

# **The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages**

Edited by  
Albrecht Classen



# THE BOOK AND THE MAGIC OF READING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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EDITED BY  
ALBRECHT CLASSEN

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*To my parents who taught me the love for reading  
Anna Marie (d. 1983) and Traugott Classen*

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# Introduction

As changes in information technologies and their implications for forms of literacy in the future are debated, it seems a propitious time to reexamine the significance of the “battle for literacy” during the Early Middle Ages and also to explore the continuation of this “battle” into our modern time. With the help of the Christian Church, most areas of human life became the object of written documentation in this period. In fact we might say that life became text, and text became life, and the final truth, the *summum bonum*, was to be found in the written word—a metonym for God, who had revealed himself to man through the Bible. The Evangelist John says about the Creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1. 1). Those who could read and knew how to comprehend words written in a book or on a single parchment were the privileged few within a sea of orality, but they were also the harbingers of divine knowledge and the carriers of specific human learning.<sup>1</sup> In the early Middle Ages the debate about reading focused primarily on the proper form of biblical exegesis. Jerome stated, for example, “Each and every sentence, syllable, letter, and comma in God’s writings is replete with meaning.” Origen even expressed his fear that it was extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible fully to fathom all the divine meaning contained in the Bible, whereas Augustine referred to the Bible as a “book of mysteries.”<sup>2</sup> In later centuries the question regarding the hermeneutic meaning of the book and literacy extended to all written texts. Consequently God’s creation revealed itself as a book filled with signs which, however, the ordinary human reader cannot understand without spiritual and intellectual guidance provided by theological exegesis. This in turn proved to be “a high-stakes reading

under pressure, for as we read, we must face—and face down—scriptural aporias.”<sup>3</sup>

Without a doubt, the world of pictures, sculptures, stained glasses, and so forth served as a practical substitute for the book, and studying pictures can easily be interpreted as a form of metaphorical reading, as it has been discussed since the early Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> The question to be examined by the contributors to this volume, however, will focus on the relevance of the written book—that is, the importance of the written words for the circle of literati who could be found both among the clergy and the learned laity, especially the poets, historians, and scribes.

Admittedly, the traditional approach to the study of the Middle Ages only via the manuscript, architecture, the chronicle, or the sculpture as silent, though eloquent testimonies, has recently been discarded in favor of much more complex ones. The new approaches, generally speaking, are based on an understanding of medieval culture as a combination of oral and literary components, and as an intriguing combination of the sacred with the secular, the Christian with the pagan, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> For instance, although they focused on many different cultural documents from many different periods, all participants of the international conference on “Aufführung” und “Schrift” in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit” (“Performance” and “Writing” in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age) at the Monastery Seeon in Bavaria (September 26–30, 1994) agreed, that the Middle Ages were a semioral world and that the study of this world requires an adequate theoretical approach utilizing concepts developed by communication and media scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the signs contained in a written text or manuscript, in other words, both the book and reading, gained absolute primacy and even spiritual authority in many areas of daily life with the ascent of Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

This observation can be traced to the late antiquity period when St. Augustine, for instance, in his *City of God*, provides an interpretation of St. John’s vision:

By those books, then, which he first mentioned, we are to understand the sacred books old and new, that out of them it might be shown what commandments God had enjoined; and that book of the life of each man is to show what commandments each man has done or omitted to do. If this book be materially considered, who can reckon its size or length, or the time it would take to read a book in which the whole life of every man is recorded?<sup>8</sup>

This image proved to be extremely problematic for him, and yet Augustine also came up with the most ingenious explanation: “And this divine power is called a book, because in it we shall as it were read all that it causes us to remember” (Oates, *Basic Writings*, 531). Consequently, reading itself is tantamount to a divine act, and throughout the Middle Ages reading and writing were the intellectual skills of the privileged few until the printing press changed all that.<sup>9</sup>

As we still might claim for our modern culture—although this could change soon in the twenty-first century—the medieval book (parchment, scroll, manuscript, etc.) was the ultimate transmitter of knowledge and wisdom, both in theological and philosophical terms. Within the world of the Church and of Christian religion, the book even served as an object of veneration: it was synonymous with the divine secrets and divine truth. The Bible represented the most sacred book, but any other book, as a written witness, could assume a similar function,<sup>10</sup> because the book as such was considered—as Ulrich Fuetrer argued in his Bavarian chronicle in 1473—a treasure chest of the Christian belief and of all virtuous deeds. The fourteenth-century Italian jurist Lucas de Penna praised the book as the “*fundamentum memoriae*” (“foundation of memory”) and as the “*hostis oblivionis*” (“enemy of forgetfulness”), which was echoed by many other thinkers, such as Paolo Vergerio in his treatise *De ingenibus et liberalibus studiis adoloscentine* (ca. 1400).<sup>11</sup>

Whether we turn to secular or religious literature, we always discover clear and unmistakable references to reading as an activity tantamount to a spiritual quest as it required the reader’s full mental capacities, the highest degree of learning, and a profound sense of the philosophical content of what the writer had conveyed on the parchment. In the following pages I will examine a wide range of literary and philosophical sources where reading and the book assume a critical position, and hope to lay the foundation for the various discussions following in the individual contributions to this volume. Essentially the issue is not the material book, the manuscript, but the reading process which requires a good reader who is not easily distracted or misled away from the full understanding of the deeper meaning of the text. The tenth-century homilist Ælfric of Eynsham, in his Homily on Midlent Sunday (*Dominica in Media Quadragesima*) admonishes against superficial reading which provides no true insights and actually blinds the reader: “Often someone sees beautiful letters written, then praises the writer and the letters, but does not know what

they mean. He who understands the art of the letters praises their beauty, and reads the letters, and understands their meaning.”<sup>12</sup> Even though Ælfric only proposes a didactic approach to biblical hermeneutics, his statement also clearly underscores the relevance of true reading for human hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup>

Those medieval readers who either discarded the text or disregarded its fundamental meaning were not only subject to failing in this life; they also endangered their transition into eternal life. Hugh of St. Victor, in his *Didascalicon*, praised good readers

who study the Sacred Scriptures precisely so that they may be ready, in accordance with the Apostle’s teachings, to “give the reason of that faith” in which they have been placed to everyone who asks it of them, . . . teach those less well informed, recognize the path of truth more perfectly themselves, and, understanding the hidden things of God more deeply, love them more intently.<sup>14</sup>

Both the many versions of *Apollonius of Tyre* composed during late antiquity and the entire Middle Ages, and Hartmann von Aue’s *Gregorius* (ca. 1180/1190) indicate that this message was one of the most important statements which the authors wanted to relate to their audiences.<sup>15</sup> We find very good examples confirming this observation in the works of Wolfram von Eschenbach (*Titarel*) and Geoffrey Chaucer (*Troilus*) because here we come across significant failures to read properly, and these failures lead, as both narrators indicate, to catastrophes.<sup>16</sup> In other words, these two poets strongly argued in favor of the book as the ultimate vehicle for all basic human epistemological efforts, without opposing, specifically, oral channels of communication. As long as the lovers are together, talk with each other, and hence confirm their love for each other orally, everything goes well in their life and they experience happiness. Only when they are separated and have to rely on the written document, the ultimate test of their love has begun, that is, whether they utilize the “book,” whether they are able to read it properly, and whether their written messages are received and understood adequately. Both in Wolfram’s and in Chaucer’s text the lovers are separated at the end and lose their partner because, as one might argue, the reading does not fully substitute for their actual being together and sharing their love. Certainly the medieval world continued, at least far into the fifteenth century, to be fundamentally an oral society as the majority of people were illiterate; and most literature,

particularly vernacular and secular, was performed orally. In this sense, the rules set up by Saint Benedict of Nursia for his monastic order and closely copied by the Cistercians and other orders, had a far-reaching impact on medieval intellectual life: "Coming together to be read to also became a necessary and common practice in the lay world of the Middle Ages."<sup>17</sup> Even after the invention of the printing press most secular literature was not intended for silent reading, rather it was meant to be read aloud to an audience, whether it consisted of *illiterati* or not, as reading constituted a communal activity.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the popular German chapbook *Fortunatus* (1509) explicitly mentions a book in which the protagonist records his life experiences, but the narrator also points out that the book's use is rather limited because despite its well-meant warnings and advice, the sons do not consult it after their father's death. Because of this disrespect for the book, both fail miserably and succumb to a violent death.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of reading as an oral, communal activity and of the notion of the book as a vehicle for divine revelation, reading and the book were invested with an aura of power and authority. And the *literati*, the chosen few who could read God's word, found reading to be a significant basis for their high status. In the *Poema de Santa Oria* by the thirteenth-century Spanish cleric Gonzalo de Berceo (c. 1190-1260) we read: "Las letras de los justos de mayor sanctidad / paresçien más leíbles, de mayor claridad" (XCV, 93) (The letters of the just enjoying higher sanctity appeared more readable, with more clarity). The script on the robes of Voxmea "reveals Berceo's awareness that the construction and recollection of holiness depend upon the power of those who wield the pen."<sup>20</sup> The book or the written word and the notion of reading also served as powerful metaphors for the act of interpreting nonverbal symbols.

The popular Franciscan preacher Berthold of Regensburg (d. 1272) claimed, in his sermon "Von den siben planêten" ("Of the Seven Planets"), that every element in this world, every stone, tree, or flower can be read, as they are letters written by God and placed in front of our eyes to be studied as letters on a parchment. According to the famous Cistercian Abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the ultimate learning experience occurs only when the diligent mind comprehends that the entire creation is a book which the soul needs to study in the same way as a scholar studies his books: "Experto credo: aliquid amplius invenies in silvis, quam in libris. Ligna et lapides docebunt te, quod a magistris audire non possis"<sup>21</sup> ("I believe what I have experienced: certain things

you find better in the forest than in books. Woods and stones will teach you what you cannot hear from the teachers"). This was not a criticism of the traditional book and the reading of written texts, but a criticism of too literal reading and human stubbornness which refused to perceive the inner depth of the book on its allegorical and especially anagogical levels.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, when twelfth- and thirteenth-century vernacular poets embarked on the ambitious project to convey their own worldly messages to their audiences in obvious competition to the clerical authorities, they fell back on the sacred image of the book and on reading as the fundamental means to reach the inner truth of all things.<sup>23</sup> Although Wolfram von Eschenbach repeatedly claimed to have been illiterate (*Parzival* 115.27–30) and pretended never to have studied books (2.19–22), we now know that these statements have to be read tongue-in-cheek, and are derived from a topos already contained in the Old Testament: "non cognovi litteraturam" (Ps. 70 [71]. 15). There can be no doubt that Wolfram commanded an impressive range of knowledge in the areas of medicine, astronomy, astrology, and other occult sciences; but because of his deliberate self-irony he assumed the mask of an ignorant person and in reality strongly suggested, as we can observe both in his *Parzival*, *Willehalm*, and especially in his *Titarel* fragments, that good reading represents the ultimate path toward salvation.<sup>24</sup> At the end of his *Parzival* we learn that the converted heathen Feirefiz, Parzival's brother, specifically orders letters to be written through which the entire world of the East will be informed about the Christian truth (822).

Andreas Capellanus, in *De Amore* (ca. 1184–1190), used the same literary device to express his deep concern with the written word, which, properly read and understood, would represent the key to absolute and finite truth. Trained as a cleric, Andreas, while discussing the basic elements of worldly love for the enlightenment of his student Walter, incorporates many images of the written word as the basis for all learning, even in the area of love.<sup>25</sup> In the short Arthurian novella narrated at the end of book two, the Breton knight not only gains from the king the hawk which his lady had requested from him, but also "a parchment on which are written the rules of love which the King of Love himself, with his own mouth, pronounced for lovers."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, when the Breton's lady has learned the teachings of love, she has copies made for all members of her court: "Every person who had been summoned and had come to the court took home a written copy of the

rules and gave them out to all lovers in all parts of the world.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, reading, that is, a careful study and thorough interpretation of the written text, is here regarded as the basis of all epistemological efforts, even in the area of human love. Giovanni Boccaccio, famous author of the *Decameron* and highly regarded Italian Renaissance poet, likewise admonishes his audience:

I repeat my advice to those who would appreciate poetry, and unwind its difficult involutions. You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another. . . . For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine.<sup>28</sup>

The admiration of the book as a material object and as the treasure of divine and human knowledge was, however, only the first step in a long process of acquiring literacy and thereby the higher levels of spiritual enlightenment. Much more important proved to be, of course, the reading itself and consequently the full understanding of the words contained in the book. In the anonymous Old French *Floire et Blanchefleur* the narrator informs us that the original story of these classical lovers can be found written in a book which was composed by a cleric two hundred years before (vv. 52–56).<sup>29</sup> The amazing thing here is that a cleric would have authored such an erotic tale, and that the actual performance of this tale was obviously done orally: “Hear, lords, hear lovers all, all those / Who bear the burden of love’s woes; / Maidens and knights, hark to my words” (1–3). Nevertheless, the message about love as conveyed through this narrative is contained in a book, and this image implies that anybody capable of reading would also be in a position to search for the original in a book, or for the true meaning of love. In other words, the oral and the written intersect at this point, but the image of the book as the source of the tale essentially remains the key to the understanding of the story. Marie de France praises books and their diligent study as the basis for any advancement in learning:

It was customary for the ancients, in the books which they wrote [. . .] to express themselves very obscurely so that those in later generations, who had to learn them, could provide a gloss for the text and put the finishing touches to their meaning. Men of learning were



aware of this and their experience had taught them that the more time they spent studying the texts the more subtle would be their understanding of them and they would be better able to avoid future mistakes.<sup>30</sup>

Although her *lais* seem to be destined for oral delivery, the context in which she places herself as a writer clearly marks the book and its thorough study as an essential instrument to acquire or maintain virtue and honor (Burgess and Busby, *Marie de France*, 41). Marie, however, takes the extra step to transfer oral tales into written form (56) because she does not want them to be forgotten and offers her composition to both a literate and an oral audience.<sup>31</sup> In the prologue to her *Fables*, Marie strongly admonishes her audience to read and to search for the inner meaning of her words:

Those persons, all, who are well-read,  
Should study and pay careful heed  
To fine accounts in worthy tomes,  
To models and to axioms:  
That which philosophers did find  
And wrote about and kept in mind.  
The sayings which they heard, they wrote,  
So that the morals we would note;  
Thus those who wish to mend their ways  
Can think about what wisdom says (vv. 1-10).<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in the Middle High German heroic epic *Diu Klage* (ca. 1210–1220), probably a literary reflection of the tragic consequences of the events discussed in the *Nibelungenlied*, the famous Bishop Pilgrim of Passau determines that a book has to be created in which all aspects of the horrible battle in Gran between the Burgundians and King Attila's men, of whom practically nobody survived, will be recorded. Every witness will be interviewed, and his or her testimony will be copied in this book, “wand iz vil übel wære, / ob ez behalten würde niht” [“for it would be very bad if it were not to be recorded”, 3478–79].<sup>33</sup> We are also immediately informed about the reason for the Bishop's decision: “This is the most momentous event that has ever occurred on the face of the earth.” Although *Diu Klage* was probably performed orally, the narrator unequivocally indicates that for him really significant information needs to be kept as a written document,

although he himself relies on the oral performance to deliver his tragic epic to his audience. Consequently, the *Klage* serves as an example that human history is truly reflected only in the book, and only those who are willing and able to read will be in a position to understand their own history, correct their course through life, and achieve enlightenment. Although the reference to an original book in which allegedly a Latin version had been copied down from which a Middle High German translation was made seems to be nothing but a fictional account, the poet nevertheless pointed out to his audience that the ultimate truth was to be found in a written record. More important, human history would not progress, rather humanity would slide backward into barbarism, if the audience would not understand the relevance of the book as a mirror in which their own past with its myriads of mistakes and errors could be read. Reading, therefore, the poet implies, means to move forward into a world of humanism based on bookish learning.<sup>34</sup>

Whether catastrophes such as the Armageddon which took place in *Gran (Nibelungenlied)* can be prevented in the future because of the book is a different question, of course. Hugh of St. Victor, at least, believed in the ultimate truth to be found in the book, the Holy Scripture, which, nevertheless, required a very meticulous and insightful interpretation leading to the *lectio divina*: "In order, therefore, that you may be able to interpret the letter safely, it is necessary that you not presume upon your own opinion, but that first you be educated and informed, and that you lay, so to speak, a certain foundation of unshaken truth upon which the entire superstructure may rest."<sup>35</sup>

The many implications of the various steps in the individual's educational, that is, the reading process, are manyfold and need not be spelled out here in detail. It must be mentioned, however, that the power of the written word quickly extended far beyond the world of the Christian church into the life of the aristocratic laity and the world of the educated citizenry. In politics and in business, in philosophy and art, in trade and in architecture, reading and writing became essential tools, and have continued to exert their role ever since.<sup>36</sup> Susan Smith might be too optimistic when she claims that, beginning in the twelfth century, "lay people from a diversity of social and professional backgrounds were reading and writing in growing numbers, some in Latin, but many more in the emerging vernaculars."<sup>37</sup> She might actually have limited this bold statement primarily to aristocratic lay women, as Herbert Grundmann has convincingly argued,<sup>38</sup> but overall, as the many literary testimonies discussed in this volume demonstrate,

orality was, indeed, eventually replaced by a wide-spread literacy, and the fascination which the book, the written document, exerted, was felt from very early on, at least since the twelfth century.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, this observation applies both to educated men and women from that time period, both to clerics and lay persons.<sup>40</sup>

We do not yet know whether we are about to witness that this epoch of bookishness, stretching from late antiquity to the end of the twentieth century, is coming to a close with the dawn of the computer age, whether the profound effects of reading skills on many different levels in the life of a human being will be transformed in face of computer screens, listserves (Internet), modems, and other forms of electronic communication. Warning voices have been heard many times,<sup>41</sup> but it seems as if the fourth industrial revolution based on computer hardware and software continues unabatedly.<sup>42</sup> The possibilities of digital technology seem to be endless and thus also infinitely superior to the printed book. The many options which the hypertext edition provides appeals to many readers who argue that digitizing of texts allows for a much more thorough and more informed study of literature.<sup>43</sup> But there are also grave disadvantages, even dangers, connected with the electronic medium as many critics have pointed out.<sup>44</sup> Ian Reinecke warns that in a computer-based society "most people may be offered more information but of a lesser quality."<sup>45</sup> Computers would make it possible, as he claims, to transform information into a product which only the economically rich will be able to afford: "If the use of the electronic technology for collecting, storing, and handling information continues as it has begun, a new polarization in the possession of information will arise."<sup>46</sup> Neil Postman is even more aggressive in his claim: "The milieu in which Technopoly flourishes is one in which the tie between information and human purpose has been severed . . . It is only now beginning to be understood that cultures may also suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms."<sup>47</sup> Technopoly, as defined by Postman, a world controlled and dominated by machines and computers, "casts aside all traditional narratives and symbols that suggest stability and orderliness, and tells, instead, of a life of skills, technical expertise, and the ecstasy of consumption. Its purpose is to produce functionaries for an ongoing Technopoly."<sup>48</sup> Some libraries spend a considerably larger portion of their budgets on computers than on books, others go the opposite way.

But so far no computer program seems to be able to substitute the wealth of a library stocked with books, especially as the human eye appears to be less adaptable to the computer screen than to the printed or handwritten page.<sup>49</sup>

Some reports, however, indicate that the average American, for example, reads more and devours more voluminous books than ever before, whereas other reports suggest that the opposite might be the case because of the allure of the computer screen and deceptive sales statistics of the modern book market.<sup>50</sup> Whatever the outcome of the current and swift transformations of modern culture will be—in both East and West, wherever modern computer technology gains influence and dwarfs the traditional media of knowledge—as the closure of the twentieth century approaches, the advantages and successes of the book culture dominating the previous fifteen hundred years of European history and literature are undeniable.<sup>51</sup> Still in 1860, Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*, had proclaimed:

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this, touches a man,  
(Is it night? Are we here alone?)  
It is I you hold, and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.<sup>52</sup>

In this respect, he was not alone at all, as we have seen, and could lean on a long-standing tradition which found a most eloquent representative in the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Fray Luis de Granada. In his *Introducción al símbolo de la fé* he pronounced: “What are they to be, all the creatures of this world, so beautiful and so well crafted, but separated and illuminated letters that declare so rightly the delicacy and wisdom of their author? . . . And we as well . . . having been placed by you in front of this wonderful book of the entire universe, so that through its creatures, as if by means of living letters, we are to read the excellency of our Creator.”<sup>53</sup>

This is not to say that the book culture of the previous epoch was unchallenged and that everybody had a share in it. The opposite would be much closer to the truth, as reading and writing were the privileges of the intellectual elite at least until roughly the eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger now even suggests that the rise of the twelfth-century book culture was the result of the realization that the eleventh-century charismatic culture was on its way out and could not be maintained

unless by means of written records. St. Maurice of Sigebert, for instance, had harshly railed against the book: "Let others believe in what they hear; I shall believe my eyes. Are not those whom I should imitate and those at whom I should marvel right here in front of me!"<sup>55</sup> But this charismatic culture was not opposed to the book as such, instead it defended the pedagogical principle of learning through example and face-to-face with inspiring teachers. Once these teachers disappeared, "the disputatious philosopher-scholar-teacher in the stamp of Peter Abelard" emerged, and with him the absolute dominance of the book as the ultimate vehicle for learning.<sup>56</sup>

It would not be long, however, before cathedral schools and other lower-level schools that based their teaching primarily on the book, also experienced a crisis. Some medieval critics soon pointed out that learning and study were, in their opinion, in sharp decline during their own lifetime. Thomasin von Zerclaere urged, in his *Der Welsche Gast* (1215–1216), that the children of the aristocracy should return to the schools and gain a bookish education; otherwise culture and hence also society would collapse:

Bi den alten ziten was,  
     daz ein ieglich chint las.  
 do warn gar die edelen chint gelert.  
     des si n niht ensint.  
 do stnt ouch din werlt baz  
     ane nit unde ane haz.  
 do bet ein ieglich man ere  
     nach siner chnst und nach siner lere.  
 die herren warn wol gelert,  
     da von warn si ouch wert.  
 nu ist der herren vil lutzel wis:  
     da von beiagent si nimmer pris.

(9849–60)

---

In the old days every child could read, and all noble children were educated. This they are no longer. At that time the world was in a much better shape, without envy and any hatred. Then every man enjoyed his honor according to his abilities and his wisdom. The lords were well educated and thus gained their reputation. Nowadays most lords are not wise and therefore do not gain any honor.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, the current debate about the changes in our education system and the role of the book had its parallels in the Middle Ages. Hugh of St. Victor proclaimed, for instance,

The things by which every man advances in knowledge are principally two—namely, reading and meditation. Of these, reading holds first place in instruction . . . For there are three things particularly necessary to learn for reading: first, each man should know what he ought to read; second, in what order he ought to read, that is, what first and what afterwards; and third, in what manner he ought to read.<sup>58</sup>

Hugh admired reading as the highway toward truth and argued that those who read do in fact reach for divine wisdom, as the opening of a book was tantamount to opening one's soul to God's words:

Twofold is the fruit of sacred reading, because it either instructs the mind with knowledge or it equips it with morals. It teaches what it delights us to know and what it behooves us to imitate. Of these, the first, namely knowledge, has more to do with history and allegory, the other, namely instruction in morals, has more to do with tropology. The whole of sacred Scripture is directed to this end.<sup>59</sup>

The intellectual elite throughout the Middle Ages espoused very similar views and expressed deep admiration for the book as the fundamental instrument of learning. The martyrs in the fourth and fifth centuries, such as Prudentius and Vincent, and the mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrud the Great, described themselves as the pages of a book on which God wrote his words; and they used the image of the book as a metaphor for their transcendental visions. Both in stained glasses and in frescoes, Christ was depicted as a scribe and as a reader, as the Old and New Testament already contained specific references to reading and writing as the medium for God to make himself known to man: "My tongue is the pen of a ready writer" (Psalms 45.2); John shows Christ writing with his finger on the ground (John 8. 6), whereas Paul likens the Christian congregation to a letter (2 Cor. 3.3). Even more significantly, the *Book of Revelations* declared that a book decides the fate of the souls in eternity: "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the

*book of life*: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (Rev. 20.12).<sup>60</sup>

Twelfth-century humanists and theologians energetically pursued the metaphor of the book as an essential epistemological instrument, whether we refer to Peter the Venerable or Henry of Settimello, to Peter Riga or Baudri of Bourgueil. Alanus de Insulis speaks of the "book of experience," and Bernard Silvestris of human history as a book to be studied by those who want to learn. Conrad of Megenberg secularized the image of the book when he referred to the "Book of Nature," and Nicholas of Cusa remarked that some saints considered the world as a written book, although for him the world was like a book which revealed its inner truth when read properly.<sup>61</sup>

About four hundred years later the Romantics, following their medieval forerunners, were to realize this concept again in their admiration of nature as a book which contains many enigmatic but revelatory signs that have to be read and studied. This metaphorical reading facilitates the reading of letters and words in a book, and it prepares the observant student for the interpretation of the ultimate book, the biblical account expressed in the ultimate revelation.<sup>62</sup> We can even go many hundreds of years backward to find other famous examples of reading as the crucial tool in reaching out for God. St. Augustine, for example, presented himself in many ways as a reader and talked about reading as a key aspect for the exegesis of the divine word and of creation. And he also referred to St. Ambrose as an attentive reader, indicating a whole circle of highly trained philosophical readers among the Church Fathers.<sup>63</sup> Most important, he himself had learned during his youth that reading had effected his conversion, and that God's command "tolle lege, tolle lege" (8.12:29) or: "Take up and read. Take up and read," lead to his salvation.<sup>64</sup> As soon as Augustine has read, he reports in his Confessions, "Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away" (8.12:202). According to Brian Stock, this experience, related in Augustine's autobiography, makes him "the first to present a consistent analysis of the manner in which we organize the intentional structure of thought through this activity: he suggests that through reading a 'language game' can become a 'form of life.'"<sup>65</sup> More than that, however, Augustine also presents to us the book as a vessel of God's power and grace, and thereby invites us to perceive reading as a path toward intellectual and

spiritual healing, or to consider the book as the safe haven for the human soul.<sup>66</sup>

Where do these and similar observations take us in our interpretation of courtly literature of the high and late Middle Ages? Several years ago, Elisabeth Schmidt pointed out that in the introductory narrative to the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, which in turn introduces the narrative stage for the voluminous Grail-Lancelot cycle, the narrator reports that he received the book out of Christ's hands and thus metonymically the Grail itself. The book promises to open the readers' and listeners' eyes to the secrets of the holy Trinity, but anybody interested in these secrets must promise not to reveal them to anybody not initiated: "et apres chou dolt, en tel maniere, dire, k'il le die de langhe de cuer, si que ja icole de la bouce ne paraut; si que cha chele de la bouche ne parolt" (and afterward one has to say [the secrets] in a way which is the language of the heart, so that the language of the mouth is not used). Those who speak the words written in the book aloud, will cause the earth to collapse.<sup>67</sup> The reading process thus assumes, although part and parcel of the world of vernacular, that is, Arthurian courtly literature, a parallel function to the study of the Bible and other divine books.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, however, there were also many dangers involved in reading, as the book could be a deceptive medium towards enlightenment, as the example of the Fall and Adam and Eve's failure indicated. Reading required extensive studies, and many failed in their efforts to grasp the inner truth.<sup>69</sup> According to Augustine, words as such were no guarantors to grasp the divine wisdom: they only reminded persons of things already known.<sup>70</sup> Gregorius, in Hartmann von Aue's religious narrative (ca. 1190–1200), demonstrates, for instance, that reading without the help of any instructor could easily mislead or offer nothing but unintelligible messages. Both the book as the medium and reading as the process required in depth investigation and the reader's full attention in order to be productive.<sup>71</sup> Juan Ruiz, in his *El libro de buen amor* (1330), provides us with other reasons why reading and writing are such important intellectual faculties:

Man's memory slips: so say the decretals. To remember everything and forget nothing is more divine than human: so say the decretals. This is why memory is a property of the soul . . . I wrote this little foreword as a decent warning and composed this new book, in which



I have set down some of the subtle tricks of frivolous worldly love  
which some people employ in order to sin.<sup>72</sup>

At this point Ruiz purports to offer moral and ethical teachings, whereas the subsequent discourse indicates that he probably had very different aspects in mind. The key aspect, however, is revealed by his insistence that the written word serves as a guarantor against forgetfulness and functions as a mirror for sinful man in which he can reflect his soul. To fulfill this function the reader has to ignore the superficial value of the words and search for the true intention of Ruiz's book (40). Later, the author resumes this topic and emphasizes again that proper reading is a crucial activity to gain the highest form of insight: "many people read a book and hold it in their hands, but they do not know what they read or how to understand; they have something precious and much sought, but they do not respect it properly" (268 f.). Ruiz, however, never gives up his sharp-witted irony and, pretending to speak in favor of the church's teaching, subtly reveals that he could also be of a different opinion. In fact his book could represent, after all, a strong support of worldly love: "This book has good qualities, whatever part of it is read, because if a man with an ugly wife or a woman with an impotent husband should read it, they would devote themselves immediately to the service of God" (307). Of course, we might add, that this does not say anything about all the other readers. Indeed Ruiz calls upon his audience to carefully peruse the many different levels of meaning of his text—"each story has another meaning on a different level, beyond that which is stated in the pleasant narrative" (308)—and to discover for themselves the power of the written word as an epistemological instrument of greatest relevance for the development of human society.

In Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, for example, composed sometime in the 1170s, the young hero also comes across the graveyard of the fallen Trojan heroes. Looking at their tombstones, he realizes that their lives and deaths had a monumental meaning, as their heroic deeds are preserved in the written words carved into stone:

He saw Achilles' tomb, of lesser breadth  
than fame, adorned with verses such as these:

AEACUS SON HECTORS SLAYER I FELL  
UNARMED UNWARY IN A HIDDEN SPOT  
PIERCED THROUGH THE HEEL BY PARIS STEALTHY DART

The brevity of these words led the king  
to vivid recollection of that prince,  
and on the barrend sands he poured pure wine.<sup>73</sup>

Although the tombstone is a highly specialized form of a “book,” Alexander’s reading reconnects him both with the past of his model warriors and his own future as a world leader. The written text forces him to meditate and to reflect on historical events and the course of man’s destiny. In other words, Alexander does not simply read some words commemorating dead heroes, but in reality views a mirror showing him significant signs which he needs to decipher before going on with his own life.

It should be clear by now that both theological and secular authors pursued the same goal, to enlighten their readers / audience about the profound significance of the written text as the essential vehicle with which “to overcome the imperfection of the human word” by reading a text and applying thorough exegesis to take the reader toward salvation.<sup>74</sup> The human mind proves to be too weak, however, always to understand the higher truths expressed in the sacred books; hence simplified texts need to be composed for those who lack the intelligence and education to comprehend the divine message in its absolute and abstract form. Many secular authors provided, therefore, their own answers to the spiritual quest through their secular and entertaining texts. The reading process did not, however, lose its ultimate purpose, and once the first levels of exegesis were reached, the willing reader could proceed in his / her quest for knowledge. Both the book as a divine instrument and reading as one of the highest forms of intellectual activities represented the key elements of medieval epistemology.

The French “feminist” writer Christine de Pizan provides us with a shining example of true booklearning and admiration for the book as the vessel of deep truth in her *Book of the Deeds and Good Character of King Charles V the Wise*. This king was a great collector of books and spent much of his money on assembling a great library. Although he was familiar with Latin well enough to read in that language, “he was so provident that because of the great love he had for those who would follow him in times to come, he wanted to provide them with teachings and knowledge leading to all sorts of virtue, and for this reason he had all the most important books translated from Latin into French by solemn masters highly competent in all the sciences and arts.”<sup>75</sup> Of course a writer like Christine would have adulated a king

like him, a patron of the arts and literature, but she also suggests that his collection represented not only a literary treasure, but especially served as a key for spiritual, intellectual, and scholarly enlightenment.

Whereas Christine was a great scholar herself, and an outstanding writer of her time, and in this respect—very understandably—profoundly admired books and writing as some of the most important educational tools, she also criticized certain books which contained, as she says, plain lies, particularly about women. In her *Letter of the God of Love* she charges Ovid with having written a bad book, *The Remedy of Love*, and ridicules all the clerics who use it in their school classes to warn their students of “women[’s] nasty ways” (147.284). Moreover, Ovid’s *Art of Love* would not truly teach anything about love: “The man who would behave as in that book / Will never love, however he is loved” (148. 374–75), and the same applies to the misogynist attacks in *The Romance of the Rose*. Christine’s response concludes in these famous lines: “If women, though, had written all those books / I know that they would read quite differently, / For well do women know the blame is wrong” (149.417–19).

Without a doubt, Christine’s criticism can only be applauded for its sharp and witty insights and strong defense of women. For our purpose, though, what matters is not her erudite opposition to these hateful books, but the fact that she herself resorts to the book to enter the debate and convey her message through the written text. With Christine de Pizan we have, of course, already entered the late Middle Ages, a time of intensive book production even before the invention of the printing press.<sup>76</sup> The point of her arguments rests on the observation that the books written by men are filled with lies, whereas her own book, her own text, contains the truth about women who are invited to read this text. In this sense, not even Christine deviates from the position taken by scholastic writers and the great poets of courtly romances and epics. The debate between Christine and her opponents does not target the book as such, does not question the validity of reading and writing, but instead invites us to a debate about the specific meaning of a book, urges the sincerely interested readers to find truth in her own words copied on her own parchment, and to form their own opinion based on a solid comparison of her texts with those in which male authors have traditionally attacked women. The book continued to be a metaphor of its time, particularly for this outstanding medieval-French “feminist.”

Those critics of the book as a symbol of traditional scholasticism and, in a strange way closely wedded to it, misogyny, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who even burns her husband Jankyn's book, do not disqualify this observation. The Wife's criticism is not directed against the book as such, but rather against the willful denigration of women contained in some books, just as Christine de Pizan does not argue against reading and writing in general terms, but instead severely questions the justification of men's vitriolic attacks against women contained in specific books. In both cases, to be sure, we can identify monumental figures of medieval literature who were influential supporters of the book and the intellectual power of reading, both of which were the essential tools of their own trade.

Robert S. Sturges even offers the intriguing interpretation of "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" as a demonstration that life itself was considered a form of a book which required careful studies: "The Wife also perceives other people, and indeed life itself, as texts to be interpreted,"<sup>77</sup> but she inappropriately "exerts interpretive power over divine language rather than submitting to it" (Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation*, 165). And the more she rails against the messages contained in certain books, the more she appeals to the readers to perceive the inner truths of all texts because they are, as texts and thus as objects of reading, available for thorough examination, not ephemeral products of oral culture, and invite the readers to form a community of interpreters, even if the individual interpretations might vary widely. To quote Sturges one more time, "*The Canterbury Tales* reminds us that communication is not the true function of a text—but it does invite participation in its textuality." As such, the book and reading are the fundamental "condition of life" (*Medieval Interpretation*, 175).

Even at the end of the Middle Ages when the printing press had largely replaced the traditional manuscript culture, hence had secularized the book as a means for epistemological investigations, the spiritual power of the written word continued to exert its influence in some cases. Thomas Malory, among others, provides a stunning example for this observation in his quasi-romanticizing Arthurian tale, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the beginning, when Merlin has set up the magical stone, and on top of it a steel anvil with its mysterious sword which only the future king of England would be able to pull out, the moment has arrived for the written word to reassume its central position for courtly society. The sword stuck in the stone has the following letters written in gold on it: "WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD

OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL, IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ALL ENGLAND.”<sup>78</sup> Both the scripture and the deed are required to determine the predestined ruler. Not surprisingly, the archbishop functions as the judge to declare Arthur as the new king of England because he is not only the spiritual leader, but also the master of the word, or the Bible. Malory clearly designates the inscription as equivalent to a divine message as it provides the ultimate answer for a human dilemma which nobody can solve: “‘He is not here,’ said the Archbishop, ‘that shall achieve the sword, but doubt not God will make him known’” (Malory, *Le morte D’Arthur*, 16). In his admiration of reading and the book as a metaphor of an entire age Malory proves to be an idealist who still believed in the spiritual power of the written word. Many of his contemporaries were much more doubtful, as Sebastian Brant in his *Das Narrenschiff* (1494; “The Ship of Fools”) and the anonymous author of *Fortunatus* (1509) indicate. Both indicate that the book and reading still play an important role, perhaps even a bigger role than ever before in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, both would have vehemently disagreed with Malory with regard to the significance of reading as the rapid multiplication of printed texts blunted the readers’ spiritual awareness and radically reduced their ability to penetrate the deeper meaning of the written words.<sup>79</sup>

This volume combines a number of articles which approach the question regarding the relevance of the book, of reading, and writing in the Middle Ages from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. Each of them refers, in some way, to the fundamental topos of the world as a book, a powerful cultural icon representing the human quest typical for the entire Middle Ages, long before the Enlightenment fundamentally changed this relationship between the reader and the word.<sup>80</sup> The purpose of this collection was to bring together studies on individual texts written in the major European languages from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. Raymond Cormier observes the significance of reading as a catalyst of love in the Old French *Roman d’Eneas* and the Middle High German *Eneit* by Heinrich von Veldeke; Penny Simons examines, on the other hand, the old French *Dolopathos* and its messages regarding the relevance of the written text and its close reading; Jean Jost analyzes Chaucer’s perception of the “magic of reading”; Patricia Grieve contributes an investigation of the Spanish *Libro de Apolonio*; Albrecht Classen presents a critical discussion of a handful of significant Middle High German romances where reading

assumes an epistemological function. Not surprisingly, although all their objects of analysis were written in different languages and at different times during the Middle Ages, the various poets and artists all share the common belief in the book as a representative of true wisdom, as a medium through which to reach the highest form of human enlightenment, and finally as a catalyst for salvation. Those who can read are on their path toward happiness; those who have failed in their efforts are condemned and face death and then a life in Hell.

Burt Kimmelman, comparing the *Pearl*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Piers Plowman* with each other, argues that they all are carried by the same fundamental concept of the text or rather body of texts as the intellectual nexus of the Middle Ages. Moreover, he suggests that this critical awareness of the power of the book provided the authors with a strong, almost pre-Renaissance authority or *auctoritas*. Despite the deliberate anonymity typical of the Middle Ages, these texts, but probably many more as well, echo the writer's name, are carriers of his or her identity, and pay homage to their creators. Jean-Marie Kauth considers the thirteenth-century Middle English rule for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, as a reflection of a book-based community of nuns who were both shaped by the text which they created and who shaped this very text as well.<sup>81</sup> Although performed orally, *Ancrene Wisse* nevertheless remained a textual reflection of the female community in which orality and literacy were part of one and the same cultural basis. Ashlynn K. Pai, in her insightful contribution, deepens our understanding of the theoretical concept supporting the metaphor of the book with her close reading of Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, in which this famous scholastic thinker constructed an intellectual paradigm of epistemology based on the image of the book, which, in turn, exemplified the universe as an "infinite network of signs." Only true readers could participate, according to Bonaventure, in God and the cosmos, as they all were letters on the pages of the one and universal book. This idea, however, can also be found in secular texts, such as courtly romances, though deeply hidden behind many other images of the daily life at King Arthur's court.

Jean Jost suggests that reading, as defined in Chaucer's various literary masterpieces, reflects both a literal and a metaphorical quest, though the reader who reads of a reader in a literary text eventually encounters himself by way of infinite regression—it is the decisive move toward the individual of the early Modern Age. In this sense, Jost deviates from the main thrust developed by the other contributors, but

her observations simply open a parallel avenue for the understanding of the “magic of reading” in the Middle Ages, leading either back to God or to the self. Whatever direction this reading takes, as Penny Simons reminds us, a careful treatment of the written text will eventually open the reader’s eye toward truth. This might take decades, and might force the reader to discard the material, earthly book, and to turn his or her eyes toward the cosmic book, the heaven and the stars, where God has written his messages for people to learn about, such as in Hartman von Aue’s *Gregorius* and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Titurel* (see the contribution by Classen).

In other cases reading is constituted by the close interaction between written text and book illustration, such as in Wynkyn de Worde’s *Vitas Patrum*, which Sue Ellen Holbrook examines in her contribution. In fact, pictures do not only serve as metaphorical texts, they also correspond to the text and communicate with the accompanying words or the text on the opposite side. But even within the picture the reading process is deliberately highlighted as a necessary, significant, and meaningful activity strongly recommended for the viewer as well. Both elements, then, text and picture, serve as catalysts for the reader to gain access to a textual community, to acquire virtue, and thus to safeguard one’s salvation in the broadest sense of the word.<sup>82</sup> This observation is closely paralleled by Jean-Marie Kauth’s analysis of the *Ancrene Wisse* although there we do not deal with pictures, but instead with textual references to an ideal lifestyle presented to the convent community in word and image. The book itself is not only a metaphor of divine wisdom, but also, in a much more concrete sense, a mirror of the community itself, as the true readers turn into letters on the pages written by God. Bad readers, on the other hand, such as Sigune in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Titurel* fragments, realize too late what damage they have done both to the book and to themselves and lose all happiness in their lives. Only when they have redeemed themselves are they eventually permitted to return to the community of readers, both in secular and in spiritual terms (Classen).

The poet of the Spanish version of *Apolonio* emphasizes, from the start, that he is aware of these dangers and “invokes the aid of God in the creation of the text” (Grieve). On the other hand, for the reader the important task is not simply to learn how to read, but, more important, to choose what to read to find the way to salvation, as Dante demonstrates in his *Divina Commedia*. Here as well as in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, the choice no longer consists of either the

religious or the secular book and culture: instead the book and its proper reading serve multiple purposes, though all of them lead to the same, ultimate goal, human salvation and the fulfillment of human happiness in this life. The sources of knowledge are contained in the written documents, and these need to be studied carefully by all who aspire to participate in the ultimate quest of the human mind.

Reading was also a sacred activity through which a knowledge of God could be acquired. One of the most important readers in the entire Middle Ages was considered to be the Virgin Mary. In many visual depictions we are confronted with a reading Mary. Both Winfried Frey and David Linton attempt to penetrate into the meaning of the book as an essential, though often hardly visible attribute of the Virgin. Frey considers Mary's iconographic function as a role model especially for female viewers and readers as she achieves salvation through reading God's laws, thus following the divine doctrine formulated in the Book which she traditionally holds in her lap at the moment of the Annunciation. Often she is also described as a book in which Christ wrote his letters, and the pious person is called upon to read her as a book to understand the numinous of her sanctity. Linton, on the other hand, focuses on the position of the book in Mary's lap and interprets this attribute in erotic terms, that is, seductively, because medieval women were traditionally taught how to do house chores, but not how to study the liberal arts. In many paintings, however, as Linton sees it, Mary's reading is eroticized, as the book seems to be the last defense against the divine impregnation. Or, in more direct and also more provocative terms, Mary's book represents her genitalia. Linton, keenly aware of the potential protests against his interpretation, refrains from any kind of Freudian theory, instead simply argues in theological and art historical terms, observing the facts and drawing convincing conclusions. According to his perception, "the question of how to represent Mary's impregnation while not attributing to the experience the usual erotic and biological aspects presents artists with special problems not easy to resolve." Although Mary's reading is marginalized, the "tendency toward literalness" could not be ignored.

In the Middle Ages reading was certainly considered to be a magical and spiritual art as it provided the key to new dimensions of knowledge and understanding. Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Sigune and Schionatulander in Wolfram's *Titarel*, among many other literary protagonists, were fully aware of it, although their reading referred to erotic messages. The relevance of the



handwritten book for medieval churchmen is well understood, whereas the impact of reading on persons outside of the Christian church is much less known.<sup>83</sup> The twelfth- and thirteenth-century scholastic thinkers strongly defended the book as the most important object for epistemological investigations, foremost among them Bonaventure, hence the visual representation of the most enigmatic transformation of a virgin into God's mother iconographically by means of a book was a powerful and adequate strategy by the artists. Hugh of St. Victor, from a teacher's point of view, explained the purpose and practice of reading as follows:

Exposition includes three things: the letter, the sense, and the inner meaning. The letter is the fit arrangement of words, which we also call construction; the sense is a certain ready and obvious meaning which the letter presents on the surface; the inner meaning is the deeper understanding which can be found only through interpretation and commentary.<sup>84</sup>

This inner meaning was best found in the written document, although other forms of reading were also possible, as we have seen above. It is no wonder that the book was metonymous for the entire Middle Ages because it transformed and ennobled that age and laid the foundation for our own world, although today the end of the book and so of the book metaphor seems to be near.

Nevertheless, as medieval artists and writers inform us, the final truth might still lie in the written word, and hence in the book, even if this might provide a dangerously powerful position especially to women readers—at least in the eyes of their male contemporaries (see Linton's and Frey's contribution). One of the most beautiful illustrations for this observation can be found in the Codex Vindobonensis 1857 in the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* in Vienna, the famous hour book or "livre d'Heures," produced for Mary of Burgundy, wife of Emperor Maximilian I, perhaps around 1475–77.<sup>85</sup> On folio 14 verso we see a miniature showing the interior of a Gothic cathedral where the Madonna sits on a throne with the Christ child on her lap. Christ is looking directly at the viewer who observes the scene watching through a window frame. A courtly lady is positioned at the window opening into the church room and attentively reading a book which she holds in her hands, probably another hour book. Significantly, however, the Virgin's eyes are directly focused on the book, which, in turn, is

exactly aligned with the carpet in front of the altar in the midst of the choir. In other words, although the lady is situated off the center, the book she holds and reads connects her with the ultimate source of spiritual illumination, the divine.<sup>86</sup>

Not surprisingly, the book motif is often repeated in other miniatures in this book of hours, strongly supporting the thesis that for medieval people reading and the book were, indeed, essential instruments for enlightenment. Hugh of St. Victor commented in his *Didascalicon*, "Omnis natura rationem parit, et nihil in universitate infecundum est" (VI, 5, 123). Ivan Illich correctly deduced from this: "Nature is not just like a book; nature itself is a book, and the man-made book is its analogue. Reading the man-made book is an act of midwifery. Reading, far from being an act of abstraction, is an act of incarnation. Reading is a somatic, bodily act of birth attendance witnessing the sense brought forth by all things encountered by the pilgrim through the pages."<sup>87</sup>

One of the most powerful images of the written document as a key to spiritual sanctification can be found in an hour book in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, MS. W. 446, created for Jean Lallemand le Jeune sometime between 1510 and 1520, either in Tours or in Bourges. The viewer is confronted with a torn screen on which a number of capital letters are written which might, or might not make sense. The first three letters are "ROMX," followed by "VEB." The focus, however, does not rest on these letters and their possible meaning, but instead on the image behind the torn screen. The catalogue description says: "Hair Shirt Seen through Torn Curtain (7v)," although this ignores the small image of a spirit figure hovering in the air amidst a cloud. Obviously, as the divine rays which emanate from the figure indicate, the illuminator here depicted the Madonna who awards the penitent sinner for having worn a hair shirt. Nevertheless, the torn curtain or screen clearly symbolizes that the letters might not always make sense, or might not illuminate enough, but they still represent the fundamental vehicle to penetrate into the depth of the final truth of God's grace for which there are no words.<sup>88</sup> Only the reader, then, is able to achieve the highest level of knowledge, once he has broken through the limitations of the written word. God's words, the script of his own being, emerge, in other words, as a palimpsest behind the book, and all true believers or searchers for truth are called upon to read.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, in the Florentine manuscript of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* composed by King Alfonso X, el Sabio (1252-82), today housed

in the Biblioteca Nazionale (MS Banco Rari 20, formerly II.1.2.3), the miniatures for the autobiographical *Cantiga* 209 show the complete and absolute healing power of the *Book of the Canticles* of Holy Mary. In this song King Alfonso relates a miracle while he was seriously ill and his doctors thought that he would die. In his desperation he called out for Mary's help, asked for Her book to be brought and placed upon his chest. Amazingly, the king, having leaved through the volume (panel 4), is immediately recovered from his severe illness and experiences peace ("jouv'en paz").<sup>90</sup> Undoubtedly, Alfonso, a powerful representative of the entire medieval belief system (mentality), reflects the fundamental approach to the book and the written word dominant at his time. A true reader (and believer) will undoubtedly gain God's grace, and those who do not know how to read or to read properly, face disaster, even death. In other words, the book holds the key to human salvation.

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## NOTES

1. This is not to say that oral culture is less significant than written culture, or perhaps primitive versus sophisticated. For a sociological discussion of "primitivism," see Don LePan, *The Birth of Expectation*, vol. 1 of *The Cognitive Revolution in Western Culture* (Houndsmill-Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 3–24. Orality is a different, though not less worthy, mode of communication for specific cultures; see John Miles Foley, "Orality, Textuality, and Interpretation," *Vox intexta. Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. A.N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 34–45. Christian society in the Middle Ages, however, viewed the written word with greatest respect because its religious teachings were based on the text, the *biblion*, or *Bible*. "Heathen" religion was primarily an oral one; hence the Christian missionaries and the entire Church hierarchy rested on the premise that God had revealed himself to man through the written word; for a broader cultural-anthropological and literary study of this topic, see Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy, Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

2. Quoted from Heinrich Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages, 1000-1200*. Trans. by Denise A. Kaiser (1992; University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 206.

3. Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things. Exegesis, Dialectic, and the Poetics of Didacticism*. *Figurae. Reading Medieval Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23.

4. Lawrence G. Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?", *Word & Image* 5.3 (July- September 1989): 227–51.

5. See the various contributions in Doane and Pasternack, ed., *Vox intexta. Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*; for a historical discussion of orality, see M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); see also Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix: De la "littérature" médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

6. 'Aufführung' und 'Schrift' in *Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Jan-Dirk Müller, Germanistische Symposien, Berichtsbände 17 (Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler, 1996); see, especially, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's brilliant discussion of