

Reading Images of Reading

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In medieval scenes of the Annunciation (plate 1), Mary reads the text traditionally identified as that portion of Isaiah predicting the birth of the Messiah as the angel announces the coming of Christ.¹ The image becomes the prototype, the visual association, that in the later Middle Ages colours all other images of reading and that visualizes the act of reading as primarily meditative and prophetic, a holy activity that has urgent and undeniable connection with the plot about to unfold, the angel announcing Christ's conception. We know what follows, and it is interesting to note that very few books and fewer readers are shown in subsequent scenes of Christ's life and passion; action takes precedence over contemplation, though on the periphery patrons sometimes read or observe the holy scenes through the medium of the page.

This essay will explore connections between reading and vision, especially prophetic vision, in late medieval miniatures and prints, looking at examples of historical readers, patrons as readers, and saintly readers, in order to address several questions: how was reading, essentially a subjective experience, represented in the later Middle Ages? What is the function of the book or text in the representation of reading? Can we learn something of the medieval experience of reading from visual representation?

We know, because they tell us, that the writers Augustine, Petrarch, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan were enthusiastic readers, though there are few surviving pictures that show these authors in the physical act of reading. Augustine, Petrarch, and Chaucer are sometimes represented holding books. In the famous frontispiece of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 61, Chaucer speaks, bookless, from a pulpit to a courtly audience, presumably about Troilus and his double sorrow. The opening initial of British Library Lansdowne MS 851 (plate 2) contains the only early manuscript portrait of Chaucer holding an open book, which he seems to glance at rather than read. This indirection of a reader's gaze in relation to an opened book, which is found elsewhere, is worth further examination. The better-known Hoccleve

¹ Isaiah 7:14–15: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. . . . He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse evil and choose the good'. For centuries the Hebrew word '*almab*' has been translated 'virgin' and this passage read as a Messianic prophecy about Jesus and his mother. Though most scholars now agree that the word means 'maiden', or 'young woman', the church continues to apply the verse to Mary and Jesus. Mary began to be shown with a book at the Annunciation from the late fourteenth century.

portraits of Chaucer and the portrait of Chaucer as pilgrim in the Ellesmere miniature show him more conventionally with his pen case, or inkhorn, and a rosary. Later, a closed book replaces the rosary in Chaucer portraits made by Protestants, as Helen Cooper recently noticed, a propagandistic prop in the recasting of the first English poet as religious reformer.²

In manuscript miniatures and woodcuts, Christine is often shown with books, though she rarely appears to be reading them. The famous miniature at the start of BL Harley MS 4431 shows Christine presenting her book to Queen Isabel of France, a book subsequently owned by Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, and later by Louis de Bruges, Lord of Gruuthuse. In this case, the book is a gift, the action taken that of great artist presenting her work to royal patron.³ The manuscript examples of Christine reading tend to occur in copies of the *Moral Proverbs*, with Christine shown seated at a desk before an open book, instructing her son or sometimes a group of gentlemen from the text at hand.⁴ On the verso of the title page of the *Boke of the cyte of ladies* (plate 3), printed in London by Henry Pepwell on 26 October 1521, is a woodcut portrait of Christine, made specifically for the volume, that recurs at the start of each of the three books of the text. Christine is shown distracted from the open book on the desk before her, her hand marking the place at which she has been interrupted. The cupboards and shelves beside her desk are stacked with books in a rather disorganized way, after the medieval fashion. Her head turns toward the Three Virtues who process at left, carrying their attributes. As in the Annunciation, here reading conjures up vision, the interior dialogues of Christine with the Three Virtues inspired in this case, rather than prophesied, by her reading of the book.⁵

² H. Cooper, 'Chaucerian representation I: mimesis', talk presented at *Celebrating Chaucer in 2000: His World, His Work, His Legacy*, the Twenty-Seventh Annual Sewanee Mediaeval Colloquium, University of the South. For Chaucer portraits, D. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography*, Cambridge 1992, App. I, and refs given there; E. Salter, 'The "Troilus Frontispiece"', in *Troilus and Criseyde: A Facsimile of Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61*, introd. M.B. Parkes and E. Salter, Cambridge 1978, pp. 15–23; A.T. Gaylord, R.K. Emmerson and B. Bowden in M. Stevens and D. Woodward, eds, *The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*, San Marino 1995. Corpus Christi MS 61, f. 1v: F. Riddy, ed., *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, Woodbridge 2000, between pp. 56 and 57.

³ Illustrated *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. L. Smith and J.H.M. Taylor, London 1996, on *Medieval Women*, E. Power, Cambridge 1975; *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's Cité des Dames*, M. Quilligan, Ithaca 1991, fig. 36.

⁴ Harley MS 4431, ff. 261v and 259v.

⁵ E. Hodnett, *English Woodcuts 1480–1535*, Oxford 1973, no. 2284, fig. 231. Woodcuts in *The boke of the cyte of ladies*, STC 7271: M. Driver, 'Christine de Pisan and Robert Wyer: the .C. Hystories of Troye, or L'Epistre d'Othea Englished', *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 1997, pp. 125, 136–37. The random placement of books was apparently typical practice: J. Updike, 'Groaning Shelves', *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1999, p. 107: 'books were propped on tilted surfaces like modern music stands or lecterns. Woodcut representations of fifteenth-century scholars at work show random book dispersal over all available surfaces'.

In fifteenth-century depictions, Mary is typically shown reading at Anne's knee, at the Annunciation, and at Pentecost. There are also charming paintings of Mary teaching the Infant Jesus to read or of the Christ Child (plate 4) seeming to toy idly with the pages of a book his mother is reading. Most late medieval illuminations and prints show the reading process as silent rather than oral, the holy mothers Mary and Anne reading silently along with their precocious children. Earlier medieval representations might include speech scrolls or captions, along with specific gestures, to indicate that speech was occurring. Certainly visual representation of subvocalized reading would be difficult to accomplish. Or perhaps, by the late fifteenth century, devotional and religious reading had become increasingly silent, as Paul Saenger has argued, silent reading encouraging intense private devotional practice.⁶ Malcolm Parkes has found evidence that such practice occurred even earlier, by the twelfth century: monastic *lectio* was 'a spiritual exercise which involved steady reading to oneself, interspersed by prayer and pausing for rumination on the text as a basis for *meditatio*'.⁷ And there are other, even earlier examples of silent readers (such as St Ambrose, whose reading was described this way by Augustine: 'When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart explored the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still . . . we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud'), though these are usually cited as exceptions rather than the rule.⁸ Silent reading seems to have been codified fairly early on, however, witness *The Rule of St Benedict*, chapter 48: 'After the sixth hour, having left the table, let them rest on their beds in perfect silence; or if anyone wishes to read by himself, let him read so as not to disturb the others'.⁹ Reading in the art of the later Middle Ages is, for the most part, shown as silent, the readers portrayed as intensely concentrated and still, engaged in the moment. Does this represent the limitations of the visual medium? Or is this perhaps the influence of the visual medium on actual later reading practice?

How to translate the internal, subjective action of reading into visual representation? Shown reading as an infant with his mother, the adult Jesus is later portrayed holding up the Book of Judgment or the Book of Life or the Scriptures, signifying a multiplicity of metaphors (plate 5). In Book XIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine examines these metaphors, first imagining the sky

⁶ P. Saenger, 'Silent reading: its impact on late medieval script and society', *Viator*, vol. 13 (1982), pp. 367-414; the same, 'Books of hours and the reading habits of the later Middle Ages', in R. Chartier, ed., *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, trans. L. G. Cochrane, Cambridge 1989, pp. 141-173; the same, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, Stanford, CA, 1997.

⁷ M.B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts*, London 1991, p. 35.

⁸ St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth 1961, p.114.

⁹ M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto 1962, p. 93.

as the Scriptures: 'who but you, our God, made for us the firmament, that is, our heavenly shield, the authority of your divine Scriptures?' The sky becomes a vellum scroll with God's Word inscribed upon it: 'For we are told that the sky shall be folded up like a scroll, . . . spread out like a canopy of skins above us . . . these heavens are your Book . . . (and) in your Book we read your unchallengeable decrees . . . [in] this firmament of Scripture'. Augustine then identifies Christ himself as the embodiment of the Word. With revelation, 'The scroll shall be folded and the mortal things over which it was spread shall fade away, . . . but your Word stands forever'.¹⁰ A prefatory illumination in a Dutch *Life of Christ*, made *circa* 1470, a manuscript now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, shows Christ holding an open book, standing on an orb, the book simultaneously signifying the Scriptures, the Word, and Christ himself.¹¹

The identification of Christ with the written text becomes increasingly commonplace in devotional literature of the fourteenth century. In the tract titled 'The Chartre of Heuene', the anonymous author of *The Pore Caitif* describes Christ's body as 'the bulle of euerlasting pardon', his sinless body stretched upon the cross like vellum on its frame by the parchment maker. Based on the format of a medieval land grant, the document is sealed as well with the body of Christ: 'The printe of this seel is the shap of oure Lord Ihesu hanginge for oure synne on the cros, as we moun se bi the ymage of the crucifix'.¹² Another fourteenth-century author, Richard Rolle of Hampole, writes in his *Meditations on the Passion* that the body of Jesus is a book on which the sacred text is written in Christ's blood: 'swet Jhesu, thy body is lyke a boke written al with rede ynke . . . Now, swete Jhesu, graunt me to rede upon thy boke, and somwhate to undrestonde thy swetnes of that writynge, . . . let me upon this boke study at my matyns and hours and evynsonge and complyne'. Writing recently on the Neville of Hornby Hours, Kathryn A. Smith has made a similar analogy: 'Christ's body is like parchment, or like the very book the reader is holding, and thus, contemplating the body of Christ Crucified is like the penitential act of devotional reading itself'.¹³ In the printed English indulgence (plate 6), produced in the sixteenth century, Christ stands wounded before us, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, visual symbols to be

¹⁰ St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Pine-Coffin, pp. 321, 322–23.

¹¹ MS 25, the ms. has female ownership marks, M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge 1895, pp. 60–61.

¹² BL MS Harley 2336, ff. 86, 88; the *Caitif*: e.g. M.T. Brady, 'The Pore Caitif: an introductory study', *Traditio*, vol. 10 (1954), pp. 529–48.

¹³ K.A. Smith, 'The Neville of Hornby Hours and the design of literate devotion', *Art Bulletin*, March 1999, pp. 81–82, cites a late fourteenth-century ms. of the sermons of Odo of Cheriton (1180/90–1247) that compares the body of Christ to a primer: 'Just as the child's ABC prepares the way to every further branch of study, just so Christ's Passion opens up the way to Paradise, where all knowledge will be made perfect. . . . The study of Christ Crucified is called the Book of Life'.

read with the text beneath: 'O man vnkynde/Bere in thy mynde/My paines smerte/And thu shalt fynde/Me true and kynde/Lo, here my herte'.¹⁴ Christ's wounded body is the anatomized text, the surrounding *arma christi* images visual shorthand for the events of the Passion, an image that retained its power over hundreds of years.

In many medieval illuminations, the patron of the book is shown witnessing the holy scene, staring away from the holy text at the blessed vision. In the Beaufort Hours, illuminated *circa* 1401 (plate 7), husband and wife, kneeling before open books, witness the Annunciation. The angel speaks to Mary, indicated by a scroll; the others are silent. Mary's bible is apparently open to the same page as the books of the human witnesses. But no one is actually looking at the text at hand. What kind of reading is represented here?¹⁵

In *The Study of the Bible in Middle Ages*, Beryl Smalley cites an apt analogy between the process of reading and prayer shown in images in like these, and the 'pierced technique' in Northern art: 'It is as though we were invited to focus our eyes not on the physical surface of the object, but on infinity as seen through the lattice. . . . We are invited to look not at the text, but through it'.¹⁶ The book serves as a conduit to transcendent vision, and there is also the suggestion that the prayer or Bible text has been internalized. Michael Baxandall has pointed out that 'The [medieval] painter was a professional visualizer of the holy stories. . . . To adapt a theological distinction, the painter's were exterior visualizations, the public's interior visualizations'. The painter was to complement 'the beholder's interior vision'. Images like these imply that reading, 'along with visualization of the central episodes of the lives of Christ and Mary', can lead the pious to a direct and personal encounter with the Divine.¹⁷

Following Augustine, Jerome, and others, the fourteenth-century mystic Walter Hilton, writing in *The Scale of Perfection*, described revelation as occurring for those who studied scripture. Christ 'alone has the key of knowledge in his keeping, as Holy Scripture says, and he himself is the key, and he lets in whom he will through the inspiration of his grace, without breaking the seal. Jesus does this . . . for those who are specially inspired to seek truth in holy scripture, with great devotion in prayer preceded by great diligence in study'. The work

¹⁴ Image of Pity: Hodnett, *English Woodcuts*, no. 2061; STC 3276. M. Driver, 'Ideas of order: Wynkyn de Worde and the title page', in *Texts and Their Contexts: Papers from the Early Book Society*, ed. J. Scattergood and J. Boffey, Dublin 1997, pp. 101–102, 138, pl. 24; related texts in C. Brown and R.H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse*, New York 1943, items 2504, 2507.

¹⁵ Beaufort Hours, BL MS Royal 2 A xviii: K.L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490. A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles VI*, London 1996, no. 37.

¹⁶ B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame 1964, p. 2, quoting R. Hinks, *Carolingian Art*, London 1935, pp. 82–83.

¹⁷ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1988, pp. 45, 47.

of contemplation, according to Hilton, was 'to see Jesus in the scriptures after the opening of the spiritual eye'.¹⁸ Reading, meditation, and prayer were traditional means to the contemplation of the holy: an anonymous woman in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 365, an Hours of the Virgin for the use of Paris made in the early sixteenth century (plate 8), kneels before her open prayer book, her hands busy with her rosary, but her vision seems internally focused, looking inward.¹⁹ In Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.11.20 (plate 9), a Sarum Hours of the Virgin made *circa* 1460, a praying nun kneels beside an open book as the Child Jesus beckons to her, directing her attention to the open book on Mary's lap, but notice that her eyes are closed.²⁰ Here Scripture is shown internalized, contemplated, rather than actively read.

The title cut in *The Orcharde of Syon* (plate 10), the English translation of the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena commissioned by Sir Richard Sutton, steward of the Bridgettine house of Syon, and printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1519, shows St. Catherine with her characteristic crown of thorns, displaying the stigmata and holding her attribute, the heart. Dressed in the Mantellate habit of the Dominican tertiaries, she kneels before an open book at a canopied prie-dieu as God the Father blesses her and a dove descends from above; the page has been printed in red and black, an early and successful experiment with two-color printing. The words *Ecce ancilla domini* appear, printed in red in a banderole above the woodcut, echoing the words of Mary at the Annunciation: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord'. The saint's gaze is directed upward in rapt attention. Then follows a remarkable series of eight woodcuts illustrating Catherine's visions, where, in virtually every scene, she is shown present before an open book, the gateway to vision, lifting her hands in a gesture of prayer as the divinely inspired images unfold around her, a static figure reading her book in a densely populated, supernaturally charged space.²¹

Noblewomen, who consciously modelled themselves on female saints or the Virgin, are typically shown with open books at a holy scene. Note, for example, the kneeling woman with her open book of hours (plate 11), mirroring Mary's Bible, in the center panel of Hans Memling's *Donne triptych*, made most probably in 1477 for Sir John Donne of Kidwelly, the English ambassador to Burgundy. Donne was in Flanders in 1468 for the marriage of Margaret of York to Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, and again in 1477, when this painting was probably made. The kneeling woman is thought to be his daughter, presented, along with her father, by their patron saints to an enthroned Mary,

¹⁸ W. Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, trans. J. P. H. Clark and R. Dorward, New York 1991, pp. 295, 296.

¹⁹ Described in the unpublished Morgan reading room catalogue.

²⁰ M.R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge I*, Cambridge 1900, p. 364.

²¹ STC 4815; Hodnett, *English Woodcuts*, nos 862, 863–69, fig. 66.

who is shown concentrated on her book, its pages ruffled by the active Christ Child.²²

The opening miniature of the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, made about 1440, shows Catherine kneeling at the Virgin's right before an open book. Her verbal prayer is here visualized in the speech scroll above: '*O mater dei memento me*' (O Mother of God, remember me). Catherine looks up at the Virgin, who holds an ink well into which the infant Jesus dips a pen. An illegible scroll (which may mirror the prayer spoken by Catherine) is draped across the lap of the Christ Child. Over the elbow of the Virgin hangs an empty scroll case or pen case.²³ By employing the attributes of reading and writing, the artist playfully recalls the words of Origen, 'The Logos was incarnate in the flesh of the holy text', using the metaphor of Christ as Book, 'The Word . . . incarnate in Scripture', which, according to Claudius of Turin, 'has a body and soul. The body is the words of the sacred text, the "letter" and literal meaning; the soul is the spiritual sense'.²⁴ The reading process that came to be known as *lectio divina*, prayerful, serious study of Scripture and the Fathers, was inspired by Augustine, who defined *studiosus* as 'anyone who pursues God with intensity', and by Jerome, who is often portrayed in prayer books, bibles, and paintings of the later Middle Ages.²⁵

The Church Father St Jerome, dressed anachronistically as a cardinal, is often shown in medieval representations at his desk, in a study before a book cabinet. The book, sign of Jerome's *auctoritas*, is almost as much an attribute as his lion. The *Golden Legend* describes Jerome as working on his translation of the Vulgate 'For fifty-five years and six months'. Isidore, writing in his *Etymologies*, says 'Jerome was expert in three languages, and his interpretation is preferred to those of others because he is both closer to the letter and clearer in his perception of the meaning'. Severus, a disciple of St Martin and a contemporary of Jerome, said: 'he was so learned, not only in Latin and Greek but also in Hebrew letters, that no one dares to compare himself with him in any branch of knowledge . . . He is totally absorbed in study, totally in

²² F. Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven 1993, p. 456. C. Weightman, *Margaret of York: Duchess of Burgundy 1446–1506*, New York 1989, pp. 108, 209. Compare the woman kneeling at a prie-dieu in *Portrait of a Female Donor* by Petrus Christus, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Samuel H. Kress Collection (M.W. Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus: Renaissance Master of Bruges*, New York 1994, p. 133). Her prayer book is open, but the woman stares out from the oak panel, her eyes lifted from the page and apparently transfixed by the now-missing holy scene which once appeared in a central panel.

²³ Illustrated J. Plummer, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, New York 1966, p. 1.

²⁴ Smalley, *Study*, pp. 1, 11–12, on Noah's Ark, Origen says 'We must make our hearts into the ark or cupboard for the books of the Bible'.

²⁵ Discussion of *lectio divina*: *ibid.*, pp. 27–196; B. Stock, *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text*, Philadelphia 2001.

books ... he is always either reading or writing'. For St Jerome, 'to read without also writing' was 'to sleep'.²⁶

Jerome can be found writing or reading at his desk in illuminations of the Psalter of St Jerome, an added text typically found in Books of Hours of the fifteenth century, as he is, for example, in the Berkeley Hours, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS Glazier G.9 (plate 12), a manuscript produced in southern England for Sarum use, 1440–1450, with illuminations by the Master of Sir John Fastolf.²⁷ Note that here, as in the other depictions of Jerome, his attention is fully fixed on his text, despite the importunities of the wounded lion. In the woodcut from William Caxton's translation of the *Vitas Patrum* (plate 13), however, Jerome's gaze is upward, directed at the vision conjured by the open book, in this case 'a multitude of men and women saints without nimboes'. These are the saints whose lives are recounted in the book propped open on the lectern, the *Vitas Patrum*, or Lives of the Fathers, a work ascribed to Jerome in the Middle Ages and also the work in which this picture repeatedly appears, the English translation from the French having been made by William Caxton, who 'fynysshed it at the laste daye of his lyff', and printed by Wynken de Worde in 1495.²⁸ Here vision, reading, writing, and seeing coincide, the woodcut conjuring the conjunction of word and image that Richard de Fournival, chancellor of the cathedral of Amiens, so succinctly described in the 1250s: 'when one hears a story read aloud, listening to the events one sees them in the present ... And when you read, this writing with its *peinture* [picture] and *parole* [word] will make me present to your memory, even when I am not physically before you'.²⁹ As in the other examples we have seen, the book becomes the passage to vision, to making saints, in this case, present to memory. But is there yet another way that reading is perhaps more actively portrayed and described?

²⁶ Jerome led a penitential life in the desert for four years, then went to Bethlehem where 'He reread his own books, which he had kept safely stowed away, and other books as well', Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. W. G. Ryan, Princeton 1993, vol. 2, pp. 213, 215; Smalley, *Study*, pp. 21, 29: St. Jerome 'was more than a channel for Greek learning. He followed Origen's example in studying Hebrew and consulting Jews ... As a Hebrew scholar and humanist he brought the Bible closer to the Latin-speaking world'.

²⁷ R.S. Wiecek, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*, New York 1997, p. 93; Scott, *Gothic Manuscripts*, no. 108; the same, 'Two sequences of dated illuminated manuscripts made in Oxford 1450–64', in *Books and Collectors 1200–1700: Essays Presented to Andrew Watson*, ed. J.P. Carley and C.G.C. Tite, London 1997, p. 69 n. 45, where she dates the ms. to c. 1460.

²⁸ STC 14507; Hodnett, *English Woodcuts*, no. 800, fig. 22; G. Painter, *William Caxton: A Biography*, New York 1977, p. 187 n.1; M. Driver, 'The illustrated de Worde' in *Studies in Iconography*, Medieval Institute Publications, 17 (1996), p. 354.

²⁹ A. Manguel, *A History of Reading*, New York 1997, p. 59; M.J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 223–24; M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*, Oxford 1993, pp. 283–84.

In *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel describes medieval practice during the Feast of Shavuot, when Moses received the Torah from God. A young boy wrapped in a prayer shawl would be placed in the lap of the teacher. The boy was then shown 'a slate on which were written the Hebrew alphabet, a passage from the Scriptures and the words "May the Torah be your occupation". The teacher read out every word and the child repeated it. Then the slate was covered with honey and the child licked it, thereby bodily assimilating the holy words. Also, biblical verses were written on peeled hard-boiled eggs and on honey cakes, which the child would eat after reading the verses out loud to the teacher'.³⁰ This practice echoes the experience of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, who had a vision of fire in which he saw 'the likeness of the glory of the Lord' ordering him to speak to the rebellious children of Israel: 'Open thy mouth, and eat what I give you . . . Eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it'. 'Then I ate it', Ezekiel tells us, 'and it was in my mouth sweet as honey'.³¹

Ezekiel's vision foreshadows John's as he records his apocalyptic vision on Patmos. He encounters a 'mighty angel . . . clothed with a cloud', with a rainbow upon his head, a face like the sun, and 'feet as pillars of fire'. The angel has in his hand an open book. A heavenly voice commands John to 'go and take the little book'. The angel says, 'take it and eat it up; and it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey'. John does so, 'and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter'. The angel then says: 'Thou must prophesy again before many peoples and nations and tongues and kings'.³²

Images of John's bibliophagia, or book eating, occur as a central scene in medieval Apocalypse illustrations, the most famous of which are arguably those appearing in an Apocalypse manuscript made *circa* 1240 for Queen Eleonore, wife of Henry III (Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.16.2),³³ and in the Cloisters Apocalypse, a fourteenth-century manuscript now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.³⁴ One particularly spectacular example occurs in a Flemish manuscript of 1470 (plate 14) attributed to the Master of Mary of Burgundy,

³⁰ Manguel, *History*, p. 71.

³¹ Ezekiel 2: 9–10. Manguel, *History*, p. 171. The image of Ezekiel's bibliophagia is still powerful and current: J.W. Earl, 'Reading for Sheer Pleasure – Remember That?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 April 2000, p. B9, describes reading during a sabbatical 'everything I hadn't gotten to in school. When I got up from my desk at night, often at 2 or 3 in the morning, I felt . . . electric. I felt like Ezekiel, when God said, "Mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this book; fill your stomach with it". And I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey'.

³² Revelation 10: 1–2, 8–11; M. Driver, '"Sweet as honey": eating a book?', *American Book Collector*, vol. 7 (1986), pp. 3–10.

³³ P.H. Breiger, *The Trinity College Apocalypse*, facsimile, London 1967.

³⁴ *The Cloisters Apocalypse: An Early Fourteenth-Century Manuscript in Facsimile*, ed. F. Deuchler, J.M. Hoffeld and H. Nickel, New York 1971.

now in the Pierpont Morgan Library.³⁵ The eating and digesting of the Word might seem isolated, odd, the peculiar action of one Old Testament prophet and another particular saint were it not for a prevalent verbal metaphor that consistently accompanies medieval discussions of reading.

The term *ruminatio*, literally 'chewing cud' and figuratively construed to mean meditation, may be most familiar to us from the story of Caedmon, whom Bede describes as learning by listening: 'He recalled everything that he was able to learn by listening, and ruminating it over in his mind like a clean beast that chews the cud, he converted it into the sweetest song to be heard'.³⁶ But the term is applied to reading as well. St. Caesarius of Arles, in his rule for nuns, set aside two hours for private reading a day and specified that the nuns read aloud during spinning. Even when doing other work, the nuns were 'always to ruminate something from Holy Scripture'.³⁷ Dom Jean Leclercq, in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, describes Peter the Venerable praising a monk who prayed: 'Without resting, his mouth ruminated the sacred words'. Leclercq continues: 'To meditate is to attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavor. It means, as St Augustine, St Gregory, . . . and others say in an untranslatable expression, to taste it with the *palatum cordis* (palate of the heart) or in *ore cordis* (the mouth of the heart)'. All this activity is, necessarily, a prayer; the *lectio divina* is a prayerful reading. Thus, the Cistercian Arnoul of Boheriss, will give this advice: "When he reads, let him seek for savor, not science. The Holy Scripture is the well of Jacob from which the waters are drawn which will be poured out later in prayer. Thus there will be no need to go to the oratory to begin to pray; but in reading itself, means will be found for prayer and contemplation".³⁸ The book becomes the prayer house, the oratory, furnishing food for later meditation.

Gertrude the Great of Helfta, a thirteenth-century visionary who was particularly (and unusually) adept in reading and writing Latin, is described in *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* as 'a student of theology [who] tirelessly ruminated on all the books of the Bible . . . The basket of her heart she packed to the very top with the more useful, and honey-sweet, texts of Holy Scripture, so that she always had at hand an instructive and holy quotation'. To Gertrude, Scripture was 'honeycomb in the mouth, harmonious music in the ear, and

³⁵ M. 484, a fifteenth-century French Apocalypse, written by David Aubert and illuminated in Flanders for Margaret of York, T. Kren and R.S. Wieck, *The Visions of Tondal from the Library of Margaret of York*, Malibu 1990, p. 15. Also Weightman, *Margaret*, pp. 187-217; N. Morgan, 'Texts of devotion and religious instruction associated with Margaret of York', in *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion, and the Visions of Tondal*, ed. T. Kren, Malibu, CA, 1992, pp. 42, 65-66, 70, 73 n. 41.

³⁶ R. Fowler, *Old English Prose and Verse: An Annotated Selection*, London 1966, p. 21.

³⁷ Smalley, *Study*, p. 29.

³⁸ Quoted in McLuhan, *Galaxy*, p. 90.

spiritual joy in the heart'.³⁹ Walter Hilton says that 'holy scripture is vital food, and nourishment full of delight. It tastes very sweet when it is well chewed by spiritual understanding, because in it is hidden the spirit of life, which quickens all the powers of the soul and fills them full of the sweetness of heavenly savor and spiritual delight'. Ingesting the book, with its obvious eucharistic symbolism, represents the internalizing of the word by God's faithful.⁴⁰

Using the model of the Annunciation, in which Mary's reading is shown as exemplary, meditative, and prophetic, we have seen books linked with vision, sometimes prophetic vision, in late medieval art, noting the indirection of the reader's gaze in relation to the open book, a sign of *meditatio* (or perhaps *ruminatio*). Reading is shown as silent in most of these images, and the reader's attention is distracted from the text at hand to the vision beyond, whether we consider Christine's secular example or the many appearances of the Virgin to reader/patrons, particularly to women with books. We have also observed some of the complexities of visualizing metaphors of reading – from images of Christ as the Word to John's eucharistic book eating. Finally, we have seen how the text or book itself might function as a gateway to heaven, the portal through which visions unfold.

³⁹ *Gertrud the Great of Helfta. The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness: Books One and Two*, trans. A. Barratt, Kalamazoo, MI, 1991, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Hilton, *Scale*, trans. Clark and Dorward, p. 294.



Plate 1. The Merode Altarpiece. Robert Campin (Master of Flemalle). Fifteenth century. The Cloisters Collection, 1956 (56.70). By permission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Plate 2. *The Canterbury Tales*. British Library MS Lansdowne 851, f. 2. Fifteenth century. By kind permission of The British Library, London.

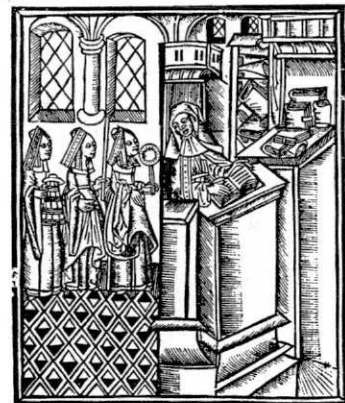


Plate 3. Christine de Pizan, *Here bygynneth the booke of the cyte of ladyes*, trans. B. Anslay, London, Henry Pepwell, 26 October 1521. The British Library. By kind permission of The British Library, London.



Plate 4. Saint Anne with the Virgin and the Christ Child.
Master of Frankfurt, 1511/1515. The National Gallery of Art.
By permission of The National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Plate 5. *Life of Christ*. Dutch, circa 1470. Fitzwilliam
Museum MS 25, f. 1. By permission of The Fitzwilliam
Museum, Cambridge.



Plate 6. The Image of Pity. William Bonde, *Treatyse for them that ben tymorouse* (1534?). The British Library. By kind permission of The British Library, London.



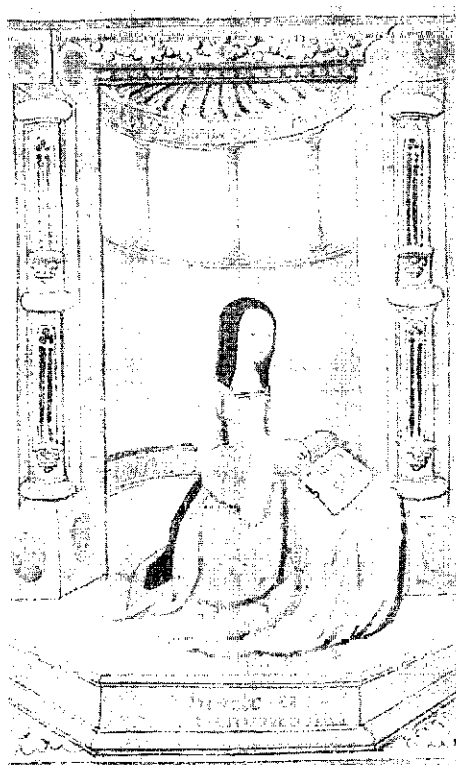


Plate 8. Woman donor. Hours of the Virgin for the use of Paris. Sixteenth century. Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 365, f. 15v (detail). By permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

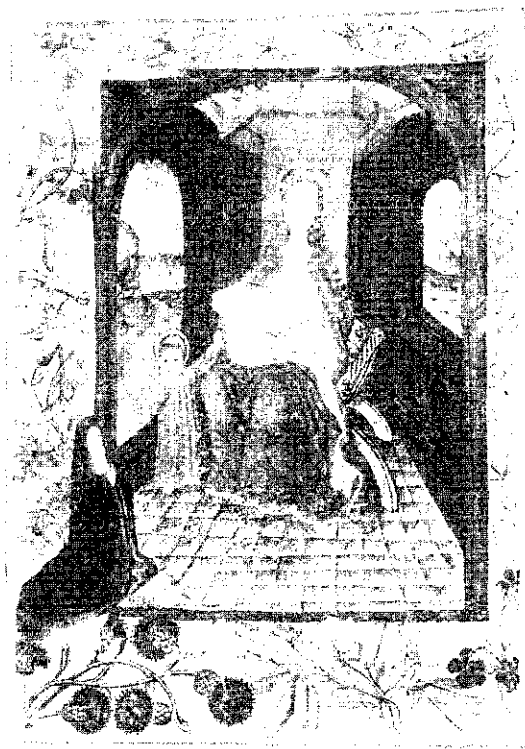


Plate 9. Nun praying. Hours of the Virgin for Sarum use, circa 1460? Trinity College MS B.11.20, f. 16v. By permission of The Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.



Plate 10. Title page. *The Orcharde of Syon*. London, Wynkyn de Worde, 1519. The New York Public Library. By permission of The New York Public Library, New York.



Plate 11 (above). The Donne Triptych (centre panel). Hans Memling. 1477. The National Gallery. By permission of The National Gallery, London.



Plate 12 (right). Berkeley Hours, Hours for Sarum use, 1440–50. Pierpont Morgan Library MS Glazier G. 9, f. 161. By permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

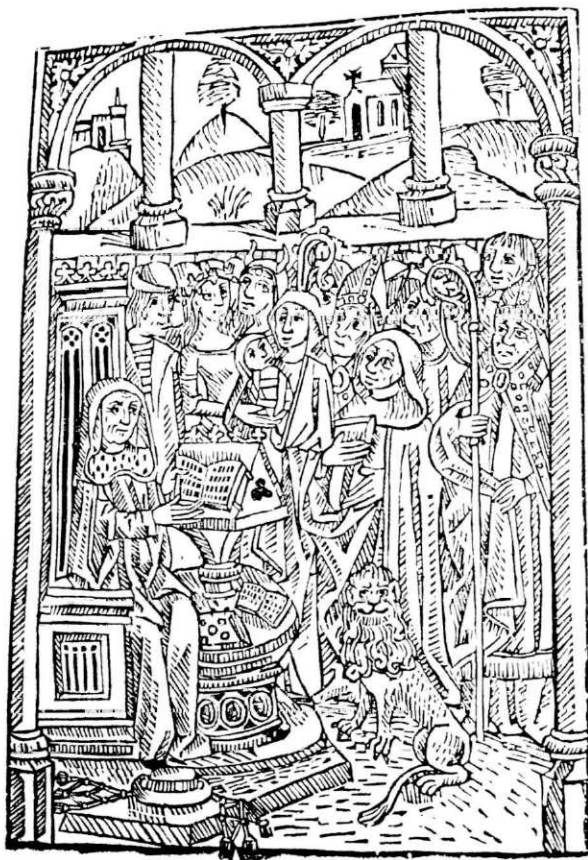


Plate 13. Jerome, *Vitas Patrum*, trans. William Caxton Westminster, Wynkyn de Worde, 1495. The Pierpont Morgan Library. By permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.



Plate 14. Apocalypse, written by David Aubert, illuminated by the Master of Mary of Burgundy. 1470. Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 484, f. 53. By permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.