

JUST FRIENDS?

Richard Rolle and the Possibility of Christian Friendship Between Men and Women

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Tiivistelmä – Referat <p>Tutkimus käsittelee Richard Rollen (k. 1349), englantilaisen erakon ja uskonnollisen kirjailijan, käsityksiä ystävydestä yleensä ja erityisesti hengellisestä ystävydestä miesten ja naisten välillä. Rolle kirjoitti useita latinan- ja keskienglanninkielisiä tutkielmia ja hengellisiä oppaita, joissa hän sivusi ystävyden tematiikkaa sekä omaelämäkerrallisesta että teoreettisesta näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen pääasiallisina lähteinä käytetään seitsemää Rollen omaa teosta sekä kanonisoinnin toivossa hänestä laadittua pyhimyselämäkertaa.</p> <p>Tutkimus esittelee Rollen ystävyysteoriaa ja suhteuttaa sen 1300-luvun Yorkshiren historialliseen kontekstiin, Rollen kirjallisiin esikuviin sekä hänen ajatteluunsa yleensä. Rolle näyttää tunteneen sekä Ciceron (k. 43 eaa.) että Aelred Rievaulxlaisen (k. 1167) teokset ystävydestä, mutta sovelsi näiden näkemyksiä omintakeisesti. Rollen maailmankuvalle oli ominaista jyrkkä kaksijakoisuus maailman ja Jumalan rakkauden välillä, minkä vuoksi ero pyhän ja maallisen ystävyden välillä oli ehdoton. Vääränlainen ystävyys oli vaarallista etenkin kontemplatiivista elämää harjoittaville erakoille ja anakoreeteille, joita Rolle opasti välttämään ihmiskontakteja.</p> <p>Jyrkkyydestään huolimatta Rolle erosi edeltäjistään ja 1300-luvun valtavirrasta puolustamalla sukupuolten välisen pyhän ystävyden mahdollisuutta. Tutkimuksen keskeinen löytö on, että Rolle määritteli sukupuolten välisen ystävyden hengelliseksi ohjaukseksi ja perusteli siten sen tarpeellisuutta; naiset tarvitsivat pyhien miesten neuvoja pelastuakseen. Tällainen opetusystävyyden ei ollut tasa-arvoinen suhde, vaan miehen tuli opastaa ja oikaista naista tämän omaksi parhaaksi. Toisaalta Rolle uskoi naisten mahdollisuuksiin saavuttaa hengellisen elämän korkeimmat asteet. Lähteet paljastavat, että Rolle tosiasiaa opasti naisia esittämänsä mallin mukaan. Tutkimus osoittaa, että yksittäisille naisille laaditut kansankieliset opaskirjeet sisältävät opetusystävyyden keskeisiä piirteitä ja noudattavat sen hierarkista logiikkaa: Rolle esiintyy välittäjänä Jumalan ja lukijan välillä houkutellessa, moittien ja neuvoen lukijaa, jotta tämä saavuttaisi yhä korkeamman pyhyden asteen. Rollen ja anakoreetti Margaret Kirkebyn välinen suhde, jota on keskiajalla ja myöhemmin pidetty esimerkkinä pyhästä ystävydestä, näyttää myös muiden lähteiden valossa olleen hierarkkinen opetussuhde.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa argumentoidaan, että Rollen kirjoittamista motivoi tarve itsepuolustukseen ja toiminnan oikeuttamiseen; hänen kontaktinsa naisiin herättivät epäilyksiä. Rolle halusi olla hengellinen auktoriteetti, mutta hänellä ei ollut luostarisääntökunnan, kerjäläisveljestön tai pappisviran tuomaa virallista tukea, joten hänen paras mahdollisuutensa itsepuolustukseen oli kirjallinen toiminta. Oikeuttaakseen toimintansa naisten parissa Rolle esitti mallin Jumalan rakkauden elävöittävästä pyhästä elämästä, johon kuului velvollisuus opettaa naisia ystävinä. Lisäksi Rollen tuli osoittaa, että hänen oma elämänsä edusti hänen puolustamaansa mallia, jonka edellytyksenä oli välinpitämättömyys maallisia houkutuskohtia vastaan. Kaiken tämän takana näyttää olleen toive tasavertaisen ystävän löytämisestä: Rolle ei ollut löytänyt vertaistaan ystävää, joka olisi jakanut hänen hengelliset kokemuksensa, joten hän pyrki hengellisen ohjauksen avulla nostamaan edes yhden oppilaistaan tasolle. On huomionarvoista, että Rolle näyttää pitäneen naisia kelvollisina kandidaatteina tällaiseen suhteeseen.</p>		
Avainsanat – Nyckelord Englanti, ystävyys, hengellinen ohjaus, keskiaika, erakot, naiskuva		
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1 Introduction

The topic of this thesis is how the fourteenth-century Yorkshire hermit and religious writer Richard Rolle (d. 1349) formulated, defended and practised a theory of friendship between men and women. Rolle is known primarily for his biblical commentaries, his instruction in the contemplative life, and spiritual experiences that manifested in sensations of heat, sweetness and song. Friendship seems to be a marginal theme in his works, but there is a very distinct chapter in his treatise *Incendium amoris* which describes a Christianised form of classical friendship and defends the possibility of holy friendship between men and women. The latter is an unusual stance in medieval discussions on friendship and encourages further investigation; indeed, closer inspection reveals a great deal of material concerning friendship, its intimate relation to spiritual instruction, and the conduct of relationships between humans in general and men and women in particular.

Not only will a study of this material illuminate Rolle's own thinking, it is also a contribution to a greater understanding of medieval discourse and practice of friendship and mixed-gender relationships; identifying what is unusual in Richard Rolle and what the points of tension were between him and his writings on the one hand and his social and intellectual context on the other can reveal certain norms and expectations which circumscribed the possibilities of individuals to act in fourteenth-century Yorkshire. More specifically, Rolle's case offers one model of legitimation and self-defence for an aspiring religious authority who, as a layman, lacked the institutional support of a monastic or mendicant order or of ecclesiastical office.

The first question to answer is: what was Rolle's general theory¹ of friendship? In order to interpret it correctly, we must also consider its literary and spiritual background, that is, its models and direct sources, as well as its relation to Rolle's thought in general. Second, how did Rolle apply his general theory to friendship between men and women? Was there a difference between mixed-gender friendship and male friendship? What was required for mixed-gender friendship to work, and what was the connection between friendship and spiritual instruction?

¹ The word 'theory' is used as a catch-all for the various arguments, opinions and off-hand remarks Rolle made about the topic; it does not presuppose a single, internally coherent argument.

Third, after Rolle's theory is sufficiently described and contextualised, we can investigate its practical application: did he express in some of his works or in his life the friendship he had theorised, and how? With answers to all these questions, it is possible to ask the difficult but rewarding question of 'why': why did Rolle write as he did about the topics of friendship, instruction and mixed-gender relationships; what were his authorial motives or the circumstances that occasioned his arguments? And finally, what was Rolle looking for personally, and how did that relate to his relationship with his beloved disciple Margaret Kirkeby; what was the true friendship he desired, and did he ever find it?

The primary sources used to answer the questions are seven works by Rolle himself, and the *Officium et miracula* account of his life.² A combination of criteria determined the selection of works from Rolle's voluminous output. The focus is on works that, hypothetically, are best able to answer the questions posed to them; in other words, works that address the topics of friendship and spiritual instruction directly, works that were written for someone as possible expressions and tools of friendship or spiritual instruction, and works that contain autobiographical material that might illuminate Rolle's life and thought. These include four works in Latin – *Incendium amoris*, *Melos amoris*, *Liber de amore Dei contra amatores mundi* and *Emendatio vitae* – and three in Middle English: *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living*.

Excluded are all the works which Nicholas Watson, scholar of medieval English literature and mysticism, has assigned to the 'early period' of Rolle's career. Most of them are derived from an earlier source and do not represent Rolle's mature style and interests.³ Many of the early works are biblical commentaries, but Rolle continued to compose more important commentaries later in his career, too.⁴ To use them would require a solid grasp of the medieval commentary tradition and a page count disproportionate to the contribution they might make to the topic. An argument could be made for the inclusion of both

² See chapter 2.3 below for more information on the sources used.

³ Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the invention of authority* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 13), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 113. For a list of the early works, see Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle. Emendatio vitae. Orationes ad honorem nominis Ihesu. Edited from Cambridge University Library MSS Dd.v.64 and Kk.vi.20* (Toronto Medieval Latin Texts 21), Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1995, 18.

⁴ For an introduction to Rolle's output, see Hope Emily Allen, *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle, hermit of Hampole, and materials for his biography*, London: Oxford University Press & New York: D.C. Heath and Company 1927.

Super Canticum canticorum and *Expositio super novem lectiones mortuorum*, which according to Watson contain many of the features found in Rolle's treatises and instructional pieces. Unfortunately, the only edition of *Super Canticum canticorum* is an unpublished doctoral dissertation not easily available. For the sake of consistency, then, no actual commentaries made it into the group of seven works used – albeit most of them, too, contain passages of biblical exposition.⁵ Some of the other works, however, are referenced as necessary, and some earlier texts, such as Cicero's and Aelred of Rievaulx's, are used for context and contrast.

Quotations from Latin will be translated, with the originals provided in footnotes. Translations are mine, unless otherwise noted; that is, when there is a good scholarly translation readily available. The Middle English quotations will not be modernised, but occasional clarifications are provided as necessary.

The works of Richard Rolle are literary products with sometimes highly abstract and conventional theological and philosophical content. Thus, in order to understand his writings on friendship, they must be placed in the context of his general theory of religious life, God and the human condition. Rolle's works are also part of a tradition in which earlier models are transmitted to and adapted by writers through direct use of sources or a common literary and spiritual background. They must be contextualised in terms of these intellectual parameters; it is assumed that the literary influence of authors like Cicero, Augustine and Aelred of Rievaulx is more relevant to Rolle's views on friendship than the political situation of fourteenth-century England.

On the other hand, the present study is not concerned with questions of the orthodoxy or coherence of Rolle's argumentation and its theological implications, but rather attempts to maintain a historical perspective: behind received theological formulations and conventional language, there is a historical individual making authorial choices and organising his material. It is important therefore to keep in mind the context Rolle lived in, especially in relation to his social networks and institutional authority. Scholarship on the social reality and religious life of late-medieval Yorkshire as well as what scarce information there is on Rolle's life are essential for contextualising his literary products.

⁵ The edition is *Richard Rolle's Comment on the Canticles*, ed. Elizabeth Murray, unpubl. PhD diss. Fordham University 1958. For overviews of *Super Canticum canticorum* and *Expositio super novem lectiones mortuorum*, see Watson, *Invention*, 147–159 and 196–207, respectively.

This is a literary study in the sense that the sources are overtly literary pieces whose intention is not to document raw historical data but to present an interpretation to influence the reader and fulfil criteria of genre and convention. Rolle's autobiographical accounts cannot be used, for example, to reconstruct an actual conversation that took place at a given time and place. The focus is therefore not on *wie es eigentlich gewesen* but on the story the sources present us with; whether a conversation really took place, the author's decision to write about one can tell a great deal about his views on the topic and his reasons for discussing it. I am not content to remain at the surface level of the text, however: the historical reality behind it can be brought to light by investigating the tensions in Rolle's account, the problems he seems to have faced and needed to resolve, and the strategies he chose to employ.

Conceptually, the analysis happens on three levels – although it is not a formula applied explicitly or rigidly in the following chapters: what the text actually says about friendship, spiritual instruction and mixed-gender relationships, how the passages in effect function when interpreted in the appropriate context, and lastly, why Rolle chose to write as he did, as an author and a historical person. The gap between reader's interpretation and authorial intention – the second and third stages of the analysis – is impossible to bridge with certainty; the text may allow for interpretations the author was never aware of, while his motives might not be wholly understandable to a modern reader lacking the relevant context. Nonetheless, with careful contextualisation of the texts, a believable picture can be sketched and some key problems identified.

This thesis is structured thematically to reconstruct and elucidate Rolle's argument for mixed-gender friendship. Chronological precision must be sacrificed in favour of coherence for two primary reasons: first, relatively little is reliably known about Rolle's life and its dates. Only his date of death, 1349, seems certain. Moreover, the most recently accepted chronology of his works by Nicholas Watson is partially tentative and assigns very few definitive dates. Even if we accept the general outline of Rolle's life, as sketched by Hope Emily Allen and corrected at points by later scholars like E. J. F. Arnould, and Watson's chronology for his works, the two cannot be matched with any acceptable degree

of reliability.⁶ With the exception of his very last work, *The Form of Living*, none of them can be connected with any specific moment in Rolle's life. Furthermore, the primary sources used all fall within the later stages of Rolle's relatively short literary career – in Watson's estimate, twenty years in all, which might make the chosen seven works some ten years apart if a guess had to be made.⁷ Lacking reliable information on when they were composed, in what order, and how far apart, it is hazardous at best to base a study of Rolle's views on a supposition of change over time.

Second, the best explanation for the different emphases and similarities between the works cannot be reduced to the passing of time, because close reading of the sources did not reveal any obvious development in one direction or another. Rather, greater attention must be paid to Rolle's authorial intentions in relation to the genre of the works and their intended audience.⁸ It can be hypothesised, for example, that a vernacular epistle addressed to a nun presents a different view of female sexuality than a semi-autobiographical Latin treatise to the clergy. Even two passages within the same work can seem to contradict each other. Rolle is not always transparent or consistent, so only by reading between the lines and analysing the function of key passages as well as the intention behind them, and rearranging observations to reconstruct an argument, can Rolle's view of friendship, and its mixed-gender variant specifically, be understood.

There has been no previous scholarship dedicated solely to Rolle's writings on friendship, but the topic has not gone entirely without comment. Modern scholarship on Rolle, the present study included, is indebted to Hope Emily Allen's 1927 *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for His Biography*. It is both a thorough manuscript study which determined Rolle's canon and a reconstruction of his life and the people around him based on any available documents and conjecture. For information on Rolle's

⁶ Allen, *Writings*, 430–526; E. J. F. Arnould, 'Richard Rolle and the Sorbonne', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 23 (1939), 68–101; Watson, *Invention*, 273–278. For both Rolle's life and the chronology of his works, see chapter 2.2 below.

⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 277–278.

⁸ Indeed, Paul F. Theiner has suggested that differences between Rolle's treatises may be better explained by his choice of writing mode rather than a systematic development to be traced in his career. Paul F. Theiner, *The Contra amatores mundi of Richard Rolle of Hampole* (University of California Publications. English Studies 33), Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 1968, 40–41.

patrons and disciples, especially Margaret Kirkeby, Allen is invaluable. Though at times erroneous or too speculative, the study has yet to be replaced.⁹

The other major monograph is Nicholas Watson's 1991 *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, which offers an interpretation of Rolle's literary career as a project of building his authority as a religious writer and contemplative hermit. Watson's approach of reading Rolle's texts as concerned with his own status and frequently blending didactic and apologetic modes is very much like the method applied in the present thesis. Being the only recent scholar to have discussed Rolle's career in its entirety, including his relationship to women and Margaret Kirkeby specifically, Watson is the scholar most frequently cited throughout this study. The reliance on Watson may seem excessive, but there is no comparable study of Richard Rolle available and the similarity of methods and interests allows for fruitful disagreement with or support of Watson's interpretations.¹⁰

Two other monographs have recently challenged or adjusted parts of Watson's picture of Rolle. Denis Renevey's *Language, Self and Love* (2001) explores Rolle's indebtedness to the language of twelfth-century commentaries on the Song of Songs in the making of his authorial, as well as actual, self. Renevey's interpretation tempers the self-referentiality of Watson's Rolle by pointing to the intertextuality of his affective strategy. For present purposes, Renevey's interpretation of Rolle's attitude towards women is especially useful.¹¹ Claire Elizabeth McIlroy's *The English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle* (2004), on the other hand, challenges the focus on the historical Rolle and instead wants to give his works a proper reading as texts to show how they construct an implied audience wider than the supposed immediate recipients. Her observations about the English works are valuable, and her attention to the literary function of their intimate mode of address is a salutary reminder that the commonplaces of friendly discourse need not presuppose an actual friendship outside the text. McIlroy restricts her treatment to three texts – *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living* – which unfortunately limits the scope of her conclusions, as does her decision to keep to the level of literary analysis at the expense of the

⁹ Allen, *Writings*.

¹⁰ Watson, *Invention*.

¹¹ Denis Renevey, *Language, self and love. Hermeneutics in the writings of Richard Rolle and the commentaries on the Song of songs*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2001.

historical. Hers is, nonetheless, the most comprehensive analysis of Rolle's vernacular treatises.¹² In addition to these four monographs, a wide selection of articles and monographs about Richard Rolle, his historical context, the medieval tradition of friendship and the religious literature of the Middle Ages is used to illuminate the primary sources.

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusions, the thesis consists of four main chapters. Chapter 2, 'Sources and Background', contains an overview of Rolle's life and work, an introduction to the eight primary sources used – their dating, transmission, genre and other basic data – as well as a brief survey of the theories of friendship from the Antiquity to Rolle's day. Chapter 3, 'God, the World and Friendship', begins the story from God's friendship as the greatest good, contrasts it with the inadequacy of worldly friendship, and then sketches a possibility of true Christian friendship between holy people. The chapter is primarily concerned with describing Rolle's friendship theory and placing it into proper relationship to tradition and his own thought. With these prerequisites in place, chapter 4, 'Spiritual Instruction – A Model of Friendship Between Men and Women', can tackle the central question of the thesis: friendship between men and women and its relationship to spiritual instruction. The chapter offers an interpretation of why Rolle presented this formulation and how it might have served his apologetic purposes. Chapter 5, 'Friendship Actualised', sorts out the implications of Rolle's theory: first his vernacular pieces of instruction are investigated as expressions of the instruction-friendship he theorised in his Latin works, and finally Rolle's relationship to the anchoress Margaret Kirkeby is evaluated as a potential candidate for the kind of holy friendship Rolle claimed to be seeking.

¹² Claire Elizabeth McIlroy, *The English prose treatises of Richard Rolle* (Studies in Medieval Mysticism 4), Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 2004.

2 Sources and Background

2.1 *Richard Rolle: Man and Author*

Richard Rolle was an English hermit and religious writer who lived in Yorkshire in the 14th century. The *Officium et miracula* is the principal source of his early life. According to the legend, he was the son of William Rolle and originated in Thornton in the diocese of York. His parents acquired some education for him, and when he grew up, master Thomas de Neville, at some point archdeacon of Durham, sponsored him in Oxford. At eighteen, Rolle left his studies and fled his home to become a hermit. He went to pray in a church where the wife and sons of John Dalton saw him, and the sons recognised him from Oxford. He was then invited to stay in the Dalton household, where he was supported in the hermit's life. Later he left the Daltons and travelled elsewhere.¹³

Details of Rolle's later life are more obscure. At some point, he moved into the neighbourhood of the Cistercian nunnery of Hampole. There he seems to have acted as a spiritual guide, at least in a literary capacity, to the local nuns. Rolle was eventually buried in Hampole; indeed, he is often known as the hermit of Hampole. The nuns of Hampole are considered the likeliest proponents of his cult in the 1380s. The *Officium* was written about his life and posthumous miracles, but he was never canonised.¹⁴ By his own writings, Rolle is known as a contemplative who within five years of his conversion received peculiar spiritual experiences or mystical sensations: *calor*, *dulcor* and *canor* are some of the terms he uses to describe the heat, sweetness and song through which he experienced God's love.¹⁵

The story of the *Officium* cannot be taken at face value, of course. Watson notes the similarities between Rolle's flight and putting on the hermit's garb and the conversion of St Francis. Such intertextuality makes it difficult to separate fact from hagiographical fiction.¹⁶ Furthermore, biographical information about Rolle

¹³ *The Officium and Miracula of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. Reginald M. Woolley, London: SPCK 1919, 23–29, 39.

¹⁴ Allen, *Writings*, 511–517.

¹⁵ See, for example, chapter 15 of *The Incendium amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. Margaret Deanesly, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1915, 187–191; Watson, *Invention*, 33.

¹⁶ Watson, *Invention*, 40–41. On the possibilities and limits of hagiographical sources, see Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their sex. Female sanctity and society ca. 500–1100*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 1998, 17–57.

outside his own writings and the *Officium* is scarce, and the available sources allow for a wide spectrum of interpretations. Watson suspects the scarcity is because he was not as popular in his lifetime as he later became.¹⁷ Allen has made an extensive investigation into possible sources for Rolle's biography, but some of it is either too speculative to take as fact or corrected by later scholarship. Her identification of the Thornton in the *Officium* as Thornton Dale, near Pickering seems credible – a manuscript of the *Officium* mentions Pickering in a later hand. Allen suggests that Rolle's family may have moved to Yaffoth, Richmondshire in his youth, but fails to reliably identify either Richard or his father from surviving records.¹⁸ Manuscripts frequently date Rolle's death at September 30, 1349, which makes the plague a likely cause of death. His birth is harder to date. Allen allows for a narrow margin on either side of 1300.¹⁹ Based on his revised chronology of Rolle's works, however, Watson suggests a later date of birth between 1305 and 1310. If Watson is correct, Rolle's entire writing career took place in the 1330s and 1340s.

Of Rolle's living conditions, Watson notes that he must have had easy access to a fairly substantial library of theological works and a steady supply of parchment or paper. The image of an anti-intellectual wandering hermit transmitted by the *Officium* is therefore not believable. Rolle may have studied at Oxford longer than reported, he probably lived a more stable life than imagined, and it is likely that he had some kind of clerical patronage – lay patrons would not have owned glossed Bibles and the specialised theological works he used in his literary work.²⁰

Wolfgang Riehle characterises the fourteenth century, and the late Middle Ages in general, as an era when the individual began to look for a personal relationship with God beyond the institutional possibilities of the church. George Keiser notes there was a growing demand in fourteenth-century England for vernacular literature of spiritual instruction, a development which according to Eamon Duffy only gained momentum towards the next century due to a growing number of devout literate lay folk.²¹ On the other hand, already the thirteenth century had witnessed an increase in lay women's religious ambitions throughout

¹⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 33. For a thorough overview of the historiography of Rolle's biography, see Watson, *Invention*, 32–40.

¹⁸ Allen, *Writings*, 431–436.

¹⁹ Allen, *Writings*, 431, 517; Watson, *Invention*, 278.

²⁰ Watson, *Invention*, 296–298.

Western Christendom; in England, the century was marked by women entering anchorholds in great numbers.²²

The anchorite phenomenon was a peculiar feature of English religious life: hermits who led a solitary life had existed for centuries, and Benedict of Nursia referred to them as *anachorita*, but the medieval anchorites were not typical hermits. Rather, they were a type of stationary hermit often physically enclosed in a cell, under ecclesiastical oversight and consecrated in a symbolic funeral rite. The cells were typically attached to a church, so the anchorite could hear Mass and receive the Eucharist. In England, the phenomenon was more widespread than elsewhere, and several manuals to the anchoritic life were produced, foremost among them Aelred of Rievaulx's *De institutione inclusarum* (twelfth century) and the anonymous *Ancrene Wisse* (thirteenth century).²³

Richard Rolle relates to this general development in several ways. For one, he was an independent hermit who chose the solitary life of his own will and did not receive episcopal authorisation. Watson does not think Rolle's institutionally irregular position caused trouble with the authorities, since ecclesiastical control of hermits seems to have been lax. However, according to Renevey, Rolle was somewhat anomalous as a literate hermit who sought to teach others – most of his colleagues mended roads and bridges. Rolle was criticised for his lack of asceticism, his changing of abode, and his relationships with women. Watson suggests this was due to his ill-defined status and personal character – it was not clear to Rolle's contemporaries how, exactly, to regard a hermit like him.²⁴

²¹ Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars. Traditional religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2005, 61–63; George R. Keiser, 'Noght how lang man lif; bot how wele': The laity and the Ladder of Perfection', *De cella in seculum. Religious and secular life and devotion in late medieval England*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1989, 145; Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English mystics*, transl. Bernard Standring, London, Boston & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, 13–14

²² Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their patrons in medieval England*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1985, 286. On religious lay women elsewhere, see Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly saints. Social interaction of Dominican penitent women in Italy, 1200–1500* (Bibliotheca Historica 35), Helsinki: Suomen historiallinen seura 1999, 26–33.

²³ Chapter 1 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* in *La règle de Saint Benoît I (prologue – ch. 7)*, ed. de Vogüé & Neufville (Sources Chrétiennes 181), Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1972, 436; Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English devotional prose and the female audience*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1990, 23–31; Warren, *Anchorites and their patrons*, 103. For a slightly dated but thorough introduction to the phenomenon, see Rotha Mary Clay, *The hermits and anchorites of England*, London: Methuen & co. Ltd, 1914, particularly pp. 73–84.

²⁴ Denis Renevey, 'Looking for a context: Rolle, anchoritic culture and the office of the dead', *Medieval texts in context*. Abingdon: Routledge 2008, 202; Watson, *Invention*, 41–47.

Rolle was also one of the first English writers to answer – or anticipate – the new demand for vernacular devotional literature. He lived with rich lay people who sponsored his work, and at least toward the end of his life affiliated himself with Cistercian nuns and an anchoress, Margaret Kirkeby. Despite his association with laity, then, his major vernacular works were directed to a professional religious audience and his activity can only be understood against the background of lay piety on the one hand and anchoritic devotion on the other.²⁵

If material about Rolle is scarce, his own writings are voluminous. They contain Biblical commentaries and discursive expositions, treatises on the contemplative life, works of spiritual instruction, meditations of the Passion, a Latin poem and some short pieces of English prose and verse.²⁶ The works this study focuses on fall into the categories of treatises and spiritual instruction, but other major works include the *Latin Psalter* and the *English Psalter* and expositions on the Song of Songs and Job (*Super Canticum canticorum* and *Expositio super lectiones mortuorum*).

With the exception of *The Form of Living*, Rolle's last work, it is difficult to date individual works or connect them to any specific part of his life. However, Watson has suggested an order of composition for the works based primarily on their internal relationships and some external evidence. Though not in all aspects beyond doubt, as he admits, it has made Allen's earlier chronology obsolete. With the exception of placing *Contra amatores mundi* after *Melos amoris*,²⁷ the present study relies on Watson's chronology. The probable order of the works most used is therefore: *Incendium amoris*, *Melos amoris*, *Contra amatores mundi*, *Emendatio vitae*, *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living*; *Ego dormio* may also be somewhat earlier.²⁸

2.2 Sources

The present study makes substantial use of eight primary sources. With the exception of the *Officium et miracula*, the works were authored by Rolle. Four of

²⁵ On the recipients of Rolle's works, see chapter 2.2.

²⁶ For an almost complete canon of Rolle's works, see Allen, *Writings*. Ralph Hanna adds to them *The Lessons of Dirige* and its Latin blueprint which seems to have served as a draft for his longer commentary on Job, *Expositio super novem lectiones mortuorum*. Ralph Hanna, *Richard Rolle. Uncollected prose and verse with related northern texts* (Early English Text Society 329), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, lxiv–lxvi.

²⁷ See below, chapter 2.2.

²⁸ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 104; Watson, *Invention*, 278.

them are in Latin (*Incendium amoris*, *Melos amoris*, *Contra amatores mundi* and *Emendatio vitae*) and three in Middle English (*Ego dormio*, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living*); they will be discussed in the given order.

The *Officium et miracula* of Richard Rolle is an important source for Rolle's life and his relationship with the recluse Margaret Kirkeby. It consists of nine *lectiones* with the appropriate hymns, prayers *et cetera* for the Hours, as well as a collection of miracles Rolle was recorded to have performed after his death. The Cistercian nuns of Hampole and affiliated persons are the likeliest proponents of Rolle's cult and compilers of the *Officium*. The Office in the surviving manuscripts does not seem to be intended for monastic services, but Allen contends that it may have been re-written and compressed from twelve lessons – as appropriate for Hampole – to nine as new material pushed the miracles into a collection separate from the Office. The two dated miracles in the collection occurred in 1381 and 1383, which makes the likely date of composition a little later, although it is possible the miracles were inserted later.²⁹

The earliest of Rolle's own writings I make use of is the *Incendium amoris*. Beyond Watson's estimate that it was written some years before 1343 there is little evidence to connect the work to any specific occasion of composition, but Watson considers it Rolle's first properly original work as regards form and content. It opens in Rolle's authorial career a new phase after some early attempts at biblical exposition, pastoral didactics and devotional verse.³⁰ This, along with the fact that it contains plenty of autobiographical material and a miniature treatise on friendship³¹ – Rolle's most substantial discussion of the topic – makes it a natural starting point for our investigation.

Some manuscripts refer to *Incendium amoris* as *tractatus* ('treatise'), though several more follow Rolle in referring to it simply as *liber*, book.³² It is a heterogeneous work containing scriptural interpretation, autobiography, prayer, pastoral instruction, exhortations to contemplative life and more. The apparent goal of the work is to exhort the reader to embrace the love of God, and show the fervent nature of that love. Watson argues that the work also exhibits a controversial or apologetic motive to assert Rolle's sanctity and legitimacy as a

²⁹ *Officium*, 83, 85; Allen, *Writings*, 51.

³⁰ Watson, *Emendatio*, 19; Watson, *Invention*, 113. For an introduction to Rolle's earliest work, see Allen, *Writings*, 89–112, 145–197, and Watson, *Invention*, 75–112.

³¹ Cap. 39 in the edition used. *Incendium amoris*, 261–266.

³² *Incendium amoris*, 147; Allen, *Writings*, 213–223.

religious author.³³ It will be interesting to see how the author's preoccupation with defending his sanctity shows in the material concerning friendship.

The book consists of a dedicatory epistle or prologue and 42 chapters, sometimes numbered as two books instead of one. The numbering and chapter titles appear to be the work of later copyists or readers, but the chapter breaks are fairly constant and probably authentic.³⁴ The experience of heat, *calor* or *fervor*, is a central theme of *Incendium amoris*, but there is a tripartite structure marked by autobiographical passages (the prologue, chapter 15 and chapter 31), and the imagery in each part correspond with one of Rolle's mystical gifts, culminating in the most elevated and alliterative section associated with the gift of song. Watson suggests as possible models for the form of the work Anselm of Canterbury's *Orationes sive meditationes* and Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones super cantica canticorum*, as well as the *Bible*.³⁵

Melos amoris, is the second of Rolle's Latin 'rhapsodic treatises', as Watson describes them.³⁶ He argues it was the culmination of the literary self-fashioning Rolle begun in *Incendium amoris* and *Contra amatores mundi*, and dates it in the mid-1340s. Renevey argues that *Contra amatores mundi* is a later work than *Melos amoris*, though, on the basis that it demonstrates developments in Rolle's self-presentation and relationship to his audience that are not yet evident in *Melos amoris*.³⁷ Renevey's case is convincing, but it does not invalidate Watson's dating: both works would have been composed close to each other in the mid-1340s.

Rolle himself referred to *Melos amoris* as 'liber de perfectione et gloria sanctorum'.³⁸ The work is a series of postils which blends third-person discourse and autobiography, as is typical of Rolle. It sets out to exhibit the hermit's life of contemplation and explain the joys it brings. Much of it is concerned with personal apology. Rolle defends his way of life against critics among the rich, the learned and the religious and asserts the sanctity of the gifts he has received and,

³³ Watson, *Invention*, 118, 124–125, 132–133.

³⁴ I will henceforth refer to Deanesly's numbering of the chapters, in which the prologue is unnumbered and the work treated as a single book. See Deanesly, *Incendium amoris*, xiii–xvii.

³⁵ Allen, *Writings*, 213; Watson, *Invention*, 117–122.

³⁶ See Watson, *Emendatio*, 18. Watson also applies the term to *Incendium amoris* and *Melos amoris*. It is fitting since it distinguishes them from commentaries and captures Rolle's enthusiastic, alliterative celebration of God's love.

³⁷ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 104–106, 124–125; Watson, *Invention*, 171.

³⁸ For further discussion on the appropriate title, see Allen, *Writings*, 113 and E. J. F. Arnould, *The Melos amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, Oxford: Blackwell 1957, xv–xvii.

by extension, himself. He also outlines his mission to teach others – a topic particularly relevant to the present study.³⁹

In most manuscripts, the text consists of 58 chapters, including the prologue, sometimes numbered and always without titles. Rolle sometimes refers to chapters, but Arnould considers the division largely artificial since the discussion does not respect its structure. The work's most prominent stylistic feature is its alliterative prose, characteristic of Rolle's work in general but taken to an extreme in *Melos amoris*.⁴⁰ Indeed, Watson goes so far as to interpret the work as a poetic representation of the mystical *canor*. It comes across to him as a literary show-piece of little use for the reader's spiritual edification: 'the idea that any sinner would repent of anything after reading *Melos amoris* other than the sheer folly of doing so is simply not plausible.' The judgement may be justified by the small number of surviving manuscripts – Allen is aware of 12 – and the fact that it generally appears in collections of Rolle's works, rather than with popular devotional works by other authors. Add to this the lack of marginalia and underlinings, and it seems *Melos amoris* was not read as much as Rolle's other works.⁴¹ As a source of his thought and authorial self-presentation, however, it is invaluable.

The trilogy of rhapsodic treatises celebrating the sanctity of the contemplative elect is concluded by *Liber de amore Dei contra amatores mundi*.⁴² As the title suggests, the book pits the lovers of God and the lovers of the world against each other. It puts even greater stress than usual, for Rolle, on the division between the elect and the reprobate or, as Paul F. Theiner puts it, the 'incompatibility of the sordid love of this world with the incontestably superior love of God.'⁴³ Allen interprets the bitter tone of the work as a reaction to recent hostilities with worldly people, possibly Rolle's patrons, but that's likely symptomatic of her over-enthusiasm to identify biographical information. A better explanation is the choice of genre which invokes secular love literature and

³⁹ Arnould, *Melos amoris*, xv–xxxii.

⁴⁰ To illustrate the prevalence of his style, the following passage was chosen completely at random: 'Perinde presentes passionēs pauper preparatus percipit et, penetrans profunda pietatis cum iugi gaudio, non cum gemitu, in gracia grandescit.' *Le chant d'amour (Melos amoris)* vol. 1, ed. E. J. F. Arnould (Sources Chrétiennes 168), Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1971, 160.

⁴¹ Allen, *Writings*, 114–115; Arnould, *Melos amoris*, xvii, xix, xxxvi–xxxvii; Watson, *Invention*, 173, 189.

⁴² The short form *Contra amatores mundi* is used throughout the study, in keeping with modern scholarship.

⁴³ Theiner, *Contra amatores*; 6; Watson, *Invention*, 160.

courtly contests: Rolle's task is to defeat the champions of worldly love in a battle of eloquence.⁴⁴

The work is divided into six or seven usually unnumbered sections, the seven-chapter versions splitting the first chapter in two. Otherwise the chapter division seems clear and authentic. The chapters are never titled. Each chapter repeats the core message of 'love of God against the lovers of the world' with small variations. Although the work does not present an autobiographical sequence, as Theiner argues, there are personal allusions and discussions of the difference between lovers of God and lovers of the world which provide relevant material for the present study.⁴⁵

Emendatio vitae is described by Allen as a manual and an epistle, even though she discusses it under the heading of Latin treatises. The work uses Rolle's own eremitic experience as a model for a generalised structure of spiritual life, adapted for a wide readership who cannot physically leave secular life.⁴⁶ The work consists of twelve chapters which concern twelve ascending stages in the spiritual life: conversion, contempt for the world, poverty, organising one's life, tribulation, patience, prayer, meditation, reading, purity of mind, love of God, and contemplation of God. The titles and their numbering are probably authentic. Each chapter is focused around a single word or phrase which has led Watson to compare the work to theological compendiums, though written in affective mode about the life of holiness.⁴⁷

Based on a manuscript dedication, Allen has suggested *Emendatio vitae* was originally written for a William Stopes whom she supposes was Rolle's disciple.⁴⁸ However, Rüdiger Spahl has recently dismissed both Allen's identification and the authenticity of the dedication as unconvincing.⁴⁹ To be sure, internal evidence does not imply a personal relationship between author and reader, and the work's subject matter and popularity imply a broad intended audience. *Emendatio vitae*

⁴⁴ Allen, *Writings*, 208. On the courtly connotations, see Watson, *Invention*, 160–161.

⁴⁵ Allen, *Writings*, 204–205; Theiner, *Contra amatores mundi*, 6–7, 19, 57–58; Watson, *Invention*, 161.

⁴⁶ Allen, *Writings*, 245; Watson, *Invention*, 208–209, 214–215; see also Watson, *Emendatio*, 5, 20–21.

⁴⁷ Allen, *Writings*, 231; Watson, *Invention*, 208–211.

⁴⁸ Allen, *Writings*, 40–41, 201, 230–231.

⁴⁹ Rüdiger Spahl, *De emendatione vitae. Eine kritische Ausgabe des lateinischen Textes von Richard Rolle. Mit einer Übersetzung ins Deutsche und Untersuchungen zu den lateinischen und englischen Handschriften* (Super alta perennis. Studien zur Wirkung der klassischen Antike 6), Göttingen: V&R Unipress & Bonn University Press 2009, 153–156.

must have been Rolle's most popular work by far: it survives in 110 manuscripts, both in Latin and in various English translations, and appears not only in connection with Rolle's work, but side by side with other ascetic and devotional works written for a wide audience, such as the early 14th century *Meditationes vitae Christi* and Innocent III's *De miseria humanae conditionis*.⁵⁰ The work's individual contribution to the present study is modest as it lacks in autobiographical references and theory of friendship and is not personal in tone, but its similarity with the English works allows for fruitful comparison.

Ego dormio is Rolle's first major English work, with the possible exception of the *English Psalter*. Watson describes it as a didactic epistle or an epistolary homily on the stages of spiritual perfection. It is structured around three degrees of love: the first part exhorts the reader to leave secular life behind, the second gives instruction in the contemplative life, and finally the third part concerns the mystical joys of contemplative love. Each part is concluded with a piece of devotional lyric. The work's erotic tone affiliates it with bridal mysticism and, in McIlroy's interpretation, attempts to seduce the reader to love God.⁵¹

If *Ego dormio* is an epistle, who was it written for? This issue must be discussed before we can investigate the three English works as expressions of friendship in chapter 5.1. In one manuscript, a Cambridge MS Dd.v.64, a rubric ascribes the work to a 'nun of Yedingham.'⁵² Another manuscript claims Rolle 'wrot [the work] to an ankeresse.' Finally, MS Longleat 29 implies Margaret Kirkeby was the recipient of all those Rolle's English works collected in the manuscript. Ogilvie-Thomson, who bases her edition of Rolle's English writings on this manuscript, defends the ascription as potentially authentic. Allen and Watson maintain that the dedication refers to the collection rather than individual works within, and may indicate an authorial compilation made for Margaret upon her enclosure – thus making the authenticity of both the Dd.v.64 and the Longleat 29 ascriptions defensible.⁵³ This seems more feasible than Ogilvie-Thomson's stance, but it is still somewhat speculative. It is possible that the story of the

⁵⁰ Allen, *Writings*, 231–242; Watson, *Invention*, 209–210.

⁵¹ Watson, *Invention*, 226; Watson, *Emendatio*, 18; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 58–59.

⁵² '[S]criptus cuidam moniali de yedyngham.' Quoted in Allen, *Writings*, 247.

⁵³ Allen, *Writings*, 34–35, 247–249; S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, *Richard Rolle: prose and verse edited from MS Longleat 29 and related manuscripts* (Early English Text Society 293), Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988, lxvi–lxvii; Watson, *Invention*, 226, 248.

friendship between Rolle and Margaret, as presented in the *Officium*, caused the scribe to ascribe all his English writings to Margaret.

Scholarly assessment of the internal evidence as to the work's intended audience has been diverse. In Allen's opinion, the basic instruction of the first part implies the recipient was a secular lady only planning to become a nun at Yedingham, or so lax in her monastic discipline that Rolle thought she needed reform. In Ogilvie-Thomson's estimate, the recipient must have been a secular woman ignorant of monastic life. Watson agrees that the work at first seems unsuitable for a nun, but points out that the first degree is covered only superficially, whereas the discussion on the second degree, associated with monastic life, is three times as long. Watson thus believes it to be for a monastic woman, a realisation of Rolle's special ministry to religious women.

McIlroy does not contest that *Ego dormio* was probably written to a woman in the early stages of her spiritual career, but she warns against over-emphasising the initial recipient. The various manuscript ascriptions could very well be scribal dedications. The work does not conform to the conventions of medieval letter writing, and McIlroy shows that the text itself does not clearly posit a single female recipient. The scholarly treatment of *Ego dormio* as an epistle is thus problematic if it does not acknowledge the quasi-public, treatise-like quality of 14th century letters. Much of McIlroy's argument is sound, although Vincent Gillespie has pointed out that Rolle's eclectic style hardly ever conforms to the conventions of a single genre.⁵⁴ *Ego dormio*, therefore, should be read both as a didactic epistle most likely to a nun of Yedingham and as a manual with wider application.

The Commandment is a short didactic piece written in a distant and occasionally severe tone. It lacks autobiographical references, and Rolle's narratorial voice adopts the institutional authority of a preacher. It is practical and does not put much faith in the reader's spiritual security – she needs to be warned against worldly desires and to embrace Christ. Though labelled by scholars an epistle, manuscript tradition refers to *The Commandment* as a *tractatus* or *trētis*. Watson identifies several borrowed passages and ideas from both Rolle's previous

⁵⁴ Allen, *Writings*, 250; Ogilvie-Thomson, *Prose and verse*, lxvi–lxvii; Watson, *Invention*, 227–228, 231; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 60–63, 97; Vincent Gillespie, 'Claire Elizabeth McIlroy. The English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle' (review), *Mystics Quarterly* 31:1 (2005), 52–57 on p. 55.

work and other authors, deciding it looks more like a patchwork than an original composition.⁵⁵

The scholarly discussion of *The Commandment's* initial audience has much in common with that of *Ego dormio*. Dd.v.64 says it was written to a nun of Hampole⁵⁶, whereas Longleat 29 ascribes it to Margaret Kirkeby along with its other texts. Ogilvie-Thomson accepts that the work was written to a nun, but since Margaret was a nun at Hampole during Rolle's association with the convent, the validity of both ascriptions can be maintained. Allen does not believe that Rolle would have written several of the English epistles to the same person as that would have been redundant. Contrary to her, Ogilvie-Thomson and McIlroy both argue for the distinctiveness of each work, intended to fulfil different needs at different stages of life. There is a general consensus that the work was written to a nun, as shown by passages such as 'þi habit seith þat þou has forsaken þe world, þat þou art gyffen to Goddis seruyce'⁵⁷ and 'if þi body be cled withouten as þyn ordre wille, loke þat þi soule be nat naked within, þat þyn ordre forbedeth.'⁵⁸ McIlroy, though, argues for the applicability of such passages in lay religious life as an allegory of hypocrisy. Her argument as to the work's reception, if not the author's original intention, is given credit by MS Magd. Pepysian 2125, which states it is 'a good rule for men that desireth to lyue perfit lif.'⁵⁹ Clearly, by the 15th century, readers did not consider *The Commandment* appropriate exclusively for nuns.

The *Form of Living* is almost certainly Rolle's last work, and the only one whose date and occasion of writing is known. It was written in the last months of Rolle's life, late 1348 or early 1349, on Margaret Kirkeby's enclosure at an anchorhold. It is the one work of Rolle's that most deserves to be called a manual and an epistle – even if, as McIlroy points out, not even the *Form* conforms to epistolary conventions and the dedication embedded in the text is only at the end of the work. The first half of the work gives advice and warnings intended to help

⁵⁵ Watson, *Invention*, 236–238.

⁵⁶ [S]criptus cuidam sorori de Hampole, quoted in Allen, *Writings*, 252.

⁵⁷ *The Commandment* in *Richard Rolle: prose and verse edited from MS Longleat 29 and related manuscripts*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson (Early English Text Society 293), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 34–39 on p. 37.

⁵⁸ *The Commandment*, 38.

⁵⁹ *The Commandment*, 37–38; Allen, *Writings*, 251–256; Ogilvie-Thomson, *Prose and verse*, lxxix–lxxx; Watson, *Invention*, 236; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 100–103, 110, 138–139, 186.

the recipient adjust to solitary life, whereas the second half contains more elevated mystical material on the love of God and the contemplative life. Both Allen and Watson think that the *Form of Living* contains a relatively comprehensive and advanced account of Rolle's mysticism.⁶⁰

Unlike the generalised message of *Emendatio vitae*, the *Form* is written for the specific vocation of solitary life and was the first major English guide to the anchoritic life since *Ancrene Wisse*.⁶¹ Despite its ascription to a specific individual, the *Form of Living* achieved considerable popularity; it survives in 38 manuscripts, which is more than the other two English works combined.⁶² The work is most interesting as evidence of a real relationship between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby and, more generally, of Rolle's literary practices of spiritual instruction.

All Rolle's works presented above have been transmitted in several manuscript copies, ranging from 12 (*Melos amoris*) to 110 (*Emendatio vitae*) by Allen's count. The top three – *Emendatio vitae*, *Incendium amoris* and *The Form of Living* – were also translated into Middle English or Latin in the 15th century. The *Officium* survives in four manuscripts.⁶³

As we proceed to analyse the material in these eight primary sources, it is important to keep in mind especially the intended audience and genre of the works. It will become evident that *Melos amoris*, for example, paints a very different picture of women than does *The Form of Living*, and the question of who was supposed to read it, and why, is crucial to making sense of this. Furthermore, while didactic and apologetic motives intermingle in all of Rolle's works, there is a clear difference of emphasis between them which demonstrates the conventions of genre but also a gradual development in Rolle's literary interests: the three Latin 'rhapsodic treatises' attempted to explain and defend Rolle's way of life and system of thought, whereas *Emendatio vitae* and the English works were primarily concerned with the reader's spiritual needs. With these points in mind, the diverse material in the sources can be placed in the right context.

⁶⁰ Allen, *Writings*, 263; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 147; Watson, *Invention*, 248, 250–255.

⁶¹ Watson, *Invention*, 242, 248.

⁶² Allen, *Writing*, 257–262.

⁶³ Allen, *Writings* lists and describes the manuscript she was aware of. For an updated catalogue of Rolle's English texts, see Ralph Hanna, *The English manuscripts of Richard Rolle. A descriptive catalogue*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press 2010.

2.3 Theories of Friendship in Antiquity and the Middle Ages

In this chapter, I will sketch the history of ideas and theories about friendship from antiquity to the late middle ages in order to identify the relevant background of Rolle's thought and better understand how he used the material transmitted to him, either through direct access to sources or as part of his general intellectual context. As will be seen throughout the rest of this study, the ideas presented here survived in some form up to Rolle's time. The focus will be on material produced, developed and transmitted in and for a religious context; the complexities of secular friendship, courtly romance and political alliances cannot be addressed satisfactorily in such a short space, and the intellectual-philosophical-religious tradition discussed below is fairly self-contained. Furthermore, the goal is not to paint a complete, representative picture of every century covered, but rather to pick out the key themes and literary material which later writers like Rolle drew upon.

There is no uniform classical theory of friendship, but some common themes can be traced.⁶⁴ The starting point for Greek and Roman philosophy on friendship is the Pythagorean idea that friends have all things in common and that friendship is equality. The ideal can be achieved in a harmonious community of friends.⁶⁵ In general, it can be said that classical friendship blurred the line between the private and the public spheres; ideal friendship was a personal attachment that was supposed to contribute to political life and the common good.⁶⁶ Other commonplaces included the intimate relationship between friendship and justice, the possibility of true friendship only between the virtuous, the benevolence felt towards a friend, the rational and reasonable nature of friendship, and the importance of affections in fostering intimacy.⁶⁷

In a study about classical friendship, one ought to discuss Plato. However, the dialogues on the topic – *Lysis*, *Symposium*, and to a lesser extent, *Phaedrus* – were unavailable in the Latin West until after Rolle's time and could have no

⁶⁴ Eoin G. Cassidy, 'He who has friends can have no friend': classical and Christian perspectives on the limits to friendship', *Friendship in medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1999, 46.

⁶⁵ James McEvoy, 'The theory of friendship in the Latin middle ages: hermeneutics, contextualisation and the transmission and reception of ancient texts and ideas, from c. AD 350 to c. 1500', *Friendship in medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1999, 6.

⁶⁶ Eva Österberg, *Friendship and love, ethics and politics. Studies in mediaeval and early modern history* (The Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture Series 3), Budapest & New York: Central European University Press 2010, 28–29.

⁶⁷ Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 45–46.

direct influence on him.⁶⁸ The first and most important Greek writer, for the purposes of the present study, is Aristotle (384–322 BC). He discussed friendship in the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle distinguished between three types of friendship: those based on utility and pleasure, and true friendship. Though natural sociability pushes people into making friendships of the lesser kind, friendship in the proper sense of the word can only exist between men of virtue. This is not an impersonal criterion: a friend must be good absolutely, but also good for me. Maintaining a friendship requires frequent contact and physical proximity; separation is difficult. True friendship is exclusive, permanent, and difficult to achieve; multiple fleeting relationships of pleasure and utility may begin and end, but there can only be one or a few true friendships in one's life. A true friend is another self; friends share one soul. Love for and harmony with oneself is interdependent with love for and harmony with one's friend.⁶⁹

Aristotelian friendship is fuelled by goodwill or benevolence (*eunomia*), and is demonstrated by wanting to do good for the friend for his own sake. Its final purpose, however, is its contribution to the *telos* of human life: contemplation (*theoria*). Contemplation requires seeing oneself clearly. This is possible only by perceiving a friend, the other self, whose actions exhibit virtue equal to one's own.⁷⁰ As will be seen in the final chapter, Rolle himself drew a startlingly similar connection between friendship and contemplation, albeit in a different conceptual framework. Aristotle's ideas began to spread anew after Robert Grosseteste's Latin translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1246, though Eoin Cassidy argues that early Christian thought on friendship had a lot in common with Aristotle, ensuring an indirect transmission into the Middle Ages.⁷¹ The friend as a mirror of the soul is an Aristotelian idea that remained prominent in Christian thought.

Cicero's (106–43 BC) influence on subsequent friendship discourse is foundational. His dialogue *Laelius de amicitia* (44 BC) is a thorough investigation

⁶⁸ See James Hankins, 'Plato in the middle ages', *Dictionary of the middle ages* vol. 9, New York: Macmillan 1987, 694-704.

⁶⁹ Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 46–48; see also McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 14.

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics*, transl. David Ross, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, IX:9, 177. The relationship between self-sufficiency and friendship in Aristotle's ethics has been the topic of some recent discussion. See Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 48–50; Zena Hitz, 'Aristotle on self-knowledge and friendship', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 11:12 (2011), 1-28; Daniel P. Maher, 'Contemplative friendship in Nicomachean ethics', *The Review of Metaphysics* 65:4 (2012), 765–794.

⁷¹ Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 45–46. On the transmission of Aristotle's work, see McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 26.

of the value and proper conduct of friendship. Cicero represented a tempered, diluted form of Stoicism and was mostly concerned to discuss ordinary, common-sense friendships, rather than a philosophical ideal few can achieve. He acknowledged a natural, universal bond between all humans – a characteristically Stoic idea – but considered the bond of particular friendship stronger.⁷² According to Cicero's definition, 'friendship is in fact nothing other than a community of views on all matters human and divine, together with goodwill and affection.'⁷³ Friendship can only exist between good men, and goodness is defined by virtues of the public life. Conversely, friendship can never justify wrongdoing. Virtue attracts affection according to nature, so proper friendship between the virtuous cannot end: 'but since nature itself cannot be changed, true friendships are for that reason everlasting.'⁷⁴ Those with a plenitude of good qualities are best suited for friendship; it is not a relationship based on need or insufficiency. Just like for Aristotle, true affection can only exist between two or a few people.⁷⁵

Ciceronian friends give each other good advice, even forcefully when needed. Friends should be corrected, but without sharpness or insult. Friends must treat inferiors as equals in a group of friends, and inferiors should not complain about the greater wealth, rank or intellect of their friends; one should help one's lesser friends to rise to one's level.⁷⁶ The idea of corrective and edifying friendship re-emerged in Christian traditions of monastic friendship and spiritual instruction, although without Cicero's emphasis on equality.

Cicero's dialogue was firmly rooted in the political context of the late Roman Republic and could not be absorbed as such. Early and medieval Christian writers used the text as a 'goldmine of appropriate quotations'⁷⁷ divorced from their original context. Curiously, it is not Cicero's definition but that of the historian Sallust that became the most popular classical definition of friendship in

⁷² Cicero, *Laelius de amicitia* in *Laelius, on friendship (Laelius de amicitia) & The dream of Scipio (Somnium Scipionis)*, ed. & transl. J. G. F. Powell, Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd 1990, 28–73 on p. 36; Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 54; Albrecht Classen, 'Introduction: Friendship – The Quest for a Human Ideal and Value From Antiquity to the Early Modern Time', *Friendship in the middle ages and early modern age. Explorations of a fundamental ethical discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010, 8–9.

⁷³ 'Est enim amicitia nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio.' Cicero, *Laelius*, 36. For all quotes of the *Laelius*, Powell's translation is used.

⁷⁴ 'Sed quia natura mutari non potest, idcirco verae amicitiae sempiternae sunt.' Cicero, *Laelius*, 44.

⁷⁵ Cicero, *Laelius*, 36, 42, 46.

⁷⁶ Cicero, *Laelius*, 48, 58–60, 66.

⁷⁷ Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and community. The monastic experience 350–1250* (Cistercian Studies 95), Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc, xxxiii.

the Middle Ages: friendship is willing and not willing the same things.⁷⁸ As will be seen, Rolle was typical in this regard: he adapted both Sallust's definition and many of Cicero's ideas into a Christian model of his own, such as applying Cicero's aristocratic all-male model to friendship between men and women.. Before turning to the fourth-century Christian reconfiguration of classical thought that preceded Rolle, though, a brief overview of the Biblical background is appropriate.

The most popular example of Old Testament friendship throughout the Middle Ages was that of David and Jonathan. Jonathan's soul was 'bound with David's soul and Jonathan loved him like his own soul.'⁷⁹ Their friendship was first established and then renewed by a formal pact (*foedus*) with political undertones, and it would last because the Lord was between them and their seed forever.⁸⁰ When Jonathan has died, David lamented that Jonathan's love for him surpassed the love of women.⁸¹ While Rolle himself did not appeal to the example, some themes were relevant to him and Christian thought in general: loving a friend like oneself, friendship primarily concerning the soul, God as the basis of the friendship, and the superiority of true friendship to carnal love.

The New Testament example most often used is that of the particular affection between Jesus and the disciple he loved, identified in patristic and medieval literature as John. Notably, the disciple reclines beside Jesus at the Last Supper and is present with Mary mother of Jesus at the crucifixion, where the two take each other as mother and son.⁸² More explicit are the words of Jesus at the Last Supper when he calls the apostles his friends.⁸³ As McEvoy argues, the passage connects friendship and love, and indicates that friendship means having no secrets between each other – Christian friendship is based on a shared knowledge of God. McGuire points out that it also suggests that friendship with Christ demands obedience to him; to love is to obey.⁸⁴ Such a reading enables a conception of Christian devotion as friendship with Christ, on the one hand, and

⁷⁸ Sallust, *De coniuratione Catilinae. Orationes et epistolae ex historiis excerptae*, ed. Jacobs, Wirz & Kurfess, Dublin & Zürich: Weidmann 1970, p. 50, line 20:4; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, xxxvi.

⁷⁹ 'Anima Ionathan conligata est animae David et dilexit eum Ionathan quasi animam suam.' I Sm 18:1.

⁸⁰ I Sm 18:3, 20:16, 20:23, 20:42.

⁸¹ II Sm 1:26.

⁸² Jn 13:23–25, 19:26–27.

⁸³ Jn 15:12–17.

⁸⁴ McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 30; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, xxv.

justifies the demand for obedience in a relationship of spiritual instruction, on the other – both of which ideas the following chapters will relate to Rolle.

In the late third and the fourth century, Christian writers set out to reconcile classical ideas with new theology – or to dismiss the former altogether. Roughly speaking, Western writers of urban, aristocratic background took friendship for granted and adjusted Ciceronian language to fit their ideology, while the Eastern desert fathers wanted to flee the distractions of community life. Friendship was a worldly tie that could distract the hermit from his focus on God. In the desert, however, a relationship of instruction between spiritual father and son developed. In McGuire's interpretation of Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Anthony is presented as an archetypal authority figure who may socialise with disciples for their benefit, but never as an equal – his friendship is reserved for angels and God.⁸⁵ A shift from solitary to communal life brought with it the need for harmony and equality between brothers, as seen in Pachomius' (c. 290–346) prohibitions for monks to defend each other on any basis.⁸⁶ Intimate friendships could lead to favouritism, distraction, and dissent in the community.⁸⁷ As a hermit, the example of Anthony's spiritual fatherhood and solitary heroism was a model more relevant to Rolle than the monastic ideal of Pachomius.

Of early Western theologians, only Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397), Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and John Cassian (c. 360–435) discussed friendship at any length. Other writers, such as Jerome, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus, made passing references and demonstrated the language of friendship in their letters. All these writers were steeped in Greco-Roman culture and did not share the Eastern fathers' fear of intimacy and homosexuality between male friends. Sexual temptation was embodied in women – despite the fact that many of them had important celibate relationships with the opposite sex.⁸⁸

Ambrose's *De officiis* contains the first attempt to adapt Ciceronian friendship into a Christian framework. Ambrose used biblical examples to enrich Cicero's theory and adjust its emphasis, appealing especially to the example of Jesus. For Ambrose, benevolence preceded friendship; it enabled equality and the

⁸⁵ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 3–9.

⁸⁶ See *The Rules of Saint Pachomius in Pachomian koinonia volume two. Pachomian chronicles and rules*, transl. Armand Veilleux (Cistercian Studies 46), Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc, 1981, 141–195 on p. 178–179.

⁸⁷ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 17–25.

⁸⁸ Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 55; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 38–42

unity of will and virtue that is friendship.⁸⁹ To the classical virtues of loyalty and truthfulness, Ambrose added humility and mercy. He also emphasised, more than Cicero, the duty to endure hardship for the friend. Ambrose's significance is often seen in light of his influence on Augustine. More relevant to the present study, however, is his unreserved optimism about the relevance of friendship in Christian life and the fact that Aelred of Rievaulx, to whom we'll come later, borrowed long passages verbatim from *De officiis*.⁹⁰

Augustine did not write a treatise on friendship. The topic is discussed in *De civitate Dei* in general terms, particularly the unreliability of friends and the worry they cause.⁹¹ Most of his thoughts on friendship are to be found in his *Confessiones* and in letters. Despite his generally positive estimation of friendship, the mature Augustine did not believe in classical *amicitia*; without the Holy Spirit, virtue could not secure a lasting friendship amidst the fragility and uncertainty of human life. True friendship meant to love each other in Christ and Christ in each other – or to love so that God might be in the other, that is, for the sake of the friend's salvation.⁹²

For Augustine, friendship offered mundane pleasures: talk, laughter, acts of kindness, reading, levity and seriousness, benevolent disagreements, teaching and learning, longing for absent friends and welcoming them back. Even so, the real purpose of friendship was the pursuit of divine truths and insights. Friends shared wisdom to further each other's spiritual progress.⁹³ Jennifer Ebbeler argues that Augustine tried to achieve this by exchange of corrective letters; true friendship was supposed to involve mutual rebuke and correction.⁹⁴ This is especially relevant as a precedent when we consider Rolle's theory of friendship as instruction and edification. While Augustine did not offer a systematic

⁸⁹ Ambrose, *De officiis* vol. 1, ed. & transl. Ivor J. Davidson (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, III:133–137, pp. 432–434.

⁹⁰ Ambrose, *De officiis*, III:129–130, pp. 430–432. Cassidy, 'He who has friends', 55–57; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 44–45.

⁹¹ See especially book XIX, chapters 5 and 8; *Sancti Aurelii Augustini episcopi De civitate Dei libri XXII vol. 2, lib. XIV–XXII*, ed. Dombart & Kalb, Stuttgart & Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1993, 362–364, 367–368.

⁹² Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 16; C. Stephen Jaeger, 'Friendship of mutual perfecting in Augustine's Confessions and the failure of classical *amicitia*', *Friendship in the middle ages and early modern age. Explorations of a fundamental ethical discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010, 191–192; McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 32–33; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 48.

⁹³ Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 15–17; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 49–50

⁹⁴ See Jennifer V. Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians. Correction and community in Augustine's Letters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

Christianisation of friendship, in addressing the topic openly and frequently he guaranteed its legitimate, if often marginal, place in Christian thought.

Jerome (c. 347–420) is another likely influence on Richard Rolle's self-presentation. His letters transmitted his language of friendship, along with quotations from *Laelius*, to later writers who mimicked him. It is interesting to note that he exchanged letters with and dedicated biblical works to women – not unlike Rolle. He seems to have been acutely aware of the need to justify his familiarity with women, for the affectionate rhetoric in his letters to them was more restrained than in those to men. He did not present himself primarily as a friend but as an ascetic giving advice to women. Close relationships between the sexes required the man's complete authority as spiritual instructor.⁹⁵

In his *De institutis coenobiorum* and *Collationes patrum in scetica eremo*, John Cassian was primarily concerned with peace and harmony in the monastic community. Despite his practical advice to ward off disunity, he also used the example of Christ and John to defend the possibility of different degrees of friendship in the cloister. Such affection and preference must be based on the merit of the friend. Although he claimed to base his views on the Bible and advocated humility, poverty, fraternity and sharing of goods, he did adopt Cicero's ideas of friendship as virtue whose impulse originates in nature. Cassian set the precedent for properly disciplined Christian friendship in a monastic context. One of the few things the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, for example, says about particular friendship is that the abbot must not love one monk more than the other, except if a monk is better in actions or obedience.⁹⁶ It is a formulation reminiscent of Cassian's argument in the sixteenth conference on friendship, and left room for friendship to flourish in later centuries.⁹⁷

The writings of Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Cassian were often copied in the following centuries, and the value given to friendship varied from time to time and from place to place. There were some new contributions: the first documented use of the term *spiritualis amicitia* is found in Bede's (c. 672–735) *Vita Cuthberti*.⁹⁸ The letters sent and received by Boniface (c. 675–754) and Alcuin (c. 735–804) celebrate their friendships with men and women alike. Both

⁹⁵ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 57–58, 61, 64; Carolinne White, 'Friendship in absence – some patristic views', *Friendship in medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1999, 73.

⁹⁶ See chapter 2 in Benedict of Nursia, *Rule*, 444.

⁹⁷ McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 13, 19; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 78–83

⁹⁸ McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 25; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 91–95

literary circles adopted the definition of Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville of the friend as *custos animi*, guardian of the soul, with all the connotations of spiritual care and support. An interesting biblical feature of early medieval thought is that friendship was considered a pact, not something that grows gradually and naturally.⁹⁹ Apart from these few exceptions, not much new or notable was written about friendship until the 11th century. McGuire characterises the period of 850–1050 as an eclipse of monastic friendship.¹⁰⁰

The next significant figure in the theory of Christian friendship is Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). His intensively affectionate language 'contributed to a veritable revolution in the expression of human sentiment.'¹⁰¹ John Cassian was Anselm's primary source, and he emphasised the friendship of Christ and John at the Last Supper more than any previous author. Curiously, Anselm seems to have valued literary friendship more than physical interaction. Human friends can be harmful to one's spiritual life and self-awareness, so the ideal friend is kept at a distance. The mental image of the absent friend anchors one's tumultuous inner life. 'The friend is a linguistic artifice on which the mind meditates'¹⁰², Jacob McDonie argues. In fact, in his prayers Anselm posited a spiritual friendship with the saints who can mend his relationship with God. Anselm was also a spiritual instructor who composed his prayers to noble laywomen retired to semi-monastic life.¹⁰³ Not only did his writings on friendship shape Rolle's intellectual background, then, he also offered a model for Rolle's ministry to nuns and anchoresses.

After Anselm, in the twelfth century, spiritual friendship flourished. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, especially the devotion of the new Cistercian order and figures like Bernard of Clairvaux emphasised friendship and partnership with God, rather than a union in which the self is dissolved.¹⁰⁴ Love was considered to be the bond that glued monastic community together, and

⁹⁹ Hans-Werner Goetz, 'Beatus homo qui invenit amicum.' The concept of friendship in early medieval letters of the Anglo-Saxon tradition on the continent (Boniface, Alcuin)', *Friendship in medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1999, 125–126, 129–130; cf. McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 105–109, 125.

¹⁰⁰ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 116–156.

¹⁰¹ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 211.

¹⁰² R. Jacob McDonie, 'Mysterious friends in the Prayers and letters of Anselm of Canterbury', *Friendship in the middle ages and early modern age. Explorations of a fundamental ethical discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010, 326–327.

¹⁰³ McDonie, 'Mysterious friends', 314–315, 318–321, 324–328, 331, 337–338, 341.

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as mother. Studies in the spirituality of the high middle ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1982, 86–87.

friendship a natural instinct crucial to individual happiness and the maintenance of society. These ideas were expressed primarily in letter-writing of unprecedented scale. Cistercians used letters as a means of conversion and recruitment, capitalising on their old friendships. In the 1140s and 1150s, letters of friendship circulated in a network around and between the monasteries of Cluny, Clairvaux and Montier-la-Celle, with the abbots Peter the Venerable (c. 1092–1156), Bernard of Clairvaux (1190–1153) and Peter of Celle (c. 1115–1183) at the heart of it. Their letters may have expressed genuine affection, but also served purposes of monastic recruitment, dispute resolution and literary collaboration.¹⁰⁵

In an age of letter-writing, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) stands out. He was master of novices and then abbot of the Cistercian Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire and acquainted with Bernard of Clairvaux. Aelred wrote two treatises on love and friendship: *Speculum caritatis* and *De spiritali amicitia*. The former set down his theory on friendship as the heart of monastic love, and the latter was a Christian adaptation of Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia*. Other important sources include Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Boethius, and the Bible. In dialogue form, Aelred set down the rules of friendship for monks and others who wanted to practice the love of God for their spiritual benefit. For him, there was no gap in the progress from communal love and particular friendship to loving God. Through his love for personal friends, Aelred could love all his monks more. His positive estimation of friendship only applied between monastic men, however; in *De institutione inclusarum*, written to his sister to guide her in the life of an anchoress, Aelred warns against contact with men.¹⁰⁶ Given that Aelred wrote for a monastic audience, it is natural that he did not comment much on mixed-gender relationships.

Aelred was not representative of the mainstream of medieval discourse on friendship. He was specific on the topic to a greater degree than any previous or contemporary writer, and considered friendship a natural and necessary part of human and monastic life. For his contemporaries, friendship was primarily a mode of literary expression. McGuire suggests this may be why his works did not

¹⁰⁵ Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 19, 28; Julian Haseldine, 'Monastic friendship in theory and in action in the twelfth century', *Friendship in the middle ages and early modern age. Explorations of a fundamental ethical discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010, 349–351, 368–369; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 231–232, 251–279.

¹⁰⁶ Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 30–34; Haseldine, 'Monastic friendship', 351; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 297–298, 316, 332, 389.

circulate much outside England. It also seems that his preferential treatment of some monks and the rumoured sins of his youth bred resentment, and the culture of toleration for intimate bonds did not continue in Rievaulx after his death. Another reason may have been that the Cistercian observance of silence did not really give the younger brothers an opportunity to cultivate the kind of friendships Aelred was able to maintain. In general, discipline tightened in the Cistercian order and expressions of affection came to be more regulated.¹⁰⁷ Despite this, Aelred had a literary influence on Richard Rolle, as chapter 3.3 will show.

With the advent of a more rigid scholasticism and the decline of monasticism's intellectual hegemony towards the late 12th and in the 13th century, friendship lost its prominence in mainstream religious literature. On the other hand, the spiritual instruction of laymen and women had gradually gained importance after the Gregorian reform and was made acute by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. These developments opened possibilities for spiritual friendships between celibate confessor-instructors and the devout women under their care.¹⁰⁸ The new mendicant orders, Franciscans and Dominicans, demonstrated from the start a commitment to the spiritual care of women. Not all such relationships were friendships, of course. Franciscans were very sceptical of the value of intimacy, and McGuire argues that the exemplary relationship of Ss Francis and Clare was not portrayed as a close friendship at all. It is typical that evidence of male-female relationships is only to be found in male accounts, which focus on the visions and virtues of the saintly woman and make her an ideal for religious devotion.¹⁰⁹ The context of spiritual instruction and pastoral care is at least as important a background to Rolle's thought and practice as contemporary monastic theory of friendship, though it will be seen that Rolle's relationships did not conform to the typical model of saintly woman and her admiring confessor.

Around Richard Rolle's time in England, the discourse of friendship in religious literature does not seem to have been lively. After the 12th century, there was a relative silence on the topic until his work. McGuire thinks that Rolle was in the minority of his contemporaries in accepting spiritual friendship. Indeed, Malcolm Moyes argues that Rolle's work needs to be seen primarily against the

¹⁰⁷ McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 21; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 329–338, 383–384.

¹⁰⁸ McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 10–11, 14–15; McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 339–341, 388

¹⁰⁹ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 389–390, 394, 398–403.

background of the Cistercian spiritual and literary tradition in Yorkshire that extended from the foundation of Rievaulx in 1132 to his day.¹¹⁰ Soon after Rolle, the high medieval faith in friendship turned to distrust. Walter Hilton (1340–1396) warned 'how goostly loue is turnyd into fleschly loue'¹¹¹ and Jean Gerson (1363–1426) was equally pessimistic about the possibility of his leading a holy life while distracted by the needs of friends. In his *De imitatione Christi*, Thomas á Kempis (c. 1379–1471) claimed that Christ was the only true friend one could rely on.¹¹² On the other hand, manuals of devotion and didactic epistles from men to religious women became more common in England in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and women, Anne Clark Bartlett argues, were exposed to the language of friendship more than before.¹¹³ In light of these attitudes, Richard Rolle appears unusual. In his work, faith in spiritual friendship and application of classical and earlier Christian discussions on the topic combine with the spiritual instruction of women in a unique model which culminates in his defence of holy friendship between men and women. In this way, he is perhaps both a vestige of an earlier time and a herald of things to come. Placing him accurately in the history of medieval thought requires thorough investigation of what his exact stance on friendship is, however – a task which occupies the following chapters.

¹¹⁰ McGuire, *Friendship and community*, 413; Malcolm R. Moyes, *Richard Rolle's Expositio super novem lectiones mortuorum* vol. 1 (Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies 92:12), Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 26–27, 55.

¹¹¹ Walter Hilton, *Walter Hilton's Eight chapters on perfection. Edited from MS. Anglais 41 [...]* with introduction, notes and glossary, ed. Fumio Kuriyagawa (Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations 9), Tokyo: Keio University, 1967, 28.

¹¹² Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 68–70; McGuire, 'Jean Gerson and the end of spiritual friendship: dilemmas of conscience', *Friendship in medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing 1999, 230–234.

¹¹³ Anne Clark Bartlett, 'A reasonable affection.' Gender and spiritual friendship in Middle English devotional literature', *Vox mystica. Essays on medieval mysticism in honor of professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1995, 139–145.

3 God, the World and Friendship

3.1 God's Friendship

Friendship is a binding of wills, assenting and dissenting to the same things. This friendship is possible between both good and evil, though by different affections. And chiefly it ought to be between God and the soul whose will is conformed to God's in everything.¹¹⁴

This introduction to Rolle's miniature treatise on friendship, *Incendium amoris* 39,¹¹⁵ contains three distinct arguments: the definition of friendship, its scope over the good and evil alike, and its highest goal in God. The three sections of the following main chapter explore topics that roughly correspond to these items, in reverse order: the union of God and man, the corrupt friendships of the world, and finally the theoretical ideal which attempts to bridge the gap between the two spheres. We will begin with God; indeed, the majority of positive estimations of friendship in Rolle's work are reserved for a relationship with God rather than one between humans.

What is friendship with God? Rolle continues his above definition of friendship by adapting Sallust's popular formulation: 'so that what God wills, she [i.e. soul] wills also; what God does not will, neither does she.'¹¹⁶ It is close to the Ciceronian *consensio*, and does not necessarily imply the intimacy of the friend as the other self.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere in the *Incendium*, however, the bond is shown to be more than just agreement: as a consequence of love, 'man's will is united with God's in wonderful friendship.'¹¹⁸ Rolle goes so far as to say that 'love unites me and my love and makes one out of two,'¹¹⁹ but this is to be understood as a union of grace and will, not of nature. Love transforms the lover, making the soul more similar to God. Love and friendship are not identical, since love radiates goodness on enemies and outsiders as well as friends and neighbours.¹²⁰ The relationship of the two is summed up in *Contra amatores mundi*, where Rolle says that loving is the only way to become a friend of God.¹²¹ In simplest terms, it seems that

¹¹⁴ 'Amicitia est connexio uoluntatum, eisdem consencienium et eisdem dissencium, et potest esse hec amicitia inter bonos et inter malos, sed affectibus diuersis; et maxime deberet esse inter Deum et animam que diuine uoluntati uoluntatem suam tenetur conformare in omnibus[.]' *Incendium Amoris*, 261.

¹¹⁵ *Incendium amoris*, 261–266.

¹¹⁶ '[U]t que Deus uelit, uelit et ipsa; que Deus nolit, nolit et ipsa[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 261. Cf. Sallust, *Catilina*, p. 50 line 20:4: '[I]dem uelle atque idem nolle, ea demum firma amicitia est.'

¹¹⁷ See chapter 2.3 above.

¹¹⁸ '[U]oluntas hominis cum uoluntate Dei mirabili amicitia unitur[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 196.

¹¹⁹ '[M]e et amabilem meum amor unit, et unum ex duobus facit.' *Incendium amoris*, 275.

¹²⁰ *Incendium amoris*, 196.

¹²¹ *Contra amatores mundi*, 106.

friendship is the state of union between God and man, and love is what brings it about.

Friendship with God is not just a mental disposition; it is best achieved and acted out in contemplative life. God's friends prefer a poor and virtuous life to one filled with riches and honours.¹²² The poor man, shunned by others, could not find more faithful and steadfast a friend than Christ, from whom he can ask anything.¹²³ Rolle exhorted others to adopt this way of life: 'Certainly and to many I preached that they not be polluted by a worldly friend [...] that living devout and chaste, they be eager to rejoice by law in Jesus, whom only they ought to accept as friend and spouse.'¹²⁴ Chastity and piety seem to be preconditions for friendship with God, to which worldly friends stand in stark contrast. This is a fairly exclusive view which demands turning from life in the world. Indeed, most of Rolle's literary output is preoccupied with the defence and praise of solitary life. Watson argues that it is not until the late stages of Rolle's literary career and particularly *Emendatio vitae* that Rolle turns his attention towards the spiritual needs of lay readers. Even then his concessions toward non-eremitic life are cautious, and the highest stages of love are reserved for the few; he sets up his eremitic life and spiritual experiences as a model relevant but not fully attainable for everyone.¹²⁵ True friendship with God seems to be possible only for those who fully embrace solitary contemplation. Already in late Antiquity, Eastern authors presented asceticism in terms of exclusive friendship with God which replaced but also enabled other relationships.¹²⁶ The precedent to elevate solitary life by defining it as a unique relationship with God probably lent credence to Rolle's view, whether or not he used the ancient authors as direct models.

There are degrees even among God's friends. In an exposition of a verse from the Song of Songs (Cant 5:1), Rolle makes a distinction between the friends of God who have given up the world to aspire to eternal joys, and the most dearly beloved who has succeeded perfectly. God encourages the former to eat and drink,

¹²² *Contra amatores mundi*, 70.

¹²³ *Incendium amoris*, 197.

¹²⁴ 'Profecto plurisque et hoc predicavi ut amico mundano non macularentur [...] caste et pie deinceps degentes gestiant de iure in Iesu iubilare quem solum suscipiant amicum et sponsum[.]' *Le chant d'amour (Melos amoris)* vol. 2, ed. E. J. F. Arnould (Sources Chrétiennes 169), Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1971, 104.

¹²⁵ Watson, *Invention*, 214–220.

¹²⁶ See Antigone Samellas, 'Friendship and asceticism in the late antique east', *De amicitia. Friendship and social networks in antiquity and the middle ages* (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 36), Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae 2009, 84–90.

but the beloved is inebriated with divine love and carried up to the melody of song.¹²⁷ It was traditional in mystical exegesis, most notably that of Hugh and Richard of St. Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux, to identify the bride of the Song of Songs with the soul aspiring to love God.¹²⁸ Picking up this idea, Rolle applies it to the chosen of God who are granted the fullness of grace and love which sets them apart from lesser friends who strive for God on their own. The idea of the *perfecti* or *electi* is important to Rolle; mankind is composed of the few chosen saints of God, the evil and forsaken diametrically opposed to God, and the majority of humankind falling somewhere in between. Much of Rolle's literary energy is spent on trying to establish his membership in the group of God's chosen.¹²⁹ The distinction made in the exposition of the biblical verse is probably that between those just setting out on contemplative or solitary life, and saints like Rolle himself, whose experiences make him an authority on that mode of life. Identification with the beloved of God, above and beyond just anyone who seeks to become God's friend, is important for Rolle's legitimacy as a writer.

Several references to friendship with God actually concern this highest state of divine favour. The *perfecti* are 'taken up into a superior abundance of eternal friendship'¹³⁰ and the *electa Dei amica* is wrapped in unending brightness.¹³¹ Most importantly, such wonderful friendship is inseparable from the mystical experiences at the heart of Rolle's contemplative career: 'in that unity such delightful heat, sweetness and song is poured into the loving soul that she cannot explain its greatness.'¹³² Since Rolle has just testified to having experienced these phenomena,¹³³ the statement effectively establishes a personal friendship between him and God. He says as much in the finale of *Incendium amoris*: he cares nothing for worldly dignity because in his poverty, 'my glory is friendship.'¹³⁴

Divine friendship also grants insight. Whosoever wishes to teach or write about the Scriptures should 'first make himself a friend of God'¹³⁵ to avoid error.

¹²⁷ *Contra amatores mundi*, 72.

¹²⁸ See Ann W. Astell, *The Song of songs in the middle ages*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1990, 73–104. The other traditional interpretations identified the bride as the church or the Virgin Mary.

¹²⁹ See Watson, *Invention*, 56–60.

¹³⁰ '[I]n hanc excellencie abundanciam eterne amicitie assumuntur[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 151.

¹³¹ *Melos I*, 106.

¹³² '[I]n qua unione tanta suavitas feruoris dulcoris et canoris amanti animo infunitur quantam senciens non potest explanare.' *Incendium amoris*, 196.

¹³³ Chapter 15 of *Incendium amoris*, 187–191.

¹³⁴ 'Gloria enim mea amicitia est.' *Incendium amoris*, 276.

¹³⁵ '[A]micum Dei se prius faciat[.]' *Melos II*, 168.

Humility, obedience, chastity, patience, but most of all fervent love, qualify one to seek God's glory in this way.¹³⁶ The context of the passage is a discussion of unqualified, wretched preachers, so the virtues listed are probably those Rolle thinks they lack, but they are also characteristic of a true friend of God. For Rolle, friendship with God is not just an ideal or a way of life worth exhorting others to; it is the state which enables him to teach others and guarantees his authority. The authority and duty to teach and offer spiritual guidance as part of friendship is explored further in chapter 4.2, but for now it needs to be noted that the teacher's personal friendship with God must underlie such aspirations.

The goal of divine love and friendship is not in this life. There is an important anagogical aspect to them: referring to Luke 22:29–30, Rolle promises Christ's friends a kingdom where they may eat and drink at his table, and judge upon thrones.¹³⁷ In heaven, the lovers will be forever coupled together, and there will be loving kisses and embraces.¹³⁸ The pure soul, both friend and bride of Christ, will get to join her spouse and burn in love with the Seraphim.¹³⁹ Friendship ultimately extends beyond God and one soul: 'For þei shal ben breþere and felewes with angels and holy men, louynge and hauynge, praisynge and seyng þe kynge of ioy in þe fairheed and shynynge of his mageste.'¹⁴⁰ The anticipation of community with angels and saints makes the transitory fellowship of this world pale in comparison.

While Rolle stands out as an idiosyncratic writer, he was not a particularly original theologian. Watson notes that he wrote little about the central doctrines of Christianity, and when he did, it was derived from other sources. This is largely in line with Arnould's estimation of Rolle's orthodoxy, though Watson shows that Rolle was not as conventional in his attitude toward ecclesiastical authority as Arnould presents him.¹⁴¹ That makes Rolle's unusual statement about God all the more interesting: 'it is most just not to ask for a just reward, but rather God's

¹³⁶ *Melos II*, 168.

¹³⁷ *Contra amatores mundi*, 107.

¹³⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 273.

¹³⁹ *Melos I*, 310–312.

¹⁴⁰ *The Form of Living in Richard Rolle: prose and verse edited from MS Longleat 29 and related manuscripts*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson (Early English Text Society 293), Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988, 3–25, on p. 10. See also *Ego dormio* in *Richard Rolle: prose and verse edited from MS Longleat 29 and related manuscripts*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson (Early English Text Society 293), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 26–33 on p. 26; *Incendium amoris*, 245.

¹⁴¹ Arnould, *Melos amoris*, l–lvii; Watson, *Invention*, 37–39, 54–55.

friendship which is God himself.¹⁴² Christian theory of love is much indebted to 1 John 4:8 and 4:16, which say that God is love. In his *De spiritali amicitia*, Aelred of Rievaulx discusses the intimate connection between friendship, wisdom and love, and raises the question whether the Biblical formulation could be rephrased as 'God is friendship.' He is quick to dismiss it as unusual and unbiblical, but he admits that whatever good follows from love can also be said of friendship; namely, that whosoever remains in friendship remains in God and God in him.¹⁴³ If arguably the greatest medieval advocate of Christian friendship remains cautious on this point, Rolle's statement seems significant. If Rolle is original and not following any source in equating God with his friendship, as I think he may be, it is a remarkable indication of the importance of friendship in Rolle's theology. The greatest gift anyone can ever aspire to is framed in terms of friendship: to become God's friend is to receive God himself.

3.2 Worldly Friendship

Rolle's reverence for friendship with God might give cause to expect a positive estimation of human relationships, too. On the contrary, at the centre of Rolle's theological system is the fundamental dichotomy of the love of God and love of the world, expressed even in the title to one of his books: *Liber de amore Dei contra amatores mundi*. The two loves are incompatible, and there is no room for the world in the soul of a lover of God: 'See! My interiors have boiled up and the heat of love [...] has wiped out the grievous joy of unclean friendship.'¹⁴⁴ At stake is nothing less than life everlasting: 'Nothing is as effective for gaining eternal joy as the love of Christ, nor does anything bring damnation sooner than love of the world.'¹⁴⁵ Rolle associates worldly love and unclean friendship with error and darkness, and contrasts it with the ordered love to which he has risen.¹⁴⁶

Love is a term that can have multiple meanings in Rolle's works. As the *Form of Living* puts it, rather tautologically: 'Loue is a thyngē þrogh which God

¹⁴² [I]ustissimum est iusticie mercedem non requirere, sed amicitiam Dei que est ipse Deus.' *Incendium amoris*, 165.

¹⁴³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia* in *Corpus christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis I. Aelredi Rievallensis opera omnia I. Opera ascetica*, ed. A. Hoste, Turnhout: Brepols 1971, 287–350 on p. 301; cf. 1 John 4:16.

¹⁴⁴ 'Ecce enim interiora mea efferbuerunt, et cauma caritatis [...] delent lugubrem leticium immundare amicitie[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 247.

¹⁴⁵ 'Nec est aliquid ita efficax ad premerendum eternitatis gaudium quemadmodum amor Christi, nec aliquid magis inducit extremam dampnationem quam amor mundi.' *Incendium amoris*, 259.

¹⁴⁶ *Incendium amoris*, 247.

loueth vs, and we loueth God, and euery of vs other.¹⁴⁷ The definition allows for love of the world as well as love of God, both carnal desire and disinterested goodwill. Renevey argues that Rolle struggled with the tension between the literal, carnal sense and metaphorical, spiritual sense of the expressions of love he used, but his purpose was to elevate spiritual love at the expense of the carnal.¹⁴⁸ What separates love of God from love of the world is that the former is properly ordered, *ordinatus amor* or *ordinata caritas*: '[L]oue, when hit is ordeyned in God, hit doth away al vnordeynt loue in a thyng þat is nat good.'¹⁴⁹ Several times, Rolle condemns worldly love specifically for not keeping measure, that is, being immoderate.¹⁵⁰ Nature can work against God's will, because it teaches that beauty is to be loved, whereas ordered love demands that the greater the good, the more the thing must be loved.¹⁵¹

The greatest good is, of course, God: 'Indeed true love consists in this: that we love God for His own sake, and every human creature because of Him. Let us make Him the beginning and end of our love.'¹⁵² This conventional idea is also expressed by Aelred in a discussion of ordered love, which Rolle was probably familiar with.¹⁵³ Nothing, not even oneself, must be loved except for God's sake, and God must become all things to all men.¹⁵⁴ The true lover of God no longer cares for carnal pleasures, even if they were permitted.¹⁵⁵ In *Melos amoris*, in a passage Watson suggests may be based on Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1164), Rolle offers a five-step hierarchy for ordered love: God is to be loved first and foremost, one's soul second, one's body third, then friends and patrons, and finally enemies.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁷ *Form*, 19.

¹⁴⁸ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 79–81.

¹⁴⁹ *Form*, 19

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, *Incendium amoris*, 213, 228, 266.

¹⁵¹ *Incendium amoris*, 196.

¹⁵² 'In hoc vero verus amor consistit: ut ipsum deum propter eum omnem humanam creaturam. Ponamus eum principium et finem amoris nostri[.]' *Contra amatores mundi*, 108, transl. p. 195. See also *Form*, 19.

¹⁵³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Speculum Caritatis* in *Corpus christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis I. Aelredi Rievallensis opera omnia I. Opera ascetica*, ed. C. H. Talbot, Turnhout: Brepols 1971, 3–161 on p. 56.

¹⁵⁴ *De emendatione vitae. Eine kritische Ausgabe des lateinischen Textes von Richard Rolle. Mit einer Übersetzung ins Deutsche und Untersuchungen zu den lateinischen und englischen Handschriften*, ed. & transl. Rüdiger Spahl (Super alta perennis. Studien zur Wirkung der klassischen Antike 6), Göttingen: V&R Unipress & Bonn University Press 2009, 222.

¹⁵⁵ *Contra amatores mundi*, 108.

¹⁵⁶ *Melos II*, 180; Watson, *Invention*, 186, n. 13.

One must be careful not to paint too neat a picture of Rolle's theology from individual statements, though. In *Emendatio vitae*, sandwiched between a discussion of the three degrees of love and an exhortation to love in good order whatever is to be loved, Rolle bluntly declares that the true lover of Christ keeps no order and covets degree in loving.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps the contradiction serves to highlight that the audience of *Emendatio vitae* are still beginners in the love of God and probably not contemplative solitaries at all. At the highest level, where Rolle considers himself to be, rules and categories become insufficient. Even at that point the goal remains clear: God is the highest object of devotion. As will be seen, Rolle's stance on loving others is not always consistent or clear. He may say it is natural, virtuous, distracting or even dangerous. The concept of ordered love, with God as the origin and purpose of all love, is key to deciphering his various statements on the topic.

Failure to respect proper order, then, is the primary reason worldly friendship is wicked. In a list of the miseries of this world, *Incendium amoris* includes 'horrible friendship' (*amicicia horribilis*). At first glance, one might take Rolle to be saying that friendship is horrible as such. Further comparison to other items on the list, however, indicates the opposite: the world is also full of contradictions like discordant harmony, savourless savour, deformed beauty, and even a nightingale that bellows more than a cow.¹⁵⁸ On several other occasions, Rolle compared himself to a nightingale singing praise to God, so he certainly did not think nightingales were categorically awful.¹⁵⁹ In each case, then, a good thing is paired with its opposite trait. The point seems to be that these positive, desirable ideals become twisted and corrupt in the world.

A similar point is made in *Emendatio vitae*: the reader should despise the world in which 'everything is disorderly and in confusion [...] - where faithfulness is unfaithful and friendship cruel, standing in prosperity and failing in adversity.'¹⁶⁰ Worldly friendship does not pass the classical test of 'a friend in need is a friend indeed'¹⁶¹ and more importantly, in its confusion it fails to represent ordered love. Friendship in the world, then, is not what it ideally should be,

¹⁵⁷ *Emendatio vitae*, 222.

¹⁵⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 259.

¹⁵⁹ See *Form*, 17; *Incendium amoris*, 277; *Melos II*, 263.

¹⁶⁰ '[O]mnia confusa, omnia inordinata [...] ubi est fidelitas infidelis et crudelis amicicia, que in prosperitate stetit et in adversitate deficit.' *Emendatio vitae*, 172.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, Cicero quoting Ennius in *Laelius*, 58: 'Amicus certus in re incerta cernitur.'

because it has become corrupt and does not conform to God's order of love. The concept of friendship as such, however, is positive. Whether Rolle's pessimism is due to personal experiences and disappointments is a question that must be saved for later, but his supposition that there is an ideal model of friendship whose worldly expressions are corrupted beyond recognition is in any case coherent with his more general dichotomy of God versus the world. The ideal model will be examined in chapter 3.3. below, but first we ought to explore the ways in which worldly friendship is lacking or goes wrong.

In contrast to the friendship of God which anticipates eternity, worldly love and friendship is transitory. It will 'prosper and die like a flower of the field in summer', and though 'it will certainly last a short while, afterwards it declines into grief.'¹⁶² Not only does it go sour in this life, 'we can thereby have nothing that lasts except the Judge's wrath and eternal punishment.'¹⁶³ This is especially true of worldly love between men and women, as a long passage in *Contra amatores mundi* attests:

All the things of this world fade away ; they vanish as if they had never existed. Love, on the other hand, remains and rejoices forever; that is to say, the love of God, and not the love of a woman or of the world. If you have loved a woman, your love is lost; and hand in hand you will go to hell together[.] [...] Moreover the form of a woman now appears desirable to you; how disgusting it may become later on! [...] So the flower of carnal delight fades, but the torment of its bitterness remains forever.¹⁶⁴

Rolle's case, therefore, does not rest solely on the vileness of worldly love in God's eyes. He also appeals to rather worldly arguments himself: the flower of young love withers, and women lose their beauty over time. *Contra amatores mundi* poses as a contribution to a debate between lovers of the world and lovers of God, so Rolle may be using rhetoric his implied opponents would accept. On the other hand, the fleetingness of female beauty is a frequent theme in *Melos amoris*, too. See, for example, the harsh words Rolle uses to describe the fate of flesh: 'Beauty is powerless at the gates, the form of woman is struck down into shit and the lasciviousness of youths languishes in a pit, for the softness of women

¹⁶² '[P]rosperabitur et peribit quemadmodum flos agri in estate, [...] sic certe subsistit per modicum, sed deinceps in dolorem declinabit[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 275.

¹⁶³ '[N]ihil durabile habere poterimus, nisi iudicis iram, scilicet eternam penam[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 227.

¹⁶⁴ 'Evanent omnia que in mundo sunt; vadunt ac si non fuissent. Amor autem permanet et gaudet sine fine; amor utique dei, non amor mulieris aut mundi. Si mulierem amaveris, perit amor tuus, et tu cum illa pariter ibitis in gehennam[.] [...] Forma autem femine ita tibi nunc apparet amabilis, et odibilis postea fiat[.] [...] Evanescit igitur deliciarum flos carnalium, sed tormentum amaritudinis earum manebit in eternum.' *Contra amatores mundi*, 100, transl. p. 186–187.

is cast into the sea.¹⁶⁵ The choice between love of God and love of the world, then, is a choice between the everlasting and the temporary – and the temporary does not even last one's whole life.

Not only is worldly friendship transient, it is a distraction for as long as it lasts. Especially in his English treatises, Rolle is worried that friendship might distract the aspiring lover of God from the contemplative life. He encourages the reader of *The Form of Living* to 'fle fro il felewshipe þat yeueth [gives] more ensample [example] to loue þe world þan God, erth þan heuyn, filth of body þan clenness of soule.'¹⁶⁶ That is exactly what nuns and anchoresses did, in theory, but Rolle's exhortations suggest that there was room for misconduct. Speaking with people could be a bad influence, and the contemplative should avoid it altogether: 'For euer þe better þat þou art, and þe lasse speche [less speech] þou hast of men, þe mor is þi ioy afor God.'¹⁶⁷ The compliments and unwanted attention of others can be especially detrimental. The reader of *The Commandment* ought to enjoy only Christ's love, not 'praysynge of men, if þay begyn to speke good of þe[.]'¹⁶⁸ Rolle also warned Margaret Kirkeby not to be swayed by her admirers: 'Men þat comen to þe, praise þe, for þei see þi gret abstinence, and for þay se þe enclosed. [...] And set noght by har [their] praysynge ne har lakyng[.]'¹⁶⁹

There are some similar passages in Rolle's Latin works. *Contra amatores mundi* instructs chaste virgins consecrated to Christ to flee the company of young men and ignore their babbling. The inspiration of Christ does not accompany idle talk, and amorous words and frequent encounters with men make women incapable of loving Christ.¹⁷⁰ The problem is not exclusive to women, according to *Incendium amoris*: 'No young man can be made holy among the blandishments and sweet words of beautiful women.'¹⁷¹ There is a slight difference of emphasis between the English and Latin passages. The former highlight the danger of spiritual pride that the company of friends and worldly associates can foster. In

¹⁶⁵ '[N]on pollet in portis pulchritudo, forma feminea in fimum feritur et iuuenum lascivia languet in lacu, nam mollicies mulierum mittitur in mare[.]' *Melos II*, 20. See also *Melos I*, 278.

¹⁶⁶ *Form*, 14.

¹⁶⁷ *Form*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ *Commandment*, 35.

¹⁶⁹ *Form*, 14.

¹⁷⁰ *Contra amatores mundi*, 102.

¹⁷¹ '[N]on potest iuuenis inter blandicias et dulcia uerba pulchrarum mulierum [...] sanctus fieri[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 166.

the Latin, the main threat seems to be sexual – the amorous babbling of wanton youngsters and the sweet words of pretty girls imply a different kind of distraction than praise for one's abstinence. It is interesting that according to Bynum, women saints were often depicted as struggling with their sexuality, whereas for men their struggles culminated in the vice of pride.¹⁷² That does not seem to be the case for Rolle.

Rolle's warnings about conversation are not exclusively a consequence of his views on worldly friendship. *The Commandment* opens with advice to be 'of litel speche. And þat silence be in occupacioun of good thoghtes, hit helpeth gretly to Goddis loue.'¹⁷³ The focus is on silence as a contemplative virtue and on the avoidance of vain speech, not on human relations *per se*. Rolle's advice is in line with a monastic tradition of silence, as expressed in chapter 6 of the *Rule* of St Benedict. Observing silence was very important to Cistercians, so the advice would have been of particular relevance to the nun of Hampole for whom *The Commandment* was probably composed.¹⁷⁴ The precedent was also set by other English anchoritic manuals: Aelred of Rievaulx's *De institutione inclusarum* advises the female solitary against unnecessary speech both because it distracts from God and because it is an occasion for sexual temptation, and the *Ancrene Wisse* discusses at length the dangers of speech and warns that even few and carefully selected words easily slide down the slippery slope of loquacity.¹⁷⁵ Bartlett suggests that later devotional texts in medieval England became more gender-neutral than their 11th–13th century counterparts, which relied on negative stereotypes about female loquacity rather than the monastic tradition of silence. McIlroy places Rolle in the gender-neutral group, although chronologically he falls between the two periods Bartlett's article discusses.¹⁷⁶ There are certainly differences in emphasis, but it is not clear that one should speak of separate,

¹⁷² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast. The religious significance of food to medieval women*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1987, 29.

¹⁷³ *The Commandment*, 34,

¹⁷⁴ Benedict of Nursia, *Rule*, 470–472. For an overview of the monastic tradition of silence, see Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism. The Cluniac tradition c. 900–1200*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 13–52; on Cistercians in particular, see pp. 145–148.

¹⁷⁵ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum* in *Corpus christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis I. Aelredi Rievallensis opera omnia I. Opera ascetica*, ed. C. H. Talbot, Turnhout: Brepols 1971, 637–682 on pp. 641–642; *Ancrene Wisse. A corrected edition of the text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with variants from other manuscripts* vol. 1, ed. Bella Millett (Early English Text Society 325), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 2:20, p. 31; on speaking and hearing in general, see 2:11–31, pp. 27–36.

¹⁷⁶ Bartlett, 'A reasonable affection', 141; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 121.

monastic and misogynistic traditions of silence. Aelred's language carries strong Benedictine echoes. Rolle seems to recognise both aspects. In regards to friendship, then, it was a two-way street: idle conversation was bad because it could lead to worldly relationships and temptations, and friendship was dangerous because it would break the silence that was good for the contemplative as such.

Another problem of friendship is the worry it causes. According to *Ego dormio*:

Perfet lif and gostly is to [...] foryet þe solace and þe likynge of þi kynreden, and loue ham nat bot in God: wheþer þei lyve or dey, be pouer or riche, be hole or seke [healthy or sick], in woo or in wel, þank þou euer God[.] [...] Forþi [therefore], if þi frendes be euer in ese and hele and in welth of þis world, þou and þai bothe may þe more drede þat ye lese nat þe ioy withouten end. If þai be in penaunce, in sekensse, or if þai life rightwisly, þei may trist in God to cum to his blisse.¹⁷⁷

The contemplative should forsake his family and friends and not worry about their fortunes; whatever happens to them is according to God's will. The same point is made in *The Commandment*, which urges the lover of God to 'dred nat anguys or noy [harm] þat may bifal bodily on þe or on any of þi frendes, bot bitake al in to Goddis wille, and thanke hym euer of al his sondes [whatever God ordains][.]'¹⁷⁸ Besides, as the *Ego dormio* quote argues, worldly adversity is often a sign of reward in the world to come, so there is really no need to get distracted by a friend's sufferings. On the flipside, delighting in a friend's worldly success may compromise one's own salvation.

Rolle subscribes here to a view like the one Cicero ridiculed in the *Laelius*, namely that friendship should be avoided because it is undesirable to be troubled on the account of others. For Cicero, the notion was as foolish as avoiding virtue because of its occasionally troublesome demands.¹⁷⁹ For Rolle, though, it is not a matter of avoiding all discomfort. Rather, virtue is an otherworldly thing associated with the love of God, whereas worldly friends and family draw one's attention to worldly troubles and distract from the contemplative life.

Rolle himself seems to have had some personal experience of the impact friends' misfortunes could have on one's psyche. In *Contra amatores mundi*, he boldly claims of the man filled with the love of God that 'when grief over friends or relatives comes upon a man so fortified, he is not shattered; nor is he thrown into confusion by their loss. But as a rational creature he shows compassion

¹⁷⁷ *Ego dormio*, 28–29.

¹⁷⁸ *The Commandment*, 37.

¹⁷⁹ *Laelius*, 48–50.

towards them for Christ's sake, and without changing his ways continues to sing the divine praises.¹⁸⁰ The lover of God is always filled with spiritual happiness and the cares of the world do not touch him on a personal level. Nonetheless, in the very next chapter Rolle tells how he experienced the death of a lady who with her husband had acted as Rolle's patron.¹⁸¹ 'In truth, such horror flew about my heart and my flesh that it was terrifying for me to enter my cell, which I did with pleasure before. [...] I have no idea why this happened, unless perhaps it was to teach me something about myself, since I thought that I could not be terrified. Whence we ought to consider that as long as we are mortals, we are wretched.'¹⁸² Rolle then goes on to preach his familiar sermon of how the flesh turns foul and how worldly love is at odds with eternal sweetness,¹⁸³ but that does not seem to capture what is really going on with the story. He was not terrified just because some woman died and decayed; it was his personal relationship to her that caused him to be disturbed. The loss of a person close to Rolle caused real difficulties for his daily routine of devotion in his cell. It stands to reason that he would warn the less advanced not to worry about their friends all the more strictly.

As we have seen, friendship is something ideally positive, and ordered love demands that people love their neighbours – with rationally motivated compassion, as Rolle put it. Proper order or moderation is what distinguishes godly love from love of the world, and Rolle keeps returning to the issue. Worldly friendship fails and foils any contemplative aspirations because it does not observe order. 'And if þou faille and fal for temptaciouns or for angres or for ouer myche loue of þi frendes, hit is no wonder if he hold fro þe þynge þat þou couaitest nat trewly.'¹⁸⁴ That is to say, loving one's friends too much, like any temptation of the world, shows that the contemplative is not truly devoted to the love of God and is thus deprived of it.

Failure to respect the order of love is even more explicitly chastised in *The Bee and the Stork*, a short vernacular allegory of the animal world:

¹⁸⁰ 'Unde parentum seu amicorum subitis doloribus non concutitur, nec illorum calamitate turbatur, at ut rationali creature eis pro Christo compaciens, divinas laudes immutabiliter canit.' *Contra amatores mundi*, 85, transl. p. 168.

¹⁸¹ For speculation on her identity, see Allen, *Writings*, 465–466.

¹⁸² 'Verum tantus horror cor meum et carnem circumvoluit, quod cellam meam michi intrare apparuit horridum, quod prius erat oblectamentum. [...] Huius rei causam ignoro, nisi forte ut meipsum cognoscerem, qui me non potuisse terreri putabam. Unde pensandum est nobis quod dum mortales sumus, miseri sumus[.]' *Contra amatores mundi*, 94, transl. p. 179.

¹⁸³ *Contra amatores mundi* 94–96.

¹⁸⁴ *The Commandment*, 36.

For many are þat never kane halde þe ordyre of lufe ynence [toward] þaire frendys, sybbe or fremmede [kindred or unrelated]; bot outhire þay lufe þaym over mekill [much], settand thaire thoghte unryghtwysely on thaym, or þay luf thaym over lyttill, yf þay doo noghte all as þey wolde till þam. [...] for thay are so hevy in erthely frenchype, þat þay may noghte flee intill þe lufe of Jhesu Criste, in þe wylke þay moghte wele forgaa þe lufe of all creaturs lyfande in erthe.¹⁸⁵

The positive aspect of the order of love is also featured in the passage: it is just as bad not to do for one's friends what Christian duty demands as it is to have inappropriate thoughts about them. By the end of the passage, though, any love of creatures of the world is dismissed as earthly friendship which makes the lover too heavy to fly to the love of Christ.

Giving up friendship was not necessarily easy. Rolle imagines the recipient of *The Commandment* objecting that 'I may nat despise þe world. I may nat fynd in myn hert to pyne my body; and me behoueth loue my fleishly frendes, and take ease when hit cometh', but he reminds her that previous lovers of the world are now in hell.¹⁸⁶ For the contemplative, the company of angels and saints should replace that of mortals: 'If þou can nat lyue withouten felewship, lift þi þoght to heuyn, þat þou may fele confort with angels and halowes, þe which wil helpe þe to God, and nat let [forsake, leave] þe as þi fleishly frendes dothe.'¹⁸⁷ This is again the claim that worldly friendship is unreliable and that ideal fellowship has God as its highest goal.

At this point it is prudent to take a little detour and discuss the dangers of mixed-gender relationships. Rolle does not often speak of them in terms of friendship but rather as a more general expression of worldly love and carnal concupiscence. However, since the present study is especially concerned with friendship between men and women, problems with their interaction in general are relevant.

In *Incendium amoris* 39 on friendship, the first comment on inter-gender friendship is that it is perilous due to carnal concupiscence and tends to be to the detriment of men's virtue.¹⁸⁸ The weakness of the flesh is a central theme for Rolle. Women are temptresses and men are victims of their own lust: 'It is the custom of women that when they feel themselves loved beyond measure by men,

¹⁸⁵ *The Bee and the Stork in English writings of Richard Rolle, hermit of Hampole*, ed. Hope Emily Allen, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931, 54–56 on p. 55.

¹⁸⁶ *The Commandment*, 38–39.

¹⁸⁷ *The Commandment*, 35.

¹⁸⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 263.

they mislead men's hearts with alluring flattery.¹⁸⁹ With her beauty, a woman leads astray young and old, rich and poor alike.¹⁹⁰ The significance of moderation and ordered love is once again apparent in the words 'beyond measure' (*ultra modum*). Marriage does not guarantee proper order, for 'when men commit themselves to the bond of matrimony for the satisfaction of their lust, they surely turn good into evil. [...] They are perverse men who immoderately love their wives for their beauty.'¹⁹¹ Lack of moderation is not exclusive to men: 'Women, if they love men, are crazy because they do not understand to keep measure in loving.'¹⁹²

Relationships with the opposite gender are to be avoided especially by contemplatives aspiring to God's love. Love of God is incompatible with love of the world, as Rolle was fond of stressing. The folly of the lovers of the world is to mistake its beauty and riches for goodness. 'Nothing can be loved except for the goodness it either has or appears to have, which goodness either is or is thought to be in the beloved.'¹⁹³ Only God is good and therefore he must be loved exclusively. Any man who looks at a woman in a worldly manner allows concupiscence to deform his inner nature and loses sight of heaven.¹⁹⁴ It is unlikely that by sight of heaven (*intuitum celescium*) Rolle means the chance for salvation. Rather, it is probably a reference to the spiritual experience of the opening of the heavenly door which led to his gifts of heat, sweetness and song and made him an authority on scripture.¹⁹⁵ Carnal concupiscence, then, is especially dangerous for contemplatives because it can deprive them of the spiritual gifts which are the sign of God's love.

Rolle's concern was primarily for young men and women, that is, beginners in the contemplative life. His instructions are rarely applicable to active secular life, and as an advanced hermit he no longer felt threatened by women's

¹⁸⁹ 'Mos enim est mulierum ut cum se ultra modum a uiris amari senserunt, per blandicias allicientes corda illorum decipiant[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 213.

¹⁹⁰ *Melos I*, 268.

¹⁹¹ '[C]um homines pro explenda libidine, sub uinculo matrimoniali se astringunt, bonum profecto in malum uertunt[.] [...] Porro peruersi uiri sunt qui eciam in proprias uxores propter eorum pulchritudinem immoderate inardescunt[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 211.

¹⁹² 'Femine, si uiros ament, isaniunt, quia modum amando tenere non sciunt.' *Incendium Amois*, 228.

¹⁹³ 'Amari autem aliquid non potest nisi propter bonum quod est aut existens aut apparens, et quod amato inest, uel certe inesse esimatur.' *Incendium amoris*, 210.

¹⁹⁴ *Incendium amoris*, 210.

¹⁹⁵ *Incendium amoris*, 189. See also Watson, *Invention*, 67–68.

company.¹⁹⁶ As already observed, the flattery of women prevents young men from achieving sanctity. *Incendium amoris* also warns of physical beauty: 'Many are truly deceived by the beauty of women, the desire for which has sometimes subverted the hearts of the just so that they began in the spirit but end in the flesh. Avoid, therefore, having conversation with feminine beauty in the beginning of your good conversion.'¹⁹⁷ The same warning is issued in *Melos amoris*, which says that the diversions of a beautiful but unworthy woman can easily bring ruin to novices.¹⁹⁸

To stress the threat of the other sex, Rolle reminds the reader that it does not only concern novices. On several occasions he warns against overconfidence. Anyone not perfectly grounded in God's love is in danger, even if they seem to have achieved salvation.¹⁹⁹ Even Solomon failed God due to his love for women, and so no one should presume to be safe and secure against the world.²⁰⁰ To demonstrate how 'an abundance of riches, the flattery of women and the beauty of youth' can make the devout fall, *Emendatio vitae* relates an anecdote of a man who after fifteen years of chastity sinned with his servant's wife. The newly-converted should therefore flee from the world, because they are particularly susceptible to worldly desire.²⁰¹ Despite his warnings against overconfidence, Rolle himself did claim to be safe from feminine distractions.²⁰² The examples of Solomon and the man fifteen years chaste are not primarily targeted at experienced contemplatives; their intended audience are still the beginners who should be all the more careful if even greater men have fallen.

If carnal concupiscence is particularly dangerous to contemplatives, it is doubly condemnable to seduce the devout. This accounts for some of the vitriol with which Rolle chastises the woman, the net of demons who leads to eternal death men who seemed to have deserved salvation.²⁰³ It applies the other way around, too. We have seen how Rolle warned Margaret Kirkeby and the recipient of *The Commandment* about men who would admire and praise them. In *Contra*

¹⁹⁶ On Rolle's claim to immunity to temptation, see chapter 4.3.

¹⁹⁷ 'Species uero mulierum multos decipit, cuius concupiscencia, corda eciam iustorum quandoque subuertit, utque spiritu inceperant, in carne terminentur. Caue ergo ne ita in principio bone conuersacionis cum mulieris pulchritudine colloquium habeas[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 228.

¹⁹⁸ *Melos I*, 264–266.

¹⁹⁹ *Incendium amoris*, 251–252. See also *Melos I*, 112, 154; *Melos II*, 216.

²⁰⁰ *Incendium amoris*, 213.

²⁰¹ *Emendatio vitae*, 166–168.

²⁰² For example, *Incendium amoris* 228–229.

²⁰³ *Melos I*, 112.

amatores mundi, he condemns men who would 'steal away from [Christ] virgins who are already betrothed to Him by a pledge of faith. O how steeped in vileness you are, who carry away one of God's beloved, so that she may cling to your embraces!'²⁰⁴ Interaction between men and women is always dangerous, then, and it could be especially detrimental to beginners in the religious life. Friendship with God, difficult as it may be, is the highest goal of ordered love and therefore it is especially wrong to come between God and the contemplative.

What of Rolle's personal experiences of human relationships and worldly friendship in particular? From various autobiographical references, scholars have concluded that Rolle had some problems with his patrons and changed abode several times. Allen suggests Rolle suffered poor hospitality, cold and hunger with his first patrons the Daltons, who themselves enjoyed comforts and had a record for exploiting the poor.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, he was also criticised for his association with the rich and worldly. Allen supposes Rolle's opponents to have been monks and secular clergy, but her evidence warrants at most a tentative consent. In particular, Arnould has shown the claim that Rolle had problems with some contemporary bishop – accepted by Allen who followed Horstman – to rest on a misinterpreted reference to Anselm of Canterbury.²⁰⁶ The identity of all those patrons, clergy and other people Rolle may have quarrelled with is not within the scope of the present study.

That Rolle did have some bad experiences and that they had relevance to his discourse on friendship, however, is clear. In *Incendium amoris* 15, Rolle defends his way of life. Although he preached solitary life, he had to admit that he had lived with people of worldly prosperity and received food from them, and had even had to hear flattery – which he insists he resisted.²⁰⁷ Likewise, he sought rest but had nonetheless moved from one place to another. In his defence, Rolle appeals to 'holy fathers' who also changed cells when they had reasonable cause.²⁰⁸ Rolle declares that the unjustified criticism has been to his spiritual profit, and indeed the chapter goes on to describe the opening of the heavenly

²⁰⁴ 'ab illo rapis virgines quas iam arra fidei sibi desponsavit. O quante es nquicie, qui ut tuis adhereat amplexibus amicam aufers dei.' *Contra amatores mundi*, 101, transl. p. 187.

²⁰⁵ Allen, *Writings*, 463.

²⁰⁶ Allen, *Writings*, 470–488; Arnould, 'Richard Rolle and a bishop: a vindication', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937), 55–77.

²⁰⁷ *Incendium amoris*, 187.

²⁰⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 188.

door and his first experience of the gift of heat. Just before that dramatic episode, however, there is an interesting remark: 'I considered them the worst detractors whom I previously believed to be faithful friends.'²⁰⁹ There is plenty of autobiographical material in Rolle's works, but this is a rare direct reference to his personal friendships. If it is a sincere complaint, it explains something of Rolle's low opinion of worldly friendship: he had experienced it and been disappointed. On the other hand, an appeal to past friendship now betrayed is a powerful rhetorical tool to make Rolle appear a wronged martyr and his opponents unfaithful backstabbers. Finally, the immediate juxtaposition of failed worldly friendship with the devotion that led to Rolle's mystical experiences highlights the incompatibility of world and God in favour of the latter. Personal, apologetic and theological motives intertwine in a manner characteristic of Rolle's style in general.²¹⁰

Another passage in *Incendium amoris* shows how Rolle applied the concept of friendship to his relationship with patrons. In chapter 17 he complains that someone poor in worldly possessions but rich in mind – a religious hermit, in other words – is unlikely to ever find a faithful friend due to the inherent imbalance of such a relationship: he would always be on the receiving end and could rarely give anything back.²¹¹ Friendship is typically a reciprocal relationship of exchange whose success requires contribution from both parties. This is the instance in which Rolle, as previously noted, recommends the friendship of Christ over that of humans.

Surprisingly, however, that is not Rolle's last word on the topic. He goes on to recommend friendship between rich and poor, despite its imbalance and the superiority of Christ's friendship:

Yet it would be more useful for the rich if he chose a holy pauper to be his special friend and willingly shared with him all that he has, even more than the pauper wants, and loved him affectionately as his best and dearest friend. For that reason Christ said, 'Make friends', meaning the holy poor who are God's friends; and gladly does God give the joys of paradise to such true lovers of the poor, for their love. I think that such rich should be well pleased with their friendship, but the verse is now true that 'The sea will be dry when the pauper has a friend.'²¹²

²⁰⁹ 'Nam eos pessimos detractores habui, quos prius amicos fidos putavi.' *Incendium amoris*, 188.

²¹⁰ Compare to Watson's double reading of Rolle's works as didactic and apologetic writing, especially explicit in his treatment of *Judica me*; Watson, *Invention*, 76–95.

²¹¹ *Incendium amoris*, 196–197.

²¹² 'Utilius tamen foret diuiti si sanctum pauperem eligeret sibi amicum et specialem, cui communicare uellet omnia que haberet et diligeret ipsum affectualiter tanquam optimum et gratissimum amicum. Ideo Christus dixit, *Facite uobis amicos*, utique sanctos pauperos, intelligens, qui sunt amici Dei; et libenter dat Deus ueris dilectoribus talium pauperum pro diuites

The theological content here is that friendship with a holy contemplative can be a means of salvation; the notion echoes Matthew 25:35–40, where Christ says that whatever good was done for his brothers, such as clothing and feeding them, was done for him. The interpretation is taken further, suggesting that the contemplative acts as an intermediary between God and the layman – a position we'll see Rolle adopt in his English treatises. The passage reveals something of the role contemplative men and women, usually anchorites, fulfilled in relation to their patrons: supporting them was a good deed that would earn them both spiritual merit and social status.²¹³

Most importantly, the passage looks like a blatant attempt by Rolle to attract new patrons or appeal to his current ones. It is significant that he used the terminology of friendship to make his case: Rolle is a friend of God, and by virtue of this friendship other people can be saved if they become friends with him. By friendship, of course, Rolle means patronage. Despite his attacks on worldly friendship, he is still eager to accept friends who provide financial support. The contradiction might not be as glaring as it appears, though: much of Rolle's advice to avoid worldly friendship is primarily intended for aspiring lovers of God, that is, professional contemplatives. What is detrimental to contemplative aspirations may be beneficial to a rich man engaged in worldly business. Besides, Rolle is not some beginner in the religious life: he assures on many occasions that God has made him impervious to worldly distractions, so a patron's friendship would pose no risk. It should be noted that the wording of the above passage encourages the rich man to take a poor holy man as his friend and provide him with everything he needs, not the other way around; no duties or agency on the holy man's part are implied. If friendship is deflated to be synonymous with financial support, the rich man's patronage need not distract the holy man's contemplation.

In Rolle's language, then, the appropriate relationship between hermit and patron can be called friendship. That may shed some light on the possible identity of the 'worst detractors' who had betrayed Rolle's friendship. Certainly, a similar accusation is made against who must be Rolle's previous patrons, perhaps the Daltons: Rolle says to have known rich people who'd only give meat but not

bene placerentur de amicitia sua, sed nunc uerum est illud metricum 'Pontus erit siccus cum pauper habebit amicum.' *Incendium amoris*, 197.

²¹³ For a comprehensive study on the relationships of anchorites and their patrons in England, see Warren, *Anchorites and their patrons*, especially 15–52, 186–264.

clothing or other necessities to the holy poor, people who failed to make any distinction between good and evil paupers, and who kept everything valuable for themselves, 'and so they make themselves half-friends [...] and so the holy poor are no more beholden to them than to other benefactors who give them clothes or other such things.'²¹⁴ Rolle condemns his patrons not only for greed, but for having failed in their duty to friendship. On the other hand, he justifies his own conduct – leaving his cell and patrons – by saying that since the patrons were only his half-friends who did not do what was expected of them, he owed them no special loyalty.

Rolle does not seem to have had any problem condemning worldly friendship as a distraction and as an expression of lust on the one hand, and appealing to the concept when he needed to justify himself, condemn his opponents or negotiate with potential patrons, on the other. There are several explanations for this. For one, his various comments were addressed to a diverse readership in diverse circumstances; friendship to a nun or an anchoress meant something else than it did to wealthy layman. Secondly, he was fairly consistent about the thesis that ideal friendship is a positive thing that has become corrupt in the world, and so he could evaluate reality with reference to the ideal. Contrasting worldly friendship with the properly ordered friendship with God is also an effective literary device that allowed Rolle to justify his way of life, exhort others and defend against criticism. Finally, some of the ambiguity in Rolle's stance towards friendship in the world may be due to personal experiences: autobiographical references suggest he had quarrelled with people he used to consider friends and experienced horror on account of the death of one. For him, the question was not purely theoretical.

3.3 True Human Friendship

It was suggested above that beyond corrupt worldly friendship there is an ideal of virtuous human companionship. Indeed, *Incendium amoris* 39 develops the suggestion into an explicit, theoretical discussion on the nature of ideal friendship. The chapter contains fairly abstract theorising which draws heavily on classical and earlier Christian philosophy, and therefore its analysis is bound to be rather

²¹⁴ [E]t sic faciunt sibi amicos semiplenos [...] et sic pauperes sancti illis amplius non tenentur, nisi sicut aliis benefactoribus suis qui uestimentum uel aliquid tale dederint[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 197.

theoretical, too. The goal is to answer, first, what Rolle's general theory of true friendship was like and, second, how it related to his intellectual background.

More or less unconnected to the previous and following chapters, *Incendium amoris* 39 unexpectedly diverges from the contemplative life of God's chosen to a miniature treatise on classically inspired Christian friendship. This abrupt transition is in line with the book's structure, but the unique subject matter draws attention. It may be relevant that the chapter is located in the last third of the book, which Watson argues attempts to depict the clarity and excitement of *canor*.²¹⁵ Already the chapter's proximity to the work's most elevated material suggests that friendship belongs to the highest stages of spiritual life.

Rolle's discussion on friendship relies on classical, Biblical and later Christian sources, but he did not follow any single model. J. P. Schneider thought the influence of Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia* was irrefutable, but Moyes dismisses his argument and methodology, contending that Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spiritali amicitia*, which Christianised Cicero's thought, was a likelier source of inspiration.²¹⁶ It will be seen, however, that on some points Rolle seems to have followed Cicero against Aelred, suggesting that he knew them both – if not some third work using one or both as a source.

For Rolle, friendship is a binding of wills, assenting and dissenting to the same things.²¹⁷ The definition is not something that Rolle could have simply copied from Aelred, who in his *De spiritali amicitia* defines friendship in Cicero's terms as 'agreement in all things human and divine, with benevolence and charity.'²¹⁸ Aelred does cite Sallust's 'willing and not willing the same things', which is close Rolle's version.²¹⁹ The phrasing of Rolle's *connexio uoluntatum* is also reminiscent of the bond between the souls of David and Jonathan, though it is not direct borrowing either.²²⁰ Rolle's phrasing seems to be original, but the idea is fairly traditional. Furthermore, a true friend treats his friend as he would treat himself, because the friend is another self.²²¹ An earlier chapter describes close

²¹⁵ Watson, *Invention*, 121.

²¹⁶ Moyes, *Expositio*, 56–58; John Philip Schneider, *The prose style of Richard Rolle of Hampole with special reference to its euphuistic tendencies*, Baltimore: J. H. Furst Company 1906, 56–61. As Moyes rightly points out, Schneider's method of comparing Cicero's Latin passages to excerpts from Richard Misyn's Middle English translation of *Incendium amoris* is problematic.

²¹⁷ *Incendium amoris*, 261.

²¹⁸ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 291.

²¹⁹ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 297.

²²⁰ 'Anima Ionathan conligata est animae David[.]' I Sm 18:1.

²²¹ *Incendium amoris*, 261.

friends as 'almost believing there is but one soul in them both.'²²² Both ideas have a classical and Biblical background, and they are compatible with Rolle's claim that love makes the lover akin to the loved and unites the two.

In agreement with Cicero, Aelred and, according to Classen, the general sentiment of the high Middle Ages,²²³ Rolle emphasises the natural origin and basis of friendship: 'Nature forces man to look for a faithful friend,' but then he continues, 'and this natural friendship is not dissolved as long as nature exists'²²⁴ – at least as long as the friends do not transgress against nature with corrupt manners. A few lines later, he repeats: 'The friendship which nature urges in friends is brought down by no poverty, erased by no error, finished by no disgrace, while the nature due to which the friendship exists, stands.'²²⁵ The indissolubility of friendship is a commonplace of Christian friendship – Aelred refers to both Proverbs 17:17 and Jerome's letter to Rufinus when he says that friendship that ends was never true to begin with.²²⁶ However, Rolle seems to break from Christian tradition in favour of a more classical argument when he appeals to the stability of nature as the basis and guarantee of friendship. Granted, he may have thought, as Aelred explained in his *De spiritali amicitia*, that God is the greatest nature who ordered everything in nature.²²⁷ It is furthermore possible that Rolle was thinking of the nature or character of the friends in question rather than the totality of the natural order. The direct appeal to the persistence of nature is nonetheless not something found in Aelred's treatise. It echoes a more explicit metaphysical statement by Cicero: 'Because nature cannot be changed, true friendship is eternal.'²²⁸ It seems very likely that Rolle had access either to Cicero's *Laelius* or to some other text transmitting its ideas besides *De spiritali amicitia*.

Given the strong opposition of love of God and love of the world in Rolle's works, his emphasis on the natural basis of friendship is surprising. It appears almost as if God was not necessary for faithful, natural friendship – this is

²²² '[P]ene crederent non nisi unam animam esse in utroque.' *Incendium amoris*, 196.

²²³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 297; Cicero, *Laelius*, 44; Classen, 'Friendship – the quest', 19.

²²⁴ 'Natura enim cogit hominem sibi querere fidelem amicum; [...] ergo ipsa amicitia que naturalis est, non dissoluetur, natura existente[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 262.

²²⁵ 'Sed amicitia quam natura agit in amicis, nulla paupertate deicitur, nullo errore deletur, nulla deformitate finitur, dum natura subsistit que amicitie illius cause existit.' *Incendium amoris*, 262.

²²⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 300.

²²⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 298.

²²⁸ '[S]ed quia natura mutari non potest, idcirco verae amicitiae sempiternae sunt.' Cicero, *Laelius*, 44.

especially peculiar since Rolle also claimed that nature can be in conflict with God's will and that nothing worldly can last.²²⁹ This apparent tension is probably partly due to Rolle following his sources; the views he simply adopted from Cicero and Aelred naturally did not fit as seamlessly into his grand scheme as those he developed himself. On the other hand, the question of genre has some relevance. Much of chapter 39 discusses a point of academic concern, commenting on the tradition of friendship theories and the empirical phenomenon. Its aim is not overtly to preach the contemplative life, a motive which informs much of Rolle's writing. To shed some additional light on the issue, we ought to investigate how he develops an ethical argument and a categorisation of friendship from the concept of natural friendship.

The primary categorisation of friendship in *Incendium amoris* 39 is based on nature's relation to ethics. True friendship is morally neutral as such, as is the delight inherent in it: 'Such friendship is purely natural, and therefore neither praiseworthy nor condemnable, unless it struggles against God's command.'²³⁰ This is then developed into a more general ethical argument: 'They err disgracefully who say that all our deeds, whether inward or external, are praiseworthy or condemnable. For they deny, or at least strive to deny, that there are natural delights and acts in us.'²³¹ These arguments make acceptable a natural friendship in the world that is not primarily religious, but amoral naturalism is not the final word on friendship. Its merit is measured according to God's will, that is, ordered love: if friendship is shaped by God's grace, made in God and directed to him, it is called holy friendship, *sancta amicitia*. If the friendship causes something contrary to God's will, it is perverse, foetid and foul.²³² So Rolle comes up with a tripartite model of friendship: friendship has a natural basis, and it can remain at that neutral level, but it can become holy or condemnable depending on whether conforms to or transgresses against God.

The general idea of three categories of friendship was not unique to Rolle. Aelred of Rievaulx also distinguished between three types: carnal friendship

²²⁹ See above, chapter 3.2.

²³⁰ 'Talis amicitia pure naturalis est, et ideo nec meritum nec demeritum nisi contra Dei preceptum aliquid molitur[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 262.

²³¹ 'Errant ergo turpiter qui dicunt quod omnia facta nostra, siue interiora siue exteriora, sunt meritoria uel demeritoria; quia auferre nituntur, uel saltem in nobis non esse contendunt delectaciones et acciones naturale[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²³² *Incendium amoris*, 262–263.

based on agreement on vices, worldly friendship kindled by hope for profit, and spiritual friendship, which is based on the similarity of life, manners and pursuits between good people.²³³ These three types correspond to Aristotle's pleasurable, utilitarian and true friendships more so than to anything Cicero wrote.²³⁴ Rolle seems to have been aware of the concept: he admits that friendship is possible between good and bad people alike, based on various affections. Utility and pleasure are mentioned in passing as an unreliable basis for friendship, but his three-way model ultimately operates on a different logic.²³⁵ The traditional model has two types of false friendships appealing to different desires and one that is good and properly called friendship, whereas Rolle acknowledged the natural middle ground as basic, becoming either good or evil through its relation to God.

The next chapter will investigate Rolle's ideas about mixed-gender friendship more thoroughly, particularly in regards to spiritual instruction. At this point, it suffices to note how he applied the concept of natural friendship to relationships between men and women. Just like friendship originates in nature, 'there is a certain love of man for woman and woman for man which no one, not even the holy, lacks. It was first instituted by God according to nature.'²³⁶ There is a natural delight inherent in such fellowship, particularly 'in mutual discussion, honest touching and pleasing cohabitation.'²³⁷ As with natural friendship in general, it is neither praiseworthy nor condemnable unless it is informed by *caritas* or denigrated by error, respectively. In such a relationship, lust earns the penalty of death.²³⁸ Watson quotes this short section concerning the natural love (*dileccio*) between men and women as representative of Rolle's ideas of mixed-gender friendship, but it is notable that in the passage the word *amicicia* is not used and what it says does not seem to have much to do with the rest of Rolle's theory of mixed-gender friendship.²³⁹

There are at least two plausible interpretations for how the concepts of natural friendship in general and the natural love between men and women relate

²³³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 295.

²³⁴ Given that a Latin translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* was not available before 1246, the transmission must have been indirect. See McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 26.

²³⁵ *Incendium amoris*, 261–262.

²³⁶ 'Est et quedam naturalis dileccio uiri ad mulierem, et mulieris ad uirum, qua nullus caret nec eciam sanctus, secundum naturam a Deo primo institutam.' *Incendium amoris*, 263.

²³⁷ '[I]n mutuis colloquiis et tactibus honestis, grataque cohabitatione[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 263.

²³⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 263–264.

²³⁹ Watson, *Invention*, 224. 'Amicicia' is, admittedly, used briefly before and after the section, but I would argue it reads like an independent paragraph.

to Rolle's thought and his literary motives. For one, it is possible that Rolle used the idea of natural friendship and its lawful delights to justify his own affections or relationships. Despite his solitary ethos and condemnation of worldly love, Rolle seems to have enjoyed the company of friends, had felt the allure of women and expressed his longing for a friend to share his temporal existence.²⁴⁰ One might suggest, then, that a doctrine of natural sociability justified this; even a holy hermit was subject to nature, and there was nothing illicit in human interaction as long as he did not transgress against God. Rolle's relationships with women especially had the potential to arouse suspicion,²⁴¹ so it may have been necessary for him to defend the idea of natural love between the sexes.

The self-defence interpretation is also compatible with the idea, important to Rolle, that external actions and appearances are secondary to inner devotion and love of God.²⁴² Natural friendship might not be distinguishable from meritable, holy friendship on the surface, since it is one's private love of God and rejection of all worldly concupiscence that determines the nature of the relationship. Rolle could, therefore, criticise others for associating with women in much the same way he did without contradiction, because they did not love God and respect the order of love like he did.

The first interpretation must be qualified: natural love and friendship is not something Rolle returned to in the rest of his writings to justify his relationships. The ideas might therefore be better interpreted as general rather than self-referential. The holy and perverse types of friendship correspond with love of God and love of the world associated with the *electi* and the *reprobi*, respectively. Watson argues that when Rolle speaks of the two groups, he is concerned with a small fraction of humanity, and while he acknowledged the existence of mediocre Christians in the middle, he tended to forget them.²⁴³ If holy friendship is something reserved for the spiritual elite, natural friendship opens the possibility of acceptable human fellowship for those who are not among the *electi*. Rolle's lack of interest in average people would explain why he seems to forget his three categories and apply rather black-and-white criteria of friendship throughout the

²⁴⁰ See *Incendium amoris*, 188, *Super Canticum canticorum* quoted in Allen, *Writings*, 75, and *Incendium amoris*, 243–244, respectively.

²⁴¹ See below, chapter 4.3.

²⁴² For example, *Form*, 14; *Incendium amoris*, 212–213.

²⁴³ Watson, *Invention*, 59–60.

rest of his work without clarifying whether it is natural or holy friendship he is talking about.

Furthermore, it is difficult to see how honest touching and living together would fit into a hermit's practice of mixed-gender friendship. Watson thinks that the reference does not concern friendship with women in general but specifically living with a female patron.²⁴⁴ Rolle did refer to his patrons as friends, and at times he lived in their households. There were instances where he had to explain his association with women – discussion, cohabitation and even touching them – as holy and legitimate, so Watson's suggestion has merit and there is an element of self-defence in the reference.²⁴⁵ A more general reading can be proposed, however. Rolle was not primarily interested in the problems of secular life, but an earlier chapter, *Incendium amoris* 24, opens with a discussion of marriage. While one who remains chaste and does not marry gains a great name in heaven, Rolle admits that 'marriage is good in itself' and only corrupted when it is motivated by carnal lust.²⁴⁶ This was the traditional Christian idea that it is good to be married but better to remain chaste and unwed. The chapter treats relationships between men and women rather more suspiciously than chapter 39, but the possibility for a positive relationship remains: there is an inherently good matrimonial bond between men and women, twisted by lust as it often may be.

An obvious parallel between the two chapters is the reference to touching: 'It is a lesser evil to touch a woman's flesh with bare hands than to stain the mind with evil delights. Truly, if we touch women and nevertheless think nothing but good in our heart, it ought not be called sin,'²⁴⁷ claims chapter 24. The similarity of the statements in the two chapters may not be coincidence. It could be argued that the brief passage in chapter 39 on natural love between men and women, with its touching and cohabitation, refers to marriage rather than spiritual friendship. That may seem far-fetched, but at least it shows that natural love between the sexes had wider application than just the defence of a hermit's personal relationships.

²⁴⁴ Watson, *Invention*, 224 n. 2.

²⁴⁵ On patrons as friends, see above, chapter 3.2; on Rolle's defence of his relationships, see below, chapter 4.3.

²⁴⁶ 'Matrimonium autem in se bonum est[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 211.

²⁴⁷ 'Minus enim malum est carnem mulieris nudis manibus tangere, quem mentem mala delectacione inquinare. Si uero mulierem tangimus et tamen in corde nihil nisi bonum cogitamus, peccatum profecto dici non debeat.' *Incendium amoris*, 212.

Of course, one interpretation does not preclude the other; letting readers draw their own conclusions from what purports to be a general statement can be an effective strategy of indirect self-defence. It is impossible to say to what extent Rolle was consciously applying a literary strategy to justify himself, but the text does allow the interpretation. In any case, natural affection was not Rolle's primary answer to the problem of mixed-gender friendship. It tied in with his theories on the types and moral quality of friendships in general, but remained more or less unrelated to the much more important concept of spiritual instruction, addressed in the next main chapter; there, the argument that Rolle used his theory of mixed-gender friendship as self-defence will be picked up with new evidence. For now, it must be left as a tentative suggestion.

Ultimately, natural friendship played a small part in Rolle's argumentation. He used the terms 'holy friendship' (*sancta amicitia*) and 'true friendship' (*uera amicitia*) somewhat interchangeably, so it is not always clear whether he was talking about faithful natural friendship or friendship in God. For one, true friendship meant to love the friend for his own sake – something quite different from the exhortation to love only for God's sake. Natural affection and virtue are tied together when Rolle clarifies: 'They love each other for themselves, certainly, according to what is good in them. And that is to be understood as a goodness of nature, not of manners.'²⁴⁸ Rolle adopted the idea that perfect friendship exists only between the virtuous, because friendship itself is a virtue – not that he ever explained what virtues are, exactly, but the identification is traditional.²⁴⁹ Virtue is Rolle's other basis for the indissolubility of true friendship: since virtue is something in a person's nature, friendship cannot end without change in the person himself.²⁵⁰ It seems that Rolle's separation of moral merit and natural friendship is not as strict as it first appeared, after all. True friendship is based on goodness and virtue inherent in nature, and it is only possible between the good.

The neat distinctions are obscured even further when Rolle equates true friendship with love: 'Friendship which wills good for the friend as if for oneself

²⁴⁸ '[A]mant se inuicem secundum seipsos, scilicet, secundum quod boni sunt, quod oportet intelligi

non bonitate moris sed nature.' *Incendium amoris*, 262.

²⁴⁹ For example, Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 292; Cicero, on the other hand, separates virtue from friendship as the highest good, but considers it inevitably linked with friendship. *Laelius*, 36.

²⁵⁰ *Incendium amoris*, 261.

ought to be called love.²⁵¹ Indeed, much of what *Incendium amoris* 39 says of friendship is elsewhere said of love. For example, love is 'fairhede of al vertu²⁵², and in holy, voluntary love the beloved is loved for himself.²⁵³ We saw in chapter 3.2 that Rolle considered ordered love more universal than human friendship: affection for one's friends is only one aspect of the order of love, since even enemies must be loved. Rolle probably did not mean to dismiss the distinction between *amicitia*, *amor* and *caritas*; his terminology is loose and his style unsystematic, which leads to confusion. Whatever else it may be, true friendship burns with the same selfless desire for the good of the other as love.

*

This main chapter described Rolle's general theory of friendship and its relation to ordered love, God, the world and contemplative life. The division into three chapters reflects Rolle's idea that friendship can exist between a human and God, between bad, worldly people, or between good people. It also represents one way of structuring Rolle's argument: friendship with God is fundamental, but it is opposed by worldly friendship that desires and does things contrary to God's will. It is nonetheless possible to mend this corrupted concept and arise to a true friendship between humans by respecting the order of love and making God, as the greatest good, the aim of friendship.

This is a fairly abstract picture, however, and does not tell much about the kind of friendship Rolle actually defended and exercised with women. As the next chapter moves on to consider mixed-gender friendship and its relationship to spiritual instruction, we ought to remember the main points of this chapter: the dichotomy of God and the world is fundamental to Rolle's thought, and accordingly there is a divine ideal of friendship that has become twisted in the world.

²⁵¹ 'Etsi oporteret ut amicitia dicatur amor, quo uult et procurat amico suo bonum sicut sibi ipsi[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 261–262.

²⁵² *Form*, 19.

²⁵³ *Emendatio vitae*, 220.

4 Spiritual Instruction – A Model of Friendship Between Men and Women

4.1 *Virgins and Whores – Rolle's Depiction of Women*

After Rolle's attack on worldly relationships between the sexes and his scolding of women in particular, it is hard to see how he might make room for a positive evaluation of mixed-gender friendships. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 7:27, he claims that because of the woman 'almost the entire world is clasped in the illusory whips and snares of roaring hell'²⁵⁴ – quite a strong statement. Indeed, David Knowles considers Rolle to be 'uncommonly harsh in his judgement of women', which is 'perhaps the least attractive feature of Rolle's outlook.'²⁵⁵ As chapter 4.2 will show, however, Rolle had plenty to say about just and virtuous relationships between the sexes. Before we can make sense of the specifics, then, something needs to be said about this apparent contradiction.

Rolle's criticism of women is often related to their beauty, the fleshly desires with which they tempt men, and their vanity. Of all the evils of the world, he was particularly vexed by make-up, fashionable hairstyles and all sorts of unnecessary ornaments. He was eager to chastise the women of his time, because the horns on their head and the paint on their faces were against nature and God, designed only to lead men astray with a false beauty.²⁵⁶ For Rolle, the debauched woman seemed to act as a symbol for all things worldly. *Super Canticum canticorum* relates a personal experience from the early stages of Rolle's career when the devil appeared to tempt him in the form of a beautiful woman.²⁵⁷ Allen takes this to be an echo of some love affair in his past and in Knowles' opinion the affection would have ruined Rolle's spiritual life had he not overcome it.²⁵⁸ Renevey does not comment on the historicity of the incident, but he notes that the representation of the devil as a beautiful woman was traditional. Nonetheless, he considers the narrative a turning point in Rolle's spiritual career, in which the figure of the woman emphasises Rolle's weaknesses. In his interpretation, 'misogynist ejaculations express a fundamental psychological trait of their writer' – that is, his

²⁵⁴ '[P]ene totus mundus retibus rugiencium inferorumque loris illusoriis laqueatur.' *Melos I*, 112. Translation by Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 69.

²⁵⁵ David Knowles, *The English mystical tradition*, New York: Harper & Row 1965, 62.

²⁵⁶ *Incendium amoris*, 266; compare *Contra amatores mundi* 102; *Melos I*, 306.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in Allen, *Writings*, 75.

²⁵⁸ Allen, *Writings*, 467–469; Knowles, *The English mystical tradition*, 62.

greatest temptations are sexual, which is also Astell's conclusion.²⁵⁹ In such a reading, Rolle projected everything foul that kept him from God onto the figure of the temptress. Admittedly, it is a psychologically believable explanation for his sustained attack against the worldly woman.

Rolle did not think all women are debauched and incapable of sanctity, however. In *The Form of Living*, Rolle frequently mentions holy women alongside holy men.²⁶⁰ Given that it was written to a woman aspiring to sanctity, that ought to be expected, but *Melos amoris* – the work that contains the greatest number of Rolle's misogynistic outbursts – also makes the most explicit women's spiritual potential; virgins who hold onto virtue can gain the love of God.²⁶¹ By virgins, Rolle meant nuns or the consecrated religious in general. They are 'honoured in the highest ranks of angels [...] and having loved more, they will dwell peacefully at the summit with the Seraphim.'²⁶² Consumed by love and devoted to God, they could even receive the gift of song, the climax of Rolle's spiritual experiences.²⁶³ There is no question, then, of women being categorically incapable of salvation and even the highest rewards of contemplative life. What it requires is resisting the world and devoting oneself to God in chastity. In an allegory of the loving soul as a woman, Rolle made clear how he felt about femininity as such: 'This woman is not soft, in a feminine way, and did not submit to the noxious words of young men, but, great in strength, and having received divine love, she stood as a man in her strength[.]'²⁶⁴ This was a typical idea among medieval male authors: women were fully capable of sanctity as soon as they gave up their femininity – that is, their carnal concupiscence – and became as men.²⁶⁵

According to Robertson, women in the Middle Ages were defined primarily through their bodies, whose restrictions they could transcend only through virginity.²⁶⁶ That is certainly the case for Rolle but to be fair, every contemplative

²⁵⁹ Ann W. Astell, 'Feminine *figurae* in the writings of Richard Rolle: a register of growth', *Mystics Quarterly* 15:3 (1989), 117–124, 119; Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 69–71.

²⁶⁰ For example, *Form*, 14, 22, 23, 24.

²⁶¹ *Melos I*, 310.

²⁶² '[O]rdine angelico optime ornantur [...] in summis subsistent cum Seraphyn que amplius amabant serene[.]' *Melos II*, 50. The term Rolle uses to refer to these women is *monialis*.

²⁶³ *Melos II*, 52.

²⁶⁴ 'Hec mulier non est mollis in moribus femineis, nec se prebuit verbis iuvenum pestiferis; sed fortis robore, divina capta dileccione, ut vir stetis in viribus[.]' *Contra amatores mundi*, 76, transl. p. 158.

²⁶⁵ Bynum gives several examples of men who urged women to spiritual masculinity, including Rolle's contemporary German mystic John Tauler. Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 28 n. 68.

²⁶⁶ Robertson, *Early English devotional prose*, 34, 40.

must give up the world to achieve holiness regardless of gender; on the other hand, as McIlroy notes, the theme of female virginity is much more emphatic in Rolle's Latin works than in the English writings actually addressed to religious women.²⁶⁷ It seems that Rolle had a greater need to emphasise the difference between chaste, holy women and debauched sinners to the primarily male readers of his Latin works than to the recipients of his vernacular instruction. It might reflect the general attitudes and expectations of his audience, but it also suggests that Rolle had to justify in Latin his association with the female religious – which would have been unnecessary in writing to those women themselves.

Scholars have offered competing interpretations of Rolle's attitude towards women. McIlroy notes the absence of 'traditional anti-feminist ideas' and gendered language in Rolle's English works, and suggests it has to do with his intended audience: the clerical male readers of his Latin works would have expected misogynistic statements, whereas the non-gendered language of the English works catered to a wide readership.²⁶⁸ The observation is valid, but it probably indicates a specific rather than a diverse intended audience for the English works; Rolle would have felt no need to warn nuns and anchoresses about the charms of worldly women, and excessive misogyny might have alienated his female disciples. Furthermore, Renevey argues that *Contra amatores mundi*, which McIlroy quotes as an example of anti-feminist tropes for men, was actually directed at a diverse audience of men and women, lay and religious.²⁶⁹ Because she focuses primarily on Rolle's English works, McIlroy does not give due weight to Rolle's critical remarks about women. They are clearly integral to Rolle's system and not mere misogynistic commonplaces.

In Astell's theory, feminine figures are associated with the affective domain and reflect the stages of affective integration as Rolle reaches spiritual maturity and his 'personal assimilation of the feminine principle.' Astell argues for a gradual development in Rolle's attitude toward women. The temptress of Rolle's vision represents Rolle's own experiences as a beginner and is meant to give weight to his warnings to beginners, as women tend to distract the *affectus* from divine things. The Virgin Mary is, for the young Rolle, a feminine other whom he should love and worship, but gradually he is able to identify her with his own

²⁶⁷ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 90–91.

²⁶⁸ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 128–132.

²⁶⁹ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 128; Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 106.

feminine affective principle and become Christ's bride. This identification empowers Rolle to form new relationships with women and accounts for his positive estimation of them later in life.²⁷⁰

Renevey detects in Rolle's writings three categories of women that roughly correspond to the stages of development sketched by Astell. There is the idealised Virgin Mary, the religious women, typically nuns and anchoresses, and the debauched women of the world. However, as Renevey points out, Astell's theory is not supported by the chronology of Rolle's writings. *Melos amoris*, a relatively late work, is full of misogyny. Renevey argues that Rolle's ambiguity toward women is best understood in reference to the category of women he is discussing.²⁷¹ To Renevey's observation must be added that bitter criticism of worldly women and praise of holy virgins both appear side by side in *Melos amoris*, debunking any neat chronology. To understand how Rolle can go from disparaging women as more or less the handmaidens of hell to recommending friendship with them, one must keep in mind the roles and categories of the women under discussion. Rolle was neither a total misogynist nor a feminist, but he did not shy away from sweeping generalisations to make his point.

4.2 Spiritual Instruction as Friendship

With the above points about Rolle's attitude towards women in mind, we can turn to investigate the relationship between spiritual instruction and friendship with women. Before instruction can be connected explicitly to mixed-gender friendship, it must be discussed as part of a hermit's Christian duty and as part of friendship in general. The final part of this main chapter shows how Rolle applied the model of spiritual instruction to respond to criticism and justify his association with women. In other words, the chapter will answer the questions of what Rolle's theory of mixed-gender friendship was and, in part at least, why he wrote as he did: what his authorial motives and the circumstances that directed his choices were.

In chapter 3.1 above, it was seen how in *Melos amoris* Rolle appealed to his friendship with God to authorise his teaching and Biblical exposition. The context of that argument is a discussion of the active, contemplative and mixed lives. After complaining about inept preachers and defending the hermits' way of life

²⁷⁰ Astell, *Song of songs*, 111–117; see also Astell, 'Feminine *figurae*', 117–123.

²⁷¹ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 73; see also note 24 to the page.

against those who would dismiss their wisdom and prevent them from preaching, and just before the claim that teachers should first make themselves friends of God, Rolle says:

Therefore it is good to be a preacher, to run about, to move, to become tired for the salvation of souls; but it is better, it is more secure, it is sweeter to be a contemplative, to feel in advance the eternal sweetness, to sing the delights of eternal love and to be snatched in the praise of the Creator by the infusion of song in jubilation. However, whoever can obtain both will be the more praiseworthy – yet this will not occur unless someone becomes a contemplative before becoming a teacher. [...] He should teach, exhort, persuade everyone to charity, that they may live in concord and chastity, in obedience [gentleness]²⁷² and patience. He should also be eager, if he has understanding of the Scriptures and sees the Holy Spirit inflaming him, to write these and many other things which he cannot preach in public.²⁷³

Rolle is here building a hierarchy of the religious, but it does not culminate in the holy hermit sitting alone in his cell, contemplating the gifts of God. Instead, the greatest contemplatives turn back to the world and try to draw others to the heights with them. Rolle recommends a life informed by love whose contents – concord, chastity, gentleness and patience – are not restricted to any particular institution or form of life. The mission is, in his own words, to everyone.

Particularly interesting is Rolle's emphasis on writing as a substitute for preaching. His problem was, of course, that as an unordained hermit he was not allowed to actually preach. Watson's interpretation is that Rolle sought to make a place for himself by blurring the established distinction between preaching and the less-valued act of teaching, and practice an eremitic equivalent of preaching and spiritual instruction through literary activity. In his discussion of this passage, Watson further argues that *Melos amoris* represents a turning point in Rolle's spiritual self-representation, a point where *canor* as a culmination of the self-sufficient solitary life is no longer the final word. He sees in it a beginning and a cipher to Rolle's later, more didactically inclined career.²⁷⁴ The passage does seem

²⁷² Watson translates *mansuetudo* as 'obedience', which gives the passage a monastic or hierarchical tone. The meaning is perhaps better rendered as tameness, gentleness or clemency. This implies a humble and mild attitude, but without the strong monastic connotation of *obedientia* towards an authority.

²⁷³ 'Itaque bonum est predicatorem esse, pro salute animarum discurrere, movere, fatigari. Sed melius est, securius et suavius contemplatorem esse, eternam suavitatem presentire, delicias canere eterni amoris et in laudem rapi Conditoris per infusionem canoris iubilei. Si quis autem utrumque potuerit adipisci, tanto laudabilior erit. Sed hoc non continget nisi prius efficeretur contemplator quam predicator. [...] Doceat, exhortetur, suadeat omnes ad charitatem, ut vivant in concordia et castitate, in mansuetudine et paciencia. Studeat quoque si habeat intellectum Scripturarum, et videat Spiritum Sanctum se inflammantem hec et alia plura scribere que in publico non potest predicare.' *Melos II*, 166–168. Translation in Watson, *Invention*, 184.

²⁷⁴ Watson, *Invention*, 180–187. On the distinction of preaching and teaching, see Vincent Gillespie, 'Doctrina and *predicacio*: the design and function of some pastoral manuals', *Leeds Studies in English* 11 (1980), 36–50.

to speak of Rolle's own career as Watson argues, and the elevation of the hermit's literary activity to the level of preaching is fairly obvious. Rolle thought that a contemplative man must instruct others so that they too might get closer to God.

It was not, however, a new idea in Rolle's work. Already in *Incendium amoris*, the lover of God with continual melody in his mind is said to be taken above all others 'so that he excites others to love and to hurry to give themselves to God perfectly and devoutly.'²⁷⁵ Compared to the passage in *Melos amoris* it is a modest remark, but it does show that Rolle was always concerned to harness the contemplative experience for the benefit of others. In *Contra amatores mundi*, too, Rolle attempts to justify his writing about his spiritual experiences and declares: 'So those who love strive also to teach others of this love; this is also very useful for us, because the more freely we teach others about what we are able to receive, the more ardently and sweetly we are carried away in love.'²⁷⁶ Not only is teaching important for the benefit of others, it apparently even enhances the contemplative's spiritual experiences further.

Renevey's dating of *Contra amatores mundi* as later than *Melos amoris* seems to support Watson's argument that *Melos amoris* was a turning point in Rolle's career, after which his writing exhibited more awareness of the readers' needs.²⁷⁷ On the other hand, Renevey's dating is partly based on the assumption of linear evolution away from self-referentiality towards accessibility and didacticism in Rolle's literary career.²⁷⁸ It cannot, therefore, be used without circularity to demonstrate such an evolution. His dating is nonetheless reasonable, and either way the testimony of *Incendium amoris* remains; Rolle's later writing seems to have focused more on the audience, but the importance of the mixed-life duty of sharing the fruits of contemplation must be noted already in his earlier works.

Two further passages suffice to show Rolle's emphasis on instruction as an element of Christian life. In their works on friendship, both Cicero and Aelred expected friends to correct each other, but the rebuke should be soft so as not to

²⁷⁵ '[U]t alios excitaret ad amandum in Deo se deuote et perfecte festinent tribuere.' *Incendium amoris*, 241.

²⁷⁶ 'Amantes itaque eciam aliis amorem predicare studiuimus, nam et nobis hoc valde utile est, quia tanto ardentius et suavius in amore capimur, quanto libencius hoc quod capere potuimus aliis predicamus.' *Contra amatores mundi*, 81, transl. p. 164.

²⁷⁷ See Watson, *Invention*, 188–191. Part IV, the last two chapters of the book, is concerned with the 'mixed' life; see 195–256. On the chronology, see above, chapter 2.2.

²⁷⁸ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 104–106, 130.

provoke them to become worse.²⁷⁹ Rolle applies this argument to the natural community of every man, according to which neighbours should be loved.²⁸⁰ They fail to love God and their neighbour who 'speak with such harshness and rigidity that often the sinners become worse. They should rather speak gently to attract with sweet words those whom immoderate correction compels to sin.'²⁸¹ In the *Form of Living* Rolle lists among sins of omission, that is, failing to do what one should, 'amendynge nat ham that synnen before his eighen' and 'techyng nat ham þat bene vnconynge.'²⁸² It is a Christian duty to correct those who sin before one's eyes, and gentle persuasion is sometimes the best way to go about it. It is not just outright sin that deserves attention; anyone who is unwise must be taught by those who know better.

Unlike the *Melos amoris* passage, these two statements do not restrict instruction to a specific role such as the preacher or the hermit. All who seek to do God's will must concern themselves with the salvation of others and do their best to help each other. Rolle presented two types of arguments, then, to justify his teaching activity: first, that the highest vocation is for a contemplative to become a preacher and that as such a man himself, he ought to exhort others to strive for the same love he has experienced; second, that teaching the unwise and correcting the sinners is actually a Christian duty expected of everyone. It must be remembered that for Rolle, this was realised through literary activity. There is no reason to suppose he never taught or chastised people in person – indeed, the *Officium* gives examples of such²⁸³ – but he goes to great lengths to establish himself specifically as a literary authority. He must write what he cannot preach.

What does all this have to do with friendship? As chapter 3.3 demonstrated, Rolle connected friendship with virtue. Friendship has a function of moral edification: true friendship is the 'reform of sinners, increase of holiness, diminishing of wickedness and multiplication of merit.'²⁸⁴ In practice, this edification is achieved through the friend's advice and example. Friends draw each

²⁷⁹ Cicero, *Laelius*, 66–68; Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 341–342.

²⁸⁰ *Incendium amoris*, 215.

²⁸¹ '[C]um tanta asperitate et rigore uerba proferunt, quod sepe corrigendi peiores fiunt. Deberent enim cum mansuetudine loqui, ut per dulcia uerba possint attrahere, quod immoderata correccio cogit nequius peccare.' *Incendium amoris*, 216.

²⁸² *Form*, 13.

²⁸³ See the sixth lesson of the *Officium*, pp. 32–33, where Rolle's patron lady brings her guests to listen to his teaching, and his visit with Margaret Kirkeby, discussed in chapter 5.2 below.

²⁸⁴ '[R]eformacio peccatorum, augmentacio sanctitatis, diminucio sceleris, multiplicacio bonorum meritorum[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 264.

other from evil by healthy counsel, and seeing in a friend the grace one wishes to have kindles an urge toward goodness.²⁸⁵ In his discussion of the indissolubility of perfect friendship, Rolle says that a true friend should be anxious to call back a friend who has erred.²⁸⁶ These general remarks do not draw an explicit connection between friendship and spiritual instruction, but I argue that both relationships serve the purpose of edification and that friendship, insofar as the friend is not already perfect, must include instruction and rebuke. In a rare address to his readers as friends, Rolle implicitly appeals to the relationship as a basis that authorises his instruction: 'Listen, I implore, my friends, that no one seduce you.'²⁸⁷ On the other hand, rather than to presuppose a friendship that precedes and motivates Rolle's instruction, one could take the passage to imply that because Rolle writes for the readers' benefit and wants what is best for them, they are effectively his friends. To teach or be taught is to be a friend.

If an implicit connection suggests itself between the general concepts of friendship and instruction, Rolle makes it unequivocally explicit when he turns to address friendship with women in *Incendium amoris* 39. Friendship with women is dangerous, Rolle admits, because the soul is fragile and fleshly desire easily kindled. Antithetically to true friendships, it tends to be to the detriment of virtue. And yet, 'this friendship is not illicit but meritorious if it is conducted with good intentions, and the love is for God rather than the sweetness of the flesh.'²⁸⁸ The emphasis is on spiritual and moral aspects, rather than natural love; the merit of the relationship is measured by devotion to God. It will be seen that a meritorious friendship between man and woman is one of spiritual instruction.

'God wills that women not be despised by men'²⁸⁹, Rolle declares. It is not some proto-feminist assertion of the inherent value of female qualities, however, but a demand arising from the need for salvation:

If women saw themselves despised by men, they would complain about God who made them such that men would disdain them, and might give up hope of salvation, for they consider themselves forsaken if they do not get counsel and help from men. They are obviously less rational, wherefore they are easily led astray and quickly defeated. That is why they need the counsel of good men.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁵ *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²⁸⁶ *Incendium amoris*, 261.

²⁸⁷ 'Audite, obsecro, amici mei, nemo uos seducat.' *Incendium amoris*, 247.

²⁸⁸ 'Non tamen est illicita illa amicitia, immo meritoria, si bono animo agatur, et pro Deo diligitur, non pro carnis suauitate.' *Incendium amoris*, 263.

²⁸⁹ 'Uult namque Deus mulieres a uiris nec prorsus despici[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²⁹⁰ 'Si enim mulieres se a uiris despectas cernerent, et de Deo conquererentur, qui eas tales creasset de quibus uiri dedignarentur, et de salute forsitan desperarent, desolatas enim se estimant, si a uiris

It is notable that this passage immediately follows the statement that friendship between men and women is praiseworthy if it is for God. Rolle leaves no room for doubt; friendship between men and women is based not just on natural affection, but on women's need for the counsel of men. According to Elizabeth Robertson, the Aristotelian view that women's souls were inferior to those of men especially in the faculty of reason – as opposed to the Platonic idea of gender-neutral souls in gendered bodies – was typical especially in Western Christianity in the Middle Ages.²⁹¹ Rolle does not seem to have been exceptional in this regard. A proper way to conduct a mixed-gender friendship is for the man to guide and instruct the woman in a hierarchical relationship.

Not only is holy instruction meritorious; it is a duty, failure in which is condemnable. Men are responsible for women's fate, since it is God's will that women be 'taught faithfully and charitably in all holiness and purity for the salvation of their souls and bodies.'²⁹² Rolle complains that it is rare to find anyone who does that any more, since men would rather teach women in some things only to win their gifts and favours and thus ruin them in other things. In particular, he condemns those who refuse to prohibit the evil things women like to use so as not to offend them.²⁹³ But the worst sinners are those 'who have taken holy orders and approach little women like sinners, saying how they languish for their love and almost melt in immense desire and conflicting thoughts. They lead those fickle and unstable women to misery in this life and the next.'²⁹⁴ The passage is in some ways a parallel to the *Melos amoris* attack on wretched preachers and the subsequent elevation of the contemplative writer.²⁹⁵ Perhaps there were real problems with sinful priests and confessors who took advantage of women, just like there may have been an abundance of incompetent preachers. Indeed, according to Robertson the synodal statutes of the previous century were

consilium uel auxilium non assumant. Minus quippe uiget in eis ratio, unde et faciliter seducuntur et cito uincuntur. Propter quod multum indigent consilio bonorum.' *Incendium amoris*, 263.

²⁹¹ Robertson, *Early English devotional prose*, 32–34.

²⁹² '[I]n omni sanctitate et sanctimonia ad salutem anime et corporis fideliter et caritatiue erudiri[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²⁹³ *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²⁹⁴ '[Q]ui sacrum ordinem acceperunt, qui accedunt ad mulierculas uelut peccatores, dicentes se languere pro amore illarum et pene tabescere immenso desiderio, cogitationumque conflictu, et sic eas leues et instabiles ad miseriam presentis uite et future perducunt.' *Incendium amoris*, 264.

²⁹⁵ *Melos II*, 160–168, discussed above.

frequently concerned with sexual transgressions among anchorites and warned female recluses about immoral advisers.²⁹⁶

Primarily, though, both instances seem to be rhetorical tools to create a contrast between Rolle and others. Rolle himself was not in holy orders, so by attacking the transgressions of priests and friars he could shine by comparison. Priests who woo women fall victim to fleshly love, but the previous chapter of *Incendium amoris* has just ended in the assertion that those who live in God's perfect love, such as Rolle himself, feel no sinful lust whatsoever.²⁹⁷ Others fail to chastise women for their vanity, but Rolle proceeds to do just that, for the chapter ends in an attack against vain clothes, hair-dresses, make-up and other reprehensible fashions.²⁹⁸ A more subtle contrast is how the Biblical *amore langueo* is corrupted by the lustful priests, whereas Rolle normally used the phrase in the context of a spiritual ascent to God's love.²⁹⁹ One might even suggest that Rolle is here appealing to popular anti-clerical sentiments and stereotypes to win over his readers and set himself apart from the dubious men of the cloth. His depiction of confessors seducing women to sin would have no doubt struck a chord with readers of *The Canterbury Tales* a few decades later, for example. In summary, Rolle justified himself by turning friendship with women, that is, spiritual instruction, into a duty that is expected of holy men like him, and deflected potential suspicions and accusations by redirecting them against lewd clergymen, real or imagined.

It is notable that unlike classical friendship, the kind of instruction-friendship sketched above does not posit a prerequisite of equality. This has caused Watson to separate the two types of relationships, at least on a conceptual level. In *Melos amoris* 43, Rolle claims that in his association with certain women he simply 'spoke with the women about faith in the Maker.'³⁰⁰ The example will be addressed more fully in the next section, 4.3, but here it should be noted how Watson characterises it in comparison to *Incendium amoris* 39: 'Here there is no hint of the loving equality of *amicitia*. Rolle states that his relationship with these women is that of a teacher[.]'³⁰¹ Watson seems to presuppose some fundamental

²⁹⁶ Robertson, *Early English devotional prose*, 25.

²⁹⁷ *Incendium amoris*, 260.

²⁹⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 266.

²⁹⁹ See, for example, *Emendatio vitae*, 188; *Form*, 15, 17; *Incendium amoris*, 194.

³⁰⁰ '[L]oquebar cum feminis de fide Factoris[.]' *Melos* II, 102.

³⁰¹ Watson, *Invention*, 224.

tension between friendship and a teacher-disciple relationship. Such an interpretation does not acknowledge the possibility of a friendship defined in the first place as spiritual instruction.

Not even the boldest statements in *Incendium amoris* equate friendship between the sexes to loving equality; as natural as the love between a man and a woman may be, the woman needs the man's firm counsel. This is not as idiosyncratic as it appears against the classical background: early Christian writings and later monastic tradition on friendship tended to emphasise humility and spiritual guardianship over equality; the model of Jesus presupposed an imbalance of authority. The penitential practice codified in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 further supported a practice of Christian spiritual direction which manifested in several famous relationships between confessors and saintly women.³⁰² Interpreted as heir to this tradition, Rolle's indifference to equality in friendship does not appear problematic. It is true that there is a difference of tone between the *Incendium amoris* and *Melos amoris* discussions, which Watson notes, but both nonetheless present a hierarchical relationship of spiritual instruction between men and women. The former openly calls it friendship.

The importance of male-female relations in Rolle's writings on friendship has been noted and perhaps even exaggerated by scholars. Watson believes that *Incendium amoris* 39 'seems to have been written largely for the sake of its reflections on friendship between men and women' and concludes that 'Rolle's underlying concern here seems fairly clearly to be his desire to find (or justify having found) a woman to play, as it were, Clare to his Francis.'³⁰³ Watson's interpretation is partially reliant on his reading of *Incendium amoris* 34, where Rolle expresses his longing for a friend, and on the assumption that Margaret Kirkeby was a special friend to Rolle. These issues will be addressed in chapter 5.2 below, but chapter 39 alone does not justify such a bold and exclusive interpretation. Roughly one fifth of the text deals with friendship between the sexes, and there is no indication that the best friendships are to be had with women. On the contrary, the first part of the chapter deals with classically inspired friendship in elevated but gender-neutral terms, whereas friendship with

³⁰² See above, chapter 2.3; also McEvoy, 'Theory of friendship', 10–11, 35; David F. Tinsley, 'The spiritual friendship of Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stagel', *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age. Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010, 479–480.

³⁰³ Watson, *Invention*, 224.

women is a dangerous special case that requires strict hierarchy and holiness to work. It does not seem like Rolle was looking for a special female confidant; rather, spiritual instruction of women is portrayed as a general duty for the holy man.

Moyes, on the other hand, describes the chapter as an attempt to give practical application to Aelredian ideas of Christian friendship in the context of spiritual direction. He thinks Rolle's reference to friendship between men and women reveals this practical purpose.³⁰⁴ Moyes hits close to the mark in connecting spiritual instruction, friendship and relationships to women. As the present study argues, spiritual instruction is what holy friendship with women meant for Rolle. It is not clear, though, in what sense Rolle's miniature exposition is a 'practical application' of Aelred's ideals. Rolle gives none of the detailed instructions on how to choose, test and treat a friend or how to reconcile friendship with communal harmony that the abbot was preoccupied with.³⁰⁵ For much of the chapter, Rolle stays on a more general, less concrete level than Aelred.

Moyes points out that there were few models available for *Incendium amoris* 39 – the subject matter might not have been new, but its articulation in an extended exposition was uncommon.³⁰⁶ Moyes does not say so, but as far as I have been able to determine, it seems Rolle's plain statements in treatise form about friendship between men and women specifically may have been unprecedented in Western Christianity in the Middle Ages. If that is so, the originality of Rolle's writing on mixed-sex friendship is enough to justify scholarly interest. The lack of literary models can help to discern Rolle's interests and personal emphases. That is not to say Rolle or his readers necessarily considered his conventional ideas any less important; to his contemporaries what he said was probably more interesting than what source it was derived from. It is nonetheless very significant that Rolle seems to have been the only one to defend mixed-gender friendship so directly.

It is not obvious that Rolle really was unique in his practice and evaluation of mixed-gender relationships, though. In Watson's interpretation, Rolle's writing on women was a self-conscious attempt to define an unusual personal stance.³⁰⁷ It

³⁰⁴ Moyes, *Expositio*, 58.

³⁰⁵ See especially book III of *De spiritali amicitia*.

³⁰⁶ Moyes, *Expositio*, 58.

³⁰⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 224.

was no doubt a self-conscious attempt to define his stance, and an unusual literary expression, but that does not mean his attitude towards women should have been unusual in itself. Relationships of friendship and spiritual instruction certainly existed between men and women before and around Rolle's time.³⁰⁸ I would argue, rather, that as a literate, sponsored hermit in contact with the opposite sex, Rolle was in the unusual position where it was both possible and necessary for him to articulate his stance. In his irregular state he did not have the support either of a monastic or mendicant order, or of ecclesiastical authority, so writing was the primary medium of self-defence available to him. In other words, the mixed-gender instruction-friendships Rolle engaged in were not necessarily atypical, but he as a participant was. It is not necessary to assume any personal eccentricity or deviant tastes on Rolle's part to make sense of the fact that he was the one to make an original contribution to medieval theory of friendship. We now turn to investigate some examples of how and in what kind of situations the theory of friendship as instruction worked in Rolle's defence

4.3 Instruction-Friendship as Self-Defence

This chapter will show that Rolle was criticised for his association with women, and the concept of instruction-friendship was central to his self-defence.

Establishing a category of friendship with women defined as spiritual instruction was not enough to deflect suspicions and justify Rolle's relationships once and for all, however. Rolle further had to convince his audience that his relationships were, in fact, instances of such holy friendship. He did not make it easy on himself; chapter 3.2 witnessed the severe contrast Rolle constructed between God and the world and how easily, he thought, men and women could lead each other to sin. The strategy can easily backfire. If a reader suspects Rolle's integrity to be anything less than perfect, Rolle's arguments turn against himself. Indeed, in *Incendium amoris* 24, Rolle reminds the reader that even Solomon was led to ruin

³⁰⁸ Well-known examples include Jerome, Paula and Eustochium, the women in Boniface's literary circle, Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua and, in England, Christina of Markyate, the monk Roger and abbot Geoffrey of St Albans. Contemporary to Rolle were Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stagel. See, for example, *The life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. & transl. C. H. Talbot, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959; Lehmijoki-Gardner, *Worldly saints*, 46; Tinsley, 'Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stagel'; Lisa M. C. Weston, 'Where textual bodies meet: Anglo-Saxon women's epistolary friendships', *Friendship in the middle ages and early modern age. Explorations of a fundamental ethical discourse* (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 6), De Gruyter 2010; Carolinne White, *Lives of Roman Christian women. Translated and edited with an introduction and notes*, London: Penguin Books 2010, xxiv.

by a woman and so no one should presume to safely say 'I do not fear, worldly temptations cannot deceive me.'³⁰⁹ And yet that is precisely the claim he sets out to defend himself with.

In Rolle's world view, the *perfecti* such as himself do not experience any meaningful struggle with temptation. Vincent Gillespie suggests Rolle was familiar with popular ideas of affectivity and possibly the more sophisticated psychological theories about the relationship between the intellect and the affective faculty (*affectus*) developing in the 13th century. The ideal function of the mental faculties was for the intellect to perceive truths and for the affections to embrace the good and shun the bad, and this harmony caused the will to choose righteous actions. The *affectus* had been corrupted in the Fall, however, and tended to prefer the world to God. The *affectus* needed to be reoriented towards God, and this is what affective literature like Rolle's lyrics and Passion meditations sought to achieve. It was not through knowledge but through love of God that one could be united with God.³¹⁰ Rolle's claim to immunity is a consequence of this theory: his *affectus* is properly oriented towards God and the good, and so he is no longer swayed by evil temptations. The possibility that the intellect might not correctly identify right and wrong did not seem to worry him. The turning of one's affections to God is the first step on the contemplative path: 'Atte þe begynnyng turne þe entierly to þi lord Ihesu Crist. That turnyng to Ihesu is nat else bot turnyng fro al þe couaitise and þe lykyng [...] of fleishely luste and vayne loue', he instructs Margaret Kirkeby in the *Form of Living*.³¹¹ On the other hand, the turning is perfect only when God grants the gifts of his love and the fervour of the *perfecti* extinguishes any evil thoughts that might arise.³¹²

Crucially to the friendship discussion, Rolle's alleged immunity to worldly desires applied to women. He did not exactly argue or demonstrate so much as he asserted this immunity repeatedly. *Melos amoris* contains many such statements, complementing its many complaints about the dangers of women.³¹³ Rolle was certain that the Holy Spirit filled him and protected him from temptation: 'made strong, I am not moved by the beauty of woman, nor will the peaceful purity of

³⁰⁹ '[N]on timeo; non me fallere potest demulcens seculum[.]' *Incendium amoris*, 213.

³¹⁰ Vincent Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot. Rolle and Affectivity', *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England. Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1982*, Exeter: University of Exeter 1982, 203–208.

³¹¹ *Form*, 9.

³¹² *Incendium amoris*, 260.

³¹³ On the the *Melos amoris* opinion of women, see above, chapters 3.2 and 4.1.

my pious heart be open to corruption.³¹⁴ Ever since he was swept up in divine love, Rolle understood the foolishness of vanity and debauchery, so to avoid the torments of Hell he 'fled from women and was not deceived into error by them.'³¹⁵ He did not really avoid women, as will soon become evident, so perhaps he simply meant that he ignored women and turned away from the surrounding world. The context seems to relate to the early stages of his spiritual life, though, so it may be a reference to the beginning of his career as a hermit. Whether or not he ever actually fled the company of people and especially the opposite sex, it is the advice he gave to beginners.³¹⁶ Whatever the case, the mature Rolle did not admit to temptation. In *Contra amatores mundi* he says plainly of the chosen of Christ: 'Now he is not pleased to laze about, nor do pretty girls please him.'³¹⁷ Because Rolle was one of the *electi* and immune to worldly temptation, he was able to have legitimate relationships of friendship and instruction with women.

Rolle never outlined the full structure of his argument in one place or as clearly as it is presented above, but it was not just an implicit defence against potential accusations that one might discern with some imagination. Both *Incendium amoris* and *Melos amoris* relate concrete examples of Rolle responding to criticism. Obviously, the situations Rolle alludes to may not have happened as he describes or at all. In any case, he was the one who chose to write about them, so they can be supposed to serve some literary purpose. The historicity of the criticism is an interesting question in itself, but it is Rolle's response that is most relevant to the present study.

Melos amoris 43 begins with the familiar assertion that Rolle has been filled with divine love and no longer cares for the pleasures and comforts of this world. He also claims to be immune to harmful speech. With the necessary reminders out of the way, Rolle moves to describe his situation. He had been living or associating with worldly and rich people. He had spoken with women about faith in the Maker and had not ceased to praise God privately, even if he occasionally played around and at least seemed to laugh with the others.³¹⁸ This is a fairly clear

³¹⁴ 'Forma feminae non flectet firmatum nec puritas pacifica pectoris pii putredini patebit[.]' *Melos I*, 226.

³¹⁵ '[F]ugiens a feminis ne fallerer in fictis[.]' *Melos II*, 24.

³¹⁶ See above, chapter 3.2.

³¹⁷ 'Iam illi carni non libet torpere, nec placent ei formose iuencule.' *Contra amatores mundi* 70, transl. p. 152.

³¹⁸ *Melos II*, 100–102.

reference to Rolle's life with his lay patrons, and indicates he gave some kind of spiritual instruction to the women in his social circle. In other words, he justifies his association with secular people by appealing to his teaching ministry – he was only there to teach the women in the Christian faith.

He had not convinced everyone of his sincerity, though: 'They judged me deceitful and faltering, thinking that I stayed with the crooked for the girls.'³¹⁹ Who 'they' are, exactly, is not specified. Rolle explains that he 'could not hide from anyone who liked to hear about the love of the Maker.'³²⁰ His intention is that all would learn to love God; 'I strived for them to stand firm and spurn filth, and I offered words of virtue to make them desire Christ rather than the flesh, to live as virgins and fly from vice to life, and pledge themselves to the most righteous King.'³²¹ His critics should understand that he lives in holiness, and repent for their mistake. 'They were mistaken to think me unjust: woman cannot deceive me, nor do I yield to maidens. [...] The mind which the Majesty has cleansed of evil devotes itself to the song and endures in a sweet protected mystery.'³²² Some teachers might be unjust and lecherous, but not Rolle, because his spiritual experiences have made him immune to temptation.

The *Melos amoris* story does not recommend close association with women, though. Rolle has preached against worldly friendship in favour of friendship with Christ, and advises the reader: 'Flee women to stay safe, you who have willingly vowed to love Christ.'³²³ The charms of women can easily deceive a man. The key to this apparent contradiction is that there are different standards for different people; women will lead you to vice 'unless the Maker has lifted you high.'³²⁴ In explicit reference to himself, Rolle warns the reader to do as he says, not as he does: 'Do not follow the example of what I told, since you do not know what God

³¹⁹ '[L]ubricum et lapsum iudicaverunt, putantes quod pro puellis persisterem cum pravis[.]' *Melos II*, 102.

³²⁰ '[A] nullis nimirum eram absconsus qui de amore Auctoris audire amabant.' *Melos II*, 102.

³²¹ 'Studui ut starent spurciam spernentes, et protule percunctans verba virtutis quatinus concupiscerent Christum, non carnem, et virgines viverent a viciis volantes ad vitam, vota Regi rectissime non reprobe reddentes.' *Melos II*, 102.

³²² 'Errabant utique iniquum opinantes: non fallit me femina, nec pareo puellis [...]. Mens quam Maiestas a malis mundavit moratur a macula in musico melode et manet in mellifluo misterio munita.' *Melos II*, 102.

³²³ '[U]t sistas securus, fugito feminas, qui Christum amare voluntarie vovisti[.]' *Melos II*, 104.

³²⁴ '[N]isi Auctor alcius te assumpserit[.]' *Melos II*, 104.

has given me. He threw me into fire and did not let me burn.³²⁵ The rest of the chapter is preoccupied with the theme of the gifts and love of God.

Seen here in miniature is Rolle's conception of his own role and how he applies it to deflect criticism: Rolle has associated with the worldly and with women in particular, but he has not compromised his holiness – the purity of the heart is more important than outward appearances. The relationship is one of spiritual instruction: he has taught them the love of God and exhorted them to contemplative life or at least to greater piety, not because he fancies their company but because instruction is his duty. Finally, as a chosen lover of God Rolle is immune to the risks inherent in such close contact with women and can therefore teach them without risk – sceptics should be ashamed to think otherwise.

In *Incendium amoris* Rolle relates another example of criticism. Again, the issue seems to concern secular laywomen with whom Rolle has lived – the household and neighbours of his patrons, no doubt. It is one of Rolle's liveliest passages, and warrants quoting at length:

Still, some time ago I rightly suffered proper rebuke from three women. One reproached me because, wanting to correct their folly in the excessiveness and softness of their clothing, I looked too closely at their immoderate ornaments. She said that I ought not to look at them so closely as to know whether or not they were wearing horns; and so it seemed to me she rebuked me well, and made me blush. Another reproved me because I was speaking of her large breasts as though they pleased me – she said it was none of my business if they were small or large, and she, too, spoke rightly. A third, touching me playfully because I was gesturing as though I wished to touch her rudely, or had touched her, said, 'Calm down, brother. [It does not befit your status as a hermit to play with women.]' [...] When I came to myself, I thanked my God for teaching me virtue through their words. [...] May I not be found guilty in front of women henceforth! A fourth woman, with whom I was somewhat familiar, said to me not in reproof but as though in contempt, 'You are nothing but a pretty face and a pretty voice; you do not have the works³²⁶.' [...] [T]hey do not know how to keep within bounds either in love or contempt. And these things happened to me because I was attending to their salvation, not because I desired anything illicit from them – for it was them from whom I received bodily sustenance for some time.³²⁷

³²⁵ 'Non accipe exemplum ex hoc quod narraui, nescisti namque quod dedit michi Deus: eiecit me in ignem et exuri non permisit[.]' *Melos II*, 104.

³²⁶ Watson translates *opus* as 'tools', which does not seem to quite catch the meaning.

³²⁷ 'Uerumtamen iam dudum a tribus mulieribus dignam merito reprehensionem accepi. Una me reprehendit quia cupiens corrigere insaniam earum in superfluitate et mollicie uestium, ornatum illarum immoderatum nimis inspexi; que dixit quod non debui eas tam considerare ut scirem utrum essent cornute uel non, et ut mihi uidetur bene me redarguit, et erubescere fecit. Alia me reprehendit quia de mammis eius grossis loquebar quasi me delectarent, que ait: 'Quid ad me pertinet si essent parue uel magne?' et hec similiter recte locuta est. Tercia me in ioco tangens quod minabar quasi rude eam tangere uellem, uel tetigi, dixit: 'Quiesce frater', quasi dixisset, 'Non pertinet ad statum tuum, scilicet heremiticum, ludere cum mulieribus' [...]. Nam rediens ad meipsum gracias egi Deo meo quia per illarum uerba me bonum docuit [...] non inueniar reprehensibilis coram mulieribus in hac parte. Quarta mulier cui admodum familiaris eram, non me reprehendendo sed quasi contempnendo dixit: 'Nihil habes nisi pulchrum uisum et pulchrum uerbum: opus nullum habes. [...] [M]odum nesciunt tenere siue in amore siue in contemptu. Mihi autem ista contigerunt quod salutem earum procuraui, non quod in eis aliquod illicitum appetiui, cum quibus sustentacionem per aliquod tempus accepi corporale.' *Incendium amoris*, 178–179.

The story is a rare example of Rolle admitting to some fault and showing humility. It is prefaced by a humble reminder that no one should despise sinners since whatever virtue they themselves have is a gift from God. Rolle laments his sinful youth, as is conventional for a conversion narrative.³²⁸ Watson argues that the purpose of the chapter and the story of the four women is to ward off accusations of spiritual pride. Rolle has placed the elect above the judgement of others and established himself as one of them, so he has to demonstrate at least some Christian humility to maintain his legitimacy. At the very end, however, Rolle turns around and places the blame on the women.

Watson calls the confession a 'comic disaster' and suggests that a personal insecurity underlies Rolle's assertions.³²⁹ Such an interpretation would corroborate the idea that Rolle's greatest personal temptations were sexual, suggested among others by Renevey.³³⁰ Whether it was an insecurity arising from Rolle's personal feelings or a reaction to the suspicions of his contemporaries is not obvious, however. There is no need to dismiss the former explanation, but his concern with sexual temptation and ambivalence toward mixed-gender relationships would be understandable if he had been criticised for them. The real feelings behind the sources cannot with certainty be recovered, but Rolle certainly would not have had to be a lewd ladies' man to be accused of such, especially in his vulnerable and irregular position.

Whatever his motive, the passage includes some familiar aspects of Rolle's thought and supports his general argument about mixed-gender relations. The themes of vanity, female beauty and touching, represented by the first three women, recur in Rolle's work. As we saw, Rolle demanded that a good instructor-friend be unafraid to prohibit vain garments and head-ornaments from the women he teaches.³³¹ The first woman's rebuke, then, conveys under a guise of humility Rolle's assertion that he had been doing exactly what a holy man should.

There is no such obviously righteous context for his preoccupation with the bodies of the second and third woman. It can be argued that Rolle's defence of

Translation by Watson, *Invention*, 130, except the line about Rolle's status as hermit, in square brackets above, which Watson omits.

³²⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 177–178. Compare, for example, the opening of book II of Augustine, *Confessions I. Introduction and text*, ed. James J. O'Donnell, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, 16, or the prologue of Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 287–288.

³²⁹ Watson, *Invention*, 129–130.

³³⁰ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 71.

³³¹ *Incendium amoris*, 264, 266; See above, chapter 4.2.

lawful touching without evil intentions³³² should guide the reader's interpretation: even if he did touch the third woman, as a lover of God he felt no fleshly lust and therefore committed no sin. Although Rolle first admitted the rebuke was proper, the story demonstrates how people were prone to misunderstand the holy hermit because they judged by appearances and did not know the purity of his soul. It seems that Rolle did act in a way generally thought inappropriate or suspicious for a holy man, since the woman had to remind him about the hermit's status.

Another possible interpretation to the story is that Rolle wanted to demonstrate the virtue of the women he instructed and lived with. The accusation in *Melos amoris*, discussed above, was not just that Rolle associated with some women but that he stayed with the crooked, *pravis*, specifically. If he were to show that they were actually good women who themselves were duly wary of inappropriate conduct, the criticism would lose its edge. Admittedly, this seems almost too convoluted an explanation, especially since Rolle could have achieved it without casting doubt on his own integrity if he were so inclined. His generalisation about women who cannot seem to be moderate in either love or contempt also undermines such a reading, although it might just refer to bad women like the fourth one.

Ultimately, there is internal tension in the story of the four women, and probably no single motive can account for it. Most interesting for present purposes, however, is the last point Rolle makes: he had to endure accusations and awkward situations, not because he had illicit intentions, but because he sought the salvation of the women who patronised him. This is the argument picked up in chapter 39 where Rolle declares that women need the instruction and friendship of good men to attain virtue and salvation, and *Melos amoris* 43 where Rolle writes that he could not leave the women who wanted to learn about God.³³³ There is enough evidence to conclude that Rolle explicitly appealed to a duty of spiritual instruction to justify his association with women. He did so when others criticised him for staying with worldly women, when women themselves chastised him for his conduct, and when he formulated the theory of mixed-gender friendship.

It is significant that explicit terminology of friendship is missing in both responses to criticism discussed above. *Incendium amoris* 39 defines friendship

³³² See *Incendium amoris*, 212, 263.

³³³ *Incendium amoris*, 263; *Melos II*, 102; discussed above.

with women as spiritual instruction, and yet the story of the four women and *Melos amoris* 43 downplay any intimacy between Rolle and his audience. Perhaps Rolle did not consider these laywomen worthy of true holy friendship; the concept applied primarily between chaste, professional contemplatives. It should also be noted, though, that an appeal to friendship did not suit Rolle's purpose in the context. Given that Rolle's literary defence of holy friendship between men and women was unusual, it is reasonable to assume it was somewhat controversial – indeed, the fact that he needed to define and argue for it in the first place suggests as much. In a direct response to criticism about his personal relationships, his novel argument about mixed-gender friendship might not have worked in his favour. Emphasising his role as instructor and leaving friendship out of the picture must have been the more effective, or at least safer, strategy.

Scholars have interpreted Rolle's relationship to women in various ways. In Watson's estimation of *Melos amoris* 43, 'the passage claims that Rolle, with his unusual resistance to carnal temptation, exercises a divinely appointed apostleship to women, and has a special role to play in persuading them to the life of perfection.' Not only does Rolle believe he has a particular ministry to women, he also makes them his friends.³³⁴ Watson is not sufficiently clear about what it meant for Rolle to make women his friends, however. He has an unarticulated assumption about what fourteenth-century spiritual friendship in England entailed. Thus he treats the *Melos amoris* passage and *Incendium amoris* 39 as two separate aspects of Rolle's rhetoric about women. The discussion serves as a preface to his treatment of Rolle's English works, under the assumption that they are expressions of both the tenderness toward women and the authority over them which Rolle established in the two Latin treatises. Watson's observations are astute – and the next chapter will explore these elements in the English works – but it must be stressed that Rolle himself did not make such a distinction between his authority and his friendship. Rolle's emphasis on his role as teacher was not a rhetorical trick to counterbalance a tender intimacy understood as friendship. For a woman and a holy man to be friends meant, first and foremost, that the woman accepted the man's spiritual instruction. The purpose of holy friendship was spiritual edification.

³³⁴ Watson, *Invention*, 225.

Another possible point of contention with Watson's argument is Rolle's supposed belief in his special ministry to women. It does seem that when Rolle defended his association with secular people and appealed to his teaching role, or when he just made reference to his patrons, it tended to be about women. Women are also prominent in the *Officium* account of his life, and the three English works of instruction were addressed to women. But then, *Judica me* and possibly *Emendatio vitae* seem to have been initially addressed to specific men, and the majority of Rolle's work is gender-neutral. So, for example, is his defence of his mixed-life, contemplative preaching ministry in *Melos amoris*.³³⁵

It is fair to say that Rolle's relationships with women are comparatively visible in his writings, but that does not necessarily imply that Rolle felt a special calling to minister to women specifically or exclusively. The religious ambitions of lay women were growing hand to hand with the demand for vernacular literature of spiritual instruction, so it was natural that women would make up an important part of the audience of an unlicensed hermit who wanted to establish himself as a religious authority but was mostly confined to unofficial activity among laypeople.³³⁶ Moreover, whatever the true ratio of male and female disciples and friends Rolle may have had, and whatever his feelings about his duty toward them, it was the mixed-gender relationships that would have aroused the most suspicion and needed justifying. I argue that his instruction of women was problematic, more so than his instruction of men, and that is surely one main reason for its prominent defence and definition in his works.

In reference to Rolle's preoccupation with debauched women, and particularly the defence in *Melos amoris* 43, Renevey notes that Rolle uses women as a 'gauge to measure spiritual progress.' To demonstrate to himself as much as to others that he is above worldly love he must, in Renevey's words, touch fire without being burnt.³³⁷ In this view, Rolle's association with women is a test of sanctity which Rolle passes when the women fail to tempt him. Astell maintains a similar view, but she wants to say more about Rolle's psychological development over his career, as was seen in her argument about Rolle's attitude towards the different feminine *figurae* in his works.³³⁸ Astell believes Rolle is

³³⁵ *Melos II*, 166–168.

³³⁶ On lay piety and the demand for devotional literature, see above, chapter 2.1.

³³⁷ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 72.

³³⁸ See above, chapter 4.1.

writing from his own experience when he describes holy friendship between men and women in God. She does not seem to detect any uncertainty or authorial awkwardness in Rolle's defence of mixed-gender friendship. Rather, Rolle's mystical marriage with God with the spiritual gifts of *calor*, *dulcor* and *canor* – in other words, his friendship with God – has effected an 'affective integration' where his affects are reconciled with his intellect and he no longer desires anything but the good, and that allows Rolle to communicate and have friendships with women without danger. 'That horizontal relationship between Rolle and a particular human friend reflects in its depth and purity the vertical relationship of 'singular love' the hermit now enjoys with God, and offers an indirect proof of an achieved mystical *unitas*.³³⁹

Astell's weakness lies perhaps in not addressing what this 'horizontal relationship' is. Compared to friendship with God human relationships appear horizontal, but she seems to be thinking of an ideal type of equal friendship and omits the fact that Rollean friendship with women is essentially hierarchical. The relationships of instruction Rolle himself writes about in his Latin treatises or acts out in his English works do not appear to be quite the kind of ideal perfect friendships in God that Rolle may have envisaged when he expressed his longing for a true friend in *Incendium amoris* 34 – a topic which will be addressed in the last chapter of the present study.

Nonetheless, Astell is right to locate the position, in Rolle's argument, of human friendship in relation to the love of God and to the status of the holy contemplative: it is because Rolle has become a friend of God that he can be friend to men and especially women; and conversely, because his mortal friendships are holy and beyond reproach, he must clearly be holy himself. While this circularity of justification is latent in the text, the two sides of the coin must be kept separate in order to evaluate Rolle's intentions as an author.

There are, broadly speaking, two ways to interpret the function of Rolle's argument. The first is that Rolle's spiritual progress was the historical cause for his successful relationships with women, and so they could act as evidence of his sanctity. This seems to be Astell's position, and the view is compatible with Renevey's suggestion that Rolle used women to test his spiritual progress; his ability to associate and even have friendships with women without giving in to

³³⁹ Astell, *Song of songs*, 117; see also Astell, 'Feminine *figurae*', 117–123.

temptation should have convinced both Rolle himself and his readers of his sanctity. The problem with this interpretation is that Rolle did not answer criticism of his relationships by an appeal to friendship, as seen above; when he defended his sanctity, it was not by pointing to his association with women. On the contrary, it seems that the appeal to his sanctity was necessary to justify his relationships. Rolle's sanctity was established primarily by an appeal to the spiritual experiences of *calor*, *dulcor* and most importantly, *canor*.³⁴⁰

I argue that the second way to read Rolle is better, then: to suppose that friendship was a problem that needed to be addressed. Rolle could not deny the empirical fact of his relationships with women – as patrons and disciples – and he had to find some way of defining them so that they did not undermine his authority as a holy man. So, it is not that Rolle sought to stress his mixed-gender friendships as evidence of his sanctity, that is, friendship with God. Rather, it was necessary for him to integrate friendship into his picture of the *perfecti* and turn the fact of the matter to his advantage by making these friendships such evidence. It was not a self-evident argument and it required some work – hence the theoretical chapter 39 of *Incendium amoris*. So, while it is true that Rolle's successful relationships with women can serve as evidence of his special grace, the argument is effective only if one has already accepted Rolle's assertion that instruction-friendship with women is appropriate for holy men.

Rolle's argument was not transparent or systematic, and it can only be roughly reconstructed. By repeating and taking for granted several interrelated claims – that the holy should instruct others, that the holy feel no temptation, that God's love manifests in spiritual gifts, that Rolle has experienced those gifts, that he has instructed women in all purity, that men and women can share holy friendship, that friendship between men and women amounts to instruction, and so on – he created a holistic discourse that legitimises and feeds on itself.

*

This main chapter explored Rolle's argument for mixed-gender friendship and how Rolle justified his association with women. First of all, Rolle separated debauched women and chaste women who had renounced the world – only the latter were worthy of holy friendship. Secondly, moral correction and spiritual instruction were to be considered a general Christian duty, a part of the highest

³⁴⁰ On Rolle's spiritual gifts as proof of his special state, see Watson, *Invention*, 70–72.

form of spiritual life, the mixed life of contemplative-turned-teacher, and also a key aspect of friendship. Together, these claims made possible the idea of friendship between men and women framed as hierarchical spiritual instruction: women have the potential to be good but need the guidance and friendship of a holy man to actualise that potential. Rolle further needed to establish his own holiness and immunity to carnal temptation to convince his readers that his association with women was entirely legitimate. When he was criticised, he appealed to his role as a teacher.

The chapter also suggested a partial answer as to why Rolle wrote as he did about friendship: Rolle's atypical position as an unlicensed hermit aroused suspicions. To maintain his image of sanctity and justify his association with women, with no official institutions to support him, he had to argue for a model of holy life that included holy instruction-friendship between men and women and show that his own life conformed to the model he had created.

The sources used to reconstruct this argument were primarily the author talking about the topics of friendship, instruction and sanctity more or less explicitly. Next, we turn to other types of sources to see how Rolle actually instructed his disciples and friend, investigate his historical friendship with Margaret Kirkeby and finally to glimpse what Rolle hoped to get for all his troubles.

5 Friendship Actualised

5.1 *The English Works as Instruction-Friendship*

Did Rolle actually practice instruction-friendship with women? Rolle's three English treatises – *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living* – were almost certainly originally composed for specific female recipients and have been treated as epistles of instruction by scholars.³⁴¹ As such, they are the best sources to investigate how Rolle exercised the instruction-friendship he sketched in his Latin works. Whereas autobiographical references and theoretical formulations in the Latin works show what Rolle wanted to say about his relationships, the three epistle-treatises are their only available first-hand expression. To see if and how Rolle practised what he preached, then, we must take a look at how he presented and established his relationship with the reader in the English works. Study of this material can also contribute to the question of why: if Rolle really made women his friends and disciples, he would have had a concrete reason to defend his model of instruction-friendship.

Given that so little is known about the circumstances of the works and their relation to Rolle's biography, there is no particular reason to treat the works in the chronological order of *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living*. Instead, they will be discussed in order of relevance to the topic at hand. Greatest attention will be given to *The Form of Living* since it contains the most suitable material and was written to Margaret Kirkeby. Her role in the *Officium* account of Rolle's life and as potentially his special friend is the topic of latter half of this main chapter. *The Commandment*, on the other hand, is fairly short and impersonal, so it will be treated only briefly.

It is generally agreed that Rolle wrote *The Form of Living* for the occasion of Margaret Kirkeby's enclosure in an anchorhold, although the work also anticipates a wider audience.³⁴² It is not explicitly an anchoritic rule, but it is a guide to the solitary life. According to Robertson, the daily reading for anchorites probably included their rule, the Bible, saints' lives, sermons and religious tracts.³⁴³ In Margaret's case, that would have included both the *Form* and *The English Psalter*, which Rolle possibly also composed for her benefit. *The Form of*

³⁴¹ See above, chapter 2.2.

³⁴² Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 141, 144.

³⁴³ Robertson, *Early English devotional prose*, 30.

Living, then, was a tangible manifestation of Rolle in Margaret's solitary life; he was to be present, as friend and instructor, primarily through his texts.

The Form of Living frequently expresses Rolle's concern for his continued authority in the recipient's spiritual life, to a much greater extent than any other of his works. Almost at the very beginning, Rolle explains that the Devil deceives men and women by making them think that whatever they do is for the best, 'and forþi [therefore] thei wol no consail haue of othre þat ben bettre and connyngre þan þei. And þis is a foul stynkyngre pride.'³⁴⁴ In plain words, Rolle is warning Margaret not to ignore his counsel out of pride. After a brief summary of the ways in which the Devil can deceive unwise humans he repeats the appeal, this time with a promise: 'And if þou wilt do good consaille and folowe holy lernynge as I hope thou wolt, þou shalt destroy his trappes and brand in þe fire of loue al þe bondes þat he wol bynd þe with[.]'³⁴⁵ If Margaret remains a loyal disciple to Rolle's teachings, not only will she avoid the snares of the Devil but may also experience the fire of love. Rolle promises to guide the reader to friendship with God.

Perhaps the most powerful and obvious assertion of Rolle's authority in the *Form* is the example of a recluse, a 'good womman', to whom the devil appeared in the form of an angel of light and promised to take her to heaven. She told about it to her confessor (*shrift-fadyre*), who gave her the necessary advice to expose the Devil's ruse with an *Ave Maria*. The fiend tempts solitary men and women, says Rolle, but 'ham þat ben wise, and wol nat anoon trow [will not immediately trust] to al spirites, bot asketh consaille of conyngre men, he may nat begile ham.'³⁴⁶ This could be read as a recommendation for Margaret to confide in her local confessor at the anchorhold, but it is difficult to interpret Rolle's constant anxiousness for Margaret to accept the counsel of wise men as anything other than an attempt to secure his own role in her spiritual development. Moreover, the story of the recluse and the Devil mirrors Rolle's own apparition of a beautiful woman, whom he repelled with an appeal to Jesus and his blood.³⁴⁷ There are marked differences, of course: the woman's temptation was not sexual and she needed to turn to her confessor and the Virgin Mary, whereas Rolle could call upon Christ on his own.

³⁴⁴ *Form*, 3.

³⁴⁵ *Form*, 5.

³⁴⁶ *Form*, 7.

³⁴⁷ Quoted in Allen, *Writings*, 75; see above, chapter 4.1.

Rolle does not trust his reader to be as resourceful and holy as he was. Either way, he was qualified to advise on fiendish apparitions because he had experienced and overcome one.

The flipside of Rolle's asserting himself as key person in the reader's life was his attempt to push her away from other people. This can be seen in the advice, already discussed in chapter 3.2 above, of not speaking with or listening to men that come to admire the anchoress. Rolle also instructs Margaret to flee from company that gives a bad example.³⁴⁸ He even warns her not to tell private things to anyone but those who she knows can keep a secret and adds that God has given some people special grace to be examples for others.³⁴⁹ Rolle may have been thinking of idle gossip, but it could also be a warning for Margaret not to get too close with confessors. If that is the case, it is quite an aggressive claim for territory. The advice has a parallel in *Ancrene Wisse*, which advises the anchoresses to seek the counsel of a trustworthy spiritual man but to trust worldly men little and religious men even less. Unlike Rolle, however, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* does not imply that he is personally the only suitable confessor to the anchoresses but rather directs them to confide in Dominican and Franciscan friars in general.³⁵⁰ This observation supports the argument that Rolle's emphasis on his own authority was not mere convention.

The reference to people with special grace served to strengthen Rolle's position further, but it can be taken to include Margaret among the specially graced and thus create a division of 'us and them.' Trusting another with one's secrets was traditionally considered a sign of friendship and something that Rolle, too, longed for in true friendship.³⁵¹ His advice to restrict such trust to people with special grace, then, also limits the anchoress's circle of potential friends to holy people – namely Rolle himself.

To ascertain that Rolle's frequent reminders about his counsel are due in part, at least, to the particular purpose and audience of *The Form of Living*, it is instructive to compare some parallel passages between it and *Emendatio vitae*. The Latin work is, in structure and content, quite similar to the *Form*, but it does not presuppose a strictly professional religious audience – a trait which probably

³⁴⁸ *Form*, 5, 14.

³⁴⁹ *Form*, 13.

³⁵⁰ *Ancrene Wisse* 2:12–13, p. 28.

³⁵¹ *Incendium amoris*, 244. Compare, for example, Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 334–335.

accounts for its being Rolle's most popular work.³⁵² Both the *Form* and *Emendatio vitae* contain a discussion on four questions: what defiles man, what makes him clean, what keeps him clean, and what makes him conform completely to God's will.³⁵³ This similarity of topic allows for fruitful comparison of the details.

One category of things that defile are sins of the heart. According to *The Form of Living*, they include 'fleshly affeccoun to þi frendes or to others þat þou louest, [...] loue to plese men, dred to displese ham, [...] shame with pouer frendes, pride of ryche kyn or of gentil, [...] dispite of good consaille and of good techynge.'³⁵⁴ The passage reflects the many aspects of friendship: the threat of carnal affection looms ever-present, while eagerness to act according to the will of other people can distract one from following the will of God. Friendship should not be a matter of worldly wealth, but the remark about the rich and the poor is not just social commentary; as a hermit Rolle himself was one of the poor, so it can be seen as a reminder not to dismiss him in favour of wealthy patrons. Finally, there is the familiar warning not to disregard his advice and teaching, which concludes the entire list. *Emendatio vitae* summarises the sins of the heart simply as thinking anything against God and being occupied with the world rather than the love and praise of God. Among the sins of deed, on the other hand, first place is given to 'indulgence, deceitful touching and kissing.'³⁵⁵ There is no mention of friendship or instruction whatsoever. Rolle is here more concerned with sexual temptation and morality, and makes no effort to establish his personal authority and presence in the reader's life.

The things that *The Form of Living* claims draw one to conformity with God's will are three:

On is ensample of holy men and wommen, þe which was ententif [eager] nyght and day to serue God and dred hym and loue hym; and if we folow ham in erth, we mowe [can] be with ham in heuyn. Anoper, þe goodnesse of our lord God, þat despiseth none bot gladly receyueth al þat wil cum to his mercy, and is homelier to ham þan broþer or sustre or any frend þat þai most loued or most trusteth on. The þrid is þe wondre ioy of þe kyngdome of heuyn[.]³⁵⁶

The holy men and women whose example ought to be followed may primarily refer to saints, but it applies equally to Rolle; he promises that if Margaret follows

³⁵² On *Emendatio vitae*'s suitability to the laity, see Watson, *Invention*, 215. On *Emendatio vitae* as the source for *The Form of Living*, Watson, *Invention*, 278–281.

³⁵³ *Emendatio vitae*, 180–190; *Form*, 11–15.

³⁵⁴ *Form*, 11.

³⁵⁵ '[L]uxuriando, lubrico tangendo, osculando[.]' *Emendatio vitae*, 180.

³⁵⁶ *Form*, 14–15.

him in this life, she will be united with God and can join Rolle and the fellowship of saints in heaven. The emphasis, in the second item, on God's superiority over friends and family is probably an attempt to help the anchoress adjust to her new lonely way of life, and shows the importance of solitary existence in such a life. *Emendatio vitae*'s third item is also the joy of heaven, but the first two are markedly different. There is no mention of holy people or promise of companionship in heaven, merely 'the example of creatures, paid close attention to.'³⁵⁷ Neither is there any comparison of the goodness of God to friends and family; 'familiarity with God, acquired through meditation and prayer'³⁵⁸ is all there is to it. In *The Form of Living*, then, Rolle expresses instruction-friendship not just in an assertion of his authority, but in positive advice tailored to the specific spiritual needs of the recipient. *Emendatio vitae*, on the other hand, keeps to generally applicable statements.

The relationship expressed in *The Form of Living* is not all about formal authority. The work's persuasiveness relies also on a sense of intimacy and togetherness that the text engenders. He encourages the reader in her choice of solitary life: 'I trow stidfastly þat þe confort of Ihesu Criste [...] shal be in þe and with þe[...] [...] Men weneth [believe] þat we haue peyn and penaunce bot we haue more ioy and verrey delite in oon day þan þei haue in þe world al har lyfe.'³⁵⁹ The change to the first person plural is significant. As the more experienced lover of God, Rolle can express his confidence in Margaret's potential, but the hierarchy is then transformed into a unity of author and reader against men of the world.

Intimacy is also presupposed or offered when Rolle promises his personal approval if Margaret is to do as he instructs regarding excessive fasting. He assures that he hopes she will grow ever more in God's love, and reminds her that inner disposition rather than outward achievement is what matters: 'I hold þe neuer of þe lasse merite if þou be nat in so mych abstinence as þou hast be, ne of þe more merite þogh þou take þe to moor abstinence[.]'³⁶⁰ A little later, he once again contrasts himself with men of the world who praised Margaret for her abstinence and enclosure; Rolle 'may nat praise þe so lightly' since he demands a complete internal conformity to God.³⁶¹ If the reader cared nothing for Rolle's

³⁵⁷ '[C]reaturarum exemplaritas, que attenditur per consideracionem[.]' *Emendatio vitae*, 182.

³⁵⁸ '[D]ei familiaritas, que acquiritur per meditationem et orationem[.]' *Emendatio vitae*, 182.

³⁵⁹ *Form*, 6.

³⁶⁰ *Form*, 11.

³⁶¹ *Form*, 14.

approval, this strategy would be powerless. Indeed, McIlroy suggests that the latter passage implies familiarity with the reader and creates a triangulating effect that encourages the reader to join with Rolle against worldly men.³⁶² Watson goes as far as to suggest that the work's frequent appeals to moderate abstinence may be due to Rolle's 'warm but fussy solicitude for his young spiritual charge' and his worry that Margaret might starve herself.³⁶³ It must be noted that moderation in fasting is not a theme unique to the *Form*; *Emendatio vitae* says much the same thing without the repetition, and according to Warren it was also the opinion of *De institutione inclusarum*, *Ancrene Wisse* and other English anchoritic rules.³⁶⁴ Rolle's concern does show, if not a concern for Margaret's health specifically, at least the intention to provide useful instruction to a beginner adjusting to the contemplative life.

Rolle wrote *The Form of Living* when Margaret was only beginning her solitary life. Despite this, the text shows tremendous faith in the recipient's spiritual potential. 'Thre degrees of loue I shal tel þe, for I wold þat þou myzt wyn to þe heghest'³⁶⁵, Rolle explains. At the very least, the second degree is open to Margaret, who 'may cum þerto, if any may get hit.'³⁶⁶ The *Form* ends with the dedication: 'Lo, Margaret, I haue shortly seid þe fourme of lyuynge, and how þou may cum to prefeccioun, and to loue hym þat þou hast taken þe to.'³⁶⁷ Rolle's intention in writing the *Form* was to help Margaret achieve the highest state of love – a privilege reserved for the *perfecti*. It might be interpreted as persuasive rhetoric to encourage and flatter the reader, but *Emendatio vitae* offers its audience no such compliments. Given Rolle's elitist view of the chosen few, it seems unlikely that he would have teased Margaret with the promise of spiritual fulfilment if he did not think she had real potential. This interpretation is supported by Watson, who characterises the entire second half of the treatise as deep, complex and respectful of the reader's intelligence in its thorough discussion of the love of God not found elsewhere in Rolle's English works. He believes it reflects the confidence Rolle had in Margaret's spiritual potential. The *Form*

³⁶² McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 158.

³⁶³ Watson, *Invention*, 251.

³⁶⁴ *Emendatio vitae*, 184–188; Warren, *Anchorites and their patrons*, 107.

³⁶⁵ *Form*, 16.

³⁶⁶ *Form*, 16.

³⁶⁷ *Form*, 25.

reiterates most of Rolle's mystical system, which suggests he thought it was 'of direct pastoral relevance to his outstanding female disciple.'³⁶⁸

Perhaps the primary stylistic feature that has caused *The Form of Living* to be regarded as an expression of familiarity and friendship is the collegial tone and implied dialogue of the second half. It is not written in actual dialogue form, like Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spiritali amicitia* is, but Rolle uses devices such as 'Thou saist to me 'Al men loueth hym þat holdeth his commaundementȝ.' Soth hit is, bot al men þat kepeth his biddynge kepeth nat also his consail'³⁶⁹ to imagine the reader's response. In McIlroy's interpretation, the passage is not instructional but conversational in tone, proposing a point of spiritual concern to an equal partner. She admits the passage could reflect Rolle's and Margaret's particular friendship, but argues that its function is to create a pedagogical intimacy between the author and any reader. The sense of familiarity is intensified by Rolle's repeated use of 'I wot wel' to imply knowledge of the reader's inner life and spiritual potential.³⁷⁰ *The Form of Living* appears to express a much more equal friendship than Rolle's other works; McIlroy argues that the work seeks to create friendship on the page so that the reader is elevated and can join Rolle in the contemplative life. According to Gillespie, its lyrics represent a higher spiritual state than those of *Ego dormio*, which makes McIlroy suggest that in the *Form* Rolle accepts the friendship expressed by the work as the most advanced spiritual relationship he has achieved with his readers.³⁷¹

Ego dormio represents a slightly different relationship between author and reader. McIlroy describes the work as 'a message of love sent by Rolle's authorial self.' Both McIlroy and Watson note that the work is concerned with a set of developing relationships between the reader and God, but also Rolle and the reader and Rolle and God. The purpose is to draw the reader to intimacy with God and Rolle.³⁷² The work opens with, in McIlroy's words, an erotic invitation, inspired by traditional exegesis of the Song of Songs:³⁷³

³⁶⁸ Watson, *Invention*, 252, 255. The transition is marked by the phrase 'amore languo' in *Form*, 15.

³⁶⁹ *Form*, 15.

³⁷⁰ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 174. See *Form*, 15, 'I wot wel þat þou desirest to hyre sum special poynt of þe loue of Ihesu Criste[.]' and 16, 'I wot wel þat þou mow wax gretly in þe loue of Ihesu Criste[.]'

³⁷¹ Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot', 216; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 145, 175.

³⁷² McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 59; Watson, *Invention*, 228.

³⁷³ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 58.

Forþi þat I loue þe, I wowe [woo] þe, þat I myght haue þe as I wold, nat to me, bot to my Lord. I wil becum a messenger to brynge þe to his bed [...] for he wil wed þe if þou wil loue hym. He asketh þe no more bot þi loue, and my wil þou dost, if þou loue hym.³⁷⁴

The passage is an expression of bridal mysticism, especially important to Bernardine spirituality and popularised in England through Cistercian influence.³⁷⁵ Several medieval English texts presented women's religious vocation as a marriage or betrothal to Christ instead of a mortal man.³⁷⁶ What is striking about the passage and sets it apart from conventional bridal mysticism, however, is how Rolle positions himself as God's representative, seducing the prospective bride to love God. It is notable that Rolle does not simply encourage the reader to love God for God's sake, or because he has experienced God's love himself. Rather, the reader must love God if she is to do Rolle's will, and Rolle wills it because he loves her. According to Watson, this position as a mediator between God and the reader, as a kind of sexual go-between who loves them both, was most untraditional.³⁷⁷ As such, it can be argued to represent a deliberate expression of, or attempt at, friendly intimacy beyond conventional expectations.

The persuasiveness of passages like the opening invitation depends on the reader's acceptance of intimacy with Rolle. If the reader had no reason to please Rolle or believe he loved her, his exhortations would have been ineffective. The question is, then, whether *Ego dormio's* intimate tone of address is the consequence of a pre-existing friendship or an attempt to engender intimacy. Some passages reminiscent of *The Form of Living* imply familiarity and confidence in the reader's potential. 'To þe I writ þis speciali, for I hope in þe more goodness þan in anoþer,'³⁷⁸ Rolle insists, and continues: 'if þou haue set þi desyre to loue God, hire þese þre degrees of loue, so þat þou may ryse fro on to anoþer til þat þou be at þe heghest. For I ne wil nat helle [conceal] fro þe þat I hop may turne þe to holynesse.'³⁷⁹ The parallel to the *Form* is obvious; Rolle has special confidence in the recipient, whom he hopes will reach the highest degree of love through his instruction that withholds nothing important.

³⁷⁴ *Ego dormio*, 26.

³⁷⁵ See John Bugge, *Virginitas. An essay in the history of a medieval ideal*, the Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1975, particularly 90–110.

³⁷⁶ D. H. Green, *Women readers in the middle ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 146–147.

³⁷⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 230.

³⁷⁸ *Ego dormio*, 26.

³⁷⁹ *Ego dormio*, 27.

The scholarly consensus is that the work was originally composed for a specific female recipient, probably the nun of Yedingham. Renevey takes instances of direct address, such as the above, to be a result of Rolle's personal tie with the nun. Watson has no doubt that Rolle is exploiting an existing fondness between him and his reader, and suggests the relationship is part of the reason why Rolle wrote the work. McIlroy, on the other hand, prefers to emphasise the literary function of Rolle's language which causes the ungendered reader to understand and desire to fulfil his authorial expectations – she does not think it is necessary to appeal to a real friendship to explain the tone of the work.³⁸⁰ It seems likely that Rolle knew the recipient, but the exact relationship he had with her outside the text is somewhat beside the point. The text itself fosters intimacy between reader and author and, as McIlroy says, places the reader into the subject position of a personal friend.³⁸¹ Whether a real friendship with the nun of Yedingham predated *Ego dormio*, it is significant that Rolle chose to convey the instruction of his first vernacular treatise in the language of intimate familiarity.

Rolle's position in *Ego dormio* as the mediator between God and reader may be untraditional in the literature of bridal mysticism, but it is not entirely different from his role in *The Form of Living*. In both works, he is situated between the reader and God, either as a seductive lover-mediator or as an experienced solitary giving wise counsel. From the perspective of friendship, the logic of the instruction-friendship expressed in the English works is indeed quite different from Aelred of Rievaulx's traditional conception of spiritual friendship. For Aelred, friendship between humans was a stage on the path to loving God; Christ was present in and animating any holy friendship, and through loving a friend one could ascend to the friendship of Christ.³⁸² In Rolle's version, he is the middleman between God and his disciple-friend. Rolle's status as lover of God empowers and legitimises him to lift others to his level and to a friendship with God. If, for Aelred, friendship and mutual neighbourly love enable people to love God, it is Rolle's prior friendship with God that enables him to practice human friendships and help others. In simplified terms, it is the difference between a reciprocal and a hierarchical relationship. No matter how intimate, persuasive, sensual or

³⁸⁰ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 79–80; Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 129; Watson, *Invention*, 231.

³⁸¹ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 81.

³⁸² Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spiritali amicitia*, 306.

respectful Rolle can be with his readers, he ultimately makes himself indispensable to their spiritual progress, a guide and teacher on the way to God.

In contrast to the other two English treatises, *The Commandment* is not very intimate in tone. McIlroy describes it as sober, didactic and formal. Watson says that whatever intimacy may have existed between Rolle and the nun of Hampole, who was the likely recipient, is omitted as inappropriate; the work lacks any personal references and presents Rolle as an institutional authority giving general instruction.³⁸³ I argue, however, that this apparent lack of friendly discourse, far from demonstrating an impersonal or indifferent relationship, represents the other side of Rollean instruction-friendship between men and women.

One example will suffice to draw the connection between *The Commandment* and Rolle's theory of friendship. In the context of vanity and inner devotion, Rolle attacks sumptuous clothing:

How may þou for shame, þat art bot seruaunt, with many cloþes and riche folow þi spouse and þi lord, þat yed [went] in a kyrtel, and þou trail as myche behynd þe as al þat he had on? Forþi I rede [urge] þat þou part with hym ar [before] þou and he mete, þat he reprove þe nat of outrage, for he wil þat þou haue þat þou hast mestier [need] of, and no more. He seid to his disciplesse þat þai shold nat haue two kyrrels: þat is þat oon shold nat haue as many cloþes as two myght be sustened with.

The passage allows for many layers of interpretation; McIlroy has discussed the symbolism of clothing and its relation to hypocrisy in *The Commandment* extensively.³⁸⁴ A concrete historical context may be found in the reality of the Hampole priory. In her classic, if dated, study of medieval English nunneries, Eileen Power has claimed that Yorkshire nunneries tended to be undisciplined and worldly, and continuously in need of admonition. Nuns occasionally received fine clothes as legacies, and in 1320 the archbishop William Melton ordered the prioress of Hampole to correct her nuns who used inappropriate clothes.³⁸⁵ Rolle may have been responding to an acute problem of lax discipline.

The passage can be further illuminated by reference to the *Incendium amoris* account of friendship. Rolle, as we saw, condemned teachers of women who lacked the courage to correct their charges and prohibit vanity.³⁸⁶ In *The Commandment*, Rolle puts theory into practice and actually does what he rhetorically claimed to do in *Incendium amoris*. It is not just a negative reproof

³⁸³ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 99; Watson, *Invention*, 236.

³⁸⁴ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 112–113, 126–135.

³⁸⁵ Eileen Power, *Medieval English nunneries c. 1275 to 1535*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1922, 325–329, 587.

³⁸⁶ *Incendium amoris*, 264, 266; see above, chapters 4.2 and 4.3.

either, but a recommendation in preparation of meeting Christ, which shows a concern for the reader's spiritual well-being.

Watson, too, notes a connection between *The Commandment* and Rolle's Latin works, but he thinks it has more to do with *Melos amoris*, treating the reader with the suspicion and wariness that *Melos amoris* expected of a pastoral relationship with women. Watson contrasts *The Commandment* to *Ego dormio*: 'It is all the difference between the *amicitia* described in *Incendium amoris* and the apostleship asserted in *Melos amoris*.³⁸⁷ The difference of emphasis is real; *Ego dormio* relies on intimate and friendly language to seduce the reader to love God, whereas *The Commandment* addresses the reader more didactically. However, it was already argued that Watson's dichotomy between loving friendship and stern apostleship does not sufficiently recognise the blending of the two aspects in Rolle's model of mixed-gender friendship.³⁸⁸ Holy friendship between a man and a woman involves the man instructing and correcting the woman from a position of authority. That is precisely what *The Commandment* does, showing that Rolle's claims of teaching women in all holiness, in his Latin works, were not just unfounded self-defence.

The exact role of the three English treatises in Rolle's literary canon and their relationship to his real relationships is a matter of some debate. Watson's thesis is that Rolle's Latin career is informed by an attempt to establish himself as a modern *auctor* – the works are 'bricks in the tower of Rolle's authority' – whereas his vernacular pieces seem to have addressed particular needs of his audience. Watson admits that Rolle may have considered his epistolary treatises as the eremitic equivalent of a clerical teaching office, just like in Latin he sought to define and express an eremitic preaching office, but believes the vernacular works are best understood as a product and expression of Rolle's intimate friendships with women. Supposedly, Rolle's most important stimulus for writing *The Form of Living* was his friendship with Margaret Kirkeby.³⁸⁹

McIlroy argues against reducing the English treatises to expressions of particular relationships and instead links them with a tradition of affective devotional literature whose purpose is to seduce the soul to piety. She thinks Rolle's relationship with Margaret has been projected too heavily on *The Form of*

³⁸⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 238.

³⁸⁸ See above, chapter 4.2.

³⁸⁹ Watson, *Invention*, 223–224, 231, 242.

Living to make it seem like a work of a particular friendship more than the text actually justifies. While Margaret was surely the catalyst, the literary strategies could appeal to a wide vernacular audience. The treatise does not allude to specific mixed-gender friendships but rather expresses an eternal friendship between Rolle's authorial self, the human soul reading him, and Christ their spouse.³⁹⁰ Indeed, we observed a similar set of relationships in *Ego dormio*. Manuscript evidence regarding the reception of the *Form* supports McIlroy's argument to the extent that at least Rolle's near-contemporary readers did not feel restricted by its original dedication to Margaret Kirkeby.³⁹¹

McIlroy is right to draw attention to the literary techniques and strategy of the English works. It would certainly be naïve to take phrases like 'To þe I writ þis speciali'³⁹² or 'I wold þat þou myzt wyn to þe heghest'³⁹³ as straightforward proof of personal acquaintance and ignore their function in affective texts which seek to persuade the reader to embrace the difficult path of loving God. She goes too far, though, when she claims that the discourse of friendship in *The Form of Living* is not because of Rolle's ministry to women as presented in *Melos amoris* nor because he longs for a spiritual companion in *Incendium amoris*, let alone because of the personal friendship with Margaret Kirkeby which the *Officium* describes. Instead, she argues, it is because friendship is an exalted spiritual relationship with and in God; Rolle's authorial intention is to draw the reader into union with God and himself, in the text and in contemplative life.³⁹⁴ McIlroy's interpretation identifies an important feature of Rolle's discourse of friendship, but it does not exclude the other factors mentioned. From the perspective of literary criticism, *The Form of Living* and Rolle's other vernacular works may deserve to be read as independent texts, but historical scholarship interested in the entirety of Rolle's corpus, the theology therein, and the reality behind the texts has no reason to dismiss evidence external to a single text. Since there is good reason to suppose Rolle was personally familiar with Margaret Kirkeby and addressed *The Form of*

³⁹⁰ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 22–23, 144.

³⁹¹ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 141–142, 183–184. For a description of known manuscripts of *The Form of Living*, see Ogilvie-Thomson, *Prose and verse*, xxxvi–xliv. McIlroy's argument is based both on the popularity of the work and the omission or, in one case, replacement of Margaret's name with another in the text.

³⁹² *Ego dormio*, 26.

³⁹³ *Form*, 16.

³⁹⁴ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 185. McIlroy seems to forget her own caution about her reader-oriented criticism not being interested in the intentions of the author, and crosses the line from purely textual analysis to a historical conclusion. See *English prose treatises*, 16.

Living to her, since the other two vernacular treatises can also be connected with particular female recipients, and since in his Latin works he explicitly developed a theory of mixed-gender friendship where holy men would instruct women in the love of God, the best and most complete interpretation of Rolle's English treatises should account for all these factors.

The importance of instruction-friendship as a motivation for the English works depends on how much weight is given to other factors. Among other things, Watson and McIlroy disagree on the expectations Rolle might have had for the reception of the English treatises. Watson argues that since Rolle could not have anticipated the later popularity of his vernacular works, he probably deviated from Latin – his natural choice of a literary language – primarily to answer the needs of his female disciple-friends. McIlroy, on the other hand, suggests that Rolle may have anticipated and responded to a growing demand for vernacular devotional literature; he possibly wanted to add some devotional manuals to his canon since they were respected at the time.³⁹⁵ It is instructive that the emphasis Watson and McIlroy give to particular friendships behind the English works correlates with how wide an audience they think Rolle expected to reach.

Whatever the demand for vernacular literature in the Yorkshire of the 1340s, there is merit in McIlroy's suggestion to treat Rolle's English works as more than just occasional pieces. In an article on the *Lectiones super mortuorum*, Renevey argues that Rolle's commentary on the book of Job was in part an attempt to align himself with the more established, regulated and prestigious anchoritic paradigm to secure himself a place in the religious sphere – as an ambitious author, he was not content to be associated with the typical road-mending, illiterate hermits of fourteenth-century England.³⁹⁶ I suggest that the same argument could be extended to Rolle's English treatises: he could clarify and defend his anomalous way of life by affiliating himself with anchoritic and monastic women as their spiritual director, at least in a literary and unofficial capacity. *The Form of Living*, *Ego dormio* and *The Commandment*, then, serve multiple purposes in Rolle's literary corpus.

³⁹⁵ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 5–7, 13–14, 105; Watson, *Invention*, 222–223. It ought to be noted that Gillespie criticises McIlroy for basing her assumptions about the horizon of expectations in Rolle's time on fifteenth-century manuscripts and literature that concerns the period some decades after Rolle's death; Gillespie, 'English prose treatises' (review), 54.

³⁹⁶ Renevey, 'Looking for a context', 202.

It is not necessary to identify the specific relationships and motivations that may have preceded and occasioned Rolle's English treatises in order to understand their connection to his theory of friendship. Whether or not Margaret Kirkeby and the nuns of Yedingham and Hampole knew Rolle in person or were even the original recipients, the works discussed in this chapter nonetheless express a Rollean instruction-friendship. As the previous chapters argued, the purpose of true friendship was to correct sin and nurture holiness. Women especially needed the counsel of holy men, so mixed-gender friendship should be a relationship of instruction. The purpose of such instruction-friendship was to exhort the disciple to love God and more specifically, to devote herself to contemplative life and virginity. The culmination of contemplative life was friendship and unity with God and the fellowship of angels and saints. This chapter demonstrated that every element of this summary, derived from Rolle's Latin works, can be found in the English treatises. Rolle set himself up as an authority, gave advice about holiness and chastised the reader for failures, seduced her to love God, and promised companionship in the contemplative life. In short, I argue that in *Ego dormio*, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living* Rolle put into practice the theory of instruction-friendship defined and defended in his Latin works. The texts themselves express and establish a spiritual friendship – to read and obey them is to become Rolle's disciple and friend.

5.2 Margaret Kirkeby, a True Friend?

Before concluding this study, something ought to be said about the one person who has been identified as Rolle's disciple-friend by contemporary sources and scholars alike: Margaret Kirkeby. Watson, for example, contends that Rolle's search for a friend was motivated by a desire to find someone to play Clare to his Francis and seems to consider Margaret to have been that person – their 'outstanding friendship' was the driving force behind Rolle's most popular English works.³⁹⁷ The relationship between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby will be investigated in light of Rolle's *Officium* and other evidence. Finally, it will be compared to Rolle's longing for a friend, expressed in *Incendium amoris*, in order to see what Rolle was ultimately looking for and to evaluate whether Margaret

³⁹⁷ Watson, *Invention*, 224, 242.

really shared with Rolle a special relationship that fulfilled his visions of true, holy friendship.

The eighth *lectio* of the *Officium* of Richard Rolle opens with the preface that 'this holy hermit, Richard, out of the abundance of his charity used to show himself very friendly to recluses and to those who were in need of spiritual consolation[.]'³⁹⁸ This is then illustrated with a story about how Rolle exorcised demons from his patron lady and, more importantly for present purposes, a story about the illness of a recluse of Ainderby named Margaret.

Margaret suffered some illness that for thirteen days deprived her of speech and caused so much pain she could not rest. A certain local *paterfamilias* decided to call for Rolle to come and help her, since he knew that 'the holy hermit Richard loved her with an affection of perfect charity – since he was wont to instruct her in the art of loving God, and to direct her, by his holy teaching, how to order her life'³⁹⁹ Rolle came to Margaret's cell, sat by her window and ate with her. After the meal she fell asleep and rested her head against Rolle through the window. Suddenly she had a convulsion, awoke, and her speech was restored. After they had recited a hymn, Rolle said to her: 'Now thy speech is restored to thee, use it as a woman whose speech is good.'⁴⁰⁰ Margaret fell asleep again, leaning on Rolle like before, and again was shaken by convulsions. Rolle held her still until she fell and awoke. Rolle then promised her she would be rid of the condition for as long as he lived. Years later the problem recurred, and Margaret asked the man from last time to go to Hampole and see if Rolle was alright. It turned out that Rolle had died the moment Margaret's affliction returned. Margaret travelled to Rolle's grave in Hampole and did not suffer from the affliction again.⁴⁰¹

What is the connection between this hagiographical account, historical reality, and Rolle's literary work? Allen has identified the Margaret of the *Officium* and Rolle's disciple with Margaret de Kirkeby, a recluse of Layton and then Ainderby, and Margaret la Boteler, a nun of Hampole who became an

³⁹⁸ 'Sanctus eciam iste heremita ricardus ex abundancia caritatis sue solitus erat se multum familiarem exhibere reclusis et hiis qui spirituali indigebant conslacione[.]' *Officium*, 39; translation in Frances M. M. Comper, *The Life of Richard Rolle, together with an edition of his English lyrics*, London & Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1933, 306.

³⁹⁹ '[S]anctum eremitam ricardum eam perfecta caritatis affectione diligere : utpote qui ipsam de arte amoris dei consuevit instruere : et in modo viuendi sua sancta institutione dirigere[.]' *Officium*, 39; translation in Comper, *Life of Richard Rolle*, 307.

⁴⁰⁰ '[M]odo restitutum est tibi labium. utere eo sicut mulier bene loquax.' *Officium*, 40; translation in Comper, *Life of Richard Rolle*, 307.

⁴⁰¹ *Officium*, 39–41.

anchoress. It is fairly safe to say that they are the same person, who was first enclosed at Layton in December 1348, moved to Ainderby in 1356 or 1357, and then possibly retired to Rolle's old cell in Hampole. She may have been a daughter of the le Botelers who lived in Skelbroke a little north of Hampole and seem to have had connections with the convent.⁴⁰² Certainly the Margaret of the *Officium* is the Margaret of *The Form of Living*, since Rolle's instruction of Margaret in how to order her life – *in modo viuendi* – is a clear reference to the work whose Latin translation was labelled to be *de modo viuendi*.⁴⁰³ Even if Allen's sources allow only for a tentative sketch of Margaret Kirkeby's life, its general outline if not its chronology – Rolle died soon after her original enclosure, and she could not have moved to Hampole for years or even decades – seems to allow for the *Officium* account. In light of the scant evidence, Rolle and Margaret's friendship is at least possible.

Allen finds it likely that Rolle met Margaret for the first time when she was a nun at Hampole, the nunnery with which Rolle seemed to be closely connected. She suspects ecclesiastical authorities would not have allowed him to live in too close contact with the monastery and places him under lay patronage at some hermitage nearby. The confessors of the Cistercian monastery were Franciscan, and McIlroy suggests Rolle's affinities with Franciscan devotion, possibly picked up at Oxford, may have helped him fit in. The duration and nature of Rolle's association with the house is not clear, and Allen thinks it is possible that the nuns of Hampole claimed Rolle after his death to a greater degree than his life warranted, in part for commercial reasons of cult promotion.⁴⁰⁴ In any case, *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living* were both dedicated to women who were or had been nuns at Hampole. There was at the very least a literary contact, and we have observed internal evidence in the texts that suggest previous familiarity. Margaret Kirkeby may have read *The Commandment* while still at Hampole and known Rolle personally. The social reality of the monastery is difficult to reconstruct, however, so it cannot be said whether Rolle could have realistically visited the sisters in person.

Needless to say, the *Officium* is hagiographical literature shaped by devotional and apologetic motives, not historical accuracy. Allen points out the

⁴⁰² Allen, *Writings*, 502–510.

⁴⁰³ For the Latin manuscripts, see Allen, *Writings*, 262.

⁴⁰⁴ Allen, *Writings*, 503, 511–515; McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 30–31.

obvious impossibility of Rolle living for years after his visit to Margaret's cell, since it is known he died less than a year after her enclosure, in September 1349. She also finds it unlikely that during a raging plague someone would have made the trip from Layton to Hampole to fetch Rolle; the story may have been embellished to make the relationship between Rolle and Margaret as explicitly miraculous as possible. She finds it likely that a visit did happen, however, especially since there does not seem to be any reason for the hagiographers to have fabricated such a suspicious story.⁴⁰⁵ Watson stresses the same principle: since both Rolle and the compilers of his life were interested to portray him as holy, material that is somehow contrary to the model of saintliness is likely to have basis in truth.⁴⁰⁶ The story of Rolle's visit would be corroborated if it really was an awkward incident and their friendship potentially suspicious.

One possibility is that the relationship between the two was known widely enough to require some comment. To address it directly was to clip the wings of gossip. Undoubtedly the compilers of the *Officium* could have downplayed the intimacy of the visit if they wanted to. Perhaps the intention was to provocatively prove Rolle's sanctity, very much like he himself connects the duty of spiritual instruction to his status as a holy man: only a saint could maintain a chaste and safe relationship with the opposite sex, and the performance of a healing miracle at Rolle and Margaret's meeting proved that there was nothing illicit about it. Therefore, Rolle must have been a saint.

It is not clear that there was anything suspicious or awkward to justify, though. In his works Rolle had elevated spiritual friendship between men and women, a view to which the proponents of his cult probably subscribed. The theme was not unknown in previous hagiography, either. Christina of Markyate, a twelfth-century Yorkshire saint, was said to have lived with several men during her religious career and enjoyed a deep emotional and spiritual connection with them. Ruth Mazo Karras notes that Christina's love for her friend Geoffrey aroused suspicion and gossip in some circles since it might have resembled carnal love on the outside. Nonetheless, her *vita* portrayed it openly as holy. Robertson further argues that it provided an important model for female reclusive life in

⁴⁰⁵ Allen, *Writings*, 517.

⁴⁰⁶ Watson, *Invention*, 295.

post-Conquest England.⁴⁰⁷ It is likely that the compilers of Rolle's life were familiar with the earlier Yorkshire recluse and could thus consider intimate spiritual friendship an appropriate part of a saintly life. From the perspective of Margaret, it is especially fitting as per Robertson's argument to have an important holy man in her life. Thorough research of the *Officium* and its sources would no doubt reveal other models and parallels; we must settle for this vague observation.

In summary, the portrayal of Rolle's visit to Margaret's cell may have followed hagiographical motives and convention, and so its historicity cannot be confirmed on the basis that the story was too awkward to make up. Rolle's own preoccupation with justifying his female relations need not pose any difficulty for this reading; it was one thing for the living Rolle to dwell among worldly women and arouse criticism, quite another for the saintly literary figure to perform a healing miracle for a devout anchoress. We should not be unduly sceptical, however: lack of conclusive evidence either way is to be expected when dealing with hagiographical anecdotes, and it seems reasonable that the hagiographers would have recalled authentic tradition which they then embellished.

As observed, McIlroy is eager to read the *The Form of Living* independent of any particular friendship. On the one hand, she denies that the text bears any internal evidence of such a limited target audience and argues that knowledge of Margaret and Rolle's relationship is primarily derived from the *Officium* account. It is what has guided scholarly interpretation of the *Form* as well. On the other hand, she suggests that it was the tone and content of the latter that may have inspired the *Officium* account.⁴⁰⁸ It is an accurate observation that what the *Officium* says of the friendship – that Rolle loved Margaret with the affection of perfect charity and instructed her in loving God – is what *The Form of Living* effectively does. Surely, Rolle's own writings influenced the interpretation of his life. However, there is a hint of circularity in McIlroy's reasoning: if modern interpretation merely projects the *Officium* account onto *The Form of Living* to conjure up a particular friendship that isn't present in the text itself, why would the compilers of the *Officium* have detected such a friendship in the *Form* and decided to recreate it in a hagiographical format? It is more likely that the

⁴⁰⁷ See *The life of Christina of Markyate*; Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Friendship and love in the lives of two twelfth-century English saints', *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 305–320 on p. 316; Robertson, *Early English devotional prose*, 28–29.

⁴⁰⁸ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 146–149.

compilers took the treatise for what it really is – an expression of friendship and instruction to a particular woman, even if it invites a wider audience – and also drew on a local tradition of Rolle's life. Since Margaret Kirkeby had returned to Hampole where the *Officium* was most probably compiled and may even have still lived at the time of its composition, it is likely the compilers had knowledge of the real friendship.⁴⁰⁹

To the evidence already presented can be added the tradition of manuscript ascriptions, though they may in part depend on the *Officium*. One of the earliest surviving manuscripts of *The Form of Living*, the late 14th century Cambridge MS Dd.v.64, says Rolle wrote the work 'for the anchoress Margaret, his beloved disciple.'⁴¹⁰ It is curious that the same manuscript also provides the ascriptions of *Ego dormio* and *The Commandment* to the nuns of Yedingham and Hampole, respectively – the scribe seems to have had unusually specific and probably accurate information about Rolle's works. Another, Oxford Colleges MS Univ. 97, prefaces the work with 'Heere bigynneth a trete þat Richard hermyte maade to a good ankeresse þat he louede.'⁴¹¹ The tradition of their friendship was clearly known among copyists. There is also the case of Longleat 29, the manuscript which seems to ascribe Rolle's all three English treatises to Margaret Kirkeby.⁴¹² Watson suggests the manuscript preserves the copy of an authorial collection Rolle prepared for Margaret and argues that it is further evidence for their friendship.⁴¹³

Finally, though lacking personal allusions, *The English Psalter* has also been taken as evidence of Rolle's affection for Margaret. Watson points to Margaret's crucial role as the catalyst for its writing, and believes it reflects Rolle's confidence in her spiritual potential beyond what is envisaged in his other English works; such material was normally available only to those educated in Latin. Renevey points to the fact that the work is actually bilingual; the translation invites the reader to the Latin original.⁴¹⁴ Both scholars emphasise the work's educational ambitions and especially Renevey seems to suggest its bilingualism

⁴⁰⁹ On Margaret's return to Hampole and possible influence on the *Officium*, see Allen, *Writings*, 51–52; 507–508.

⁴¹⁰ '[A]d Margaretam anachoritam, suam dilectam discipulam.' Allen, *Writings*, 259.

⁴¹¹ Allen, *Writings*, 258.

⁴¹² See above, chapter 2.2.

⁴¹³ Watson, *Invention*, 248–249.

⁴¹⁴ Renevey, *Language, self and love*, 135; Watson, *Invention*, 247.

makes is particularly advanced. It must be noted, though, that singing the Psalms in Latin was part of the anchoress' daily routine, so the *English Psalter* had a practical function.⁴¹⁵ A translation and commentary without the original would have been quite impractical. Further, McIlroy claims that it was blatantly designed for a general audience despite the nominal dedication.⁴¹⁶ Be that as it may, the *English Psalter* can offer only humble confirmation about the friendship between Rolle and Margaret.

Even apart from *The Form of Living* interpreted as an expression of a particular instruction-friendship, then, there is evidence to indicate a special friendship between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby. The *Officium* story is no doubt embellished and partly inaccurate, but there is no reason to suppose the friendship it represents was pure fiction. Both its compilers and several copyists of Rolle's work seem to have known Margaret as Rolle's beloved disciple. If the *English Psalter* was really written with her in mind, it attests to Rolle's dedication to her spiritual progress. There is little reason to doubt that Rolle exercised with Margaret the instruction-friendship he theorised and defended in his Latin works.

So far we have been mostly concerned with Rolle's definition of friendship as a form of hierarchical instruction and edification whose ultimate goal is to guide the disciple-friend to the love of God. That is how both *The Form of Living* and the *Officium* account represent his relationship with Margaret Kirkeby, too. Rolle's discourse of friendship was rooted in traditional ideas of spiritual friendship, in the strategies of affective devotional literature and also in his need to justify and explain his association with women. What these three aspects have in common is that the motivation for the discourse is external to Rolle: they are in relation to tradition, his readers, and his critics. It remains for us to investigate the final research question: what was the true friendship Rolle was looking for and what might it have meant for him, personally? If Rolle's conception of mixed-gender friendship was in part determined by the expectations of his audience, did it also correspond to his ideal vision of true friendship? And where did Margaret Kirkeby fit in?

The evidence does not allow for detailed discussion of Rolle's feelings and desires so answers to questions like these must be, to an extent, speculative.

⁴¹⁵ For instructions on anchoritic devotion and the Psalms, see the first part of *Ancrene Wisse*, 7–19.

⁴¹⁶ McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 147.

However, *Incendium amoris* 34 contains Rolle's address to God in the first person which declares his longing for a friend. One must be wary of accepting Rolle's confession at face value here – it is a literary device like any other – but it does seem to be the most direct personal statement he ever made about friendship:

Who would sing me my songs and the joy of my state [...]so that from a companion's songs of love I might subtly investigate my nature, and the measure of song, in which I am considered excellent, might become known to me; if perhaps I might find myself exempt from unhappiness. And I do not presume to say that for myself, because I have not yet found what I long for: that I might rest with sweetness in the solace of my companion. If indeed I judge that that shout and song is entirely hidden from external ears – which I dare say is true – would that I might find a human author of that melody who, though not by talking but through writing, would sing for me my glory. [...] This would indeed be more lovable to me than gold: and none of the precious things to be had in this exile would compare to him. For the charm of virtue dwells with him and he investigates the secrets of love perfectly. I would love him just like my own heart and I would hold nothing hidden from him, because he would express to me the song I desire to understand and make clear my joyful shout.⁴¹⁷

There are some further remarks in chapter 35. Rolle wishes he had a companion to make lighter the burden of his earthly exile, to discuss without conflict, and to finally leave their external prison and enter the inner home together, receiving seats in heaven with all those who loved Christ in equal measure.⁴¹⁸

This passage has been relatively neglected by scholars. Watson simply notes that Rolle was looking for someone to share his mystical experiences with, and connects this desire to the defence of mixed-gender friendship in chapter 39; he seems to think Rolle had a female candidate in mind.⁴¹⁹ In such an interpretation, Rolle's instruction-friendship with women aimed at finding a true and equal companion in the contemplative life. And, given the witness of the *The Form of Living* and the *Officium* to a special friendship between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby, she seems like the most likely person to be such a friend.

It is clear that Rolle did not think just anyone could be the special companion he longed for, even if they were his disciple-friends. *Incendium*

⁴¹⁷ 'Quis ergo mihi modularetur carmina cantuum meorum, et gaudia affectuum [...] ut saltem ex canticis caritatis sodalis subtiliter indagarem substanciam meam, et mensuram modulacionum, in quibus prestabilis putarer, mihi innotesceret, si forte ab infelicitate exemptum me inuenirem, et quod per me predicare non presumo, quia nondum reperi quod exopto, in solaciis socii mei requiescerem cum dulcore. Siquidem si clamorem illum canorem ab extrinsecis auribus omnino absconditum arbitrer, (quod et uere esse audeo annunciare,) utinam et illius modulaminis inueniam auctorem hominem, qui etsi non dictis, tamen scriptis mihi gloriam meam decantaret [...]. Hic etenim esset mihi amabilis super aurum: et omnia preciosa non adequarem ei que habentur in hoc exilio. Uenustas namque uirtutis cum ipso habitat, et amoris arcana perfeccius inuestigat. Diligerem denique illum sicut cor meum nec esset aliquid quod ab ipso occultare intenderem, quia canorem quod cupio intelligere mihi exprimeret, et iubilum iocunditatis mee clarius enodaret.'

Incendium amoris, 243–244.

⁴¹⁸ *Incendium amoris*, 245.

⁴¹⁹ Watson, *Invention*, 224.

amoris, *Contra amatores mundi* and *Melos amoris* all hint at relationships with women, but the former two clearly say he had not yet found what he was looking for: 'It is rare to find a faithful friend. Everyone looks out for their own and nobody has a friend who he says is his other self.'⁴²⁰ And: 'Ah, wretched me! solitary such as I am, that things are so in my day that not one person can I find who wishes to go along with me, and in repose and silence to long for the delights of eternal love.'⁴²¹ Especially the latter quote emphasises Rolle's disappointment in that despite his best efforts, no one has really embraced his teachings and way of life.

All the Latin texts predate Margaret Kirkeby's enclosure and the composition of *The Form of Living*, so it is chronologically possible that Rolle did find in her what he was looking for. Indeed, there are parallels between the *Incendium amoris* passage and the friendship expressed in *The Form of Living*. The possibility of joining the company of angels and saints together is something we saw Rolle offer to the recipient of the *Form*. Rolle also warned Margaret not to reveal her secrets to anyone she could not trust completely; conversely, as it was suggested, he implied that he was a suitable confidant. The parallel in *Incendium amoris* is the statement that Rolle would keep nothing hidden from his friend. Most importantly, what Rolle is looking for in his friend is the highest of his spiritual experiences, *canor*. The purpose of *The Form of Living* is to guide the reader to the highest state of love where the song can be experienced, and expresses confidence in the recipient's ability to reach it.

This last similarity also marks a crucial difference, however. The Rolle of *Incendium amoris* is not just looking for someone to teach in the contemplative life – he wants someone who is already at his level, a mirror of himself. The role of the friend in this passage goes beyond anything Rolle expressed elsewhere in his writings: he could better understand himself and the grace he has been granted if he could perceive the same gifts in a friend. This idea bears a fascinating echo of Aristotle, according to whom friendship resembles the highest goal of human life, contemplation. One can see oneself clearly only in a friend whose virtues

⁴²⁰ '[U]ix aut raro inuenitur fidus amicus. Omnes querunt que sua sunt, nullus habet amicum de quo dicit: mihi est ille alius ego.' *Incendium amoris*, 263.

⁴²¹ 'Heu michi misero; quia qualicumque solitario, ita fit in meis temporibus quod nec unum inuenio qui cupit mecum currere, ac sedendo et tacendo eterni amoris delicias desiderare.' *Contra amatores mundi*, 86, transl. p. 169.

equal one's own.⁴²² Rolle's concept of contemplation is of course very different from Aristotle's, but the idea that he can 'subtly investigate his nature' only through a companion's spiritual experiences places friendship at the peak of contemplative life in a way reminiscent of Aristotle. Rolle had at least some knowledge of the Philosopher, so direct influence is not out of the question.⁴²³ The relationship expressed in *The Form of Living* and in the *Officium*, intimate as it may be, remains hierarchical: Margaret is still in need of Rolle's guidance and authority, and she has not yet received the spiritual gifts that would mirror Rolle's own.

Another thing that suggests Rolle was looking for more than the instruction-friendship he shared with his female disciples is the reference to writing. The friend should demonstrate to him the gift of *canor* not by talking but through literary activity. Depending on how much weight is given to this remark, it could shift the interpretation of the entire passage. It reflects Rolle's understanding of his own writing as a literary expression of *canor* – writing is the closest one can get to express the mystery of song outwardly.⁴²⁴ Ideally, then, Rolle is looking for a fellow author of mystical treatises, perhaps to legitimise his own idiosyncratic teaching with his or her output. Watson has argued that Rolle was preoccupied with establishing himself as a modern *auctor* comparable to the old doctors of the church, and also that he faced the problem that no previous authority had written of the spiritual experiences he claimed to have.⁴²⁵ It is understandable that in Rolle's vision the true friend would vindicate him with literary testimony to the same experiences. It might even be suggested that Rolle is looking for a primarily literary, perhaps epistolary, friendship, but that may be reading too much into the remark. Needless to say, Margaret Kirkeby was not a fellow author of mystical treatises, and even if *The Form of Living* along with the two other English treatises were to be accepted as epistles, they clearly weren't part of any continued exchange of letters.⁴²⁶ As far as can be known, the literary dimension of Rolle's

⁴²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, IX:9, 177. See also chapter 2.3 above.

⁴²³ *The Bee and the Stork* mentions him by name: 'Arestotill sais þat þe bees are feghtande agaynes hym þat will drawe þaire honny fra thaym.' *The Bee*, 55.

⁴²⁴ See Watson, *Invention*, 176–180.

⁴²⁵ Watson, *Invention*, 131, 139–140, 167–168.

⁴²⁶ McIlroy argues against treating the works as epistles. At the very least, their style and purpose transcend the original epistolary context. McIlroy, *English prose treatises*, 147.

ideal friendship was not fulfilled in his relationship to Margaret Kirkeby or other disciple-friends.

In Margaret Kirkeby, Rolle seems to have found a promising and close disciple-friend. As far as their relationship can be reconstructed, however, it did not fulfil the criteria of the true friendship Rolle longed for. The relationship remained closer to the hierarchical instruction-friendship between men and women, outlined in *Incendium amoris* 39, than to the fellowship of saints who act as mirrors for each other's spiritual experiences as expressed in chapter 34.

Did Rolle think Margaret had the potential to be such a friend, though? Possibly. Particularly, Rolle did not seem to think that the fact that she was a woman would keep her from the heights of spiritual experience.⁴²⁷ Her vocation as a religious recluse was more relevant than her gender. If the *Incendium amoris* theory of mixed-gender friendship is to be taken seriously, however, her gender did mean that she needed the instruction of a holy man to get there. And this appears to be the point of Rolle's model of mixed-gender friendship as instruction: to lead the disciple-friend to union with God and the saints so that she might share with Rolle his spiritual experiences. Part of Rolle's motive for instructing his disciples and Margaret Kirkeby in particular was the hope that one of them would reach his level of sanctity, help him understand his spiritual gifts better, validate his teaching and ease the burdens of mortal existence. Since he had not found a friend like that, he sought to make one through spiritual instruction. If ever that point was reached, the friendship would cease to be a hierarchical relationship of instruction and become true and equal unity in and for God.

*

This final main chapter investigated Rollean instruction-friendship beyond his theoretical formulations: its application in practice, the hope that motivated him – beyond the self-justification and defence of his life discussed in the previous chapter – and the potential of Margaret Kirkeby to fulfil that hope. We saw that the three English works discussed, all initially addressed to specific women, each expressed key aspects of Rolle's model of instruction-friendship and together painted a more or less complete picture of it. This is significant not only because it answers the question posed to the sources, that is, whether Rolle did apply his

⁴²⁷ See, for example, *Form*, 16; *Melos I*, 310; *Melos II*, 50–52. The fact that *Incendium amoris* refers to the longed-for friend in the masculine need not be taken as anything more than a convention of grammar.

theory in practice and how, but also because it qualifies and contextualises the previous chapter's answer to the 'why' question: the model was purely literary self-justification and apologetic fiction, since Rolle really did practice the kind of instruction-friendship he described. On the other hand, the fact that he did act as spiritual guide to religious women is the evident reality which he had to justify.

Beyond self-defence and actual practice, Rolle also yearned for the comfort of true friendship; but what was this friendship he desired? It was argued that the crucial difference to instruction-friendship is that longed-for friendship would transcend the hierarchy of unilateral instruction; Rolle sought an equal to share his spiritual experiences. Margaret Kirkeby has traditionally been considered Rolle's special friend and most beloved disciple, but their relationship does not seem to have conformed to the lofty ideal Rolle hoped for. Instead, I suggested that Rolle's declaration of his longing reveals a fundamental motive for his practice and, indirectly, writing on friendship: through instructing his disciple-friends, he hoped to edify even just one of them to his level of spiritual grace, so that he might have a fellow in the contemplative life.

6 Conclusions

Over three main chapters, this study explored Rolle's theory and practice of friendship and answered the questions posed at the outset: Rolle's general theory of friendship was described and placed into the context of his outlook on God, the world and religious life as well as his sources and literary background. This set the groundwork to explain the nature and prerequisites of mixed-gender friendship specifically. The theoretical model could then be compared to Rolle's works to women to answer the question of whether Rolle applied his theory into practice, and how. The final chapter evaluated Rolle's relationship with Margaret Kirkeby in relation to his longing to find a true friend to further illuminate what he was looking for and whether he ever found it. All these answers contributed to the suggested explanation of Rolle's authorial motives and circumstances, that is, why he wrote as he did.

Rolle's general theory of friendship, as expressed especially in *Incendium amoris* 39, seems to have been derived largely from earlier sources, particularly Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia* and Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spiritali amicitia*. Those two are written in dialogue form, however, and Rolle's straightforward exposition has no exact models. For the most part, his ideas were traditional, but his explicit defence of mixed-gender friendships seems to have been unprecedented. This idiosyncrasy called for a more thorough investigation of mixed-gender relationships in Rolle's works.

To understand friendship between men and women requires a good grasp of Rolle's general theory of friendship. According to Rolle, friendship is a connection of wills that agree and desire the same things, to the point the friends almost think they share one soul and are each other's other selves. Not only does friendship originate in the natural sociability of man, it cannot end as long as the nature it is based on persists. This Ciceronian argument is surprising, because Rolle typically presented the natural world as working against God, but the harsh naturalism is tempered by the introduction of virtue in the friend's nature as the good basis of friendship. Rolle did, in any case, come up with a tripartite categorisation of friendship based on nature: morally neutral, natural friendship is the basis which can become holy through devotion to God or corrupt if it involves something contrary to God's will.

The majority of Rolle's writings imply that almost all friendship among humans is of the corrupt kind. The most important measure of whether a friendship is holy or corrupt is whether it represents ordered love, *ordinatus amor*, which dictates that things ought to be loved according to their measure of goodness. God is the greatest good, so he should be loved for his own sake, and everything else because of him. Indeed, the best friendship is to be had with God. To love God is to become God's friend, which relationship Rolle equated with the contemplative life – and contemplative life meant, essentially, turning one's back on the world. His spiritual experiences of heat, sweetness and song were a sign and consequence of his friendship with God. More often than not, he argued, human friendship fails because it is not properly ordered, that is, it lusts after worldly things instead of God.

There is a real tension between Rolle's attack on worldly friendship, on the one hand, and his defence of true human friendship, on the other. Part of this is due to Rolle's strategy of elevating the love of God at the expense of the love of the world. The dichotomy is fundamental in Rolle's thought; one wins life everlasting, the other brings damnation. Rolle encouraged an affective reorientation toward God, which meant that anything that might inspire carnal concupiscence was to be shunned. Many of the distractions of worldly friendship he mentioned – sexual temptation, spiritual pride, worry – were especially dangerous to beginners in the contemplative life. Since many of Rolle's works were intended for aspiring contemplatives, be they already nuns, anchoresses or just potential converts, it stands to reason that he was typically critical of friendship. On the other hand, the few advanced friends of God – the *electi* or *perfecti* among whom Rolle counted himself – were impervious to worldly temptations, so there was a possibility for legitimate friendship between humans.

What kind of a model did Rolle offer for friendships between men and women, then? For one, he claimed that there was a natural love between men and women that was neither right nor wrong unless it was informed by love or corrupted by error; this is an application of his tripartite categorisation of corrupt, natural and holy friendships. The primary model Rolle appealed to, however, was mixed-gender friendship defined as spiritual instruction.

Moral correction and spiritual edification were part of Rolle's theory of general friendship. He also argued that the highest Christian vocation was a mixed

life: a contemplative lover of God turning back to the world to exhort others, in writing, to aspire to the level he has reached. Rolle's late works undeniably represent an interest in the spiritual needs of their audience, but I argued that the idea of the holy man sharing his experience with others was evident as early as *Incendium amoris*. Both these aspects, instruction as a holy man's duty and edification as part of friendship, are fundamental in mixed-gender friendship: women are not as rational as men, and they both need and want wise counsel for their salvation. For a man and a woman to be friends means for the man to instruct the woman, and rebuke her when necessary.

Such instruction-friendship is not an equal relationship. The man/teacher is hierarchically above the woman/disciple, and that is the primary difference between Rolle's general theory of true friendship and the mixed-gender model. In his thorough study of Rolle's literary career, Nicholas Watson noted a contrast between passages that speak of mixed-gender relationships in terms of friendship and those that appeal to instruction, and presupposed a tension between the two concepts. In light of the present argument, however, the difference is reduced to one of tone or emphasis: Rolle could make his teaching activity seem impersonal, but his model does not ultimately make a distinction between friendship and spiritual instruction between men and women.

What were the prerequisites for mixed-gender friendship? Given Rolle's strong suspicion toward worldly love and criticism of worldly women, some work was required for a model of mixed-gender friendship to seem viable. First of all, Rolle attacked women for their beauty and vanity with which they deceive and tempt men with a vitriol that might make a positive estimation of female worth incongruous. The temptress or debauched woman should be seen as a symbol, however, representing the dangers of the world, obstacles on the way to God, perhaps even Rolle's sexual insecurities. In contrast to her, Rolle elevated the figure of the devout virgin, perfectly capable of fulfilling her spiritual potential and experiencing the gifts of God's love Rolle had received, too. The women eligible for holy instruction-friendship, then, were of this latter category. Arguably, one reason for this sharp dichotomy was Rolle's need to justify his association with the opposite sex to his readers: the women he dealt with were pure, and he had no sympathy for wicked women. The comparative lack of misogyny in Rolle's vernacular works addressed to nuns and anchoresses supports

this argument; he hardly needed to justify himself to the devout women themselves.

To legitimise his relationships with women, it was not enough for Rolle to establish a model of mixed-gender instruction-friendship and identify a type of woman eligible for the relationship. He, too, had to meet his high criteria. In part due to his own emphasis on the corruptive power of the world and the uncertainty of conversion, it was imperative for Rolle to convince his readers that he could associate with women safely. The way Rolle established himself among the *perfecti* is not within the scope of the present study as it pervades most of his writing, but an essential consequence of his sanctity – in other words, his friendship with God – was that he no longer struggled with worldly temptation. His turning away from the world had been fulfilled when God granted the fire of his love which extinguishes any concupiscence that might arise in the soul. No woman could tempt Rolle, therefore, and with this special grace he could safely participate in instruction-friendship with women.

One of the questions posed at the outset of this study was whether Rolle ever applied his model of mixed-gender friendship in practice, and how. Chapter 5 demonstrated that yes, he did, through his vernacular works of instruction to individual women. Each of the three works has a different tone and emphasis, but together they represent all aspects of Rolle's model of instruction-friendship: *The Commandment* rebukes the reader sternly for the benefit of her soul, *The Form of Living* repeatedly urges the reader to listen to good counsel and thus strengthens Rolle's authority over her spiritual life, and *Ego dormio* evokes almost erotic intimacy to persuade the reader to love God, for example. The latter two works also exhibit great confidence in the reader's spiritual potential.

An interesting feature the works, especially *The Form of Living* and *Ego dormio*, have in common despite superficial differences is that Rolle positioned himself as a mediator between God and the reader. He was a lover and friend of God who could draw others to the same relationship with God with his instruction, a necessary middleman without whom women would go wrong. The relationship expressed by the works is essentially the logic of instruction-friendship between men and women: holy men advise women who need their counsel due to their weakness in a hierarchical but also intimate relationship whose goal is spiritual edification. It is uncertain whether Rolle's relationship with

the recipients of the works ever found expression outside of his literary work, but the model of instruction-friendship does not necessarily require physical contact. The vernacular works of instruction are evidence that Rolle did not just theorise for the sake of theorising; he actually practised instruction-friendship with women, at least in writing.

Rolle's defence of mixed-gender friendship and his model of instruction-friendship were unusual and required a fair deal of intellectual manoeuvring to fit into his outlook, which brings up the question of motive. What motivated him to write about friendship, spiritual instruction and male-female relationships? Did he potentially benefit from adopting the terminology of friendship and instruction, or had he no choice? In short, why did he write as he did?

Rolle's criticism of worldly friendship was probably partly related to his personal experiences. Reportedly, he had experienced and overcome a sexual temptation in his youth, and knew well the dangers of concupiscence. He wrote of his distress when a woman who had been his patron passed away, echoing his warning that worry for friends can be distracting. He also had some problems with his patrons, and complained that his worst detractors used to be his faithful friends. If the complaint was sincere, the personal disappointment must have contributed to his distrust of human friendship, but all these experiences were undoubtedly intended to make a point. Not only did they shape and motivate Rolle's views, they also justified them: Rolle could claim he knew what he was talking about when he scorned sexual temptation, warned disciples of the distractions of worldly friendship and scolded his enemies for failing to stay faithful. One interpretation does not exclude the other; ambiguity is highly typical of Rolle's arguments.

The present study argues that Rolle's writings on friendship and spiritual instruction should primarily be interpreted as a strategy of legitimation and self-defence. It is evident in all aspects of the discourse. His friendship with God was the basis of his personal authority. His theory of natural friendship and love could justify his own affections and relationships: even the holy are subject to nature, and therefore he was not doing anything wrong. And, most importantly, the model of mixed-gender instruction-friendship turned his potentially suspicious association with women into something expected of a holy man.

Rolle appealed to his teaching duty several times to respond to criticism; whether he was accused by others of associating with wicked women, or by women themselves of inappropriate conduct toward them. He claimed to have a God-given gift and therefore a God-given responsibility to attend to the salvation of anyone who would listen. Careful not to give a bad example, however, he stressed that people should not do as he did, because he had received special grace to resist worldly dangers. The remark deflected any criticism that might be directed at him by way of comparison to others who had fallen; he was not like them. Curiously, Rolle emphasised the duty of instruction rather than the terminology of friendship in his response to concrete criticism. It is likely that his theory of friendship-as-instruction was somewhat controversial and therefore an appeal simply to his impersonal duty of spiritual instruction was the safer strategy. Whether or not he called these relationships friendship, however, they clearly conformed to the model he had outlined.

Rolle's relationships with women could be and have been interpreted as a test and demonstration of his sanctity: because only the holy could befriend and teach women safely, Rolle's ability to do so was proof of his holiness. This is problematic, because he did not advertise his friendships when he was criticised. It seems, instead, that association with women was a problem Rolle needed to address. He had to integrate his relationships into his account of the perfect friend of God. Rolle's instruction-friendship with women could only serve as evidence of his sanctity once he had successfully redefined them as such evidence instead of a problem.

I argue that Rolle's preoccupation with friendship, spiritual instruction and mixed-gender relationships was necessitated by circumstances. Relationships with women are apparent in his literary career and anecdotes of his life, and his insistence on the potential holiness of mixed-gender friendship was highly unusual in the literary tradition of friendship theories. Rather than suppose Rolle had an exclusive personal interest in the opposite sex or that his views were wholly unprecedented and eccentric, however, it can be argued that his unusual circumstances enabled and demanded a literary reaction. Rolle was a hermit with no official monastic, mendicant or clerical support, but unlike most hermits he was literate and aspired to be both a spiritual instructor and an authoritative religious writer. His association with women was bound to cause more suspicion

and controversy than his dealings with men. He had to justify himself, and the only way he could do that was through literary activity. When he wrote about the *perfecti* and the proper conduct of human relationships, he had to make sure his own life fit the model.

While Rolle's need to justify himself somehow is the best explanation for most of what he wrote about friendship, it should not be dismissed as wholly insincere apology. The evidence of the English works shows that he really did practice the kind of instruction-friendship he defended in theory – indeed, there would have been no need to spend so much energy on the argument if he had not – and his personal motive can be glimpsed in Rolle's declaration of his longing for a friend. He was looking for someone to share his spiritual experiences, act as a mirror to help him understand his own state better, and make lighter his life in the world. In other words, he wanted to find an equal in the spiritual life. That desire motivated him to teach and befriend women and, consequently, to formulate and defend a model of mixed-gender friendship.

Rolle complained in his Latin works that it was difficult to find a true friend. By the time Rolle wrote *The Form of Living*, however, he could have found one in Margaret Kirkeby. There is little evidence to reconstruct the specifics, but it seems they did share a relationship of instruction and friendship. The *Officium* attests to their love without shame, the *The Form of Living* is a clear expression of the model of instruction-friendship, and there is miscellaneous evidence to support the interpretation. Certainly, Rolle teased Margaret with the promise of fellowship together in the company of angels and saints and seemed confident in her potential to reach the highest stages of spiritual life. However, the sources only demonstrate this hope; they do not indicate Margaret ever reached that level. She is presented as Rolle's disciple in a hierarchical relationship.

I would argue, then, that while instruction-friendship between men and women had the potential to be holy and just, it was not the ultimate form of friendship Rolle was looking for. As long as the women he instructed remained at a lower level of spiritual life, they were disciple-friends whom he was supposed to instruct and edify, but the best human friendship was only possible between the chosen of God who had experienced spiritual gifts and turned from worldly love completely. It seems that Rolle's personal motivation for instruction-friendship

was this: to edify a disciple and turn her into one of the *perfecti* so that Rolle might finally have a friend who equalled him in the love of God.

Interestingly, Rolle's version of holy friendship as spiritual instruction did not involve a mutual search for God (like Augustine) or a progress from loving one's neighbours to loving God (like Aelred); mortal friendship was not a springboard to divine friendship. Instead, one had to first become a friend of God and by consequence immune to worldly temptations in order to practice human friendship safely. Only then could the holy man reach out to others and form bonds of instruction-friendship to edify the disciple-friend to the level of the teacher-friend. Rolle's theory of friendship had much in common with Christian tradition, so it is significant that when the distinct logic of his model breaks with tradition, it turns out to correspond so well with his personal motives and historical circumstance. As for Rolle's place in the history of medieval thought, his notable achievement was to combine traditional theory of spiritual friendship with the practice of spiritual instruction, which led him to defend relationships between men and women – by no means unprecedented in themselves – in the language of holy friendship.

The thesis explored the formulation and application of as well as the motivation for Rolle's theory of friendship in general and its mixed-gender variant specifically. The result is a nuanced picture of Rolle's thought that defies easy generalisations. On the one hand, he defended the spiritual potential of women and offered a model of holy friendship between the sexes. On the other hand, the model presupposed woman's essential inferiority, and he based the attainment of holy life on the scornful dismissal of the debauched woman who represented everything worldly. He had a genuine interest in instructing women and many of his arguments appear to be based on personal experience, but his extensive writings on the topic are largely motivated by apology and self-legitimation. Rolle's confident declaration of holiness and the safe purity of his relationships is underlain by the fundamental insecurity of his unofficial and irregular position; despite his best efforts, it was always possible to suspect whether the disciples he claimed to instruct justly and in purity were, after all, just friends.

Apart from its contribution to Rolle scholarship – most importantly, the argument that friendship and instruction cannot be treated separately in his works – the thesis also offers a perspective on the norms of late medieval English society

and on the possibilities and needs of individuals to justify their behaviour. The fact that Rolle was criticised for and had to explain his association with women testifies to a norm about appropriate interaction between the sexes. That is hardly surprising, but it is interesting that a different standard seems to have applied when holy people were under scrutiny: Rolle could defend himself and the women he associated with by appealing to their holiness as chaste, devout contemplatives. It did not appear to be against hagiographical convention for the *Officium* to depict a very intimate encounter between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby, either – a dead would-be saint did not have to worry about criticism the way a living, somewhat unusual hermit did.

The argument that Rolle wrote as he did about friendship because his unique circumstances made it possible and necessary invites comparison to other medieval authors and opens the possibility of a similar interpretation of their work. If Rolle's views are partly explained by his lack of official backing or a clear contemporary reference group, his conflicts with patrons and other critics as well as the fact of his ministry to women, it would be interesting to compare the views of, say, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Aelred of Rievaulx, Henry Suso and Walter Hilton to see if their arguments about friendship correlate in some way with their different circumstances. If there is a lesson to be learnt from Rolle's case, it is that a phenomenon as long written-about, morally charged and continuously relevant as friendship cannot be explained without reference both to the social context and contemporary problems behind the sources studied and to the spiritual, intellectual and literary tradition which sets the parameters and provides the models for the discourse – not to forget the motives of the individuals for whom the context and its parameters are, essentially, life.

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