

Erotic Devotion: Richard Rolle's *The Form of Living*

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This article considers Richard Rolle's use of erotic imagery and romantic metaphor in his popular fourteenth-century devotional manual, The Form of Living. The Form engaged a widespread community of readers through the glorification of desire and pleasure, which were sanctified by merit of Christ, the lover that Rolle encouraged his readers to woo. While the use of language in the text is inclusive, allowing all readers to become lovers of Christ, the text is addressed to the particular needs of an ideal reader—a celibate anchorite in a nuptial relationship with him as a man—and thus also allows readers to participate in an exclusive romance as an observer. This article will examine The Form's popularity within a diverse readership, arguing that the spiritual and bodily romance Rolle constructed between an imagined lover and Christ is central to its appeal to all Middle English readers.

Richard Rolle's *The Form of Living*, a fourteenth-century religious manual, uses descriptions of sensuous religious love to appeal to a diverse range of readers. Though the text was purportedly constructed as an instructional guidebook for a female recluse dedicated to loving Christ, as a devotional work it proved exceptionally popular. Rolle engaged with his readers through the celebration of desire, romance, and eroticism, welcoming them into an intimate relationship that was developed between him as the author, the anchorite he addresses throughout the text and, most significantly, Christ. Rolle encouraged the reader to move through various stages of loving Christ, and the sensual aspects of late Middle English spirituality form a *gradus amoris* of love and desire beginning with identification of Christ as the love object and culminating in erotic fulfilment. While the relationship that casts the devotee as the lover and spouse of Christ was significant on an allegorical level, it also describes a physical and emotional expression of eroticism and spirituality in the Middle Ages. The Middle English erotic experience can be seen as encompassing various degrees of actual physicality: sexual abstinence and chastity formed part of an erotic relationship with Christ as a man and spiritual entity. For Rolle, chastity itself was the perfect physical state to facilitate an erotic engagement with Christ and love for him was not complicated by the sins of the flesh as they could not exist at the same time. Rolle adopted the use of erotic imagery not only because it was a suitable mode of encouraging spiritual union but also because of its ability to increase engagement with readers of religious texts, including those from more secular society. Through describing the desired spiritual union with Christ as domestic experiences associated with marriage and erotic interest the relationship could be understood as an equitable, but due to its lack of sexual intercourse, preferable alternative to secular life. Rolle presents the reader with a model of *par amours* in which the spouse, Christ, is the most pleasing and fulfilling lover possible, offering pleasures to the devoted lover and ideal reader far surpassing those of the world. In *The Form of Living*, Christ is cast as a permissible

erotic and romantic figure, the popular appeal of which is contextualised by the increasing prevalence of the romance genre in fourteenth and fifteenth century England.

In Rolle's text the desirability of Christ as a lover is related to the desirability of love itself in the Middle Ages. Positive depictions of women's sexuality in the medieval romance genre suggest eroticism could be culturally valuable. Helen Cooper considers that 'spontaneous and active female desire, rightly directed, becomes a driving force in the larger providential scheme', noting that the only other medieval genre showing similar traits is the life of the female saint in which 'active desire is redirected towards Christ'.¹ The emotional states of love and desire formed an attractive way of life, thus making them suitable carriers for spiritual ideals. The appeal of romance and sensuous desire offer an explanation for *The Forms's* continued relevancy and popularity throughout the period. An examination of Middle English religious love-poetry shows many similarities of experience between secular and spiritual love. Cooper emphasises the heroic quality of women's love and sexuality within the vernacular romance genre and, while she is particularly interested in women's secular romances, her study can be considered in relation to spiritual texts that focus on a love for Christ. Love texts for Christ were frequently written for, or by, women, and show a valorisation of women's desire. These texts also show that Middle English spirituality, for both male and female celibates, was sensual, erotic and bodily. Concurrently, for those of Rolle's readers who were not celibate, this imagery would have prompted comparison with their own romantic and sexual histories through evoking sensual experience and the glorification of desire.

In *The Form of Living* Rolle constructs spirituality as a form of sanctified eroticism in which the reader can choose to engage. Rolle's use of eroticism is found in explicit reference to Christ as a loving and pleasure-giving spouse, but also implicitly through his sensuous use of language and imagery. His use of the Middle English vernacular, which is associated with an intention to write for less educated readers, includes language that evokes both spiritual and sexual meanings often alongside use of the nuptial metaphor. Writing in the tradition of Thomas of Hale's *Love-Run*, Rolle acts as a messenger to deliver the reader into Christ's love, bringing what were previously guarded secrets of metaphor to a wider and less carefully selected readership. This trait, which had led to comparison between Rolle and Pandarus, is explicitly stated in Rolle's *Ego Dormino*: 'I wil becum a messanger to brynge þe to hys bed þat hath mad þe and boght þe... for he wil wed þe if þou wil loue hym'.² He invites the reader into something they know—the desire for desire itself and pleasure in this desire—but with the benefit of spiritual sanctification. Rolle uses intimate language to stimulate the reader, urging them to aspire to a privileged relationship with Christ. Though it is suggested that Rolle was aware of the wider scope of his eventual readership, *The Form of Living* contains no warnings against inexpert

¹ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), p. 220.

² Claire Elizabeth McLroy, *The English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle*, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2004), p. 68; Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1995), p. 67.

readers or readers from an active, not contemplative, life. This makes it unlike comparable didactic texts.³ Instead, Rolle writes especially for a less spiritually educated readership, encouraging them to love through promises of spiritual reward and joy.

As a guide book to a solitary and celibate life, *The Form of Living* begins by stating that the sinful man or woman will to be bound in sin by their fleshly desires and notes a general desire in people for the pleasures of the flesh, but that this can be overcome. Those who wish to live a celibate life are particularly tormented, though Rolle assures that within a few years of suffering for God's love they shall have more delight in being reclusive and speaking of love for their spouse, Jesus Christ, than if they were a 'lady of a thousand worldes'.⁴ Because, while

[m]en weneth þat we haue peyn and penaunce, bot we haue more ioy
and verrey delite in oon day þan þai haue in þe world al har lyfe.
Thei seen our body, bot þai seth nat oure herte wher our solace is.⁵

Rolle wants to convince the reader that a relationship with Christ can offer not only a sensuous and gratifying, but far more enduring pleasure than other worldly ones. While earlier texts, such as *Ancrene Wisse*, focus on the practicalities of Christ as a husband, Rolle generally focuses on the fulfilling qualities of Christ as a lover. It has been argued that this *sponsalia Christi* motif appropriates patterns of sexual desire and love while simultaneously discouraging actual marriage.⁶ Reflecting on a comparison between actual marriage and spiritual nuptials, Sarah Salih asserts that 'it should not be assumed that whatever is true of earthly marriage is also true of *sponsalia Christi*. The same words, marriage, lover, spouse, have two sets of distinct referents, which are... opposed'.⁷ Rolle's inducement of nuptial love was directed towards spiritual bodies, and is thus representative of a different kind of erotic experience, or as Ruth Mazo Karras believes, a sexual orientation towards the spiritual.⁸ In *The Form of Living* spiritual love is presented as a preferable option to marriage and Rolle's assurance of great pleasure for the loving reader imply the appeal of desire. Rolle promotes the idea that a spiritual life is romantically fulfilling, valuing it according to a society that regarded romantic and erotic experience as positive and meaningful. Differentiating himself and the reader from those critics who consider their way of life a hardship, Rolle states that though they appear to be in great penance they actually enjoy far more delight, for onlookers only see their bodies and not their hearts where their *solace* is located. *Solace*, in Middle English, covers all manner of pleasures. It can mean joy, happiness, sexual intercourse, delight and also a sense of consolation, comfort or

³ McIlroy, *English Prose Treatises*, 19; Vincent Gillespie, 'Vernacular Books of Religion', in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (eds.), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375-1475*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989), pp. 317-344, p. 322; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, p. 51.

⁴ Richard Rolle, 'The Form of Living', in S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson (ed.), *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988), pp. 3-25. Line 129.

⁵ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 130-133.

⁶ Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006), p. 52.

⁷ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2001), p. 68.

⁸ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: doing unto others*, (Routledge: New York, 2005), p. 53.

spiritual joy.⁹ Considering the devotional nature of the text, the obvious interpretation in this context is one of spiritual joy. While acknowledging this, it does not seem accidental that in defending the pleasures of, amongst other ascetic measures, abstinence, Rolle chose a word that also reflects positive sexual pleasure.¹⁰ Though *solace* was used in secular texts to refer to sex, it also implied love and companionship, meanings that are also found in Rolle's use of the word. Though the ascetic seems to have a life devoid of pleasure, his or her heart is actually filled with abundant delight and the companionship of Christ. If the potential lay reader is considered at this point, the message that Rolle delivers is that the celibate spiritual devotee enjoys the potential to feel a comparable sensory pleasure and comfort to physical sexuality and erotic companionship. The sensuous pleasures that Christ delivers to his lovers in turn help them move further away from worldly desires:

...wondrefully Ihesu worcheth in his louers, þe which he reueth fro
þe luste of fleisshe and blood þrogh tendre loue. He maketh ham
to wil non erthly thyng, and doth ham rise in to solace of hym,
and to foryet vanyteeȝ and fleishly loue of þe world...¹¹

Christ makes his lovers want for no earthly thing, of something that has material and transitory existence on earth, but instead to *rise* in the *solace* of him, thus forgetting worldly pleasure, trivial pursuits, the love of physical things and sexual pleasures of the world.¹² The sensuous pleasures that Christ provides far surpass the sexual will and desires of the worldly body, appealing instead to a spiritual body that Rolle suggests can enjoy similar *solace*. To reach this state, however, one must first overcome his or her bodily desires. Through emphasising the rewards of a chaste and spiritual life, Rolle suggests that the dedication of love to Christ by the ideal reader of *The Form* will prove more pleasurable and joyful than secular love.

When discussing the relationship between the devotee and Christ, Rolle references *The Song of Songs*, translating parts of it into Middle English for his vernacular readers and describing the feeling of love they may expect to experience.

For he þat mych loueth, hym lust oft to synge of his loue, for ioy þat he or
sho hath when þay þynke on þat þat þay loue, namely if har louer be trewe

⁹ Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn (eds.), 'solas (n.)', *Middle English Dictionary* (Michigan University Press: Ann Arbor, 2001).

¹⁰ Secular examples of the word include the narrator's description of Nicholas in *The Miller's Tale*—'Of deerne love he koude and of solas;/ And therto he was sleigh and full priuee,/ And lyk a mayden meke to see.' Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Canterbury Tales', in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), pp. 3–328. Lines from 3200; And John Gower in Book VII of *Confessio Amantis*, uses the word in a similar, is less explicit, context: 'Among the men is no solas,/If that there be no woman there. For but if that the woman were,/This worldes joie were away.' John Gower, *Confessio Amantis: Gower's Confession of a Lover in Three Volumes*, (Bell and Daldy Fleet Street: London, Vol. Three, 1857), p. 149.

¹¹ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 243-257.

¹² The Middle English Dictionary defines *rise* as meaning, amongst other things, to stand, be resurrected, move upward, be stirred by emotion or aroused or to prevail. Kurath and Kuhn, 'risen (v.)', *Middle English Dictionary*.

and louynge. And is to þe Englisshe of þese two wordes 'I languysshe for loue'.¹³

This love that Rolle muses over is not defined as secular or spiritual. He uses a secular model of love to gauge the natural experience of romantic love, not using Christ as the love object but simply the experience of the lover in thinking of '*þat þat þay loue*', whomever, or whatever, that may be. Rolle suggests that it is only natural to love Christ in such a way, desiring to sing for the joy of the love. In an exploration of the Middle English understanding of love as an emotion, Cooper suggested that 'love between a man and a woman at its fullest included "gratified desire", [of] the body as well as the heart'.¹⁴ This meant that instead of differentiating between a love that included sexuality and one that did not, 'the most widely used medieval term for such love was simply that — love'.¹⁵ For Cooper, the specific understanding of the term *fin amor* shows the inclusiveness of such love: 'the emotions as well as the body, and, with the emotions, the potential for the infinite linguistic and rhetorical exploration of that surplus that is the special domain of love-poetry'.¹⁶ To *languysshe* in love is one such rhetorical expression, referring to lovesickness and the suffering and grief of the lover for an unobtainable or unrequited love.¹⁷ Rolle does not caution reserve, instead transforming the symptoms of *luxuria* and love sickness to a holy, perfect and infallible cause.¹⁸ By merit of the disembodied nature of the seemingly paradoxical feeling, the dangerous excesses of worldly love are not a risk for those who choose to love Christ instead.

In *The Form of Living*, Rolle describes the physicality of a spirit that reflects the actions of the body. Making use of sensuous language he describes a soul as a burning fire and a nightingale that becomes so enamoured with Jesus that singing and praising God is all that brings comfort. Rolle describes this singing as *ghostly*, and as both *for* Christ and *in* him. He goes on to explain the nature of *ghostly* singing to the reader:

And 'Thesu' nat bodily crynge with þe mouth: of þat maner of syngynge speke I nat of, for þat songe hath both good and il, and þis maner of songe hath none bot if þai be in þis þrid degree of loue, to þe which degree hit is impossibil to cum bot in a greet multitude of loue.¹⁹

This passage introduces the concept that the movements of the soul have different values to the movements of the body. Rolle describes that though bodily singing can be both good and bad, singing the love of God with the soul, if one loves properly,

¹³ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 490-494.

¹⁴ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 221.

¹⁵ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 221.

¹⁶ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 221.

¹⁷ Kurath and Kuhn, 'languishen (v.)', *Middle English Dictionary*.

¹⁸ Mark D. Jordan, 'Homosexuality, Luxuria, and Textual Abuse', in Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (eds.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 24-39.

¹⁹ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 574-578.

can be nothing but good. This concept may be a useful analogy through which to understand the ethical position of erotic desire in a spiritual context. Though the text implicates the eroticised body, through use of the same language it is aimed at inducing an arousal of the bodily spirit. Desiring Christ does not have the same restrictions as desiring a secular lover. This *ghostly* singing described by Rolle is not only allegorical, and Rolle included lyrics in *The Form of Living* to be sung in the heart of the longing devotee while coveting Christ's coming for them:

When wil þou cum to comfort me, and brynge me out of care,
 And gif me þe, þat I m[ay] se, hauynge for evermare?
 Thy loue is euer sewttest of al þat euerware;
 My hert [for loue] when shal hit brest, þan languyssh I no mare.²⁰

The lyrics, which are addressed intimately to Christ, call for his presence and for him to give himself to the singer. When the heart *brests*, or breaks from internal pressure, bursts, gushes, bursts into tears or is broken for love, the reader will languish in love no longer, but be fulfilled.²¹ The heart will burst at the time of death as a release of the pressure that has been maintained through their desire during life. Death as the moment of consummation of the relationship with Christ was represented in various earlier devotional texts to *The Form of Living*, and Rolle continues with this theme, encouraging the ideal reader to eagerly await their death.²²

Though one can be Christ's lover, Rolle warns that no person may have a perfect sight of heaven while his or her body remains on earth. When they die, however, 'þai ben broght bifor God, and seth hym face to face, and egh to eigh, and wonneth with hym withouten end, for hym þai soght, and hym þai couaited, and hym þai loued in al har myght.'²³ *Wonneth* here means to live or dwell with, and can be used to describe a sexual relationship of cohabitation.²⁴ This passage, close to the end of *The Form*, resolves the tension of the long distance loving of a spiritual life. Death brings the lover face-to-face and eye-to-eye with Christ, to stay with him forever more. Earlier spiritual guides warn the chaste reader against the danger of looking in case it stimulates desire. *Ancrene Wisse* admonishes the anchor to avoid looking out her window as '*Oculi prima tela sunt adultere*- "The eyes are the arrows [and the first weapons] of lechery's pricking",²⁵ whereas the *Rule of Saint Augustine* cautions against visual interactions between men and women, 'for the eye is the herald of the heart'.²⁶ Rolle, however, uses the sight of Christ, eye-to-eye with the lover, as a moment of final, long awaited union. The use of *couaited* is significant as it generally means an immoderate desire for worldly goods, greed, avarice, a strong sexual desire or concupiscence or a strong desire or craving.²⁷ In this instance it is a

²⁰ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 594-601.

²¹ Kurath and Kuhn, 'bresten (v.)', *Middle English Dictionary*.

²² Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 70.

²³ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 890-893.

²⁴ Kurath and Kuhn, 'wonen (v. (1))', *Middle English Dictionary*.

²⁵ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (trans.), *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated works*, (Paulist Press: New Jersey, 1991), p. 70.

²⁶ Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, p. 46.

²⁷ Kurath and Kuhn, 'coveitise (n.)', *Middle English Dictionary*.

sign of a life lived yearning for an absent lover. As the devotee remains tied to his or her flesh, as Rolle himself does, the act of loving Christ will be imperfect. In turn, when they die and are resurrected with a more perfect body, they can hope for a more fulfilling love. One Middle English view that describes the dignity of the resurrected body and its capacity for love is found in Johannes de Irlandia's *The Meroure of Wyssdome composed for the use of James IV, King of Scots A.D. 1490*. In Books III to V, Irlandia discusses 'the vniuersal resurreccioun of all the pepil men and women'.²⁸ Instead of removing the erotic potential of the body, his understanding of resurrection simply removes the moral complications of sex. While on earth 'this corruptible body haue put impediment to the saule,' whereas after 'the resurreccioun quhen the body sal be incorruptible it puttis na maner of impediment bot helpis the noble operacioun of the saule'.²⁹ In practical terms this means that 'all blissit persouns men and women sal rys wt all perfeccioun wtout ony maner of deformite'. Men shall rise as males and women as females,

[a]nd the membris of men and women sal nocht haue the wse that thai had here na that salbe na euill appetit na concupiscence in the seing or behalding of thame bot the persouns in the behalding and sicht of thame sal lofe and honour the gret wisdom and benigrite of god that ordand sic membris for the generacioun of the haly pepil of god quhen the tyme of generacioun was and than sal be passit.³⁰

Once removed from the fallen and immoral context of the world, the sight of the resurrected genitals of the body may fill a viewer with love and honour. The resurrected body is a more perfect version of the earthly body, an understanding that allows for a more literalised erotic experience for the lover of Christ, who may await his or her death and the perfect resurrection of the body that allows union with the spouse.

In *The Form*, Rolle discusses varying degrees of love for Christ, explaining the difference between merely following his commandments or seeking his counsel, and feeling the fire of his love burn in one's heart. He creates a hierarchy of love, saying this final stage is the privilege of those who lead a solitary life, and that only they are completely fulfilled by the sweetness of Christ. 'Dyuers men in erth haue dyuers yiftes and graces of God, bot þe special yift of þo þat ledeth solitary lif is for to loue Ihesu Christe'.³¹ While all Christians love Christ they do not have the same heady experience or spiritual rewards as those who are dedicated to him completely.³² Rolle divides love into three categories, the highest example of which is called singular:

Synguler loue is when al confort and solace is closet out of þe herte, bot of Ihesu Crist only. Oper delite ne other ioy list hit nat, for þe swetnesse of hym

²⁸ Johannes de Irlandia, *The Meroure of Wyssdome composed for the use of James IV, King of Scots A.D. 1490*, (William Blackwood & Sons: Edinburgh, Vol. 2, 1965), p. 74.

²⁹ de Irlandia, *The Meroure of Wyssdome B*, p. 79-80.

³⁰ de Irlandia, *The Meroure of Wyssdome B*, p. 79.

³¹ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 494-495.

³² Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 499-500.

in þis degre is so comfortable and lestyng, his loue so brennyng and gladyng, þat he or scho þat is in þis degre may as wel feele þe fyre of loue brennyng in har soule as þou may fele þi fynger bren if þou put hit in þe fyre. Bot þat fyre, if hit be hoot, is so delitable and wonderful þat I can nat tel hit. þan þe sowl is Ihesu louyng, Ihesu thynkyng, Ihesu desyryng, only in coueitys of hym [ondyng], to hym seghyng, of hym brennyng, in hym restyng.³³

The physicality of this experience is made tangible through comparison to burning one's finger in a fire. Rolle assures that even though the fire of Christ's love is *hoot*, it is unlike burning a finger in that it is more sensuous and exquisite than can be told. Christ is to be the only *comfort*, which means gratification, encouragement or pleasure, and *solace* for the devotee, who lusts after no other. The soul is to be consumed by Christ, and Rolle repeats the name to emphasise the total absorption of the experience. The reader is only to covet him, search for him, burn in him and rest in him. Rolle uses the body to map the experiences of Christ's love, thus describing it as a physical experience. He writes of two distinct ways of living a life devoted to God; the active and the contemplative. People in the active, who are more prone to worldly temptations, have a role to play in society that is representing godly virtues and being merciful. Those in the contemplative life can be divided into two groups; the lower and the higher. The lower meditates on Christ's words and dwells on good thought and sweetness. In contrast,

[t]he hegher partie of contemplacioun is biholdyng and desire of þe thynges of heuyn, and ioy in þe Holy Goost... þan may I say þat contemplacioun is a wonderful ioy of Goddis loue, þe which ioy is a praysyng of God, þat may nat be told. And þat wondreful praisyng is in þe soule, and for aboundance of ioy and swetnesse hit ascendeth in to þe mouth, so þat þe hert and þe tonge accordeth in on, and body and soule ioyeth in God lyuyng.³⁴

Though the arousal and love Rolle refers to is a movement of the soul, the language he uses charts the love across the reader's body. After the reader beholds and desires the joys of heaven, Christ's love moves up from the soul to the mouth and the tongue. The mouth, as the centre of taste, allows for the sensual experience of Christ's love. Rolle makes use of oral imagery once again to explain that after God has inspired a contemplative man or woman to forsake the world and all the bad lusts and covetous things within it:

...he ledeth ham by ham on, and speketh to her herte, and, as þe prophet seith, he yeueth ham to souke þe swetnesse of þe begynnyng of loue. And þan he setteth ham in wil to gif ham holy to praiers and meditaciouns and teris.³⁵

³³ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 550-559.

³⁴ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 865-874.

³⁵ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 877-880.

Christ's courtship is described in bodily terms, this time through imagery of sucking which, much like descriptions of drinking from Christ's love, focus the reader's attention not only on the mouth but also on taking Christ into one's body. The text is frequently ambiguous as to whether it refers to a spiritual or physical body. While Christ leads the lover he talks to their heart, and encourages them to pray and cry tears. The use of oral imagery emphasises the sensual potential of loving Christ and allows Rolle to convince the reader that both the body and soul, though distinct from one another, have joy in the devotional life. Rolle's choice of vocabulary makes use of bodily sensations, fundamentally relying on a physical understanding of a spiritual relationship.

As *The Form of Living* is an instruction manual, Rolle anticipates that readers may want the experience of love clarified for them. The fleshly nature of the people who yearn for Christ is ubiquitous throughout Rolle's discussion of love, and though he goes into a detailed discussion of the parameters of the emotion, and what the lover of Christ may expect to feel, it is not without first disclaiming that he is only a mortal man. Rolle anticipates the reader asking him 'þou spekest so mych of loue; tel me what loue is, and whare hit is, and how I shal loue God verrayly, and how I may knowe þat I loue hym, and in what state I may most loue hym'. To which he admits 'These bene hard questions to louse to a febel man and a fleisshely as I am...', and then begins a detailed answer to the hypothetical questions:

The firste askynge is: what is loue? And I answere: Loue is a brennynge desire in God, with a wonderful delite and sikernesse. God is light and brennynge. Light clarifieth oure skyl; brendynge kyndyls oure couaities, þat we desire nat bot hym. Loue is a lif coupelynge togiddre þe louynge to þe loued... Loue is desire of þe herte euer thynkyng to þat þat hit loueth, [and whan hit hath þat hit loueth], than hit ioyeth and no thyng may make hit sorry.³⁶

Burning, when used to describe an emotion in Middle English, is to be fervent or inflamed, ardent, passionate and aroused, and heat itself is associated with erotic love.³⁷ Rolle describes that this particular burning kindles such covetous feelings that no one is desired but Christ. Rolle describes being joined to him, *copuland* (unified) together in love.³⁸ Love is a desire of the heart, and also a possession of the loved one, for when the heart has its desire nothing can make it sorry. Thus, according to Rolle, love is a combination of loving and being loved by Christ. Christ is not a passive figure in this relationship, but a passionate and active participant who woos and holds the lover to him. Love is essentially a yearning desire for one another: 'loue is a desire betwix two, with lestyngnesse of thoghts'.³⁹ It is proven through constancy and an unchanged quality over time. Rolle's erotic imagery can be firmly

³⁶ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 626-642.

³⁷ For a discussion on the erotics of heat in Middle English literature see Robert Allen Rouse, "'Some Like it Hot": The Medieval Eroticism of Heat', in Amanda Hopkins and Cory J. Rushton (eds.), *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 2007), pp. 71-81.

³⁸ Kurath and Kuhn, 'copulacion (n.)', *Middle English Dictionary*.

³⁹ Rolle, 'The Form of Living', Lines 643-644.

based in a physical reality. In his twelfth-century sermons on *The Song of Songs*, Bernard of Clairvaux used erotic language to manipulate arousal and explore spiritual experiences. Jean Leclercq has suggested that the monastic community at Clairvaux mainly consisted of monks who had joined at a later stage in life, and thus Bernard chose to exploit their sexual experiences by stimulating their secular desires and redirecting them to a spiritual purpose.⁴⁰ Bernard frequently appealed to the monks' past experiences, prompting them to put the 'full emotional force of their memories of secular love into the interpretation being conducted', through an erotic use of biblical imagery.⁴¹ By addressing anticipated questions about the nature of the love one should have for Christ, Rolle gives evidence of a contemporary uncertainty surrounding the emotions of spiritual devotion. He describes a physical and spiritual experience of love, thus prompting romantically experienced readers to recall his or her feelings of desire and associate them with loving Christ.

Rolle is commonly considered to be an author who wrote particularly for women, but through addressing the interests of both male and female readers passages within *The Form of Living* also show evidence of a more gender-neutral intention.⁴² While medieval authors themselves frequently associated female devotion with an emotional love for God, and male devotion with clerical learning, this did not exclude *The Form of Living* from a male readership.⁴³ It does, however, encourage questions surrounding the parallel experiences of men and women whilst reading a text that was frequently dedicated and addressed to one woman, the anchorite Margaret Kirkeby.⁴⁴ *The Form of Living* is said to have been written for Margaret, but Elizabeth Freeman notes that this full name only appears in one manuscript, with other versions addressed to 'Margaret' or 'a recluse þat was icleped Margaret', or 'an anresse', or no one at all.⁴⁵ Claire McIlroy believes that while Margaret may have been the catalyst for Rolle's English treatises, she is not addressed exclusively throughout the works and he instead 'relies on strategies of affective language to construct a separate discourse in each work that appeals to each reader as an individual soul, and so potentially invites a wider audience'. It appears that Rolle expected his English prose texts to reach a broader audience than Margaret, and that he consciously worked towards the needs of this audience.⁴⁶ The dedication to *an anresse* creates a fictional and idealised reader who, as a character,

⁴⁰ Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France: Psycho-Historical Essays*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1979), p. 105; Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, p. 50-51.

⁴¹ Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, p. 51.

⁴² McIlroy, *English Prose Treatises*, p. 19, 97; Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, pp. 25-26.

⁴³ For a discussion of the gendered attributes of medieval spirituality see Caroline Walker Bynum, "'... And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in Religious Writing in the Later Middle Ages", in Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman (eds.), *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, (Beacon Press: Boston, 1986), pp. 257-288.

⁴⁴ Kathryn Vulić, 'De Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte and the Topos of the Female Audience', *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 34, 2008, pp. 1-43, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, 'The Priory of Hampole and Its Literary Culture: English Religious Women and Books in the Age of Richard Rolle', *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Vol. 29, 2012, pp. 1-25, p. 6.

⁴⁶ McIlroy, *English Prose Treatises*, p. 19.

becomes part of the narrative form.⁴⁷ *The Form of Living* can thus be seen as part of a specific literary genre that used the creation of an exemplary reader to encourage an actual vicarious reader to view or imitate them in order to access devotional material, thus guiding their response.⁴⁸ Devotional texts appear to be the most commonly owned type of book in medieval England and the significant number of surviving manuscripts of Rolle's work suggest that he was a widely disseminated author through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁴⁹ His readers included not only monks and nuns, but also the secular clergy and the devout laity.⁵⁰ Amongst the profusion of devotional works available, some authors expressed concerns that their work may not be original enough to warrant the attention of readers, as Jennifer Bryan has shown.⁵¹ The author of *Speculum Devotorum* was disappointed to learn that Bonaventure had written on the same subject matter, worsened by the fact another Carthusian had already 'turnyd the same boke into englyshe'.⁵² Likewise, the author of the *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastynge Wisdame* has similar concerns, fearing that his work will be wasted considering that there are already so many books 'of vyces and vertues and of dyverse doctrynes... that this short lyfe schalle rather have an ende' than allow time for them all to be read.⁵³ In considering the popularity of Rolle's work during this surplus of new devotional material, the parallel cultural taste amongst secular readers for romantic texts is relevant. The romance of the relationship between the devotional woman the text addresses and her lover Christ, in opposition to impassive content found in vernacular devotional manuals also intended for the laity, such as the catechism and the Ten Commandments, may have engaged with a more widespread readership.⁵⁴ Kathryn Vulić has argued that in the Middle Ages a literary topos developed in which didactic prose, purportedly written for devotional women, formed part of a genre that appealed to both male and female readers.⁵⁵ Vulić suggests that it is in the numerous texts falsely attributed to Rolle that the boundaries of this devotional genre can be identified. The texts are commonly addressed to a devout religious woman who is only literate in the vernacular and lives an isolated life in which she limits her dealings with the outside world.⁵⁶ The attractiveness of these characteristics to many Middle English readers implies a particular interest in the insights into spiritual development allowed by

⁴⁷ Paul Strohm, 'Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implies, Intended, Actual', *Chaucer Review*, Vol. 18, 1983, pp. 137–145, pp. 138–140.

⁴⁸ Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ McIlroy, *English Prose Treatises*, p. 1.; Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*, (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2011), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Watson, 'The Methods and Objectives of Thirteenth-Century Anchoritic Devotion', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium IV, Dartington 1987*, (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1987), pp. 132–153, p. 137, cited in Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, p. 68. Circulation of the text may have been further enabled through its dissemination in the form of individual booklets that could be added to a larger collection of texts, Gillespie, 'Vernacular Books', p. 327.

⁵¹ Bryan, *Looking Inward*, p. 2.

⁵² Carthusian of Sheen, *The Speculum devotorum of an anonymous Carthusian of Sheen*, (James Hogg: Salzburg, 1973) Cited in Bryan, *Looking Inward*, p. 2.

⁵³ Carl Horstmann (ed.), *Orologium Sapientiae or The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdame*, (Anglia 10, 1888) Cited in Bryan, *Looking Inward*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Vulić, 'De Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte and the Topos of the Female Audience', p. 7.

⁵⁵ Vulić, 'De Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte and the Topos of the Female Audience', p. 2.

⁵⁶ Vulić, 'De Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte and the Topos of the Female Audience', p. 6.

this sort of guidance.⁵⁷ Vulić suggests that this engagement was due to the method of intensive contemplative spirituality found in the genre, describing it as being especially attractive to lay males because it implied a rigour of spiritual devotion: 'the *topos* of the female religious reader... offer[s] solace to their non-enclosed readers, in order that their devotions, too, might be as effective and as profound as the worship of enclosed religious'. To further this, the rigours of devotion that can be accessed through *The Form of Living* are especially attractive to lay readers as they encourage feelings of intimacy and desire through an interaction between the genres of romance and devotion and a narrative of love.

The sexualised language Rolle adopted to describe the relationship the reader should seek with Christ suggests that, in writing about the relationship, the most appropriate experience to emulate was one of erotic and sexual partnering. *The Form* can be placed within a general tendency in the fourteenth century to be less wary of sensuous manifestations of religious faith.⁵⁸ This is identified in the allegorical nuptial metaphors found in *The Song of Songs* as well as through readers' engagement with romantic subject matter and the principles of pleasure and desire represented in Rolle's work. The love that he describes in *The Form of Living* traces the movement of arousal and love across a spiritual body in turn implicating, and sometimes directly referencing, the worldly body of the devotee, encouraging them to languish in their love for Christ. Middle English concepts such as solace, singing, burning, being eye-to-eye and languishing are used by Rolle throughout *The Form* to create a discourse that is both erotic and spiritual. This explicit terminology of pleasure appealed to a culture that valued desire and eroticised romance. Farina has suggested that it is the 'body's capacity for sensual pleasure that enables the anchorite, as both textual figure and reader, to apprehend divinity', and it follows that this is also the case for the readers of the anchorite's, or other spiritually dedicated woman's experience.⁵⁹ It is not only an understanding of bodies, but also of the type of relationship possible between them that fundamentally shaped the reader's perception of the romance between Christ and Rolle's inscribed reading subject. Through blending romance and spirituality into a narrative of love and desire, in which Rolle cast an ideal reader as the central participant, *The Form of Living* made use of eroticism to appeal to a community of English readers throughout the late Middle Ages.

⁵⁷ Vulić, 'De Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte and the Topos of the Female Audience', p. 16, 30-31.

⁵⁸ For a description of the decreasing warnings against guarding chastity in anchorite texts see Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, p. 51.

⁵⁹ Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, p. 48.

Author Biography

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In Memoriam of Philippa Maddern

As an undergraduate I imagined Philippa to be the quintessential academic; critically brilliant with such an effortless manner of recalling mountains of knowledge, matched with a fondness for biscuits. Philippa's enthusiasm and her compelling but pragmatic approach to teaching history made studying the subject an easy choice and her influence was fundamental in my decision to pursue further research in Medieval Studies. Her consistently insightful critique is sorely missed and I consider myself very fortunate to have had such a brilliant scholar supervise my research. Philippa's expectations of academic competence were a pleasure to strive to meet and her dedication to her own work will remain a constant source of inspiration within all areas of my life.