

Mystical Feeling in Late Medieval England: An Assessment of the Textual Evidence

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I. Introduction

Is there such a thing as a mystical text? Is there such a thing as mystical feeling? Although my questions may sound incongruous, I believe that, in the wake of recent scholarship on medieval religious literature, carried over especially in English Departments, the questions are worthwhile asking. In *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, Nicholas Watson, in his chapter on ‘The Middle English Mystics’, claims that ‘the field is the product of a modern, not a medieval reality – for, in actual fact, there was no such group as the “Middle English mystics” until it was created after the turn of the century for what we have seen to be ecclesiastical reasons’.¹ In his view, it is mainly modern preconceptions about the quality of experience which serves to distinguish the writings of the Middle English mystics from other texts engaged with the interior life.² Those whose writings offered a sufficient quality of experience to be labelled mystics consisted of a group of five writers: the hermit Richard Rolle (d. 1349), the lawyer and Augustinian canon, Walter Hilton (d. 1396), the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Margery Kempe (d. after 1438) and Julian of Norwich (d. after 1415). Without even considering other religious vernacular writers and other texts, some of them anonymous, whose quality of experience would not promote them to ‘mystic’ label, the ‘quality’ of the writings of some of those so-called mystics should be called into question. For instance, in order to fit Rolle into this category, one needs to shut out one’s attention to a large number of texts belonging to his corpus, because lacking mystical quality- I have recently contributed myself a piece to Richard Rolle which examines a wider range of his

¹ N. Watson, ‘The Middle English Mystics’, *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 543.

² Watson, p. 544.

writings than those that contributed to his making of a mystic.³ Such a broader outlook shows Rolle to have been not only an incredibly prolific writer, in Latin and Middle English, but also an expert on generic variation, as Rolle tackled a large variety of genres, such as the pastoral manual, the auto-biographical account, the commentary and the postil, the lyric and the epistle, just to name the most obvious ones. So, my contribution on Rolle takes up Watson's challenge and demonstrates indeed that, even in the case of the so-called mystics, the label has outlived its usefulness.

So, should we then pack, go, and perhaps come back another time with another topic, another perspective, to consider the large field of medieval religious literature? I am not so sure, and I may not be the only one. Despite the problems that the label 'mystic' creates, it remains in use, against the more tolerant and more encompassing label 'vernacular theology' suggested by Watson. The book *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, which just came out with D.S. Brewer, and to which I contributed my piece on Rolle, keeps the mystical label, even if several of its contributors make reference to Watson's challenge (Renevey, Thomas H. Bestul in 'Walter Hilton', R.S. Allen in 'Introducing the Mystics') or show more general uneasiness with it (Glasscoe, 'Contexts for Teaching Julian of Norwich'). Also, one of the forthcoming volumes to the Cambridge Companion Series is *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, edited by Vincent Gillespie and Samuel Fanous. The presentation that I offer today is the starting point for a ten-thousand word chapter which I shall contribute to this volume, with a consideration of texts written between the periods from 1215 to 1349. Nicholas Watson, the very man who has challenged the label 'mystic' contributes an introduction also of twelve thousand words! Yet, even if 'mysticism' is often used in the excellent rationale for the book that each contributor has received, the editors demonstrate an awareness of the challenge that such use implies. Their

³ See Denis Renevey, 'Richard Rolle', *Approaching Medieval English and Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 63-74.

division of the book into several time periods, from c. 1080 to the mid-sixteenth century, attest to an interest in texts and cultures which fall outside the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the time during which the five Middle English mystics lived and wrote. About special themes and issues, the editors write:

Underpinning this work is a desire to redress the widespread view that ‘mystical’ activity in the Middle Ages was a rarefied enterprise of a privileged spiritual elite. A consequence of this is that medieval mystical texts are too often studied in a cultural and even literary vacuum. This has led to a herding of such mystical texts away from the rest of the literary canon with the resulting emphasis on the five major authors (Richard Rolle, The *Cloud*-Author, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe). In fact, mystical and para-mystical activity was far more widespread among every stratum of society and should be perceived as one of a range of experiences in the spectrum of ordinary daily life. This dissemination of the idea of contemplation outside the cloister is evidenced not only by the large number of surviving mystical texts but also by the large number of works which are not classified as contemplative, which nevertheless clearly show influence of the contemplative tradition.⁴

In the paragraph that follows this one, the editors seem to continue moving away from the word ‘mysticism’ and its adjective, as they do towards the end of the paragraph above, to use systematically instead the word ‘contemplation’ and ‘contemplative experience’. It is clear from this passage that the word ‘mysticism’ is loosely used here to define generally a Christian engagement with the interior life, or its textual representation, without an assessment of the quality of the experience as measuring stick.⁵ In fact, then, the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* is truly a companion to medieval English

⁴ Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, ‘An Invitation to Contribute to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, pp. 3-4.

vernacular theology, as it does not confine itself to a study of strictly mystical texts, but explores instead a much broader cultural and literary context. It may be therefore that marketing and commercial reasons played their role in keeping a more traditional label for this book title and the one I mentioned earlier. What I believe is nevertheless apparent is that scholars are growing more and more uneasy with the old label, and this presentation so far accounts for my own genuine anxiety with this terminology. Similarly, 'contemplation', 'contemplative' from Latin 'contemplatio' which translates the Greek word *theoria* in which the root *te* means to see, directed of course towards the divine, defines a limited, elitist form of interior life.⁶ However, it is a terminology which medieval religious writers used to talk about their own practice, experience, and their textual accounts of them. As Bhattacharji argues for 'contemplation' to cover a range of different approaches to spirituality, I suppose then that 'contemplative feeling' could easily be substituted to 'mystical feeling' in the title for this presentation.⁷

Appealing to human emotions in order to direct the reader towards a better knowledge about himself and help him understand and experience a personal relationship to God is what I have in mind when I use the term 'mystical feeling'. My concern in this presentation therefore is to assess the way in which some medieval religious texts address in particular the emotional, affective side of the audience in order to move it to a greater desire for the divine. After a brief consideration of *Ancrene Wisse*, I would like to turn my attention to a relatively little known piece, the *Luve Rune* of Thomas of Hales. I will then conclude my assessment of mystical feeling with a brief consideration of Richard Rolle's *Ego dormio*, also written for the attention of a female recipient. They all participate to, and develop out of, the

⁵ Watson, p. 544.

⁶ See Santha Bhattacharji, 'Medieval Contemplation and Mystical Experience', *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 51-59, esp. p. 51.

⁷ See Bhattacharji, pp. 51-59.

movement of affective piety which had its origin in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, and which was taken over by the friars.

The attribution of *Ancrene Wisse* to a Dominican friar has certainly an important bearing on recent directions of research that have been carried out since Bella Millett made that suggestion.⁸ She argues for a composition of *Ancrene Wisse* that postdates the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, with the significant decision for requiring all Christians to confess and take communion at least once a year. Recent research on *Ancrene Wisse* argues for the influence of confessional literature and Part Four and Five, called ‘Temptations’ and ‘Confessions’, stand at the core of the work and are enclosed by the more anchoritic parts.⁹ And yet this material, together with the following chapter on ‘Penance’ is distinctly universal in its address and is comparable to other pastoral theologies that were written following the Fourth Lateran Council decisions. I am not trying to claim that *Ancrene Wisse* was not written for anchoresses. However, the author himself shows an awareness of his treatise’s interest for a larger community than his primary audience of three sisters:

All that I have said of the mortification of the flesh is not meant for you, my dear sisters, who sometimes suffer more than I would like; but it is for anyone who handles herself too gently.¹⁰

Elsewhere in the Corpus manuscript, which may have been revised by the author himself, reference is made to a much larger community of anchoresses living throughout the whole of England.¹¹ The author therefore seems to assume a multiple anchoritic audience. However, considering the significant confessional material that makes the core of the treatise, one is inclined to speculate on the possibility that, from the onset, *Ancrene Wisse* was not

⁸ Bella Millett, ‘The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*: New Answers, New Questions’, *Medium Aevum* 61 (1992), 206-28.

⁹ Bella Millett, ‘*Ancrene Wisse* and the Conditions of Confession’, *English Studies* 80 (1999), 193-215.

¹⁰ *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, tr. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 187.

¹¹ *Anchoritic Spirituality*, p. 141.

exclusively designed for an anchoritic audience. It may be therefore that we need to allow for the text to be read in more subtle ways than originally anticipated. For instance, although I am convinced about the literal meaning of the passage below, I would not deny the possibility of a more metaphorical understanding of the passage, addressed to a non-anchoritic audience interested in the exploration of the interior life:

And was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb? These two things belong to the anchoress: narrowness and bitterness. For the womb is a narrow dwelling, where our Lord was a recluse; and this word "Mary," as I have often said, means "bitterness." If you then suffer bitterness in a narrow place, you are his fellows, recluse as he was in Mary's womb. Are you imprisoned within four wide walls? – and he in a narrow cradle, nailed on the cross, enclosed tight in a stone tomb. Mary's womb and this tomb were his anchorhouses.¹²

Confinement images are semantically loaded: considered more loosely, they could be used more generally by an audience wanting to experience contemplation. Reference to the humanity of Jesus invites comparison with one's own life: the immediate and implied parallel is with the anchoritic mode of life, but it does not exclude other possible comparisons. After all, the anchorhold in *Ancrene Wisse* is defined as extension of the body, necessary container of the soul, as the author reminds us when talking about the anchoress leaving, like Christ, those confined spaces: 'That will be when the spirit goes out in the end, without break or blemish, from its two houses. One of them is the body, the other is the outer house, which is like the outer wall around a castle.'¹³

Despite its highly specialized nature, *Ancrene Wisse* is influenced, as other religious treatises written during that period, by pastoral theology about whose transmission the friars took an important role. Despite its organized structure and its general rational approach to the

¹² *Anchoritic Spirituality*, p. 186.

¹³ *Anchoritic Spirituality*, p. 187.

anchoritic/contemplative life, *Ancrene Wisse*'s aim is to lead its readership to the pinnacle of the Christian life, achieved only after the enduring of hardships and multiple sufferings. In that respect, when one reads beyond its anchoritic aspects, *Ancrene Wisse*'s ultimate aim does not differ extensively from the Cistercian spirituality of which Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx in England, were among its best exponents in the twelfth century. For, indeed, Part Seven of *Ancrene Wisse* suggests a form of spiritual love that is enacted via the erotic and sensuous representation of Christ as the wooing lover/knight:

“Your love,” he says, “is either to be wholly a gift, or it is for sale, or it is to be taken and captured by force. If it is to be a gift, where could you bestow it better than upon me? Am I not the fairest one? Am I not the richest king? Am I not highest born? Am I not the wisest among the rich? Am I not the most courteous of men? Am I not the most generous one? For one says of a generous man who can keep nothing back, that his hands are pierced – as mine are. Am I not of all things the gentlest and sweetest?”¹⁴

Part Seven, on ‘Love’, constitutes thus the mystical moment of *Ancrene Wisse*, a moment which points to the potential one can achieve if following the discipline expounded in most of the other parts of the treatise. Imagery from the world of romance is fused with images borrowed from the Song of Songs or its commentaries. Although brief, it alludes to the potential of ecstatic experience and thus depicts mystical feeling. I would argue that, if one approaches the *Ancrene Wisse* group with each piece serving a different, but nevertheless complementary purpose than the other texts, then one could trace a continuation of the exploration of traces of mystical feeling in texts such as those forming the sub-group called ‘The Wooing Group’, or even the treatise *Holy Virginit*y. I am arguing for the fact that *Ancrene Wisse* and its associated texts are influenced by the new pastoral theology of the

¹⁴ *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 193-4.

thirteenth century while being influenced as well by the Cistercian spirituality of the twelfth century. Such appropriation of highly mystical texts in either the anchoritic or lay devotional contexts of the twelve and thirteenth centuries is not without its problems. Author's expectations about the level of spiritual competence of such readership could not reach those of their Cistercian predecessors who wrote for a highly specialized Latinate public sharing the monastic values of their author, and having reached a degree of spiritual competence that would have been known to him. Of course, such is not the case of the vernacular authors we are talking about. If triggering mystical feeling is still an important concern of those authors, there is need for them to pass on material that will help readers achieve a spiritual level of consciousness which will make possible the experience of mystical feeling. In view of the initial requirements which are necessary for them, the call for mystical feeling in those texts is expressed much more tentatively than in twelfth century spiritual writings.

The twelfth century, often called the first renaissance, sees a spiritual change in the way human beings position themselves with regard to the deity. Indeed, before that period, personal manifestations of religiosity outside the liturgical framework are rare, whereas the twelfth century makes possible the emergence of a new affective piety which finds expression, among other genres, in early English lyrics. Those early lyrics show various responses to ways of practicing private devotions based on an exploration of the humanity of Jesus, more particularly his sufferings and his relationship to his mother.¹⁵ This strong affective exploration of the self aimed to make one aware of one self as soul, *anima*, but one which from an initial position of *anima curva*, because of its sinfulness unable to consider itself as the mirror image of the deity, would recover its position of *anima recta*, after a long process of discovery through several degrees of love.¹⁶ This bernardine contemplative practice had an impact on the way Franciscan friars wrote for the attention of lay people in

¹⁵ See Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 16-17.

order to stir them to the love of God. Thomas of Hales 'Luuve-Ron' is a good case in point. If the narrator's information can be taken at face value, the poem was written at the instigation of a young maiden, and it is filled with an emotional dimension that would appeal to a girl inexperienced in matters of love. Supposedly being commissioned, the poem shows a mild didacticism in its goal to lead the reader to an exclusive desire for God.

The introductory stanza of the 'Luuve Ron' makes reference to the commissioning of the work by a 'mayde cristes', a maiden of Christ, so we can safely assume that this female character may have decided for a religious life, be it as a nun or an anchoress. Hence the narrator assumes she has undergone outer *conversio* and her request for the 'Luuve Ron' may indicate her need to be strengthened in her new life devoted to Christ in order to reach inner *conversio*.

Franciscan spirituality belongs to the affective and cataphatic tradition, working on the emotions of the listeners to move their audience to shift attention from the material to the spiritual world. This insistence on moving the audience is of course essential to effect the initial conversion from one domain to another, but it is not limited to this significant moment. I would argue that, even at the higher reaches of the contemplative life, the need to touch emotionally is considered as of utmost importance to lead the listener to develop mystical feeling. The first stanzas of the 'Luuve Ron' are set as *ubi sunt* formulae, with a discussion of common themes, such as transitoriness in general, followed by reference to the rich, the noble, the powerful, and those having a strong human love. The author makes reference to the great lovers of both the classical and medieval traditions to make his point:

Hwer is Paris and Heleyne

That weren so bryht and feyre on bleo?

Amadas and Ideyne,

¹⁶ See Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A.H.C. Downes (London, 1955), pp. 87-88.

Tristram, Yseude, and alle theo?
Ector with his scharpe meyne,
And Cesar riche of wordes feo?
Heo beoth iglyden ut of the reyne
So the schef is of the cleo. (ll. 65-72)¹⁷.

Instability of human love is pointed out. Reference to romance heroes suggests the recipient may have been a keen reader of such texts herself formerly, and one not unfamiliar with Fin' Amor practice more generally. But such models and practice no longer fit the role she has now taken for herself as bride of Christ. At this point then, her will must be turned towards other models and practices, even if such conversion does not imply a complete negation of her former outlook. Rather, the romance heroes are used as a springboard to the love of Christ. The technique thus used by Thomas of Hales has its roots in Bernardine spirituality. In his sermon twenty on the Song of Songs, Bernard speaks about the qualities of love and says: 'Do not let the glory of the world or the pleasure of the flesh lead you astray; the wisdom of Christ should become sweeter to you than these. The light of Christ should shine so much for you that the spirit of lies and deceit will not seduce you.'¹⁸ Further on Bernard speaks about carnal love when applied to Christ as an important step towards developing a pure spiritual love. He says:

... carnal love is worthwhile since through it sensual love is excluded, and the world is condemned and conquered. It becomes better when it is rational, and becomes perfect when it is spiritual.¹⁹

¹⁷ References by line number are to the following edition: *Moral Love Songs and Lament*, ed. Susanne Greer Fein (Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, 1998). I have used here the electronic version available at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/lovefrm.htm>.

¹⁸ *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, vol. 2, *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p.149.

¹⁹ *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, p. 154.

Bernard devises an explanation which regards God having planned a very careful strategy in leading carnal man back to its right track. From a low form of carnal love, devoid of any quality except the selfish satisfaction of carnal desires, God worked at recapturing men by keeping their carnal love, but directing it to the person of Jesus. Once that achieved, he could then draw them to a higher, spiritual, form of love which Bernard describes as a state when the soul loves steadfastly God in His more abstract form and with nothing that could impede that loving attitude of the soul.

Thomas of Hales, unlike other Franciscan writers of his time, does not rely upon the Franciscan trend of depicting in a detailed manner the many sufferings of Jesus on the Cross. (I do not think that Thomas would have been a fan of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.) The humanity of Jesus is absent from this poem. Indeed, Thomas of Hales use of *ubi sunt* formulae as a means of denying the physical world calls for a state diametrically opposed to any form of transience. The Lord turned into flesh would not be appropriate a substitute following this denial of the world. On the other hand, the rehabilitation of Fin Amor' vocabulary for the expression of eternal and idealized love works most effectively in this poem. Christ becomes the ideal lover, without the martial characteristics of the lover-knight which is found in many other poems or texts arguing for a love relationship with the deity. Stanzas twelve to nineteen offer a full development on the person of Christ. The charms of Christ, and the invitation to the maiden to become his bride are followed by a description of the glories and bliss of Christ's eternal abode. Stanza eighteen describes the bliss of the sight of Christ and stanza nineteen concludes this part with the gift to the maid of a precious treasure, which is in fact her virginity. The poem tactfully builds a generous portrait of this new lover, so that from an initial desire to set the will towards God it moves to triggering a strong desire for his sight:

A! Swete, if thu ikneowe
 The gode thewes of thisse childe —
 He is feyr and bryht on heowe,
 Of glede chere, of mode mylde,
 Of lufsum lost, of truste treowe,
 Freo of heorte, of wisdom wilde —
 Ne thurhte the never reowe
 Myhtestu do the in His ylde! (ll. 89-96)

Despite those highly abstract, Neo-Platonic-like qualities of the lover, comparison is made with individuals of this world, and the power of this lover is in the following stanza measured with the king of England himself:

He is ricchest mon of londe,
 So wide so mon speketh with muth;
 Alle heo beoth to His honde,
 Est and west, north and suth!
 Henri, King of Engelonde,
 Of Hym he halt and to Hym buhth.
 Mayde, to the He send His sonde,
 And wilneth for to beo the cuth. (ll. 97-104)

In view of the fact the poem was written between 1225-1275, it is most likely that the reference to 'Henri king of engelonde' and 'henry ure king' a few lines earlier (l. 82) are to Henry III, who reigned from 1216 to 1272. Henry III was a great benefactor of the church. After planning the building of the new gothic church of Westminster Abbey, he attended its official opening in 1269, only twenty-four years after work had started. Many monastic houses, friaries and anchorites benefited from his benefactions. According to Betty Hill, it

may be that the maiden for whom the 'Luve Ron' was composed was a minoress at the House of Minoresses at Northampton, which profited from the benefactions of the king.²⁰ If the building of Westminster Abbey is not mentioned, building imagery nevertheless looms large in this poem. I would argue that it reaches a sophistication that is perhaps unequalled elsewhere in the poem. References to Henry would immediately call to the mind of a medieval reader (especially to one whose religious benefited from his generosity) his project of such a gigantic building dedicated to God. Then of course, lines 113-120 refer to Solomon's temple, and here again a medieval reader would not be without knowing about the full range of interpretations that commentators have given to this building. Also, the description of the temple as being made of most precious stones echoes the description of the New Jerusalem of John's Book of Revelations. Such a reference of course would be most appropriate to a virgin as she could associate herself as being one of the one hundred and forty four thousand virgins who are described as being in procession and venerating the lamb in the New Jerusalem. The 'bolde' to which Friar Thomas makes reference is, when associated to Solomon, the temple, which itself carries both literal and allegorical meanings. The 'bolde', and its gems also suggest the Heavenly Jerusalem, a city of impressive architectural design. But the 'bolde' is also in the contemporary world of the recipient and in her fictionalised world of fin' amor the lady's bower, an impenetrable dwelling where the lady of romance can expose herself to the view of potential lovers without any danger of losing her virginity. It is also in anchoritic literature the enclosure which is equally impenetrable and serves the same function of protecting and preserving virginity. But here the 'mote' refers also to a contemporary castle, perhaps of Norman design and the use of this expression at this moment in the poem allows for a deeper focus on the interior life.

²⁰ See Betty Hill, 'The "Luve Ron" and Thomas de Hales', *MLR* 59 (1964), and 'The History of Jesus College, Oxford MS. 29', *Medium Aevum* 32 (1964), 203-213.

Recognition of the significance of one's own interiority makes possible a reference to an experience of love that is beyond the duality of the world of every day experience:

Ne may no mon Hine iseo
Al so He is in His mihte
That may withuten blisse beo;
Hwanne he isihth ure Drihte,
His sihte is al joye and gleo!
He is day wythute nyhte!
Nere he, Mayde, ful freo

That myhte wunye myd such a knyghte? (ll. 137-44)

Such moment of bliss is only possible through the preservation of the maiden's virginity. Towards the end of the poem, virginity becomes its main topic and spiritual bliss will be delivered upon condition of preservation of this most marvellous gem that she possesses. In many ways then, the 'Love Ron' is not what it claims to be throughout most of its two hundred and ten lines. It is a poem that promises a rich spiritual life as an endearment to convince maiden preserve their virginity.

But the slightly unpredictable ending of the 'Love Run', stressing the value and importance of virginity, does not preclude within the poem a movement which culminates in making possible for the audience a strong mystical feeling, a strong desire for the experience of union with the divine. That feeling has been made possible through a fine-tuning of fin' amor values which work at touching the spiritual chord of the audience. Such an approach is however not without some ambiguities. Indeed, in a few passages of the 'Love Rone', the persona of the narrator is rather ambivalent. First, his answer to the maiden's request for a 'love rune' is not clear. First of all, what is the maiden asking for? A love song, a piece of

wisdom on love, a private message between lovers?²¹ Friar Thomas seems to play with linguistic ambiguity and to transfer that ambiguity to the role which he enacts with the maiden. For lines 185 to 192 refer once again to the request of the maiden for a ‘love run’ and the narrator’s words could be suggesting that the maiden had a choice between the narrator himself and Jesus. This is of course a reading which plays with the possible secular meaning of the amorous language of the poem and of course it may be that the poet wishes to keep such ambiguity in order for his audience to always keep check of its mystical feeling when reading the text. One should remember that, as advised by the narrator, the maiden or any other reader, should turn back to the text, memorize it and sing it ‘mid swete stephne’ (l. 203). The ‘Love Rune’ is not to be read for pleasure but to check one’s own will and spiritual direction. There is no overt didacticism in this lyric and no substantial point of doctrine is raised either. On the other hand, it makes intelligent use of the affective spirituality whose precursors were Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi and the early Franciscans.

Early on in my presentation, in the context of my brief discussion on terminology, I mentioned how deceptive the label ‘mystic’ can be when applied to Richard Rolle. I would like to reiterate my anxiety about it. However, I want to redeploy the label, using it to define some of his texts or even moments in texts, as I have done in the case of the texts I have discussed so far. Some of Rolle’s texts are deeply emotive in nature, appealing to the affectus of the readership in order to move it to a stronger desire for God. Ways by which such a trigger to move the soul to the love of God have sometimes been considered controversial by some Rolle scholars. Rolle at times overtly projects himself and his experiences as a superior model of the spiritual life. Also, he makes mystical claims which many, during his time and soon after his death, as well as today, deem excessively ambitious. The *Incendium Amoris*, or

²¹ See notes in the Love Rune, TEAMS edition, electronic version.

Fire of Love, one of his many Latin texts, is autobiographical at times and it shares many of the weaknesses and qualities which are hallmarks of his textual output, such as the desire for self-promotion, the construction of an authoritative narratorial presence, mixed with moments of great sincerity. Of all the so-called mystics, Rolle is perhaps the one who insists more on touching the affectus in order to trigger mystical feeling. For that reason, he belongs, as the two previous texts discussed so far, to a tradition marked by the impact of pastoral theology as spread by the friars. In fact, some of Rolle's writings are pastoral in nature, such as his *Judica Me*, and it would be possible perhaps to construct from his entire corpus a spiritual programme that would also show a move from pastoral concerns to a higher form of spiritual life. However, this is a task that is too daunting to achieve here, and I would like instead to put my attention on one piece by Rolle, one which in my view shows best how triggering mystical feeling can be achieved in the context of fourteenth century religiosity.

The *Ego Dormio* is a text that was written towards the end of Rolle's career. It is an epistle addressed to a nun, and it offers her a systematic approach to the mystical life, based on three degrees of love which correspond to different states of consciousness. The first degree of love is experienced when one follows the Ten Commandments and avoids committing one of the seven deadly sins. The second degree of love is achieved or performed when one forsakes the world completely, including parents and siblings. The third degree of love corresponds to a state that Rolle defines as the contemplative life, which he defines first in rather pragmatic terms as a solitary mode of life, but one that is marked by a thought process in which prayers become joyful song and thoughts become melody. What is particular about this epistle is its high degree of performativity. Indeed, I would like to argue that the epistle attempts to lead its reader/listener to an affective feeling which will prompt performance, and correspond to the level of consciousness encapsulated in the two lyrics which are an integral part of the epistle. In fact, the epistle ends with a lyric corresponding to

the third, i.e. highest, degree of love, one which defines a pure spiritual form of love directed in this particular case at the person of Jesus. Time not permitting a more detailed analysis of the epistle, I would like to put attention on this last lyric. Rolle discusses of course in great details the particular feeling that one is likely to experience when living in one of the three degrees of love. For the third degree, he writes:

In þis degree of loue al drede, al sorrow, al wo, al ydel ioy and al wicked delites is put fro us, and we lyve in swetnesses of heuyn. Thynk euer to lest, and to be bettyr and better, and þat wil gif þe grace to love hym, as he doth another.²²

Rolle then offers a lyric to be performed and in which one will find pleasure when one loves Jesus Christ. The lyric, which Rolle calls ‘a songe of love’, is very much imbued with the imagery of the Song of Songs: indeed, as one would guess from the Latin verse which begins the epistle, *Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat* (Cant. 5:2), the Song of Songs participates in a significant manner in the making of this piece. The kind of feeling that Rolle tries to trigger with his request for the performance of his modern version of the Song of Songs is mystical. But of course the lyric itself does not provide the feeling without a genuine participatory performance which is possible conditional to the performer’s pure intention. One has to love Jesus Christ in order to experience mystical feeling. One is struck here as well by the strong eroticism of the piece inspired by the Song of Songs and Fin’ Amor vocabulary and values:

Ihesu my savyour, Ihesu my confortour, of fairnesse þe floure,
My helpe and my sokour, when may I se þi toure?
When wil þou me kale? Me langeth in to þi halle
To se þe and þyn alle. Thi love let hit nat falle...²³

Further, the narrative voice calls for Jesus’ mercy so that union be made possible now:

²² Richard Rolle: *Prose and Verse. Edited from MS Longleat 29 and Related Manuscripts*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS 293 (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 32.

When wil þou rewe on me, Ihesu, þat I might with þe be,
To love and loke on þe? My sete ordain for me,
And set þou me þerin, for þan may we never twyn,
And I þi love shal synge þrogh syght in þy shyning
In hevyn withouten endyng. Amen.²⁴

I believe that Rolle's intentions with this part of the epistle cannot be properly understood if one does not take into consideration the prerequisite necessary for a proper performance of the song of love. Some scholars have argued for the sexual double-entendres with which Rolle may have been occupying himself, placing himself as an in-between and possibly directing the female recipient to direct her love message both to him and Jesus. In that manner, Rolle's epistle would have the same kind of ambivalence as Thomas of Hales 'Love Rune' which I discussed at greater length early on. However, if the early part of the epistle functions in a dialogic fashion with the narrator fashioning himself as an expert in love and spiritual guidance and asking the female recipient to surrender to his advice, the lyrical parts of the epistle are by their very nature deleting this dialogic exchange in which the narrator shaped a strong fictional identity for himself. The lyrics are for the recipient to be performed on her very personal terms: the author does not write down the experience of mystical feeling, he only offers a textual rendering which may or may not trigger mystical feeling.

Conclusion

The three texts that have been considered as part of this presentation are only a small fraction of the enormous input of religious texts written during the period 1215 to 1349, which is the period I have been allocated for the writing of the chapter I spoke to you about earlier on in my presentation. Several interesting facts need to be stressed at this point. *Ancrene Wisse*, Hales 'Love Run' and Rolle's *Ego Dormio* are either written by friars, probably a Dominican

²³ *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, p. 33.

²⁴ *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, p. 33.

friar in the case of the AW, definitely a Franciscan friar in the case of the 'Love Run', or are influenced by the affective mystical tradition that the Cistercians spread in the twelfth century, and which the friars developed for lay use in the thirteenth century, as is the case of course for Rolle's *Ego Dormio*.

Another characteristic shared by those texts, perhaps to a lesser degree in the case of *Ancrene Wisse* (although not in the case of a consideration of the *Ancrene Wisse* group as a whole), is the high degree of performativity of those three texts. The 'Love Run' is clearly a text to be performed, as is indicated in the last stanza: 'Hwenne thu sittest in longynge,/ Drauh the forth this ilke wryt:/ Mid swete stephne thu hit singe,/ And do al so hit the byt. (ll. 201-4). The lyrics which make an integral part of *Ego Dormio* are also to be performed. Although not all texts from the period I explore are characterized by such a high degree of performativity, I believe nevertheless that, as mystical feeling cannot be confined to a textual setting, most mystical texts will, to a certain degree, point to their own performative qualities. It may be that performativity may be part of the answer in our aim at qualifying mystical texts and the kind of feeling they hope to generate on the part on their performers. What is true for sure of all mystical texts is the high degree of active engagement they require on the part of the audience.

A third point which those three texts share is the fact that they all initially address a female readership: three anchoresses in the case of the AW, a young maiden just having become a nun in the case of the 'Love Run', and a nun in the case of the *Ego Dormio*. Of course it would be too simplistic a trajectory to come to the conclusion that affective religious literature was considered to appeal mainly or only to a female public. After all, Rolle himself proves that some of his other writings, written in the Latin language for a male clerical audience, show the same kind of affective tone as the pieces addressing female audiences. I believe on the other hand that, although the friars were not solely responsible for

the spread of private forms of piety among the laity, their influence in the thirteenth century and later was most considerable. Together with the use of the vernacular as conduit for the propagation of such new forms of lay affective piety, they had a great impact on the way mystical feeling and mystical texts would be written down in the vernacular. That female religious and lay readers often were the commissioners of such texts is only part of the answer why affective mysticism in particular and affective religious devotional literature in general, was so popular in the late medieval period.

This is only a tentative conclusion, but which I hope I shall be able to finesse further in my exploration of other texts from a very prolific period of composition of religious texts following the Lateran Council of 1215 and the death of Richard Rolle in 1349.