

Ancrene Wisse Preface: content

Ancrene Wisse, a Middle English 'rule' or 'guide' for female recluses, was composed in the West Midlands in the early thirteenth century. There is still no scholarly consensus on its exact date, localization, authorship, or audience, but it was most probably originally composed in the late 1220s for three well-born sisters who had entered the anchor-house directly from the world; the version in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, includes revisions addressing a larger group of anchoresses, 'twenty now or more', and it was also adapted for other audiences, including male and female religious and a broader lay audience.

It is a carefully-structured work, divided into the Preface edited here and eight parts (called by the author *distinctiones*). The first, which deals with the anchoresses' devotional routine, and the eighth, which covers their remaining outward observances, constitute the 'Outer Rule'. The remaining *distinctiones*, which deal with the custody of the senses, the nature of the solitary life, the Seven Deadly Sins and their remedies, confession, penance, and the love of God, constitute the 'Inner Rule', and offer general spiritual guidance as well as specific advice on the anchoritic life.

The Preface to *Ancrene Wisse* shows the influence of the Preface to the early Dominican regulations, which itself was taken over from the earlier regulations of the Premonstratensian canons. It does not simply base itself on this model, however, but addresses and in some respects questions the assumptions it embodies, emphasizing that 'true religion' should not be identified only with the cloistered life.

This edition offers a corrected form of the text of the Preface in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, but also draws on the evidence of the manuscripts as a whole to place it within the broader history of the development of the work.