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COLORS AND BOOKS IN MARGUERITE D'OINGT'S *SPECULUM*:  
MNEMONIC IMAGES FOR MEDITATION AND VISION<sup>1</sup>

Sergi Sancho Fibla

It is known that the interpretation of any medieval text involves a heavy effort for its readers and exegetes. No matter how trained a scholar is, a barrier of seven, eight, or twelve centuries continuously frustrates his attempts. The approach can be even harder when the text is not only from the Middle Ages, but also a so-called mystical work. The oddness then increases and the darkness becomes denser. However, these are common obstacles for any medievalist: while the dust slowly covers a manuscript, the writer's and reader's habits gradually change. Sometimes, precisely this unusual nature makes the text even more fascinating, but that fact might obscure the historical understanding of a work. Some precise commitments are required, therefore, to not only bring those spiritual works closer to our contemporary world, but also so that we may cultivate attitudes that lead us to have a greater openness towards such texts. Between these two movements, I presume, we may find some kind of real comprehension.

Due to their theological, visual, and literary attributes, mystical texts have been recently studied from an anthropological point of view which stresses the reading and meditation practices, the mechanisms of textual transmission, the tools of literary creation, and the historical theories of image, cognition, and imagination. These "usages of the text" are, in my opinion, essential for an accurate comprehension of the text's functions. Consequently, I am going to introduce here an appropriate case of literary study that will show fruitful conclusions of what medieval meditation, creation, or vision were intended to be in their contexts and why a new revisit would be so relevant.

We must start with the consideration that, for its essentially visual nature, medieval mystical literature is especially suitable for this kind of approach. Whether for their meditational or visionary character,<sup>2</sup> these works can properly be examined from the

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<sup>2</sup> As an example, we can mention here, among others, the following works: Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

fields of art history, book history, literary criticism, historical anthropology, mnemonic and visual studies. This is precisely the task that the research group “Bibliotheca Mystica et Philosophica Alois Maria Haas” has been carrying out. On one hand, we have been studying the contemporary manifestations of the mystical phenomenon in art, literature, or thought; and on the other hand, we have been recovering the visual nature of mystical literature in the Middle Ages. This methodology has already proved fruitful in respect to many authors, including Hildegard von Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and San Juan de la Cruz.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I am going to introduce a work written by Marguerite d’Oingt, a thirteenth-century Carthusian nun. During her lifetime, she was a prioress in a monastery called Poleteins, near Lyon, and three works and five letters have been preserved from her writings, guarded in France until present day. One of those was written in Latin (*Pagina Meditationum*), two other in Franc-Occitan dialect (*Speculum* and *Li via Seiti Biatrix de Ornaciu*), and some of her letters, in a somewhat irregular French. Specifically, I will focus on the first chapter of the *Speculum*, perhaps Marguerite’s best-known work.<sup>4</sup>

Marguerite’s *Speculum* develops upon a typical theme within medieval mystical literature, namely the relationship between God and the soul through a language based on a sensorial symbolism. Smell, hearing, taste, touch and especially sight are involved in the meditation that intends to accomplish the *deificatio* and the *visio*, which are the intended goals of the text. The work is divided into three chapters with different aims and subjects, all of them clearly articulated by the imagery of the mirror. In the first one, Marguerite explains how she received a “grace” in the form of a figure. While she was in her cell, Jesus Christ appeared to her several times, holding a book in his hand in order “to teach her” (§2). The story then focuses on the book, describing its cover, which was completely covered in words written in white, black, red and gold letters. In the white characters, one could read the life of the Son of God, his examples and his doctrine (§4 “li sancta conversations al beneit dil Deu”). The vile insults and outrages the Jews committed to Him (§4 “li col et les tenplees et les ordures que li Jue li gitavontensasaintifaci et per son noble cors”) were written in black, while the red

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<sup>3</sup>E.g. Victoria Cirlot, *Hildegard von Bingen y la tradición visionaria de Occidente* (Barcelona: Herder, 2005); Pablo García, “La poética de la visibilidad en Marguerite Porete” (PhD diss., Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2009); Anna Serra, “Iconología del Monte de perfección. Para una teoría de la imagen en San Juan de la Cruz” (PhD diss. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2011), Francesco Zambon, ed., *Viridarium 8: La Visione* (Milan: Medusa, 2012), among others.

<sup>4</sup>Bibliothèque de Grenoble: 5785R. Edited and translated in *Les oeuvres de Marguerite d’Oingt*, ed. Antonin Duraffour, Pierre Gardette, and Pauline Durdilly (Paris: Société d’Édition Les Belles lettres, 1965). Quotations in English are taken from Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, ed., *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt: Medieval Prioress and Mystic* (Newburyport: Focus Library of Medieval Women, 1990).

letters described the wounds and the blood of his ordeal (§4 “les plaes et li pretious sans qui futespanchies per nos”). In addition, there were two seals or clasps that kept the book closed and on which two sentences were written in gold: “Deus erit omnia in omnibus” and “Mirabilis Deus in sanctissuis” (§5).

This image has often been considered to be a spiritual vision related to gothic imagery, which in turn has been interpreted symbolically as an image of celestial wisdom.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, if we take into consideration the thirteenth-century anthropological notion of “spiritual vision,” we could state that this is not strictly a “vision,” but a “*semblanci*.” That is to say, an earthly figure elaborated by the mind as a tool for meditation or cognition.<sup>6</sup> Other exegetes have interpreted the meaning of the different colors of the cover as a simple allegorical message which, following the precepts of traditional imagery, connects white to purity, black to the devil, red to sin, and gold to glory. While this interpretation cannot be denied, we should stress the point that nobody has explained the function of these allegorical associations within the text. According to recent scholarly works, this structure might have a definite “performative” purpose, and that is what I aspire to point out here.

First, though, we must try to understand the whole complex mechanism that the book image carries in this work. To begin, we can say that the divine volume that Jesus Christ holds in his hand is a metaphor for (or a reflection of) the book that Marguerite is writing (the *Speculum*). While in the first chapter it appears closed, and one can only see the cover, in the second chapter the book suddenly opens, allowing Marguerite to see the interior, which turns out to be a beautiful two-page mirror. These bright pages here reflect the images and qualities of the Divine Trinity, while in the third chapter it clearly mirrors the face of God. These reflected images provide Marguerite with a meaning for the two Latin sentences written in gold. Consequently, we can say that the book was closed because Marguerite could neither understand nor see the sentences

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<sup>5</sup>E.g. R. Maisonneuve, “L’Expérience mystique et visionnaire de Marguerite d’Oingt (ob. 1310), moniale chartreuse,” *Kartäusermystik und mystiker* 1 (1981): 101-122 (92).

<sup>6</sup>Marguerite sets the difference between “ymagena” and “semblanci” in her work *Li via Seiti Biatrix d’Ornaci* (§83-86). “Ymagena” is supposed to be an actual and physical illustration, that is, a plastic figure; while by “semblanci” she is referring to mental visions, normally come to her heart from a divine origin. For a deeper study about this subject in the medieval context, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps des images: Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). Concerning the visionary or meditative nature of the *Speculum*, both B. McGinn and V. Cirlot assert that, following the Carthusian gradual conception (*lectio-meditatio-visio*), it is in the second and third chapters in which Marguerite would achieve the mystical contemplation of Christ, but not before. Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 289; Victoria Cirlot and Blanca Garí, *La mirada interior: Escritoras místicas y visionarias en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Siruela, 1999), 166. For an excellent explanation of the grades of the “Spiritual Vision,” see Victoria Cirlot, *La visión abierta* (Madrid: Siruela, 2010).

written in the seals. As she says at the end of the first chapter, the eyes of her heart were too dark to comprehend: “Mays illiaveit encores les uouzelcorsio obscuris que illi ne poet contemplar Nostru Segnoure n’el” (§13).<sup>7</sup>

The image of the cover is, therefore, a strategy that structures this work, and, at the same time, a way or a tool to reach the visionary level, as Marguerite confirms later. Indeed, a couple of paragraphs after presenting Jesus Christ’s volume, she compares this divine book to her “livro de saconcienci,” namely, the book of her conscience.<sup>8</sup> So, in order to make her “book of consciousness” similar to that divine book, she used this literary image as if it were an illustration from a Book of Hours, that is, she meditated on those letters but also on herself (§13 “illiseestudiavet grant teinsencetamaneri”<sup>9</sup>) for a long time, until she was able to comprehend the meditations. Only at this point were the seals opened, and she was able to see beyond; in other words, she received the divine vision. Therefore, Marguerite puts into play three different books: the colored book of Christ, the book of her consciousness, and the book she is writing (*Speculum*). In this way, the manuscript assumes the functions of the mental book that first Marguerite and later the reader reconstruct in their minds. Through the correlations between, on the one hand, the opening of the metaphorical book and the beginning of the second chapter, and on the other, the narrator’s book of consciousness and Christ’s book, Marguerite is presented to the reader as an example to follow.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, facing the image of the colored letters, the reader, although he is reading Marguerite’s book and not God’s volume, will imagine the second one, imitating the narrator’s attitude. Hence, the physical book and the metaphorical one are linked and articulated through the reader’s mind, providing him a useful tool for meditation—what M.

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<sup>7</sup> For a deeper study on the anthropological relevance of opening a medieval book as revealing the mystery, see Jeffrey Hamburger, *Ouvertures: La double-page dans les manuscrits enluminés du Moyen Âge* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Marguerite follows here an age-old concept, whose origin and motivation might lie in the patristic exegesis of Revelation 20.12. See Jean Leclercq, “Aspects spirituels de la symbolique du livre au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *L’homme vivant devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac. II: Du moyen âge au siècle des lumières* (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 63-72; Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) who provides us with plenty of similar examples.

<sup>9</sup> My emphasis. The reflexive use of the verb “to study” displays an idea of meditation-comparison between herself and the book.

<sup>10</sup> It was a traditional strategy in this specular genre. J. Hamburger points it out in H. Seuse’s *Exemplar*: “Suso represents himself as both as a *speculum* and *imago*: a mirror in which his readers will find Christ’s example faithfully reflected and, at the same time, an exemplary image or model that they themselves should reflect.” “The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns: The Case of Henry Suso and The Dominicans,” in *The Visual and the Visionary*, 197-278. See also this very same structure underlined in Porete’s *Mirouer*: García, *La poética de la visibilidad*, 8.

Carruthers calls a “literary picture”.<sup>11</sup>

In consequence, I strongly believe that Marguerite is providing a mnemonic image here, shaped by a background surface (a page or a book cover) and a series of textual markers (the chromatic variations arranged on the surface). This process settles a mental image that would be used by the prioress, day after day, for studying, comparison, and meditation. Each of the colors would be a key or a kind of *catena* of combinations that would be deployed in order to be remembered.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this mechanism is an explicit usage of classical mnemonics, set up by Cicero in his *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,<sup>13</sup> since the surface of the book and the clasps would provide the *loci* and the colors, the *imagines agentes*. Through their traditional symbolism, the author and the reader, as we will see below, could be capable of recalling all the points derived from them (see the table below).

In fact, Carruthers, one of the most devoted scholars of medieval memory and rhetoric, confirms that the book or the page were familiar images of “trained memory.”<sup>14</sup> She states that in the Middle Ages, the most common model for human memory was a tablet or a parchment page, upon which a person writes. This model was extremely old and widespread, and it is very interesting that even in antiquity, when actual books were written in scrolls, the model for memory was that of a flat, rectangular surface that could be taken in with a single mental “look.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>“Organizations of images that are designed to strike the eye of the mind forcefully, and to initiate or punctuate a reader’s ‘progress’ through a text, in the way that particular images (or part of images) structure the ‘way’ of one’s eye through a picture.” Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought, Rhetoric and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>12</sup> “The *catena* or “chain” is a very old medieval genre of scholarly commentary, used widely by the monastic scholars as part of *lectio divina*. The authorities are chained, or hooked, together by a particular Biblical phrase.” Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*; or John B. Friedman, “Les images mnémotechniques dans les manuscrits de l’époque gothique,” in *Jeux de mémoire: aspects de la mnémotechnique médiévale*, ed. Bruno Roy and Paul Zumthor (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1985), 169-184.

<sup>14</sup> According to M. Carruthers, the metaphor of the mind as a waxed tablet or, later in manuscript cultures, a page of a parchment, is already found in ancient works, but in Western Culture is developed mostly from Cicero’s *De Oratore*: “One finds it as early as Homer, certainly in Plato, The Book of Proverbs, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Jerome, and then down through the ages. Now this model of memory is essentially a locational one: matters are written into a « place » in memory as characters are impressed into a tablet or incised onto parchment. The physical book’s surfaces provide « support » for the laid-out page, including its decoration and punctuation, and these features in turn « support » the memory of a reader by providing visual cues to the « matters » of a work (visual cues in the form of written letters, dots and curlicues, pictorial images, and all that can be ‘placed’ away in memory).” Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 25 ff. See also Carruthers, “Reading with Attitude,” in *The Book and the Body*, ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>15</sup> “In extent (as all the books on memory advise), no picture should exceed what can be seen and kept in mind in a single « look » or *conspectus* of the mind’s eye. In medieval texts, it is described as the size and shape of a single page.” Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 12.

In fact, at least from John Cassian or Augustine of Hippo, the necessity of the exercise with the mental *ymago*<sup>16</sup> settles in the medieval mentality. I. Illich explains that this is the seed of “The Great Change,” in the twelfth century, from oral to silent reading.<sup>17</sup> This scholastic variation<sup>18</sup> implies a shift from the collective to the singular, and even “from legible to visible” (*du lisible au visible*).<sup>19</sup> Illich is referring here to a kind of writing and reading device founded on a visual mode of cognition. As O. Boulnois also states, “au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le livre devient un répertoire de la pensée de l’auteur, un écran ou un tableau sur laquelle le lecteur déchiffre ses intentions.”<sup>20</sup> The page thus turns into an image clearly intended to be memorized, and some elements emerge in a wide variety of genres: textual marks, indexes, *catenas*, schematic images, and so forth. In summary, mnemonic keys primarily help the reader to remember maxims or arguments in the process of silent reading. Therefore, although its roots are in the Antiquity and in the Early Middle Ages, we could say that, in this context, a kind of a visual literature was born, a taxonomic system thought to facilitate memorization and the different usages of the text.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Ivan Illich, *Du lisible au visible: la naissance du texte. Un commentaire du Didascalion de Hughes de Saint-Victor* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991). Also, Olivier Boulnois, *Au-delà de l’image: Une archéologie du visuel au Moyen-Âge V-XVI siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> The strategies of visualization implied in oral reading (what H. Wenzel calls “Strategien der Visualisierung”) don’t disappear with the arrival of written culture, on the contrary, they get more relevant in these centuries: “dabei ist zu berücksichtigen, dass das poetische Sehen, von dem hier die Rede sein soll, nicht in imaginierbares Sehen übergehen kann.” Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen Schrift und Bild, Kultur und Gedächtnis in Mittelalter* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995), 338.

<sup>18</sup> “Les figures qui apparaissent sur les pages sont désormais moins des rappels de modèles sonores que les symboles visuels de concepts. Ces gens sont alphabétisés selon le mode «scolastique» et non plus «monastique».” Illich, *Du lisible au visible*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> “La page se transforma soudain de partition pour pieux marmotteurs en un texte optiquement organisé pour des penseurs logiques.” Ibid., 115. See also Hamburger, *Ouvertures*, 41: “Alors que le rouleau convient surtout à une lecture orale, le livre s’est de plus en plus prêté à une lecture silencieuse, au sens où ce qu’on voyait –que ce soit la lettre décorée ou une image d’illustration –venait remplacer l’écoute.” F. Alessio or A. Petrucci have also provide excellent ideas about this fact, stating that from the 12th century onwards, texts were, for the first time, written to be read: “*siscrive in vista della lettura. . .Fatto per la lettura, la consultazione, lo studio, il commento e la predica, tutto vi è disposto; questo fine domina sulla fattura del libro e lo conforma a sé.*” Franco Alessio, “Conservazione e modelli di sapere nel Medioevo,” in *La memoria del sapere: Forme di conservazione e strutture organizzative dall’Antichità a oggi*, ed. P. Rossi (Rome: Laterza, 1988), 99-133 (104-105); Armando Petrucci, “Lire au Moyen Âge,” *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome-Moyen Age, Temps Modernes* XCVI (1984): 603-616. For a general history of this change and the importance of the *mise en page* in the process of medieval reading, see Carla Bozzolo et al., “Noir et blanc: Premier résultats d’une enquête sur la mise en page dans le livre médiéval,” in *Il libro e il testo*, ed. C. Questa and R. Rafaelli (Urbino: Università degli Studi, 1984), 195-221 (204).

<sup>20</sup> Boulnois, *Au-delà de l’image*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> A.-M. Legaré provides us with a very similar case that will be properly studied later. According to her, these are examples of a kind of “littérature énumérative et cumulative, érigée en un système taxinomique et sériologique visant à faciliter le travail de mémorisation du savoir scripturaire et théologique, que se fonde dès le milieu du douzième siècle l’enseignement moral chrétien.” Anne-Marie Legaré, “L’image du livre comme adjuvant mémoriel dans le Conte des trois

Examples of this process are numerous. Yet, a century before Marguerite, Hugh of St. Victor, while instructing students in the Art of Memory, asked his students to construct imaginary spots (*modus imaginandi domesticus*) and to put text in them by stressing the features of the text: color, typography, letter size, where it has been read (*Didascalicon* III, 10, 142). Also André de Saint-Victor, for instance, in his commentary on Isaiah 1:18, advised imagining a blank page, where one had to write (mentally) sins in red letters, seeing that they forcefully stroke the mind's eye, thus making memorization easier.<sup>22</sup>

Thence, it seems evident that the *mise en page* (and the decoration as well)<sup>23</sup> of the book illustrates many basic principles of the medieval mnemonic tools. As shown by M. Carruthers in her analysis of the Bosham Page, a manuscript written by Thomas Becket's priest in Paris around 1170,<sup>24</sup> color, number sequences, and the alphabet were three obvious features that could fit these requirements, although there were others in use as well. As Carruthers confirms, the *mise en page* of the Bosham Page "illustrates many basic principles of the arts of memory *as much as a mental image could do*."<sup>25</sup> In order to memorize a long work, the text was divided into short segments, and then "placed" mentally into an orderly scheme. This scheme could be anything, as long as it was clear and readily recoverable. That was the role of the *imagine agente*, that is, the agent image, which in fact could be the page itself, as Dante did in *Vita Nova*: an image

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chevaliers et des trois livres," in *Medieval Memory: Image and Text*, ed. Herman Braet, et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 129-143 (130). For a deeper understanding of this sort of visually structured literature, see Lina Bolzoni, *La rete delle immagini: Predicazione in volgare dalle origini a Bernardino da Siena* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002). The notorious works of J.-C. Schmitt and A. Katzenellenbogen already encouraged us to understand this kind of literature in this way: Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art: From Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*. London: The Warburg Institute, 1939; Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Les images classificatrices," *Bibliothèque de l'École de Chartres* 147 (1989): 311-341.

<sup>22</sup> Beryl Smalley, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 148. We could find plenty of cases similar to this. Amongst others, we can name Peter Abelard's *Sic et non*, the *Glossarium Salomonis* (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 13002, fol. 7v; for a better understanding of it, see Adam Cohen, "Making Memories in a Medieval Miscellany" in *Making Thoughts, Making Pictures, Making Memories in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Anne D. Hedeman, special issue, *Gesta* 48[2009]: 135-52). Peter Lombard (Illich, *Du lisible au visible*, 118-120), or Saint Bernard who, in order to avoid the obliteration problems of his monks, made them a mnemonic model based on "coloring"/dyeing a fabric or writing on a parchment (*Ad clericos* 15.28; 4:102-4). M. Carruthers analyse this fragment in "Reading with Attitude," 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Carl Nordenfalk, "The Beginning of Book Decoration," in *Essays in Honor of Georg Swarzenski*, ed. Oswald Goetz (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), 9-20 (12); also Jocelyn Penny Small, "Organizational Aids Within the Book," in *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1997), 14-19.

<sup>24</sup> For a better understanding of Bosham page, see Mary Carruthers, "Mechanisms for the Transmission of Culture: The Role of 'Place' in the Arts of Memory," in *Translatio: Or the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Laura Hollengreen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 1-26 (8-9).

<sup>25</sup> Carruthers, "Mechanisms," 8-9.



of a book, mentally reconstructed by the reader with some features stressed with capital letters, *incipits*, and paragraphs, like physical manuscripts.<sup>26</sup>



1. *Psalter of Herbert of Bosham*. Cambridge, Trinity College, Ms B.5.4, ff. 146v-147r.

But those agent images were not only guided towards the reader, but also the writer, as it may have helped him to structure and thus create the work. That is exactly the process that L. Bolzoni emphasizes in early Renaissance literature. According to her, many images, schemes, tables, and diagrams underlie different genres of literature until modern times. She argues, as does Carruthers regarding medieval texts, that these visual tools provide the backbone of the whole work, thus involving not only memorization, but also inventing.<sup>27</sup> In Marguerite's case, the first image of the *Speculum* could be the seed of the whole work, since, on the one hand, it provides a mnemonic tool that will help the reader in his meditation towards the contemplation of the divine visions; and on the other hand, the image of the book contributes to the building of the threefold structure, as we will see below. We could say, therefore, that specifically the image of the page, with its colors strategically arranged on its

<sup>26</sup> "In quella parte del libro della mia memoria dinanzi alla quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice *Incipit Vita Nova*. Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritte le parole. . . verrò a quelle parole le quali sono scritte ne la mia memoria sotto maggiori paragrafi." *Dante Alighieri: Vita Nuova*, ed. Domenico de Robertis (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1980), 28.

<sup>27</sup> See also Mary Carruthers, "Inventional Mnemonics and the Ornaments of Style: The Case of Etymology," *Connotations* 2, no.2 (1992): 103-114.

surface,<sup>28</sup> helped Marguerite in her writing process and, at the same time, assisted the reader to meditate day after day, in all the considerations derived from the colors.<sup>29</sup> It is also worth stressing the fact that Marguerite even provides a schedule for the study of the colored letters: she suggests starting the day with the study of the white letters, and carrying on with the black and red ones. In fact, she specifies the same planning in one of her letters addressed to a “brother” who asked for a penance (§127). In that text, she recommends that he act “just as He had taught me” (§128), that is to say: from Matins to Terce, she took the Jesus child into her arms (Nativity); from Noon to Sext she reflected on how the sweet Lord was tormented; and finally, in the evening, she put him in her bed and bent down towards his wounded flank.<sup>30</sup> In addition, she equates these times of day to the calendar: “and this went on from the Nativity to the day of the Purification of our Lady”<sup>31</sup> (§131). Therefore, Jesus Christ’s life, being the mnemonic key represented in the *Speculum* by the colors, not only underlies the order of the study, but could even structure the whole process of meditation along the day and the year.

But, how did it work? How could colored letters perform such a mental activity? If we focus on the text, we can easily see that all the meditations can be appropriately linked to a color. Hence, the reader, simply by recalling the cover of the book and the chromatic order, could mentally display, for example, all the considerations found in this paragraph:

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<sup>28</sup> In the *Speculum*, a clear and strict order is followed, an itinerary that revives Christ’s life from White to Gold, from his Birth to his Resurrection. This precise order should be also seen as a mnemonic device, since, according to Barbara Obrist’s studies on diagrammatic structures in the Middle Ages, the *dispositio* of the elements is a basic point in memory figures. The example that perfectly illustrates this fact is the structural function of the winds located as cardinal points in early and late medieval diagrams. Barbara Obrist, “Wind Diagrams and Medieval Cosmology,” *Speculum* 72 (1997): 33-84. Instead of winds, in this case we have colors, although this does not mean that they had not been present in traditional writings. For instance, in a poem written by Antiochus of Athens, the four colors (white, red, black, and yellow) are linked to the four seasons and the twelve zodiacal signs (three for each of them). That is a chromatic whole structuring a spatial disposition that Dronke found in plenty of cases within the Western medieval literature. Peter Dronke, “Tradition and Innovation in medieval Western Colour-Imagery,” in *The Realms of Colour: Eranos 1972: Lectures Given at the Eranos Conference in Ascona from August 23<sup>rd</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>, 1972*, ed. A. Portmann and R. Ritsema (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 51-107 (61).

<sup>29</sup> That is also how N. Hopenwasser considered the image of the book in Marguerite’s *Speculum*: “The original visionary book presented to her by Jesus had become a meditative object which she returned to again and again while engaged in deep contemplative prayer.” N. Hopenwasser, “Citi Creatura: Perceptions of Self in Writing of Marguerite d’Oingt, St. Brigitta, and Margery Kempe” (PhD diss., University of Alabama, 1992), 166.

<sup>30</sup> Actually, in the *Speculum* she says: “Or no ha pas grant teins que illieretenoreisonapresmatinesetcomencevetregardaen son livroassi come illiaveitacotuma” ([§14] Not long ago, she was praying after *matins*, and she began to look at her book, as was her habit). My stress.

<sup>31</sup> The Bible (Lk 2:22) specified a forty-day purification period after childbirth. The date of the Purification of the Virgin is thus, February 2.

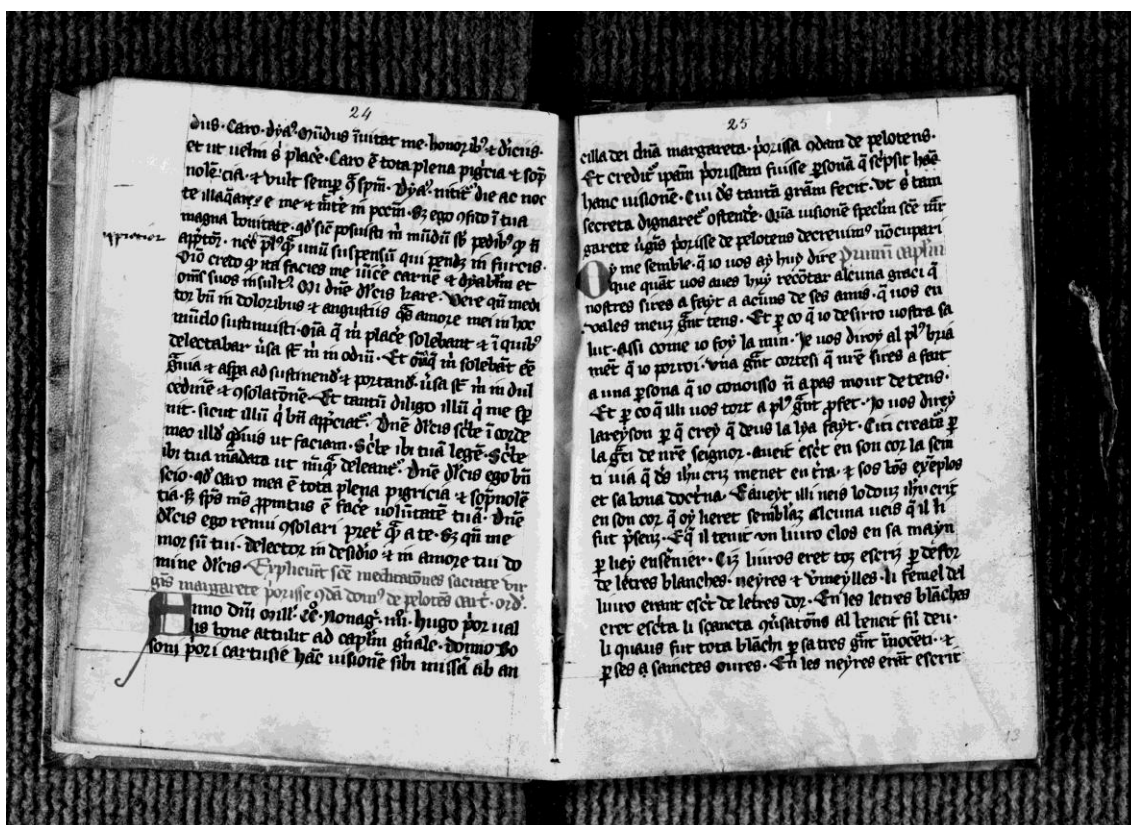
§6. Or vos diray briament coment ci creatura se estudievet en cet libro. Quant veneit lo matin, il li commencavet a pensar coment li beneyz diuz Deu volit desendre en la miseri de ce mont, et prendre nostre humanita a ajotar a sa deita, en tal maneri que l'on puet dire que Deus qui ere immortal fut mors per nos. Apres il pensave la grant humilita que fut en luy. Et pues pensave coment il vocit estre persegustoz jors. Apres pensave en sa grant poureta y en sa grant patienti, et coment il fut obedissenz tan que a la mort.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, this paragraph settles a threefold arrangement that sets out direct relationships between the different meditations and the episode of Christ life connected to the color:

White (Nativity)	<i>Coment li beneyz diuz Deu volit desendre en la miseri de ce mont</i> (The Incarnation/Nativity)	<i>Sa grant poureta</i> (His Poverty)
Black (Torture)	<i>La grant humilita que fut en luy</i> (His Humility)	<i>Sa grant patienti</i> (His Patience)
Red (Passion)	<i>Coment il fut obedissenz tan que a la mort</i> (His Obedience).	<i>Coment il fut obedissenz tan que a la mort</i> (His Obedience).

If we keep placing all the aims found in the whole first chapter of the *Speculum*, it is clear that, although the copyist did not display it in the page layout, they all fit in this threefold structure.

<sup>32</sup> “Now I will tell you briefly how this creature studied this book. When morning came she began to think of the manner in which the blessed Son of God wanted to descend to the misery of this world, take on our humanity and join it to His divinity, so that one can say that God, who was immortal, died for us. Then she thought of the great humility that was in Him. Then she thought about how He always wanted to be persecuted. Then she thought of His great poverty and His great patience and how He was obedient until death.”



2. Beginning of the *Speculum* in the oldest manuscript we have, where can see the absolute lack of images or visual tools. Bibliothèque de Grenoble, ms. 5785R, f.24.

Also, once we have filled the entire table with all the cogitations, it allows us to glimpse the cognitive process that stimulates Marguerite’s meditations, which are defined by four actions: thinking about what the letters say, considering what they refer to, comparing them with her life, and concluding what she can learn from that:

LETTERS	WHITE	BLACK	RED
<b>What they say:</b>	□ “The Saintly life of the blessed Son of God” (§4)	■ “The blows and the slaps and the filthy things that the Jews had thrown at His saintly face” (§4)	■ “The wounds and the precious blood that was shed for us” (§4)
<b>What they refer to:</b>	□ The Incarnation and the Nativity (§6). □ “His great poverty” (§6).	■ “His great humility” (§6). ■ “His great patience” (§6).	■ How “He always wanted to be persecuted” (§6). ■ “How He was obedient until death” (§6)
<b>Comparing to them:</b>	□ She is “full of falsity and lies” (§7).	■ She is “full of pride” (§7)	■ “She found in herself just the opposite” (of wanting to

			be persecuted, §7).
	□ She does not want “to be so poor” (§7)	■ “She found none in herself” (of patience, §7).	■ “She did not find herself as obedient” (§7).
<b>From them, she learns:</b>	□ “Christ’s life and doctrine” (§8)	■ “To bear the tribulations with patience”( §9).	■ “Not only to bear tribulations with patience, but also to enjoy them” (§10).

This would not be, however, an odd case in the Western literature of the Middle Ages.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, A.-M. Legaré has already linked the image of the colored books to the mnemonic mechanisms developed by Carruthers.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Legaré analyzes an early fourteenth-century French manuscript which reunites several doctrinal works.<sup>35</sup> One of them is “Le Conte des trois chevaliers et des trois livres,” a tale about three knights who abandoned their arms and joined the pious life. After a while in a monastery, the two younger knights were tempted by the devil and resolved to leave that arduous life. At this moment, the oldest knight tried to convince them of the benefits of the devout life, by reproaching them for wasting their time instead of studying the three books that might have saved their life and shown God’s love. He persuaded them to stay by promising to let them know those valuable books.

<sup>33</sup>For a similar case, see Lina Bolzoni, “Allegorie e immagini della memoria: il *Colloquio spirituale* e il ciclo della *Torre della Sapienza*,” in *La rete delle immagini*, 47-101.

<sup>34</sup>Legaré, “L’image du livre comme adjuvant mémoriel,” 137

<sup>35</sup> Chantilly, Bibliothèque Condé, ms 137; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, n.a.fr. 4338 and fr. 1136.



3. Three knights with the three colored books. *Recueil de traités de dévotion en prose et en vers: Legiloque*, 1325-1350. Paris, BnF, fr.4338, f.135r

Although the narrator does not describe the appearance of these volumes, as Marguerite does in the *Speculum*, he points out the metaphoric value of their colors. The first was the “Book of Conscience,” the knowledge of all the sins and mistakes done in the whole life. The second was the “Book of Science,” which gave the experience of truth. Finally, the last one was the “Book of Wisdom,” which provided the knowledge of the “real delight.” Legaré stresses that, from this point onwards, the narrator presents a ternary structure that associates each book with different elements, such as colors (precisely black, white and gold), rubrics, meanings, and the time of day. This text would therefore likewise work as a mnemonic tool exactly as Marguerite’s *Speculum* would, since all the threefold considerations could be reconstructed as a typical schema of the time (or as the table we elaborated above). Additionally, the attitude and “actions” for the study are similar to those of Marguerite: thinking about the colors, considering the rubrics, reflecting on the meanings, and placing it in a precise time of the day (only the comparison to oneself is missing). Consequently, although Marguerite uses three kinds of colored letters in one volume, while in the *Le Conte des trois chevaliers*, the image is that of the three colored books, the similarities are striking.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the main point that in both cases the mnemonic craft is

<sup>36</sup> In both cases the book is considered as a symbol of knowledge and wisdom, since the two works have a doctrinal purpose. On the other hand, the usage of the book imagery allow both authors to

articulated not by the book, but by the colors and the reader's attitudes to the text.<sup>37</sup>

By way of a cursory glance at further works share the same image of colored books, we will be able to prove that these are not peculiar cases, but general devices of reading and writing in the Middle Ages throughout Europe. Pierre Gardette, one of the editors of Marguerite's works in French, briefly pointed out some coetaneous texts<sup>38</sup> like Bonvesindella Riva's *Libro delletrescritture*, Ruusbroec's "The Seven Enclosures," and even a medieval French song from around 1330:

Trois letres devons recorder/  
quechascuns doit avoir en lui:  
La première, d'enque noir, tret  
Nos pechiez que devons gemir;  
La seconde, vermeille, c'est l'amour Jhesucrist,  
...  
La tierce letre est d'or cler,  
qui sus les deus porte le pris:  
C'est la saintedivinité<sup>39</sup>

F. Willaert gathered Gardette's assumptions and focused on Ruusbroec's fragment from "The Seven Enclosures." There, the author describes three books written in black, white, red, and gold ink, which were linked to different Christian doctrines as in the previous cases. Willaert accurately analyzes this image and stresses that "with these three (metaphoric) booklets, the overall structure of the passage is delineated quite

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develop the conception of the mystery hidden that is revealed when the book is opened. In order to understand that, we must mention that the work that follows "Le Conte des trois chevaliers et des trios livres" in the manuscript is "Le Livre de vie et aiguillon d'amour." This shows a literary picture depicting an opened book with a crucifixion on a white surface where it is written, in golden letters: "IhesusNazarenusrexJudeorum." Certainly the parallelisms between these two manuscripts must be better studied, especially because A.-M. Legaré states that the manuscripts she studied came probably from a Carthusian ambience and were particularly spread in a female environment. See Legaré, "L'image du livre comme adjuvant mémoriel," 133.

<sup>37</sup> This will be a common tool in meditative literature. J. Hamburger already noticed the mnemonic nature of colored metaphors in the Rosary prayers of Dominican monks from Unterlinden. Jeffrey Hamburger, "La bibliothèque d'Unterlinden et l'art de la formation spirituelle," in *Les dominicaines d'Unterlinden*.1 (Paris: Somogy, 2000), 110-159 (141). In the same way, B McCormick has stressed the mnemonic character of the stones in the building of Christine de Pizan's *La Cité des dames*. Betsy McCormick, "Building the Ideal City: Female Memorial Praxis in Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* XXXVI, no. 1 (2003): 149-171.

<sup>38</sup> Duraffour, Gardette, and Durdilly, eds., *Les oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt*, 160.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Järnström and Arthur Långfors, eds., *Recueil de chansons pieuses du XIIIe siècle* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Tomituksia, 1927), 2:186-87.

clearly.”<sup>40</sup> So, agreeing with Carruthers and noticing what we have outlined above, Willaert concludes that this literary picture structures the text as well as helping the reader to memorize it:

Every evening as you come before you bed, you should read though three booklets, if you have the opportunity, and should always carry them with you. The first little book is old, ugly and dirty, written in black ink. The second little book is white and lovely, written in red blood. The third is blue and green, written entirely in fine gold.<sup>41</sup>

Bonvesindella Riva, one of the most notorious poets in thirteenth-century Italian literature,<sup>42</sup> also displays a similar literary image, because in his *Il librodelle trescritture*, he spreads out a web of associations focused on three colored writings (scrittura “nigra,” “rubra,” and “aurea”) that provide the backbone of the entire work.<sup>43</sup> Written in a style close to the *miracula* or *exempla* of its time, this work depicts Hell in the “black letters” chapter; Christ’s Passion in the red part; and Paradise in the golden one. As we have seen above in the previous cases, these three parts combine the elements in order to build a mnemonic system. This system displays correspondences, for instance, between the twelve punishments in Hell and the twelve glories in Heaven. In his study on Bonvesin’s works, R. Stefanini notices the proceeding—which he interlinks to the *contrapasso*<sup>44</sup>—and elaborates a table of equivalences that we partially reproduce here:

SCRITTURA NIGRA <sup>45</sup>	SCRITTURA AUREA
1. Fire (ll.297-328): description of the punishment (through l.316) and lament of the damned soul [32 ll.]	1. The beauty of the Heavenly City (ll.81-184): description of the glory (through l.160) and song of the blessed soul. [104 ll.]

<sup>40</sup> Frank Willaert, “Margaret’s Booklets: Memory in *Vanden seven sloten* by Jan van Ruusbroec,” in *Medieval Memory: Image and Text* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 99-128 (105).

<sup>41</sup> *Jan van Ruusbroec: Vanden seven sloten (The Seven Enclosures)*, ed. G. de Baere, trans. H. Rolfson, vol. 2 of *Jan van Ruusbroec: Opera omnia*, Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis 102 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), 899-903.

<sup>42</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento: Poesia didattica del nord. Poesia “popolare” e giullaresca*, vol. 2 (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1995), 667-670.

<sup>43</sup> “In explaining the subject of the poem in the opening verses of Si (ll. 9-20), Bonvesin himself states that these three texts constitutes a single work (i.e., a *libro* containing three separate “scriptures”). Apparently, the scribes still felt free to dismantle his triptych.” Patrick S. Diehl and Ruggero Stefanini, trans., *Bonvesin da la Riva: Volgari Scelti; Selected Poems*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 123.

<sup>44</sup> “At times, the relationship is so obvious that nothing more than a mournful *ubisuntis* required to point it out, without any need for comparative or casual propositions (punishment no.9); in other cases, the bond is instead rather general (glory no.1) or loose and unconvincing (glory no.5). As well as single, there are also double *contrapassi*, and in these instances the two members either complement each other or act as alternatives.” *Ibid.*, 131-2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-8.



2. Stench (ll. 329-353-372) [44 ll.]	2. Fragrance (ll. 185-212-224) [40 ll.]
3. Cold (ll. 373-392-400) [28 ll.]	3. Wealth and rank (ll. 225-256-276) [52 ll.]
4. Worms (ll. 401-420-432) [32 ll.]	4. Liberation from this world's prison (ll.276-308-324) [48 ll.]
5. The face of the other damned and the sight of the devils (ll. 433-480-492) [60 ll.]	5. The face of the angels, of the Virgin, and of Christ (ll. 325-392-408) [84 ll.]
6. Groans, weeping, uproar (ll. 493 -520 -536) [44 ll.]	6. Music and songs (ll. 409 -452 -464) [56 ll.]
7. The tortures inflicted by the devils (ll.537-628-652) [116 ll.]	7. The attendance of Jesus Christ Himself upon the blessed (ll. 465 – 484 -496) [32 ll..]
...	...

Stefanini hence emphasizes that Bonvesin “relies upon a basic pattern to which he adheres closely, merely retouching its outlines here and there as the particular case demands. Along the vertical axis of the text, he thus produces twelve *derivations* in each set . . . when one puts pains and glories side by side, their horizontal oppositions yield a sort of *paronomasia*.”<sup>46</sup> The system, however, is not as accurate as Marguerite’s, since some of the links are lacking or seem rather shaky.<sup>47</sup>

To conclude, I would like to say that I have not intended to provide a thorough study on all the works I have quoted. I simply wanted to refer to excellent examples of research in order, at least, to emphasize that the structure seems to recur in every case where the metaphor of the colored book appears.<sup>48</sup> And although the associations I made warrant deeper study, this first approach already allows me to claim the applicability of visual-mnemonic analysis for those medieval spiritual works related to study, meditation, and/or vision. There is still a great deal of work to do in this field, and many interesting writers to scrutinize. For instance, I strongly believe that Hadewijch’s *Visions* deserve further study in this way, as do Mechtild von Magdeburg,

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>47</sup> “Each glory should represent the opposite of the corresponding punishment . . . while the eleventh opposition, stated in negative terms of loss and escape, is perfectly symmetrical, the twelfth, directed at the eternity of either pain or bliss, is not so neat.” Ibid., 131-2.

<sup>48</sup> In the very same thirteenth-century Italy, we may find more examples in poetry and meditational literature. We could name Domenico Cavalca (Tito Sante Centi, ed., *Domenico Cavalca: Lo Specchio della Croce* [Bologna: O.P. Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 1992], 282-284) or Iacopone da Todi’s, 14th Lauda (Matteo Leonardi, ed., *Jacopone da Todi: Laude a cura di* [Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2010], 54-56).

RaimundusLulius, and Meister Eckhart. At the same time, I hope to have proved that, if we follow a commitment of historicity, that is to say, if we try to understand these works in their context rather than freely use them in ours, we will be able to establish coincidences, differences, and peculiarities with a more genuine and reliable way.

However, the fruits of this hermeneutic approach to medieval mystical texts not only will inspire the present practices of spirituality by supplying them with another way to use and understand the same texts they still currently use; but also it will provide the scholarship with new ways to envisage the literature and the practice of reading itself. Mystical works are essentially visual; their authors have been forced to express with words what was intended to be reconstructed visually in the reader's mind. That is why they can furnish, clearer than any other kind of literature, a new way to comprehend both medieval and modern texts, according to the "visual turn"<sup>49</sup> stated by recent scholarship. Such new wave of criticism is precisely claiming another manner of conceiving cognition, memory, creation, and reading in the study of literary works departing from the relationship between Word and Image. An illustrative example of this is the concept of "mnemonic criticism,"<sup>50</sup> which was essentially born from this new approach to medieval mystical and meditational works, and has later spread to analyze Renaissance, baroque and even modern texts and their readers.

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<sup>49</sup>See, for example, Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor, "La cultura de la imagen y el declive de la lecto-escritura," *Arbor*, vol. 186, no. 743 (2010): 365-375.

<sup>50</sup> "Mnemonic criticism is not one « approach » among many to the *interpretation* of literature (as Engel's term might imply) but was a fundamental feature of ancient and medieval art, since it was basic both to elementary pedagogy and to all meditative composition (as though there were any other kind)." Mary Carruthers, "Inventional Rhetorics," 103-104. See also William E. Engel, "Mnemonic Criticism & Renaissance Literature: A Manifesto," *Connotations* 1, no. 1 (1991): 12-33; Lina Bolzoni, *La Stanza della memoria: Modelli letterari e iconografici nell'età della stampa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995); and Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor, *Teatro de la memoria: siete ensayos sobre mnemotécnica española de los siglos XVIII y XVIII* (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, 1988).