

*The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group*. Edited by Susannah Chewning. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages Series. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. Pp. xiii + 236. ISBN: 9780708320334.

It is good to see a book of essays specifically on the *Wooing Group*, a collection of Middle English meditations written for anchorites in the early thirteenth century, which too often plays the part of the younger sister to the longer guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*—bridesmaids but never brides, if that is not an inappropriate metaphor for works that were intended to be read by women devoted to the virgin life. Their only spouse was Jesus, and essays in this collection comment on the paradox of bridal imagery: “All the anchoritic texts combine bridal devotion to Christ with celebration of committed female virginity” (Sarah Salih, “Transvestism in the Anchorhold,” 151). Clearly, these meditations are open to feminist readings, and many papers in this collection will be of interest to readers of *Medieval Feminist Forum*.

Susannah Chewning is to be congratulated for bringing together such a wide range of essays, which allows the full scope of research on the *Wooing Group* to be appreciated: from the specialized such as Jeremy Smith’s examination of spellings in *Wooing Group* texts in two manuscripts, Cotton Nero A.xiv and Lambeth Palace 487, which shows that attention given to scribal activity can be valuable in understanding the locality in which texts were produced, through scholarly contextualization by, for example, Bella Millett, to more speculative papers concerned with the meditations as the nexus in the relationship between Christ, the object of the meditation, and the anchoress as reader of and as inscribed within the text. Study of the texts and their contemporary intellectual and religious contexts, the manuscripts, their provenance and probable readership provides the foundation for the building of more theoretical edifices. Nicholas Watson shows in his “Afterword” (which as a review and preview of study of the *Wooing Group* is indispensable) that many of the papers in this collection partake of a new, celebratory approach to anchoritic texts which formerly attracted only “vituperation” (198).

This book would prove useful as an introduction to a student of medieval literature approaching the *Wooing Group* for the first time, so it is important that clear information is given on the texts. There is, however, possible confusion about the number and titles of the works. Chewning tells us in the introduction that W. Meredith Thompson, the editor of the EETS edition, lists six works, but a careful reading of Chewning’s explanation reveals that in two cases two works, virtually identical, are found in different manuscripts but given

different titles. Chewning, like Thompson, counts these as separate works and adds the fourteenth-century *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, based on two of the Wooing Group texts, to make “the total seven works.” Catherine Innes-Parker refers to four short texts in the Nero manuscript, apart from *De Wobunge of ure Lauerd*, but one of these, *On Ureisun of ure Lefdi*, is male-voiced and not usually included in the Wooing Group, as she explains (115, n. 6). Removing the doubling of titles and the male-voiced *Ureisun* leaves us with “the four Middle English meditations of the Wooing Group” Salih refers to (149).

Salih uses all four texts to argue for a fluidity in gender identity: these were texts written by a male author although voiced by a woman. This preference for a female persona may reveal an anxiety on the part of the author for writing as a man of his love and desire for Christ. Salih reminds us that the meditation “is a stimulus to mystical experience rather than a record of it” (156); the question of the mysticism of these texts is one that reverberates through a number of the papers but is not directly addressed. Michael Sargent claims to be “uncomfortable” with the word “mystical,” preferring to speak of “contemplative and devotional literature” (179). It should be noted that he is discussing the literature, not the people—anchorites or others—for whom the literature was written. Chewning writes of the difficulty of translating the mystical experience into language, but with reference largely to women other than those for whom the Wooing Group meditations were written, about whom little is known. The prayerful meditations of the Wooing Group present the conditions for a mystical experience; as Innes-Parker suggests: “the most effective means of union with the heavenly spouse is found in the affective participation in his Passion through meditation” (107). The pain and pleasure of meditating upon Christ are also the focus for Anne Savage’s somatic readings of the texts, imagining bodily response to affective reading.

The anchoresses may not have achieved a moment of transcendent rapture, but the texts do invite, and even anticipate, such an experience, and it is possible to construct from the texts anchoresses whose prayerful contemplation leads to mysticism. Innes-Parker considers possible models for the anchoresses who read these texts—not the virginal ingenues we might expect, but mature widows with too much experience of the politics of thirteenth-century England. Innes-Parker suggests the *Wobunge* “requires a close and careful reading”; it also deserves such a reading. Those papers which concentrate on gendered and bodily readings of texts are most rewarding when that reading is close to the text. Michelle Sauer’s paper on the redemption of the bleeding body of the anchoress through the bloody crucifixion of Jesus is wide-ranging, but she is

at her best when analyzing a short passage to show its analogy to rape description (140–41). Jennifer Brown gives an analysis of the rhetoric of the text to examine the relationship between anchoress and the object of her devotion: who is wooing and who is being wooed?

Taking the idea of rhetoric further, Sargent explores the influence of Latin rhetoric on *A Talkyng of þe Love of God*, in particular the “Isidorian” style, an “elaborately repetitive style of writing” (187) which was designed “to stir piety or amusement” (183; quoting John of Garland). Millett also considers Latin models for these English vernacular works. In a carefully worked argument, she tracks the history of the *topos* of conditions of eligibility, showing that for the anchoresses, the qualities Jesus displays as a lover are not an analogy for the relationship between Christ and the soul but an argument for their choice of him over any earthly suitor.

These essays form an important addition to the Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages Series from the University of Wales Press. It is unfortunate that there are mistakes and inconsistencies in the references and bibliographical apparatus. It is to be hoped that a paperback edition—which this book deserves to make it more accessible—would iron out these problems. The texts themselves will become more accessible with the publication of new editions and translations by two of the contributors, Catherine Innes-Parker who is preparing an edition and translation for Broadview’s Literary Texts Series, and Michelle Sauer who is preparing a critical edition for Boydell and Brewer.

*Cate Gunn*  
*Colne Engaine*