with the symbolic space of the anchorhold and considers the issue of permeability of its borders in terms of the genres of anchoritic guide and romance. It also comments on the active/passive role of the romance lady and the anchoress, on their roles as a receiver and an initiator of action.[1]

Keywords: *Ancrene Wisse*; anchoresses; romance; love; castle; siege; suitor

When romances emerged from the splendour of the twelfth-century French and English courts, they were first intended for élite audiences whose values they reflected as well as helped to establish, telling stories of chivalric exploits, love and loyalty to one's lord and liege. Yet with their increasing popularity, they started to be reworked for new audiences in new cultural and geographical contexts, which resulted in a plethora of motivic and plot variations – this makes defining romance such a notoriously difficult feat (cf. Finlayson 1980, 45). The ability of romances to be "reshaped through rewriting" (Bruckner 2000, 13) meant that they often merged with other genres, which in turn stretched and reshaped their own genre boundaries.[2]

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[2] In medieval English literature, though, genre distinctions start to become acknowledged only in the fourteenth century in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, where it is often parody which helps to draw

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One of the genres with which romances shared a close affinity was devotional writing. Such closeness is hardly surprising, as both are perhaps best perceived as mutually influencing and feeding off each other. Although the origins of courtly love, one of the pivotal concepts of romance, are elusive and unclear,[3] it has been argued that it arose "from the interaction between aristocracy and clergy in secular courts" (Kay 2000, 85). In the light of this point, the notion of love as an ennobling principle which has the power to perfect one's soul and stands at the very heart of a romance plot can be seen as reinforced and influenced by the religious writings of the twelfth century where it is rife in the works of affective devotion,[4] most palpably in the works of Bernard of Clairvaux or the Cistercian authors.

In romances, numerous biblical motifs can be found, especially those linked with *The Song of Songs*, one of the most heavily commented on sources: e.g. the verse *vulnerasti cor meum in uno oculum tuorum*[5] evokes one of the crucial romance motifs of a look which has the power to pierce the heart with love; the image of an enclosed garden, *hortus conclusus* (*Song of Songs*, 4:12–16), can be seen as closely linked to the classical concept of *locus amoenus*, the ideal, paradise-like landscape suited for love (Hunt 1980, 189–90).[6] Some romances also have a Christian message directly embedded in them and therefore can be read as an exploration of what it means to be a good Christian. This is especially true of the works ascribed to Chrétien de Troyes and is perhaps most obvious in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, where the series of tests that the hero undertakes is aimed at proving that he is worthy of his noble, spiritual pursuit as well as at realising that "the only true, ennobling love is the love of God" (Quinn 1975, 179).

Just as Christian elements find their way into romances, so are romance motifs equally common in devotional texts. The tales of chivalry were used in sermons to the effect of making the spiritual message more palatable for the members of the audience prone to lukewarm response to the word of God: in this respect, MS Harley 7322 famously records that "one who is left unmoved by the story of Christ's Passion read in the Gospel for Holy Week is stirred to tears when the *Tale of Guy of Warwick* is read aloud to him" (Owst 1933, 14). Romance features are likewise borrowed by legends or hagiographical works.[7] A good example of such a text is the action-packed *Life of Christina of Markyate* in which the eponymous nobleman's daughter-turned-recluse, strongly reminiscent of a romance hero in need of proving himself, undergoes a series of tests which are to cement her spiritual resilience and determination to serve the Lord and thus confirm her identity as one of the chosen.

This closeness of romance and devotional literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is hardly surprising given that they both originate from the same intellectual

attention to the motifs of the genre (Davenport 2004, 27). That medieval texts are usually mixed in terms of their genre was pointed out by the literary critic H. R. Jauss 1972, 108. For more on the inter-generic nature of romance see A. Butterfield 1990, 184–201.

3 For an overview of possible sources of courtly love see Boase 1977.

4 I.e. the works which emphasise the loving relationship between man and God, stressing the necessity to repay with love the utmost sacrifice Christ willingly suffered for his great love of mankind.

5 See *Song of Songs* 4:9: "you have taken away my heart, my sister, my bride […] with one look you have taken it".

6 In medieval English romances, this garden is referred to as "the pleasance".

7 Some hagiographical texts also borrow from romance its typical form (especially in French romances): rhymed octosyllabic couplets.

background; they both share the same focus on exploring the self. The twelfth-century Renaissance, revolving around the Delphic maxim "Man, know thyself", highlighted the importance of personal experience and introspection, which meant that religious as well as secular life was viewed as "seeking and journeying" (Southern 2007, 212), with emphasis placed on self-questioning and self-perfection.

Such focus on interiority and on a more personal approach to God also led to the exploration of new, genuine ways of religious devotion, which centred on a more personal type of religious life – one that would emulate the life of Christ and his apostles as well as his later followers, the monks and hermits in the Egyptian deserts of the Thebaïd. Under this influence, the twelfth and especially the thirteenth century saw the rise of the anchoritic movement. Anchorites were semi-religious: never officially organised as a unified monastic community, they were only required to take the vows of chastity, obedience and stability of abode, which made them symbolic occupants of a liminal space between the sacred and the secular. Theirs was a life of seclusion, spent in prayers and holy meditations. Enclosed in their constricted anchorhold, they were meant to be dead to the world, yet they often found themselves at the very centre of a village or town. Their needs were tended to by the community for which the anchorites provided intercessory prayers and advice, taught children to read and in times of war might even offer their anchorhold, the safest space in town, as storage for treasures.[8]

Such a way of life was especially appealing to women; in the thirteenth century, there were three times more anchoresses than anchorites (Warren 1985, 20). This might be due to demographic reasons (the crusades caused imbalance in the ratio between the proportion of women and men) or due to necessity: in the thirteenth century, places for women in monasteries were scarce and only available to those who could secure a dowry (cf. Lawrence, 216). In contrast, life in an anchorage was open to anyone who was able to secure the stable support of a patron (or patrons). What is more, anchorage was considered more suitable for women, as they were deemed more fragile and dangerous than men by the ecclesiastical authorities and therefore much better "shut up in the house of stone"[9] than roaming about like hermits.

There were no official anchoritic rules, yet because some guidance was much needed to prevent indolence and various forms of misconduct in the anchorhold, unofficial rules were available, and it is one of these, the thirteenth-century text called *Ancrene Wisse* ("A Guide for Anchoresses") that I would like to concentrate on here. This is a rich and spiritually nourishing work, meant to keep the mind and imagination busy in the austere, dim space of the anchorhold. It was written in the West Midlands by an unknown author, possibly a Dominican (Millett 1992). The text is quite lengthy, comprising eight parts which draw on a variety of sources ranging from the Church fathers to twelfth-century monastic writers, especially the Cistercians. In terms of its genre, it has a lot in common with the new type of university sermon which emerges in twelfth-century Paris: it is

[8] Anchorholds (also anchorages or reclusoria) were dwellings of variable size most commonly built at the northern side of a church but could be also part of town fortifications or cemeteries. They were typically built for one anchoress, although pairs were not uncommon. For a concise overview of the phenomenon of recluses see Warren 1985, more recently Jones 2019.

[9] As noted by a certain monk in Canterbury, exasperated by Margery Kempe, a visionary notorious for her unbridled outbursts of emotional response to Christ's suffering. See Windeatt 2000, 93.

clearly structured and draws heavily on the preaching and confessional aids which flourished in the thirteenth century, utilising exempla and rhetorical questions for dramatic effect as well as for eliciting the reader's active response. Importantly, it is not a monastic rule in the strict sense of the word; rather, it equips the audience with benevolent guidelines for anchoritic life, focusing on spiritual progress towards a pure and pious heart whose love then becomes the chief principle which has the power to unite man with God.

The original audience of this text were three sisters of noble birth who, while still young, renounced their worldly possessions to pursue a life of devotion, possibly sharing one anchorhold together.[10] Later, the text was reworked for a wider audience, both religious and lay, male and female. In the present article, though, focus will be placed on the female audience. The following section will concentrate on specific romance motifs in the light of how they were perceived by the anchoresses as well as what functions these motifs might have in the construction of the text's meaning.

No matter the background of the anchoress before she entered the cell, the act of enclosure elevated her above all the other women. She became the bride of the most supreme of all suitors and her task in the anchorage was to be constantly proving that she was worthy of such an honour. In romance, the lady who is the object of the knight's devotion is traditionally ascribed a rather passive role (she helps the knight discover his identity and fulfil his destiny, but she herself remains without much to do):[11] her role is that of a "public icon rather than a private agent" (Spearing 1994, 142). Women are often excluded from the knightly world of chivalry, which is predominantly a male affair. But when transplanted to a devotional context, it is true that the lady-anchoress is still portrayed as the object of love, yet being (or rather becoming) Christ's beloved means constant strife, which demands her active participation – in other words, to become the Lord's spouse is an active journey and an individual quest that the anchoress must prove to be able to undertake on her own.

In keeping with the traditional, passive role of women, the text not only describes the anchoress as the object of Christ's love and devotion, but also as the target of unwanted advances of unworthy, lustful suitors who are drawn to her by her appearance. Life in an anchorhold not only ennobles the woman from within but also endows her with attributes of nobility which are reflected in her physical appearance. The text ascribes to the anchoress physical features that reflect the then ideal of beauty which is also reiterated and reinforced in romances: because of the lack of sunlight, the anchoress is desirably fair-skinned and white-faced; her hands are beautiful because she does not have to do hard menial work.

> Nu kimeth forth a feble mon, halt him thah ahelich yef he haveth a wid hod ant a loke cape, ant wule i-seon yunge ancres, ant loki nede ase stan hu hire wlite him liki, the naveth nawt hire leor forbearnd i the sunne (*AW*, II, 82–85)[12]

[10] Most likely, each sister was allotted a separate cell (Warren 1985, 36).
[11] I am fully aware of the crude generalisation involved in such a statement. Alexander romances, as mentioned later, are a good example of strong, active female heroines.
[12] All extracts from *Ancrene Wisse* follow Robert Hasenfratz's edition (2000).

> Now along comes a man who is weak, but thinks he deserves respect if he has a wide hood and a closed cloak, and wants to look at young anchoresses, and absolutely has to see how the beauty of a woman, whose face is not sunburnt, appeals to him. (Millett 2009, 22)

The text, in keeping with its moral, didactic message, reflects the fear and suspicion that the Church felt towards women – their outward beauty is considered a trap of sin ensnaring the wild beast of a man, who falls readily in and succumbs to the temptation.

> …the put is hire feire neb, hire hwite swire, hire lichte echnen, hond, yef ha halt forth in his echye-sihthe. (*AW*, II, 102–103)

> …the pit is her beautiful face, her white neck, her roving eyes, her hand, if she holds it out where [the man] can see it. (Millett 2009, 23)

Consequently, any concern for outward beauty should be supressed, the stress ought to shift from the outer beauty to achieving a pure heart, which is the only thing that makes the anchoress attractive in the eyes of her heavenly suitor. For this reason, in an echo of *The Song of Song*'s "nigra sum et formosa", the anchoress is urged to imagine herself as scorched by the true sun – Christ himself. Yet perhaps the strongest rejection of fleeting, worldly and therefore insignificant beauty is suggested to her in the passage which forbids the anchoresses to admire their beautiful hands and urges them to think on the mortality of their own flesh instead:

> Hire-seolf bihalden hire ahne hwite honden deth hearm moni ancre, the haveth ham to feire as theo the beoth for-idlet. Ha schulden schrapien euche dei the eorthe up of hare put thet ha schu*le*n rotien in. (*AW*, II, 813–16)

> Admiring their own white hands is bad for many anchoresses who keep them too beautiful, such as those who have too little to do; they should scrape up the earth every day from the grave in which they will rot. (Millett 2009, 46)

The dim space of an austerely furnished anchorhold represents a fluid, highly symbolic space whose meanings shift and merge together: at one time it poses as a metaphorical prison, at another as Mary's womb, which the anchoress shares with Christ; its meaning oscillates between her grave and the place of spiritual rebirth as well as the symbolic wasteland of the Desert fathers. Importantly, the text repeatedly ascribes to the anchor house the role of a private, intimate space where the anchoress communes with her divine spouse. When she watches through her squint the priest taking communion during mass,[13] she is urged to:

> …ther foryeoteth al the world, ther beoth al ut of bodi, ther i sperclinde luve bicluppeth ower leofmon, the into ower breostes bur is i-liht of heovene, ant haldeth him hete-veste athet he habbe i-yettet ow al thet ye eaver easkith. (*AW*, I, 203–206)

[13] As mentioned above, anchorages were usually built next to a church and were equipped with a small opening, a squint, which allowed the recluses to observe the celebration of the mass.

> …forget all the world, there be quite out of the body, there in burning love embrace your lover, who has descended from heaven into the chamber of your breast, and hold him tightly until he has granted you everything that you ask. (Millett 2009, 13)

The image of an enclosed space where lovers meet not only evokes *The Canticles* or Anselm's famous sentence in the *Proslogion*[14] which calls for a deeply intimate, emotional experience of faith, but is also strongly reminiscent of the romance space of the lady's bower – a space which is private, intimate and uniquely feminine in contrast to the masculine space of the hall reserved for feasts and courtly rituals (Spearing 1994, 140). In romance, entering the bower and engaging in an often highly ritualised courtly dalliance with the lady is seen as a knight's reward after undertaking a series of tests and perilous adventures. Yet here, the experience of a lovers' encounter is seen from the lady's perspective; it is presented as the anchoress's own emotional experience and a profound, deeply individual response to faith. In this respect, time spent in the anchorhold can be viewed as romanced in its "eroticization of waiting" (Wogan-Browne 2001, 35), highlighting the ecstatic moment when the soul is ravished and through love aspires to be united with Christ, its lover.

Feminist literary criticism has been prone to view such use of intimate romance imagery in *Ancrene Wisse* as belittling women's ability to form their relationship with God. Because women are in their nature emotional rather than intellectual, the *sponsa christi* motif is more fitting for them than some abstract terms of theology (Robertson 1990a, 72). Such a viewpoint seems to be echoing St. Anselm's claim that "women, above all, need a method of disciplining the heart rather than the mind" (Robertson 1990b, 173). While it is possible that women would perhaps more easily identify themselves with romance heroines, the promotion of affective response to faith in devotional literature should be perceived in a more positive and gender-neutral way. Using earthly experience (including earthly affections) as a stepping-stone to understanding spiritual, Divine love was common in the writings of the Church fathers as well as in the preaching practices of the time. One of the proponents of using concepts of earthly love as the means of attaining love which is pure and spiritual and thus leading to God was, most notably, Bernard of Clairvaux, who in *Sermo 20* from the *Canticles* claims:

> I think that was the main cause why the invisible God wished to be seen in the flesh, and as man to converse with men: so as to draw all the affections of fleshly men, who could only love in a fleshly way, to the saving love of his flesh, and thus by stages to lead them to a spiritual life. (Morris 1991, 153)

In the text, the anchorhold, a sacred space reserved for the meeting with the lover Christ, also metaphorically merges with the anchoress's own body whose virginity needs to be cautiously guarded against ceaseless attacks of sin and temptation. Moral strife is thus typically construed in architectural terms as a castle of virtue under siege, with the body viewed as a "fortified enclosure of sealed and regulated entrances" (Whitehead 2003, 91). As already mentioned above, by assuming the role of its guardian and protector, the

[14] "Enter into the chamber of your mind and exclude all else but God and those things which help you in finding him, close the door and seek him" (Williams 2007, 79).

woman adopts an active role in her spiritual quest, which makes her transgress into the male domain of feats of courage, usually reserved for the knight in the romances.

The motif of the soul as a besieged castle starts appearing with greater frequency in secular as well as theological texts in the thirteenth century, but its roots are much older: it features in Plato's *Timaeus*, the motif of a soul as a city falling because of moral weakness later appears in St. Augustine's *De civitate dei*, and the metaphor of the soul as a city besieged is also utilised in the writings of St. Gregory (cf. Hebron 1997, 137–39). The motif's dual attribution to secular as well as devotional tradition can be ascribed to the fact that "the castle of religious virtue begins to be elaborated by churchmen at almost precisely the same time that the castle of courtly love enters the repertoire of the French 12th century romance" (Whitehead 2003, 89–90). In both traditions, the castle is a metaphorical projection of the woman's body. Yet there is a significant difference. In the devotional, anchoritic literature, the emphasis lies in maintaining it safely enclosed at all costs, while in the romance tradition, "the castle can be taken and entered, with metaphor of temporary defence being present for erotic reasons" (Whitehead 2003, 89). Given that the medieval Church considered women weaker and more prone to failure in terms of succumbing to their desires, the text of *Ancrene Wisse* devotes considerable space to the theme of bridling one's senses, where the space of the anchorhold metaphorically merges with that of the castle which the devil keeps relentlessly attacking. To include just one example among many:

> Sikerliche ure fa, the werreur of helle, he scheot, as ich wene, ma quarreus to an ancre thenne to seovene ant fifti lavedis i the worlde: the carneus of the castel beoth hire husthurles. (*AW*, II, 140–42) [Ne tote ha nawt ut at ham, leste ho the deoueles quarreus habbe amid te ehe, ear ho least wene; for he asailyes ai. Halde hire ehe inwith, for beo ho iblind earst, ho is eath-falle; ablinde the heorte, ho is eath to ouercumen and ibroht sone thurh sunne to grunde].[15]
>
> Certainly our enemy, the warrior of hell, shoots (as I believe) more bolts at one anchoress than at seventy-seven ladies in the world. The embrasures of the castle are her house windows. She should not look out of them in case she gets the devil's bolts right in the eyes when she least expects it, since he is constantly attacking. She should not keep her eyes inside, because if she is blinded first, she is easily knocked down; if the heart is blinded, it is easy to overcome, and quickly brought down by sin. (Millett 2009, 24)

Depicting anchoresses as ladies in their own castle could have given them a sense of exclusiveness and a reason to construe their identity as that of high social standing. Those who entered the anchorhold from a noble background had their status confirmed, while those who came from a poorer family must have felt ennobled and socially elevated. This notion was grounded in the real circumstances of the life in an anchorhold which was, in effect, a "miniature female community" (Wogan-Browne 2001, 30) – the anchoress usually had two maids at hand who cared for her bodily needs while she, as their superior, looked after their spiritual development and made sure they would shun

[15] The passage in brackets is present only in the Titus manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse* and is taken from Millett's edition (2005, 24).

sin. In this respect, *Ancrene Wisse* instructs the anchoress to read to her women from this guide, which is reminiscent of common readings in a monastery but also in a noble household. Moreover, becoming an anchoress itself meant a rise in social prestige, which is one of the great paradoxes of anchoritism. Having entered the anchorhold, anchorites were meant to be dead to the world, but they often found themselves at the very centre of their community: people revered them for their holiness, intermediary prayers as well as for their visions which cemented their status as mouthpieces of God (Holloway, Wright, Bechtold 1990, 3). Yet in keeping with its didactic tone, the text itself is well-aware of the danger of pride which such an elevated status might have ignited – it repeatedly and vehemently claims that an anchoress must never consider herself a great lady in the worldly sense:

> Bihofde nawt thet swuch were leafdi of castel. Hoker ant hofles thing is, thet a smiret ancre ant ancre biburiet – for hwet is ancre-hus bute hire burinesse? (*AW*, II, 705–707)
>
> It would not be proper for a woman like this to be the lady of the castle; it is a shameful and ridiculous thing for an anointed anchoress – and a buried anchoress, for what is her anchor-house but her grave? (Millett 2009, 43)

Instead, she needs to bear in mind that her elevated status results from the fact that God has chosen her for his beloved, and so to become an anchoress means to become a lady in his heavenly court.

Inside the anchorhold, in its silent and motionless contemplation, a fierce battle rages on, however. The devil's temptations which wage war on the anchoress's fortress are not only described in terms of weaponry, as shots and arrows, but they also take on the form of an actual person, a lecherous clergyman who approaches the anchor house to woo its occupant with sinister intent. In the following extract, the text describes this wooing and the tumultuous effect it has on the woman with a curiously keen psychological insight:

> Yef ei wurtheth swa awed thet he warpe hond forth toward te thurl-clath, swiftliche anan-riht schutteth al thet thurl to, ant leoteth him i-wurthen. Alswa, sone se eaver eani feleth into ei luther speche thet falle toward ful luve, sperreth the thurl anan-riht, ne ondswerie ye him na-wiht, ah wendeth awei with this vers, thet he hit mahe i-heren: *Declinate a me, maligni* **…** Ant gath bivoren ower weoved with the *Miserere*. Ne chastie ye na swuch mon neaver on other wise, for inwith the chastiement he mahte ondswerie swa, ant blawen se litheliche, thet sum sperke mahte acwikien. Na wohlech nis se culvert as o pleinte wise, as hwa-se thus seide, "ich nalde, for-te tholie death, thenche fulthe toward te" – ant swereth deope athes – "ah thah ich hefde i-sworen hit, luvien ich mot te. Hwa is wurse then me? Moni slep hit binimeth me. Nu me is wa thet tu hit wast, ah foryef me nu thet ich habbe hit i-tald te. Thah ich schule wurthe wod, ne schalt tu neaver mare witen hu me stonde." Ha hit foryeveth him, for he speketh se feire, speoketh thenne of other-hwet. Ah "eaver is the ehe to the wude lehe." Eaver is the heorte i the earre speche. Yet, hwen he is forthe, ha went in hire thoht ofte swucche wordes, hwen ha schulde other-hwet yeornliche yemen. He eft secheth his point for-te breoke foreward, swereth he mot nede, ant swa waxeth thet wa se lengre se wurse. For na feondschipe nis se uvel, as is fals freondschipe. Feond the thuncheth freond is sweoke over alle. For-thi, mine leove sustren, ne yeove ye to swuch mon nan in-yong to speokene. (*AW*, II, 556–75; original emphasis)

> If any man gets so carried away that he reaches out toward the window-curtain, quickly shut the window at once, and leave him alone. Similarly, as soon as any man starts on any indecent talk hinting about illicit love, close the window at once, and do not give him the slightest answer, but turn away with this verse, so that he can hear it, "Keep away from me, you wicked man…" and go up to your altar with Miserere. Never rebuke a man of this sort in any other way, and blow so gently, that some spark might be kindled. No advance is so underhand as when it comes in the form of a complaint, so someone might take this line, "I'd rather die than have lustful intentions towards you (and he swears great oaths), but even if I'd sworn not to, I can't help loving you. Can there be anyone in a worse state that me? I'm losing so much sleep over it. Now I'm sorry that you know about it; but forgive me for having told you about it. Even if it drives me mad, you'll never know what I'm feeling any more." She forgives him for it because he talks so persuasively. Then they change the subject; but *the eye still turns its gaze / towards the woodland ways.* The heart is always recalling what was said earlier. Even when he has gone, she often turns over this kind of talk in her mind, when she should be concentrating on something else. Later he looks for his moment to break the promise, swears he cannot help it, and so the damage gets steadily worse because no enmity is as bad as false friendship. An enemy who seems to be a friend is the worst traitor of all. And so, my dear sisters, do not give a man of this sort any opening to speak … but respond to any overtures by turning away from him, just as I said above. There is no better way for you to save yourself or defeat him. (Millett 2009, 38–39; original emphasis)

To imagine a situation like this in which the anchoress is portrayed as a woman wooed and desired must have been considered pleasant for her.[16] It encouraged her to embrace and explore her worldly desires and elevate them by endowing them with a higher, spiritual meaning. In this way, the status of an anchoress was empowering in the sense that it gave her the power to reject unwanted, unworthy suitors and actively choose a suitor herself – the one Suitor which by far surpassed all men on earth. In this respect, the lady-anchoress bears comparison with famously bold ladies in Anglo-Norman or Alexander romances who are keen to choose their husbands themselves.[17]

The anchoress's privilege to actively participate in choosing her own spouse is clearly apparent in perhaps the most famous and most often quoted extract from *Ancrene Wisse*, namely the parable of the royal wooing, often used as the textbook example of the use of romance motifs in the text.

> A leafdi wes mid hire fan biset al abuten, hire lond al destruet, ant heo al povre in-with an eorthene castel. A mihti kinges luve wes thah biturnd upon hire swa unimete swithe, thet he for wohlech sende hire his sonden, an efter other, ofte somet monie, sende hire beawbelez bathe feole ant feire, sucurs of liveneth, help of his hehe hird to halden hire castel. Heo underfeng al as on unrecheles, ant swa wes heard i-heortet, thet hire luve ne mahte he neaver beo the neorre. Hwet wult tu mare? He com him seolf on ende, schawde hire his feire neb, as the the wes of alle men feherest to bihalden, spec se swithe swoteliche, ant wordes se murie, thet ha mahten deade arearen to live, wrahte feole wundres ant dude muchele meistries bivoren hire eh-sihthe, schawde hire his mihte, talde hire of his kinedom, bead to makien hire cwen of al thet he ahte. Al this ne heold nawt – nes this hoker wunder? For heo nes

[16] Whitehead mentions that to imagine the body as a citadel under siege was presumably a pleasurable project for the anchoress (2003: 89).
[17] For a discussion of powerful women in Anglo-Norman romances see e.g. Weiss (1993).

neaver wurthe for-te beon his thuften, ah swa thurh his deboneirte luve hefde overcumen him, thet he seide on ende, "Dame, thu art i-weorret ant thine van beoth se stronge thet tu ne maht nanes-weis withute mi sucurs edfleon hare honden, thet ha ne don the to scheome death efter al thi weane. Ich chulle for the luve of the neome thet feht up-o me ant arudde the of ham the thi death secheth. Ich wat thah to sothe thet ich schal bituhen ham neomen deathes wunde, ant ich hit wulle heorteliche for-te ofgan thin heorte. Nu thenne biseche ich the, for the luve thet ich cuthe the, thet tu luvie me lanhure efter the ilke dede dead, hwen thu naldest lives." Thes king dude al thus: arudde hire of alle hire van, ant wes him-seolf to wundre i-tuket ant i-slein on ende – thurh miracle aras thah from deathe to live. Nere theos ilke leafdi of uveles cunnes cunde, yef ha over alle thing ne luvede him her-efter?
Thes king is Jesu, Godes sune, thet al o thisse wise wohede ure sawle, the deoflen hefden biset. Ant he as noble wohere efter monie messagers ant feole god-deden com to pruvien his luve ant schawde thurh cnihtschipe thet he wes luve-wurthe, as weren sum-hwile cnihtes i-wunet to donne – dude him i turneiment ant hefde for his leoves luve his scheld i feht as kene cniht on euche half i-thurlet. (*AW,* VII, 59–86)

A lady was completely surrounded by her enemies, her land laid waste, and she herself quite destitute, in a castle of earth. But a powerful king had fallen in love with her so passionately that he sent his messengers to woo her, one after another, often many together; he sent her many splendid presents of jewellery, provisions to support her, help from his noble army to hold her castle. She accepted everything as if it meant nothing to her, and was so hard-hearted that he could never come closer to winning her love. What more do you want? At last he came himself; showed her his handsome face, as the handsomest of all men in appearance; spoke so very tenderly, and with words so beguiling that they could raise the dead to life; did many amazing things and performed great feats before her eyes; demonstrated his power to her; told her about his kingdom; offered to make her queen of all he owned. All this had no effect. Wasn't this contempt extraordinary, since she was never fit to be his maidservant? But because of his gentle nature love had so overcome him that at last he said: "You are under attack, my lady, and your enemies are so strong that without my help there is no way that you can escape falling into their hands and being put to a shameful death after all your suffering. I am prepared to take on that fight for your love, and rescue you from those who are seeking your death. But I know for certain that in fighting them I will receive a mortal wound; and I am very willing to do it in order to win your heart. Now, therefore, I beg you, for the love I am showing towards you, to love me at least when this is done, after my death, although you refused to during my life." This king did just as he had promised: he rescued her from all her enemies, and was himself shamefully ill-treated and at last put to death. But by a miracle he rose from death to life. Surely this lady would have a base nature if she did not love him after this above all things?
This king is Jesus, Son of God, who in this way wooed our soul, which devils had besieged. And he, like a noble suitor, after numerous messengers and many acts of kindness came to prove his love, and showed by feats of arms that he was worthy of love, as was the custom of knights once upon a time. He entered the tournament and, like a bold knight, had his shield pierced through and through in battle for love of his lady […] (Millett 2009, 146–47)

The original story on which this exemplum is based, that of a king wooing a beggar maid, is ancient, common in the works of eastern patristic and monastic writers. In the western tradition, it gained popularity especially in the thirteenth century when it evolved, under the influence of the romance, into a story of a knight wanting to win the love of his lady

and eventually dying for her sake. In this form, it was often used in devotional texts as an exemplum, where it fully utilised its potential as a metaphor of Christ's self-sacrificial love of mankind and was able to place new emphasis on the personal, affective relationship between God and man.[18] Chivalric motifs present in this exemplum in *Ancrene Wisse* are clear and well established: a lady in distress is surrounded in her castle by her enemies; the enamoured knight-king first sends gifts and messengers to proclaim his love, then arrives himself to show her his fair face and woo her with amorous words, to ultimately prove his love when he gives his life to free the lady from her assailants. We do not learn much about the lady except for the fact that she, despite being unworthy of such a noble suitor, is reluctant to accept the king's advances.

This limited focus on the lady has led some scholars to suggest that the exemplum betrays a typically male-oriented approach in that it repeats the patterns of woman's dependence and passivity (Robertson 1990a, 70–76). Yet when understood in terms of what the parable was meant to convey to the anchoresses who read it, a different reading is possible which emphasises the need for the woman's active choice. *Ancrene Wisse* is a dramatic text, full of rhetorical questions aimed at eliciting response from its readers. It often utilises examples of misbehaving women (such as Dinah or Eve in Part II) to urge the anchoresses to repudiate such behaviour and have their moral superiority confirmed. The rhetorical question "Surely this lady would have a base nature if she did not love him after this above all things?" invites the anchoress to identify the lady as a soul haughty with sin and to feel shame and outrage at her coldness and reluctance. In doing so, she is invited to replace the lady in the parable with herself, to substitute her cold response for her own ardent love of Christ (Innes-Parker 1994, 517). It is no wonder that the parable is included in the part of text devoted to different kinds of love and is soon followed by a passage in which the whole text culminates – a passage which urges the heart, cleansed of sin, to burn with unquenchable love for the Lord to match his love of mankind, likened here to a formidable medieval incendiary weapon – Greek fire.[19]

This overview of romance motifs in *Ancrene Wisse* cannot but briefly address the pending question if or to what extent the anchoresses[20] were able to identify the romance motifs in their guide. It makes sense to assume that the original anchoresses for whom the text was written could have become acquainted with romances before entering the cell. As gentlewomen, they would have had access to some basic education: their knowledge of Latin was most likely rudimentary, just enough to be able to read their Psalter or

[18] For the development of the theme of Christ the lover-knight see Woolf (1986) and Robertson (1990a, 72).

[19] Rosemary Woolf in her discussion of the wooing knight theme stresses that this version of the exemplum is unusual in that it focuses on the king's wooing before the battle; usually the versions of this parable concentrate on the situation after the battle when the lady treasures the shirt of the dead knight as a loving memory of him (Woolf 1986, 105). I would like to suggest that the exemplum as used in *Ancrene Wisse* could be understood as an antithesis to the wooing of the lecherous clergyman mentioned above. The two episodes could be read as examples of the wooing of a bad suitor set against the wooing of the supreme suitor. This reading is supported by the fact that the text itself invites the readers to ponder its motifs carefully, to commit them to memory and constantly seek analogies between them. Moreover, both episodes involve the motif of fire: the lecherous cleric episode mentions the danger of kindling a spark of carnal love, the second extract leads to the passage which likens unquenchable love of Christ to Greek fire.

[20] The original three sisters or the group of twenty or more anchoresses mentioned in the manuscript Corpus Christi Cambridge 402.

The Book of Hours (Kline 2003, 16), but as *Ancrene Wisse* itself testifies, they were able to read and write in the vernacular and in French. Moreover, noble households were often equipped with manuscripts compiled for a family audience which often contained romances alongside saints' lives.[21] About the host of other anchoresses for whom the guide was intended we know nothing in terms of their social standing, reading abilities or experience. We can only assume that these would vary from person to person (Millett 1996, 88). However, even if they were not able to read romances themselves, they might have heard them read aloud or told, which would have equipped them with some knowledge of common romance motifs.[22]

To conclude, the more one reads the text of *Ancrene Wisse* the more it becomes evident that a life spent enclosed in an anchoritic cell should not be understood as a bleak and stern life-choice, but rather as an option women could have embraced to live a fulfilling life outside marriage. As J. Wogan-Browne points out, "virgin enclosure sounds more like a productive and busy life than a living death" (2001, 32). To cut oneself off from worldly impulses meant turning one's senses inward, to embark on an adventure and a quest for self-exploration and self-perfection. To spend life in a confined space of one's cell with nothing else to do but pray and meditate on achieving union with the best of all suitors meant that the imagination was mobilised and it needed to be fed with enough impulses. These often relied on worldly experience, but because the imagination needed to be bridled and steered in the right direction, the anchoresses were urged to use the worldly concepts as a stepping-stone to a spiritual experience. The romance motifs used and modified in *Ancrene Wisse* according to the devotional needs of the text empowered and ennobled the anchoress who was able to imagine herself as a highborn heroine in her own castle, in charge of her own destiny. Both as a lady desired and a knight triumphant. Yet her strife, unlike that of a knight, was not linear, following a series of tests and trials, but rather vertical, along the metaphorical line between heaven and earth.

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[21] A famous example of such a household book would be The Auchinleck manuscript (Wogan-Browne 1994, 85).

[22] Among these motifs are the attributes of beauty of a romance heroine, the knight saving the lady from a castle besieged by enemies, and amorous looks likened to arrows.

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RÉSUMÉ:
RYTÍŘSKÝ ROMÁN V SYMBOLICKÉM PROSTORU POUSTEVNY: MOTIVY RYTÍŘSKÉHO ROMÁNU V *ANCRENE WISSE*, „PRŮVODCI PRO POUSTEVNICE“

Ve 12. století řada významných ekonomických a společenských změn podnítila intelektuální a duchovní obrodu, která kladla důraz na prozkoumávání a rozvoj individuality skrze osobní zkušenost a kultivaci ctností, což se stává také středobodem žánru rytířského románu. V náboženské sféře tyto tendence vedou ke vzniku nových forem duchovního života. Jednou z nich je i poustevnictví (anachorétství), jenž usiluje o nápodobu apoštolského života (*vita apostolica*) prvních následovníků Krista. *Ancrene Wisse* je duchovní příručkou sepsanou pro tři urozené sestry, jež zasvětily svůj život Bohu coby rekluzy. Pro text tohoto duchovního průvodce je typické použití světské obraznosti (včetně motivů převzatých z rytířského románu) za účelem duchovního poučení. Tento příspěvek rozebírá, jaké motivy z žánru rytířského románu se v textu průvodce objevují, a snaží se zhodnotit jejich smysl. V tomto směru a v kontextu žánrů rytířského románu a duchovního průvodce se soustředí na srovnání pro rytířský román typického toposu dámy v komnatě se symbolickým prostorem poustevny s ohledem na prostupnost jejich hranic. Zároveň zkoumá aktivní/pasivní roli dámy rytířského románu a poustevnice společně s jejich rolemi pasivního účastníka děje a jeho původce.

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