IMAGINATION, MEDITATION & COGNITION IN THE MIDDLE AGES

MICHELLE KARNES

"*Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* serves as a salutary reminder that, as a way of systematically structuring the perceived world, scientific thought was not restricted to the groves of academe in the Middle Ages; it pervaded every corner of medieval culture." —*Isis*

"Skillful, persuasive, and thoroughly enlightening. . . . To borrow a term from Bonaventure, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* is *multiformis*: at once a lucid primer to medieval Scholastic theories of knowledge, an illuminating study of Bonaventure's thought and influence, an original essay in the history of imagination, and an indispensable addition to the growing scholarly literature on medieval Passion meditation." —*Modern Philology*

"An excellent, very well-informed and well-argued study, a must-read for anyone who would understand the psychological assumptions underlying late medieval devotional and contemplative literature in particular, but also any literature of the period that deals with the cross-fertilization of imagination and spirituality—which is to say, with virtually all of late medieval literature." —*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*

In *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, Michelle Karnes revises the history of medieval imagination with a detailed analysis of its role in the period's meditations and theories of cognition. Karnes here understands imagination in its technical, philosophical sense, taking her cue from Bonaventure, the thirteenth-century scholastic theologian and philosopher who provided the first sustained account of how the philosophical imagination could be transformed into a devotional one. Karnes examines Bonaventure's meditational works, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, the *Stimulis amoris*, *Piers Plowman*, and Nicholas Love's *Myrrour*, among others, and argues that the cognitive importance that imagination enjoyed in scholastic philosophy informed its importance in medieval meditations on the life of Christ. Emphasizing the cognitive significance of both imagination and the meditations that relied on it, she revises a long-standing association of imagination with the Middle Ages. In her account, imagination was not simply an object of suspicion but also a crucial intellectual, spiritual, and literary resource that exercised considerable authority.

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For Shane

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ABBREVIATIONS

CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*
CCCM	*Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*
EETS	Early English Text Society
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
Itinerarium	Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*
LT	James of Milan, *Stimulus amoris*, expanded fourteenth-century version (i.e., long text)
MVC	*Meditationes vitae Christi*
Myrrour	Nicholas Love, *Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*
PL	*Patrologia cursus completus*, Series Latina (or *Patrologia Latina*)
PP	*Piers Plowman*
Prickynge	*Prickynge of Love*
ST	James of Milan, *Stimulus amoris*, short text
STC	Short Title Catalogue

TO THE READER

The foreign language translations are mine unless otherwise noted. I have retained the orthography of original editions with one exception, which is that I modernize *u*'s and *v*'s in Latin quotations throughout. In many cases, I have made silent alterations to the English translations I cite.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

There is no dearth of histories of imagination. Among those that concern imagination as a mental power, one finds a familiar narrative: imagination limps along for centuries, feeble and error-prone, before finally achieving prestige as the engine behind human creativity. In its prolonged prepubescent state, imagination mimics rather than invents, serving only to reproduce sensory or other data until it becomes "a productive or creative power which autonomously frames and constructs its own image of reality."[1] The long and homogeneous age of the re-presenting imagination extends from Plato up until, usually, the eighteenth century, whence "the efflorescence of modern theories of the 'productive imagination' in German idealism and European romanticism generally. Only then would the philosophy of 'mimetic' imagination be definitively overturned and a more positive and humanist portrait come to occupy the centre stage of Western thinking."[2] The eventual ascendancy of the creative imagination is almost always treated as a positive development, in part because it is seen to parallel the coming of age of humanity itself. For instance, in Kearney's study, Kant, Fichte, and Schelling have the honor of "releas[ing] imagination from its long philosophical imprisonment," and as they do so, they allow man to "declare his autonomy from all given being."[3] The unfettering of imagination, so understood, is accompanied by a discovery and celebration of the individual's fullest creative potential. No longer controlled by God or limited in his or her mental activity to simple reproduction of natural objects, the individual invents, and by doing so, asserts his or her uniquely human authority over

1. Murray's introduction to Cocking, *Imagination*, vii.
2. Kearney, *Wake of Imagination*, 131–32.
3. Ibid., 156.

the world. The creative imagination is both the vehicle of the individual's empowerment and its consequence.

Although this is the dominant narrative of imagination, it is not the only narrative.[4] Eva Brann, for instance, instead focuses on the modern demotion of imagination, one most easily witnessed by the eventual transformation of the Greek word for imagination, *phantasia*, into the less weighty terms "fancy" and "fantasy."[5] The role of medieval imagination in these narratives, when it has been granted a role, is nonetheless consistent. Medieval imagination is there a static concept, distinctive not because the period advanced a new theory of imagination but because it succumbed wholeheartedly to imagination as it was already conceived. This results in what might seem contradictory readings: the Middle Ages was simultaneously beholden to imagination and wary of it. Regarding the former, James Simpson writes that "English writers from the mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries understood the later Middle Ages as an age wholly subject to, and dangerously infantilized by, the rule of imagination."[6] From this perspective, imagination had exceeded its proper bounds in the Middle Ages. Unsupervised by reason and prone to fanciful inventions, it was a mental faculty run amok. As such, it provided a basis from which to herald a later triumph of reason over imagination, as witnessed by Descartes's seventeenth-century declaration, "imagination . . . is not a necessary constituent of my own essence, that is, of the essence of my mind."[7] Although the dominion of imagination in the period can be formulated positively as well—Jean Leclercq comments on the vigor of medieval imagination, which enabled people to make themselves present in imagined biblical scenes and renders ours by contrast "lazy"[8]—it is almost eerily potent in either case.

Imagination's power has more often been viewed negatively than positively, and we read that it inspired trepidation more than confidence. Thus, the Middle Ages was "hostile" to or "suspicious" or "distrustful" of imagination.[9]

4. There is some disagreement, for instance, about when the triumph of imagination occurred. Alan White sees imagination's redemption only in the twentieth century (*Language of Imagination*), whereas Mark Johnson thinks it has yet to occur, but should. He offers a modified understanding of Kant's theory of imagination as a means to help us appreciate "the central role of human imagination in all meaning, understanding, and reasoning" (*Body in the Mind*, ix).

5. Brann, *World of the Imagination*, 20–21.

6. Simpson, "The Rule of Medieval Imagination," 4.

7. Descartes, *Meditations*, 6, in *Oeuvres de Descartes* 7:73. Trans. Cottingham et al., *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2:51.

8. Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 75.

9. Minnis offers "suspicion" as the common thread that connects medieval thought about imagination ("Medieval Imagination and Memory," 240). Rambuss refers to "the suspicion with which the imaginative faculty was typically regarded in the Middle Ages" ("'Processe of

Commonly believed to be the vehicle by which demons could tempt the would-be virtuous Christian, whether in dreams or outside of them, imagination could easily be a force for evil.[10] The two characterizations of medieval imagination—its authority and the distrust aimed at it—are compatible, of course. The very power of imagination might have elicited suspicion. But there is a fundamental problem with this reading, one visible in its competing claims that imagination was unusually powerful in the period and that medieval thought about imagination lacked innovation. I do not deny that imagination figured prominently in medieval thought—there is a sense in which it is fair to call the period an age of imagination, as I will explain in a moment—but I will argue that such prominence was at least in part the result of a carefully articulated philosophy of imagination. It was, in other words, thanks to the period's innovative philosophy of the faculty, especially in the context of its theories of cognition, that medieval imagination enjoyed uncommon authority. Theories of cognition were debated with more passion in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries than they had been since the time of Aristotle and than they would be until the seventeenth century.[11] Imagination occupied a central place within them, and this alone invites us to look more carefully at medieval thought about imagination.

What we discover is that medieval philosophy invested imagination with a new authority, one drawn from the Aristotelian philosophy of the soul made available to the Latin West only in the late twelfth century.[12] In Aristotle's philosophy, and all the more in Arabic commentaries on it, imagination occupied a privileged position because it was involved centrally in every act of knowledge acquisition. As Aristotle famously said, "The soul never thinks without an image," an image provided by imagination (*De anima* III.7, 431^{a}16–17).[13] Any good Aristotelian held that knowledge originates with the senses and becomes available to the intellect in

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tyme,'" 670). Kearney likewise speaks of the medieval "suspicion of" and "hostile view" toward imagination (*Wake of Imagination*, 130–32).

10. For instance, the author of the *Chastising of God's Children*, citing Aquinas, explains that demonic, false visions proceed from imagination (c. xx, p. 179).

11. On theories of cognition in the Middle Ages, see Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*; Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*; and Spruit, *Species intelligibilis*, vol. 1.

12. Here and throughout this study, I treat "imagination" as a subject capable of doing things. Technically, it is the individual who acts, using his or her imagination. Aristotle makes a relevant point: "It is doubtless better to avoid saying that the soul pities or learns or thinks, and rather to say that it is the man who does this with his soul" (*De anima* I.4, 408^{b}13–15, trans. Barnes, p. 651). Aristotle nonetheless gives himself permission to sacrifice some precision in the interests of brevity, and I will claim for myself the same right to treat imagination as an agent.

13. All future references to Aristotle's *De anima* will be to Hamlyn's translation, with Bekker references drawn from Ross's edition, unless otherwise noted.

normal circumstances only through imagination. The last of the sense faculties, imagination made a unique contribution to the process by which sensory knowledge became intellectual apprehension (a process detailed in chapter 1). In tandem with the agent intellect, imagination formed the crucial bridge between sense and reason. Often reliable and accurate in these contexts, medieval imagination is least like imagination as we discuss it, and might therefore be least easy for us to recognize. Today, imagination is most celebrated for its power of invention, and while that attribute is prominent in medieval discussions of the faculty as well, the most important cognitive task assigned to medieval imagination was the discovery of truth. By understanding the cognitive importance of imagination, we might better appreciate the richness of the faculty not only in a philosophical but also in a literary context.

The scope of this book is the cognitive work that medieval imagination performs, both in Aristotelian philosophy and in meditations on Christ.[14] It strives to recuperate the full range of the meaning of imagination in medieval philosophy and to illuminate its role in the period's religious literature as well. Indeed, the consistent association of imagination with truth requires us to rethink the relatively humble aims that we assign both to it and to imaginative meditations in the period. The prominence of imagination in late-medieval piety has sometimes been seen to demean it,[15] but this book encourages a different perspective by linking Aristotelian philosophy of imagination to the period's gospel meditations, the genre of literature in which imagination is most prominent.[16] Depending for its value,

14. As I refer to it, "meditation" is not monastic meditation, defined by Leclercq as a sort of moral training nearly equivalent to *lectio divina* (*Love of Learning,* 16–17). Rather, I refer to a later, more general sense of the term, according to which meditation is a perceiving of God through careful, well-disposed attention to the created world. McGinn comments on the marked changes in the definition of meditation during the Middle Ages in *The Growth of Mysticism,* 135–38. See also *méditation* in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité,* 10:906–14.

15. For Cousins, for instance, late-medieval "use of the imagination in a specific method of meditation, with its extensive cultivation of human emotions, especially compassion, with its almost exclusive emphasis on the passion" is a major failing, a means of separating too sharply Christ's humanity from his divinity ("Humanity and the Passion of Christ," 376). Huizinga similarly finds in late-medieval Christian art "the utmost elaboration, and even decomposition, of religious thought through the imagination" (*Waning of the Middle Ages,* 241).

16. What I call "gospel meditations" or "meditations on the life of Christ" are more often called "affective meditations," "lives of Christ," or even "Franciscan meditations." Their purpose, however, is not wholly affective, and the texts are concerned less to recount Christ's life than to present individual episodes from it for meditation. I tend not to label them "Franciscan" because doing so asserts more than we know about who wrote and read many of these texts. John Fleming addresses this problem by defining Franciscan literature by its themes rather than its authorship, but the result is to beg the question of what constitutes a Franciscan rather than

in part, on an Aristotelian notion of imagination, whereby imagination enabled any transition from sensible to intelligible apprehension, imagining the life of Christ drew on the power of imagination to impel the meditant from Christ's humanity to his divinity. Imagination did not participate in the highest forms of contemplation, but it did guide the meditant to the point at which mystical transports began.[17] The Paris-trained master of theology Bonaventure has a central place in this study because he first applied scholastic philosophy of imagination to medieval meditations on Christ, as we will see in chapters 2 and 3. Relying on a newly powerful faculty of imagination, he made more powerful the act of imagining the life of Christ, both in his own meditations and, through their influence, in many of those that followed. The purpose of this book, then, is to establish not only that medieval imagination had a unique authority, but that imaginative meditations on Christ were more ambitious and purposeful than the scholarship on them has recognized.

The particular power of medieval imagination that Bonaventure identified arose not from the simple importing of Aristotelian philosophy into the Latin West but from its application to Augustinian theology, a union discussed in chapter 2.[18] This study focuses especially on Aristotelian philosophy of the mind, which has been relatively neglected and which was, in the thirteenth century, the new influence that made imagination newly potent. However, in its theological applications, it always interacted with Augustinian theology, a fact that my attention to Aristotelian philosophy

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a Dominican or secular theme. As Fleming acknowledges, his approach results in some illogical assertions, as when he says, "The greatest 'Franciscan' masterpieces of penitential literature are probably those of Dominicans" (*Introduction to Franciscan Literature*, 12). The category of "gospel meditations" has its own problem, namely, that the texts frequently include extrabiblical material, but I think it more accurately captures the purpose of the texts.

17. In spite of the attention devoted to the topic by medieval writers, mysticism is notoriously difficult to define. Attention in recent years has gone to what mysticism is not—whether an experience, a synonym for union, or theophany—rather than what it is (see McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, xiii–xx, as well as Turner, *Darkness of God*, 160–68). McGinn settles for an encompassing definition, whereby Christian mysticism "concerns the preparation for, consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God" (*Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii). I have no desire to amend this definition. I will only note that mysticism focuses on the presence of God in his divinity, not his humanity alone. On the topic of mystical union, and the various forms that it might take, see McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and *Unio mystica*."

18. Bundy observes that the efforts to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy (which he discusses under the headings of the "mystical" and "empirical" traditions of medieval imagination, respectively) "resulted in an appreciation of the imagination not for many years to be achieved again," but his position is not echoed much elsewhere, and Bundy himself does not elaborate on it (*Theory of Imagination*, 178).