

Reading and meditation in the Middle Ages: *Lectio divina* and books of hours

LAURA STERPONI

Abstract

This article offers a historical perspective on reading as a situated activity through an examination of the medieval devotional practice of reading the book of hours. My historical investigation opens with an analysis of key pedagogical treatises and religious essays popular in the Middle Ages, which provided instruction on reading, its sensori-motor enactment, its interpretive procedures, and its ultimate goal. These texts, which portray reading not as a self-contained and intrinsically motivating activity but rather as a necessary component of a broader spiritual project, offer precious clues about how medieval readers approached the reading activity, the ways they engaged with the book, and their expectations pertaining to the scope of the reading practice. In the second part of the article, the focus turns to the book of hours. We will leaf through folios of these devotional manuscripts and examine their format, semiotic configuration, and textual and visual content. This analysis will show how textual and illustrational features of the book of hours reflect and foster the ideology and practice of reading as meditative and prayerful activity.

Keywords: reading practice; religious community; sacred text; medieval Christian tradition; book of hours; lectio divina.

1. Introduction

This article offers a historical perspective on reading as a situated activity through an examination of the medieval devotional practice of reading the book of hours. Reading as a situated practice is ephemeral and dynamic; it is not entirely encoded in the text and leaves poor traces behind (de Certeau 1984). This conception constitutes the foundation as well as the challenge for any exploration of reading practices in

historical epochs far from ours (Cavallo and Chartier 1999). Historical investigations of reading practices are faced with the task of reconstructing the sociocultural contexts to which texts belonged: the institutional and more informal situations within which they were animated and apprehended, the mentalities and ideologies they illustrated and contributed to shaping. This article aims to shed light on the practice of reading the book of hours by considering who engaged in this practice, how the book of hours was read, and what the goal of such reading activity was.

Different dimensions—usually separate domains of inquiry, investigated by different research traditions—define the matrix of this historical investigation: analysis of texts, deciphered in their form and content—that is, their materiality, semiotic structure, genre, and theme. In line with the work of bibliographer Donald F. McKenzie (1986, 2002) and cultural historian Roger Chartier (1992, 1995), this study approaches texts as cultural artifacts and considers the material supports through which texts are made available for reading. Format, page layout, script, and the juxtaposition of script and images are integral parts of a text's meaning. It is in its material manifestation that a text's content is then considered.

Reading as a cultural practice is also intimately interrelated with local customs and dispositions pertaining to people's relationship with knowledge and tradition, the role of texts in the conservation and transmission of such cultural heritage, and in the specific case considered in this article, the role of texts in the communication between human beings and the Divine. A historical investigation must thus examine the conventions of reading, the norms that dictate the legitimate uses of texts, and the reading modalities for each community of readers.

This essay explores medieval ideas about reading as meditative experience and devotional practice. We begin by considering a few key pedagogical treatises and religious essays popular in the Middle Ages that provided instruction on reading: the sensori-motor and interpretive procedures as well as its ultimate significance. These texts offer precious clues about how medieval readers approached the reading activity, the ways they engaged with the book, and their expectations pertaining to the scope of the reading practice. The second part of the essay focuses on the book of hours. This type of manuscript is chosen from among the various kinds of medieval materials for moral reformation and spiritual growth because of its wide distribution and specific design for the laity. During the Middle Ages, no other manuscript was produced in greater quantity (Calkins 1983; de Hamel 1986; Harthan 1977).¹ According to Saenger (1985), books of hours in the fifteenth century were produced by

the tens of thousands, primarily in France, Italy, and the Low Countries; and de Hamel (1986) estimates that within the first 75 years from the invention of printing, more than seven hundred separate editions of books of hours were published. Sociological analyses of book ownership, estate inventories, and catalogues of library sales (e.g., AA.VV. 1981; Labarre 1971) offer further evidence of their wide production and distribution. Because of their popularity, books of hours have also been referred to as the medieval bestseller (Delaissé 1977; Kren et al. 1997). We will leaf through folios of these devotional manuscripts and examine their format, semiotic configuration, and textual and visual content. Specifically, it will be shown how textual and illustrational features of the book of hours reflect and foster the ideology and practice of reading as a meditative and prayerful activity.

2. Medieval reading instruction and *lectio divina*

Landmark historical studies of the Middle Ages have revealed that medieval culture was profoundly memorial and remained so even as the use and diffusion of books increased (Carruthers 1990; Lackner and Philip 1978; Yates 1966). One crucial reason for the unaltered primacy of memory is its fundamental role in the formation of moral virtue. In line with this general disposition, medieval ideology and habits of reading were profoundly linked with mnemonic activity (Carruthers 1990; Illich 1993). Reading was thought to allow the incorporation of the text into one's self, which would prelude the exercise of memory. The intimate bond between reading, memorizing, and moral growth is evident in medieval pedagogical essays and devotional literature.

First consider Hugh of Saint Victor's *Didascalicon*, an early twelfth-century text, acknowledged as the first book dedicated to the art of reading (Illich 1993; Lemoine 1991). Therein, reading is presented as a spiritual activity whereby readers can pursue God as wisdom. More specifically, for Hugh of Saint Victor reading is a crucial *remedial* practice that can allow humanity to recover closeness to God, lost because of Adam's sin. Reading as worship is closely linked with meditation:

- (1) (*Didascalicon*, Book III, Chapter 10, 92–93. English translation from Taylor 1961)

Meditatio principium sumit a lectione, nullis tamen stringitur regulis aut praeceptis lectionis. Delectatur enim quodam aperto decurrere spatio, ubi liberam contemplandae veritati aciem affigat [...] principium ergo doctrinae est in lectione, consummatio in meditatione.

‘Meditation takes its start from reading, but is bound by none of the rules or precepts of reading. Meditation delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth [...] The beginning of learning thus lies in reading but its consummation lies in meditation.’

Repeatedly in his treatise, Hugh emphasizes that reading is part of a spiritual project of personal betterment and religious apprehension. Outside such a teleological trajectory, reading loses its meaning and appears as a sterile technical exercise (*Didascalicon*, especially books III and VI).

The *Didascalicon* was written for novices, not uniquely for young monks but for the general population also. Hugh’s projected addressees can be easily identified in the treatise’s preface, in which the canon sketches his contemporary social and moral environment. Therein, Hugh blames those who allow *negotia* to distract them from learning, while advocating for the right to learn by those whose deprived economic conditions impede their dedication to this moral activity. The *Didascalicon* thus offers detailed instruction about the modes of engagement with sacred texts and the rules of ordered progress pertaining to them: rigorous memory training constitutes the foundation of the *ars legendi*. When approaching reading, students are expected to employ their memory skills to retain the details of the texts being accessed (*Didascalicon* III, 11). A literal apprehension of the text thus constitutes the first step of Hugh’s reading program, ‘[s]ince no doubt mystical grasp of Scriptural sense can be gained only if first its literal sense has been well established’ (*Didascalicon* VI, 10). Only once the student has *incorporated* the text—that is, learned it bodily (*corporaliter*)—can she explore its allegorical sense and then be enlightened through its contemplation.

A similar embedding of reading in a broader spiritual project is found in *Li livres des enfans Israël*, a text of moral and spiritual instruction contained in a fourteenth-century anthology of devotional treatises in French and Latin. The text introduces the lay reader to the practice of meditative reading, emphasizing its spiritual essence and its intimate link to devotion and reformation:

- (2) (*Li livres des enfans Israël*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 1802, fol. 201v; English translation from Huot 1996)
Trois manieres sont d’esperituel exercite: c’est leçons, meditations, et oroisons. Ces trios sont si conjointes que l’une ne puet valoir sans l’autre. Car leçons sans meditation tourne a negligence et a ociosité. Meditations sans leçon mainne en erreur. Et meditations sans oroison engender vanité. Et oroison sans meditation est sans lumiere et sans

fervour. Pour ce convient premiers le cuer enfourmer par leçon, et fermer par meditation, et puis refourmer par oroison.

‘There are three kinds of spiritual exercise: namely, reading, meditation and prayer. These three are so interconnected that one cannot be of value without the other. For reading without meditation turns to negligence and idleness. Meditation without reading leads to error. And meditation without prayer engenders vanity. And prayer without meditation is without light and fervor. Therefore, one must first inform the heart through reading, fortify it up through meditation and then reform it through prayer.’

In this formulation, reading is seen as the necessary foundation for further spiritual progress.² It is not an end in itself but a fundamental part of the overarching process of spiritual formation and devotion (Huot 1996).

The characterization of reading as a devotional activity and its close link with meditation and prayer is also manifest in the practice of *lectio divina*. Literally translated, *lectio divina* means ‘divine reading’. However, the Latin also has been rendered in English as ‘prayerful reading’ (Edsall 2000; Leclercq 1957), ‘spiritual reading’ (Peterson 2006), and ‘meditative reading’ (Carruthers 1990). *Lectio divina* has been a central activity of monastic life since the founding of Western monasticism (fifth century) to the late medieval period,³ when it also became popular among the laity.

Lectio divina was conceived of as a primary instrument for individual reformation, designed to progressively liberate the practitioner of vice, shape virtuous habits, and guide her to spiritual illumination.⁴ For example, on the opening page of the classic of monastic spirituality *Scala Claustralium*, the twelfth-century Carthusian Guigo II suggests that *lectio divina* constitutes a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven.⁵ As a devotional practice, *lectio divina* is thus more encompassing than textual reading; it is a spiritual *habitus* that applies not only to texts but also to individuals’ lives, the world, and history.

Lectio divina is a three-step practice that integrates reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and prayer (*oratio*) in one devotional activity (Casey 1996; Edsall 2000; Leclercq 1957). The *lectio* is an active reading—that is, first of all a sensori-motor activity: the book is held in the hands, and the words are pronounced aloud. For the medieval devout, central spiritual practices, such as reading and praying, are quintessentially carnal activities. In his commentary to Hugh’s *Didascalicon*, Illich (1993: 54) characterizes the medieval devout reader as someone who ‘understands the lines by moving to their beat, remembers them by

recapturing their rhythm, and thinks of them in terms of putting them into his mouth and chewing'. In another instructional text, the *De modo orandi*, Hugh of Saint Victor recommends conducting the private prayer as a vocal activity 'not to benefit God who knew the intimate thoughts of all but to stimulate the person praying to a higher state of devotion' (quoted in Saenger 1985). A similar emphasis on the central role and significant benefit of vocalization in devotional reading is found in the *Jardin des Nobles*, a vernacular treatise on theology, law, and history written for laymen by the Franciscan theologian Pierre des Gros in 1464 (Paris, B.N., MS fr. 193). Therein des Gros distinguishes three modes of prayer: first, silent prayer; second, vocal prayer without affect or attention; and third, mixed prayer, when vocal prayer is accompanied by attention and engagement. This third mode of praying, des Gros states, should be adopted for the canonical hours, when the devout would be reading from the book of hours. Indeed, it is to this mode of engagement with sacred texts that the Franciscan accords the greatest benefits:

- (3) (*Jardin des Nobles*, Paris, B.N., MS fr. 193, f. 346v; English translation by the author)

Et cette oroison de voix avec l'affection de cuer fait quatre biens. Le premier est qu'elle excite la devocion [...] Le second est congregacion de pensee et de attencion, car la pensee plus se unist quant la voix est avec la devocion car ansi que les mauvoises paroles distraient la bonne pensee, les bonnes le unissent et conioingnent a Dieu. Le tiers est entier service a Dieu, car raison est que l'ome serve a Dieu de tout ce qu'il a pris de Dieu. Puis qu'il a pris ame et corps, raison est que de ame par oroison de cuer et de corps par oraison de bouche il serve Dieu. Le quart est redundance car par telle oroison le devocion de l'ame redunde au corps car comme dit Ihesu Christ en l'evangile de l'abondance du cuer le bouche parle [Mt 12, 34].

'And this vocal heartfelt prayer produces four benefits. First, it prompts devotion [...] The second [benefit] is the congregation of thought and attention, as thought focuses better when the voice joins devotion since, because faulty words distract from good thought, the good [words] unite and bond one with God. The third is full service to God, as it is right that man serves God with all he has taken from God. Since he has taken soul and body, it is right that he serves God by soul through prayer and by heart and body through vocal prayer. The fourth is redundancy since, through such prayer, the devotion of soul resonates in the body as Jesus Christ has said in the Gospel: of the heart's abundance, the mouth speaks [Mt 12, 34].'

Thus the *lectio* encodes a multisensory appropriation of text as foundation for further modes of text apprehension. As in many other medieval spiritual practices, in *lectio divina*, the body is both rigorously regimented and amply exploited (Foucault 1984; Taylor 1994).

Meditatio follows *lectio*, as the process through which the words just seen and heard are fixed in the mind. Thus *meditatio* is quintessentially a memorizing practice. In Leclercq's (1957: 90) words, '*meditatio* consists in applying oneself with attention to this exercise in total memorization; it is, therefore, inseparable from the *lectio*. It is what inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul'. This process further illuminates the close intertwining of reading, memorizing, and embodiment in medieval devotion.

Lectio and *meditatio* prepare one for prayer (*oratio*), which is offered in response to the meditation about what has been read. In praying, the devout enjoys the sweetness of the interiorized texts, thereby attaining a better understanding of the Divine (see Guigo's words below). In summary, *lectio divina* was a complex teleological practice in which reading, meditation, and prayer, as exercises of memory and devotion, were intertwined.

In Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium*, *lectio divina* includes a fourth step, *contemplatio*, which is 'when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness' ('*mentis in Deum suspensae quaedam supra se elevatio eternae dulcedinis gaudia degustans*', Caput I) (Colledge and Walsh 1981):

- (4) (*Scala Claustralium*, Caput III; English translation from Colledge and Walsh 1981)

Beatae igitur vitae dulcedinem lectio inquirat, meditatio invenit, oratio postulat, contemplatio degustat. Lectio quasi solidum cibum ori apponit: meditatio masticat et frangit: oratio saporem acquirit: contemplatio est ipsa dulcedo quae jucundat et reficit.

'Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole in the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes.'

Other monastic writers who have discussed and taught *lectio divina* (e.g., St. Benedict, John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux) did not include contemplation as its final component. Rather, they considered contemplation to be the ultimate goal of the devotional practice of *lectio divina*, one that only few attain on earth and that will be eternally enjoyed in heaven.

Whether contemplation is included as the last step of the devotional practice or whether contemplation constitutes the scope of that practice, *lectio divina* projects and scaffolds a deep emotional involvement with text, one that is grounded in codified sensori-motor actions and is constructed through the exercise of memory and reflection on the text.

The practice of *lectio divina* has played a crucial role in Christian spirituality for centuries. It was a prominent part of the monastic routine: as monks returned to their cells after ritual offices or from their labors, they would read the Scriptures, writings of the Fathers of the Church, or other spiritual treatises, and they would engage in prayerful reflection on these texts to attain a deeper communion with God in prayer and contemplation. From the IV Lateran Council in 1215 the Church undertook a pervasive campaign of individualization of faith. Priests were instructed to encourage their parishioners to attend more diligently to personal devotion (see in particular Canons 9, 21, and 66). The obligations laid on the laity to confess their sins annually and to meditate on their spiritual state throughout the year were accompanied by the provision of materials, notably the *Lay folks' catechism*, that would offer doctrinal instruction and serve as devotional guides (Constable 1996; Gillespie 1980; Hudson 1985). As more people became literate in the late Middle Ages and believers became more autonomous in their devotional activities, religious texts of various kinds (e.g., stories of saints' lives, collections of prayers and meditations, mystic poetry, in addition to catechismal manuals) became central to the spiritual life of the laity (Martin and Chartier 1982; Russell 1962). The spiritual masters who wrote or compiled those texts instructed readers to read them in the style of *lectio divina* (Huot 1996).

3. The book of hours

Although reading is not entirely inscribed in the text, our attempt to reconstruct meanings and gestures of engagement with sacred writings in medieval Christian tradition cannot be separated from a semiotic analysis of the textual forms (linguistic and visual) through which religious foundations were presented and individual devotion was nurtured.

The analysis in this article focuses on the manuscript that *par excellence* was produced to foster individual devotion among the laity: the book of hours. I shall illustrate in what follows how this manuscript was designed to encourage the kind of meditative and introspective reading experience that contemporary Christian treatises designated as a fundamental devotional practice.



Figure 1. *The manuscript (de Brailles Hours) in the hands (Donovan 1991)*

The book of hours has usually been considered a daily planner for prayer: it was designed in the manner of the breviary (which pertained exclusively to the clergy), although with fewer textual extracts. Books of hours were typically relatively small in size (Figure 1),⁶ so that people could carry them throughout the day in their work and leisure activities. The devout owner was meant to stop eight times a day and read the appropriate section of the book.⁷

Medieval books of hours vary considerably in their content. Variation is mostly linked to patronage, local custom in the area of production, the style of the illuminator, and the language of the texts (Hutton 1997; Lerouquis 1927; Manzari 2004). All of them, however, share some features: all books of hours begin with a liturgical calendar, listing the feast days of the Church year, the saints of the days, and essential recurrences guiding performance of the right devotions for each day of the year. Occasionally the death or birth dates of family members are also included. The signs of the zodiac or labors of the months often decorate the calendar pages. The zodiac signs are the same as we know them today, while the labors of the month reflect agricultural work or seasonal activities and varied according to the geographic area in which the book was produced (Figure 2). For their content and illustrations, the calendar pages are thus particularly useful in attempting to identify the manuscript's original patronage and the place and time of its production.

The calendar is followed by short extracts from each of the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and then by the text that constitutes the core part of the book of hours: the hours of the Virgin, which include Psalms verses, hymns, prayers, and excerpts from the Bible to be



Figure 2. Calendar page for September (*Frick Book of Hours*): two men treading grapes and pouring wine into barrels (*folio 9 recto*); Libra holding the scales of justice (*folio 9 verso*) (*Blackman and Golden 2003*)

read during the eight canonical hours of the day.⁸ The Seven Penitential Psalms, the hours of the Cross, the office for the dead, litanies, and more prayers to the Virgin and various saints follow. A book of hours is thus a compilation of diverse materials, little blocks of texts alternating between verse and prose, and cycling through combinations of new and repeated passages. Moreover, books of hours were most frequently bilingual texts, combining Latin and the vernacular, the former being used for prayers, hymns and psalms, the latter for passages of the Scriptures and the illuminations' captions (when present). The juxtaposition of different genres and languages gives to the reading of the book of hours some unique characteristics: the portions in verse and Latin, often repeated across canonical hours, invite attention to and appreciation of the written text's musicality, thereby facilitating sensory attunement and memorization. The vernacular, on the other hand, cues a focus on the text's content, offering suggestions for meditation.⁹

Except for the Compline—which opens with the verse 'Convert us, O God our Savior. And turn away Thy wrath from us' ('*Converte nos, Deus salutaris noster. Et averte iram tuam a nobis*') (see Figure 4)—each devotional hour begins with the versicle 'Lord, open my lips and my

mouth shall declare Thy praise' ('*Domine labia mea après et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam*'). This formula establishes an intimate and multisensory engagement of the devout reader, whose articulatory and auditory systems are mobilized to properly perform and fully enjoy the prayerful reading. Psalms, a brief excerpt from the Bible, and prayers follow. In the hours of the Virgin, this textual composite celebrates the venerated protagonist in many ways, notably as bride of God, mother of Christ, queen of Heaven. Thus different genres, temporal frameworks, and dimensions of the Divine are offered at each devotional hour for the reader to *contemplate*.

Books of hours are also richly illuminated with numerous miniatures¹⁰—borders, roundels, *bas-de-pages*—whose function is not merely ornamental. Large miniatures open each new section in the book of hours, acting as bookmarks for a particular office or portion of it. At the same time, these illustrations create a continuity across the pages: in the hours of the Virgin, for example, the large miniatures heading each section illustrate in chronological order the main events of the Virgin's life, while the text refers to the Virgin in many different ways and proposes excerpts from the Old Testament and the New Testament without following an orderly, linear narrative. Therefore, these large miniatures do not strictly illustrate the adjacent text; rather, they comment on it and expand its meaning, thereby offering the reader further suggestions for meditation. Moreover, it can be argued that these illuminations also function as mnemonic devices (Carruthers 1990; Huot 1996), as reference marks that evoke other texts and help the reader contextualize specific events in the Virgin's life with respect to the others. The semiotic configuration of books of hours thus points the reader toward multiple temporal planes and textual sources.

This is especially true for highly illuminated books of hours. One such book is the Bedford book of hours, which we shall consider in some detail to illustrate (British Library Ms. Add. 18850; Backhouse 1990). The Bedford hours was commissioned by John, Duke of Bedford, as a wedding gift for his bride, Anne of Burgundy.¹¹ The manuscript, with 578 pages in the format 263 × 184 mm, was illustrated in a Paris workshop, at a time when the city's reputation for manuscript making was unsurpassed. The identity of the chief illustrator of the Bedford hours remains unknown, however, and art historians refer to him as the Bedford Master.

Every page of the Bedford hours is illustrated and the manuscript contains 38 large-format miniatures. Those introducing each canonical portion in the hours of the Virgin present a central image surrounded by smaller marginal images. For instance, on the opening page of the

Matins (Figure 3), the central illustration of the Annunciation is surrounded by scenes of the earlier life of the Virgin Mary. While focusing on a quintessentially forward-oriented event (i.e., the Annunciation), the reader is thus prompted also to remember and (re)think the important events in the Virgin's life preceding the appearance of the archangel Gabriel.

In contrast, on the opening page of the *Compline* (Figure 4), the central illustration of the Death of the Virgin is surrounded by scenes of the gathering of the Apostles and her funeral. The reader is thereby projected forward, revisiting the events following what is represented in the central scene.

The juxtaposition of images and text invites (at least) two kinds of reading: illustrational reading, which follows a linear chronological order and offers visual sources for recalling other texts (primarily Christian hagiographic writings and the Sacred Scriptures); and textual reading, which uses the visual narrative as a springboard and guides the reader through further prayerful explorations. In other words, the interplay between written passages and illuminations creates a multitextual landscape that the reader can actively explore and meditate upon.

Besides the large miniatures opening different hours, additional images illustrate each section: small circular or rectangular images on one side of every page form several narrative cycles that correspond to the major sections of the book (Figure 5).

The themes illustrated in the cycles of narrative miniatures for the various offices and canonical hours are usually standard. For example, the hours of the Virgin are customarily illustrated with depictions of the Apocalypse. Another temporal framework and a further narrative trajectory—besides those offered through large-format miniatures—are thus presented: while the former span the life of the Virgin, the latter are oriented toward the eschatological horizon anticipating the second coming of Christ.

Marginal illustrations of books of hours also frequently drew on themes and symbols derived from popular literary sources, such as fables, bestiaries, and oral narratives, mostly allegorical. Those images acquired currency and familiarity for the devout reader, so when they appeared in the pages of books of hours, although out of their original context, they were recognized and the moral message they conveyed recollected. In line with the didactic tradition of sermons, these marginal images provided positive exempla to emulate, or negative exempla to abhor (Randall 1957).¹²

As such, they operate differently from the text but can reinforce or inflect its meaning for the reader. It has been suggested, for instance, that



Figure 3. *Hours of the Virgin (Matins) (Bedford Hours): the Annunciation, with scenes from the early life of the Virgin Mary (folio 32 r) (Backhouse 1990)*



Figure 4. *Hours of the Virgin (Compline) (Bedford Hours): the Death of the Virgin, with scenes of the gathering of the Apostles and her funeral (folio 89 v) (Backhouse 1990)*

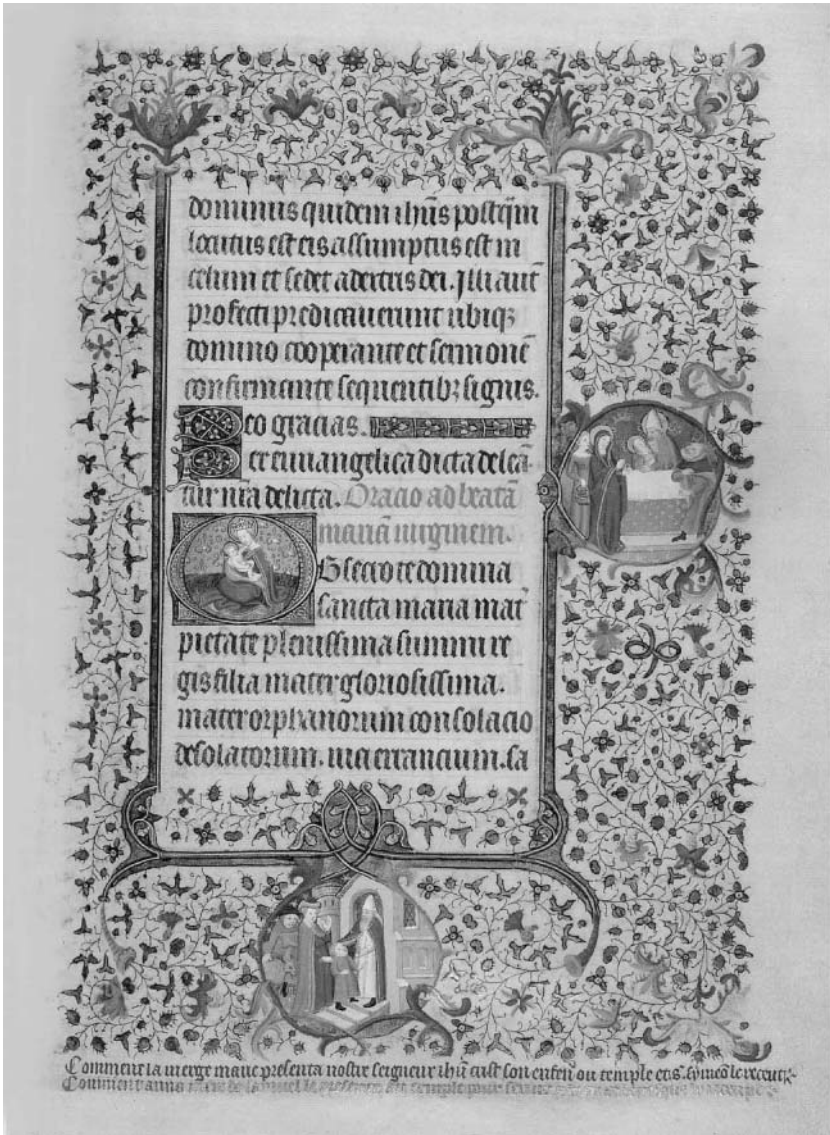


Figure 5. Prayer page (*Bedford Hours*): historiated initial of the Virgin and Child and marginal roundels from the *Speculum* cycle showing the presentation of Christ Child and its prefiguration, the entry of the infant Samuel in the Temple (folio 25 r) (Backhouse 1990)

they are visualizations of proverbial experience; that is, they stand in proverbial relationship to both text and reader (Camille 1992): like proverbs they are activated by their association with a text and prompt the reader to position herself in relation to the text. In other words, these marginal images visually promote a transition and provide a link between the text being read and the reader's existential and spiritual life, thereby leading the reader into introspection on personal mundane experience.¹³ In the *Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux* (Ms. Acc. 1954.54.1.2, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, New York), a fourteenth-century manuscript wonderfully illuminated by Jean Pucelle,¹⁴ the opening page of the Matins (in the office of the Virgin) presents a large miniature of the Annunciation and a smaller image in the *bas-de-page*: it shows a group of four young people engaged in a buffeting game (Figure 6).

This pastime, also referred to as '*Qui fery*' in French and 'the bobbid game' in English, was very popular in that period,¹⁵ and Queen Jeanne herself may have occasionally participated. However, this *bas-de-page* cannot be considered merely a secular image designed for the queen's amusement, simply offering a diversion from the overall religious frame of reference (Randall 1972: 248–249). As Randall (1972) has shown, there are striking similarities between this image of the buffeting game, other pictorial renderings of the same pastime, and contemporary illustrations of the Mocking of Christ immediately after the Betrayal. The representations of this episode in the Passion narrative draw from the four Gospels, which all mention it (although each provides different details). Thus, as the reader is invited to focus on the central episode/image of the Annunciation to the Virgin, which in a sense constitutes the beginning of the life of Christ, she is also reminded, through the *bas-de-page* image, of the ultimate meaning of that pivotal historical moment—that is, Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Furthermore, I suggest an additional reading path that the *bas-de-page* invites the reader to take: the allegorical nature of the image, which offers a secular scene (*vis-à-vis* a more literal representation of the Passion episode), prompts the reader to think about her own life in light of the sacred texts excerpted nearby, referred to, and illustrated. In this metaphorical dimension, the buffeting game becomes a trope that solicits the reader to be attentive and ready for the *announcements* that God intends for each human being. Thus, as the reader goes through the hours of the day and reads bits of biblical text, she is at the same time (through marginal images) invited to focus introspectively on the self. The reader is encouraged to meditate on her own moral journey through life, to read her own book of conscience, and to compare all those texts (Huot 1996).



Figure 6. *Hours of the Virgin (Matins) (The Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux): the Annunciation with scenes of the buffeting game in bas-de-page (Avril 1978)*

In summary, in the book of hours many different temporal and narrative frames are juxtaposed. Each section corresponds to an hour in a day; the textual excerpts provide snapshots of key religious events while the large miniatures expand the temporal framework to more extended and overarching spans (e.g., the entire life of the Virgin). Moreover, the marginal images take the reader through further temporal planes: the release of time into eternity (as in the Apocalypse narrative), and the existential time of one's own life (as in the allegorical images and proverbial representations). The reader is thus invited to follow all of these different

temporal trajectories and to meditate upon the relevance of each one for her own spiritual development.

4. Conclusions

Some connecting lines between the features of the book of hours, the instruction on *lectio divina*, and the ideology of reading in the Middle Ages can now be traced. The characterization of reading as a devotional activity and its close link with meditation and prayer—which emerged from the analysis of medieval pedagogical treatises and from religious literature—inform the very existence of books of hours. These portable manuscripts were conceptualized and designed to intimately engage lay believers with the sacred. Leafing through them would add a spiritual pulse to the cadence of their daily life.

In turn, the material form and semiotic content of the book of hours promote and reinforce the devotional process, organizing the reader's involvement with the text in a way that is deeply incarnated and that at the same time encourages contemplation: by juxtaposing hymns and prayers (which recur repeatedly throughout the devotional hours), snippets of biblical texts (which synecdochically refer to broader scriptural episodes), and illuminations (which index other texts and external sources), the configuration of the book of hours promoted and guided the practice of memory and reflection. Like *lectio divina*, reading the book of hours was thus interlocked with memorizing and remembering. Through the recitation and recall of sacred texts, the reader would progressively come to embody the divine words and transform her conduct into an exemplum of piety and faith.

Furthermore, by interweaving textual and visual sequences—whose temporal scope varies from a fragment of one day, to the span of a human life, to eternity—the book of hours nurtured introspection in the pursuit of spiritual illumination. These were also the goals of medieval instruction on *lectio divina* and devotional manuals.

In summary, the design of the book of hours afforded a multifaceted devotional activity that embedded the act of reading within a broader moral and spiritual project of self-transformation and religious illumination. As such, reading was always both actual and metaphorical: while reading the text and recalling other texts, the reader was also constantly prompted to *read* in the book of her own conscience and worldly experience. All these operations follow the steps of *lectio divina* and implement the instructions of medieval pedagogical treatises. This convergence of information allows us to better understand not only medieval devotional

literature and the unique semiotic matrix of books of hours, but also what *reading* meant to medieval lay readers and the ways they engaged with their books. Distinct from other historical epochs, in the medieval Christian tradition reading was primarily a spiritual activity in which meditation encoded reading.

From a theoretical perspective, I hope in this article to have illustrated the fruitfulness of an approach that interweaves an analysis of texts, in their form and content, with an investigation of contemporary norms and conventions of reading, defining the legitimate uses of texts, the reading modalities, and the scope of the reading activity. A semiotic examination of focal texts offers precious information about their horizon of readership and the kind of engagement they call forth; we cannot, however, extrapolate from such an analysis how readers actually appropriated those texts and the meanings they took in their lives. An investigation of contemporary reading ideology—primarily through an analysis of pedagogical treatises and other texts of religious and moral instruction—provides the opportunity to fill part of this gap, enabling a reconstruction of the normative framework and the horizon of expectations that characterized the practice of reading and the appropriation of (certain kinds of) texts.

This investigation remains, nevertheless, painfully incomplete. One further axis of inquiry is left largely unexplored: that of first-person accounts by the devout on their reading experiences. Unfortunately, this important source of information is in great part unattainable. Lay readers, especially those of humble origin, have left no written testimony of their reading experience or traces on the manuscripts themselves (Petrucci and Nardelli 2005).¹⁶ It remains nevertheless plausible that letters or autobiographical accounts by those lay readers could be found in some town hall archives or in private or parochial libraries in northern Italy or central France (and worth a search).¹⁷

The study of reading practices in historical epochs far from the present challenges the ephemerality of such practices through creative search processes and the interweaving of multiple clues into ethnographic portraits. Although inexorably tentative, these portraits deepen our understanding of reading habits, motivations, and modalities that have become unfamiliar to contemporary readers.

Notes

1. Although devotional reading of books of hours was not rare in the Early Middle Ages, it became widespread in the later Middle Ages. This article thus focuses in

particular on the historical period between the early twelfth century and the late fifteenth century.

2. Similar formulations are found in other medieval devotional treatises. For instance, consider the following passage from Guigo II's *Scala claustralium* (Caput XIV):

Ex his possumus colligere: quod lectio sine meditatione arida est; meditatio sine lectione, erronea; oratio sine meditatione est tepida; meditatio sine oratione, infructuosa: oratio cum devotione contemplationis acquisitiva; contemplationis adeptio sine oratione, aut rara, aut miraculosa.

'Reading without meditation is sterile, meditation without reading is liable to error, prayer without meditation is lukewarm, meditation without prayer is unfruitful, prayer when it is fervent wins contemplation, but to obtain it without prayer would be rare, even miraculous.' (translation by Colledge and Walsh 1981)

3. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* (early sixth century) and Guigo II's (d. 1193) *Scala claustralium* are the classic primary sources on *lectio divina*.
4. In this sense *Lectio divina* is different from exegesis, hermeneutics, and the theological study of Scriptures (Peterson 2006).
5. The text, composed as a letter addressed to a brother named Gervase, was widely circulated not only in monasteries and cloisters but also among lay believers, especially in aristocratic homes. It survives in over sixty manuscripts in both Latin and English (Colledge and Walsh 1981).
6. The manuscript of *Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux* measures 94 × 64 mm and is known as 'the very small pocket prayer-book' (Avril 1978). The *Grandes Heures de Rohan*, which measures 290 × 208 mm on the other hand, has an unusually large format. Most of the books of hours fall between those two in size.
7. Mumbling through it would take about five minutes (de Hamel 1986: 174; Harthan 1977: 12).
8. The eight devotional hours are: Matins (before dawn); Lauds (daybreak); Prime (6:00 a.m., recited together with Lauds in winter); Terce (9:00 a.m.); Sext (noon); None (3:00 p.m.); Vespers (sunset); and Compline (evening).
9. Aiming at broadening the education of the laity, the IV Lateran Council promoted a language policy that encouraged use of the vernacular in the administration of sacraments, in the celebration of divine offices, and in doctrinal instruction as well (see especially Canons 9 and 10). But Latin remained the preeminent language of the Church for centuries after the 1215 council (Resnick 1990). It was only with the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965) that local vernacular languages began to be used in Mass and other central Catholic practices.
10. The term 'miniature' derives from the Latin word *minium*, which was the red pigment (lead oxide) the scribes used to rubricate or mark initials at turning points in the text. The word was later used for indicating manuscripts' pictorial illustrations of any size or shape. The fact that these images were necessarily relatively small probably reinforced a folk etymological association with the Latin *min-* in *minore* 'minor', which has ultimately affected the development of the extended senses in English and in other languages (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2002).
11. The wedding was celebrated on 13 May 1423.
12. Drawn from the Scriptures as well as from other literary sources, popular tradition, historical events, and everyday life, the exempla soon were assembled in alphabetized compendia (e.g., the *Liber exemplorum ad usum praedicatorum* [ca. 1275] and the *Speculum laicorum* [late thirteenth century]). These compilations served as sources for

- preachers seeking an illustration for the theological messages in their sermons (Randall 1966).
13. Camille (1992: 36) has pointed out that ‘proverbs, which play an important role in medieval communication as well as art, are not really “texts”. Because of their oral matrix as “sayings”, they suggest speech without a speaker, an utterance of universal application that can function with various metaphoric or parabolic associations’.
 14. It is believed that Charles IV commissioned the book for his wife, Jeanne d’Évreux, between the date of their marriage in 1325 and his death, shortly after, in 1328 (Avril 1978).
 15. The game has survived the passing of the centuries, and a detailed description of it can be found in Opie’s (1969) study of children’s games.
 16. It is indeed important to remember that the Christian investment in reading for the propagation of faith and pious mores translated into instructional activities that offered to the uneducated the rudiments of reading but left them incapable of writing (Graff 1982; Resnick and Resnick 1977).
 17. Memoirs of reading are found in a few eighteenth-century autobiographies written by lay individuals (e.g., Valentin Jameray-Duval, a peasant born in Bourgogne [quoted in Hébrard 1985]).

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Laura Sterponi received a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Rome (2002) and a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles (2004). She is currently assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley (Graduate School of Education). Her research focuses on the nexus of literacy, culture, and cognition. Her most recent project analyzes modes of human involvement with text and how they are structured by historically rooted social conventions and cultural ideologies. Her work has been published in *Discourse Studies*, *Human Development*, and *Linguistics and Education*. Address for correspondence: Language & Literacy, Society & Culture, Graduate School of Education, University of California Berkeley, 5643 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1670, USA <sterponi@berkeley.edu>.