

## Article

# Visualisation in Late-Medieval Franciscan Passion Literature from the Low Countries: *Cransken van minnen* (Wreath of Love), 1518

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**Abstract:** Late-medieval devotional literature embraced visualization as a means of providing the reader-devotee with the experience of being a virtual witness during a text-guided meditation. Based on a new reading of *Cransken van minnen*, a Middle Dutch prayer book from Franciscan milieu, this paper will propose a framework based on the interrelations between visualization and other key aspects pointed out in recent research as significant for understanding this type of literature: affective reactions, anamnesis and virtual witnessing. This framework entails two assumptions. The first is that visualization, especially with Mary as the compassionate “focaliser”, was instrumental in achieving the goal of devotion, which was to promote an affective reaction (contrition). The second is that this prayer book offered devotees an experience of anamnesis (“recalling”) that depended on the provision of sensory perceptions through which readers could become virtual witnesses to the events meditated upon. Using a combination of philological and literary–historical methods, the structure and content of this prayer book are scrutinized in detail to provide new insights into the strategies used by the compiler to infuse the prayer discourse with elements suggesting visual perception.

**Keywords:** visualization; affect; meditation; anamnesis; virtual witnessing; medieval Low Countries; Middle Dutch; Franciscan Observants; Passion devotion



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## 1. Introduction

The later Middle Ages saw a proliferation of meditative exercises on the Passion. The central objective of these exercises, often observed during the Lent period of the liturgical calendar, was to help the faithful attain a state of repentance. To achieve this purpose, Passion meditations typically emphasized the physical agony of Christ and the suffering of Mary, in particular during Good Friday, but also with references to both earlier and later events described in the Gospels. Various narrative and descriptive techniques were applied to make the intellectual and affective experience of meditating on the Passion more vivid and immediate for devotees. These techniques included enhancing the level of detail, especially related to sensory cues, particularly visual (but also auditory) ones, beyond what was provided in the Gospel narrative of the Vulgate, to add a realistic, material texture. Reflecting on such a scene evoked through a verbal meditation engaged the imagination. A combination of narration and visual elements enhanced the degree of participation by the medieval faithful and heightened their awareness of Christ’s and Mary’s humanity (Peirats and Gregori 2023).

In recent decades, scholars—especially art historians—have increasingly argued that, far from constituting separate domains, devotional texts (in northern Europe, for example, in the Low Countries, especially those written in the vernacular) interacted with and informed visual culture, and vice versa. This paper draws, in its main assumption, on the argument of Reindert L. Falkenburg that “images were integral parts of [medieval] culture, as much as texts were, [and] each medium sustained and affected the other in its capacity to support prayer, meditation and other devotional practices”

(Falkenburg 2001, p. 4). Recently, Ingrid Falque has shown how late-medieval devotional portraiture from the Low Countries systematically used insights into spiritual development articulated in contemporary devotional texts (Falque 2019). Conversely, the meditative reading of devotional texts involved, for the devotee, forming an “inner perception that parallels the reading and viewing of devotional paintings” (Falkenburg 2001, p. 7). This experience in itself eludes analysis, but what can be studied using the methods of textual criticism is how devotional literature used literary means (e.g., metaphors and imagery) to allow the reader to form a mental image. Such imaginative picturing triggered by the reading of a devotional text is what is understood in this paper as visualization.

Late-medieval devotional literature on the Passion relied very often on creating a narrative with descriptive elements to stimulate the readers’ or listeners’ imaginations. A literary Passion scene could be easily recreated in the mind by devotees in order to bring about a spiritual transformation (repentance). The role of the imagination was recognized by medieval theologians, for instance by Bonaventura da Bagnoreggio, a Paris-trained scholastic thinker, whose work was instrumental in creating a spiritual program based on meditation on Christ’s life. As Michelle Karnes argues, “Bonaventure’s work proved foundational to late-medieval meditations on Christ, which often retained and even developed his belief in the unusual efficacy of imaginative meditation” (Karnes 2011, p. 141). Far from being an accidental byproduct, the techniques of visualization employed in these texts should be seen as an intrinsic part of the theological body of thought originating from Bonaventure, and hence as an important element of the Franciscan tradition of religious instruction, which developed from the thirteenth century onwards. However, this emphasis on the imagination transcended the boundaries of religious orders: a hugely successful Middle English adaptation of the Pseudo-Bonaventurian treatise *Meditationes vitae Christi*, Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, was the work of a Carthusian. As Michael Sargent pointed out, the former and the latter both “[...] embed their teaching in the narrative itself, calling upon the reader to ‘see’ the virtues—particularly humility, obedience, chastity, reverence, and love of poverty—in the actions, physical postures, and facial expressions of Jesus, his mother, and his disciples” (Sargent 2017, p. 393). In the Low Countries, far from avoiding images in a text-induced meditation, the Modern Devotion justified them, as can be seen, for instance, from the theoretical statements in Geert Groote’s *Tractatus de quattuor generibus meditabilium* (Falque 2019, pp. 239–52).

The invention of printing, which became a widespread tool for book publishers in the last decades of the fifteenth century, helped to disseminate narrative accounts of Christ’s Passion to a wide audience of laypeople, shaping their religious beliefs. Instructions on devotional practices, which would otherwise have been passed on by word of mouth, could now be distributed through this new medium. In the Low Countries, the Observant Franciscans were among the pioneers of a collaboration between printers, laity and members of religious orders on the production of Passion-oriented devotional literature (Goudriaan 2016). An example of such contacts was the relationship between the Antwerp Franciscan Matthijs Wentsen (Matthias Weynsen, c. 1480–547) and the Leiden and later Delft printer Hugo Janszoon van Woerden (Dlabačová 2014, pp. 210–12). This particular case led to the production of the *Fasciculus mirre* (Fascicle of myrrh), a Franciscan prayer book, which Bert Roest calls “one of the few early sixteenth-century devotional treatises on the Passion offering a systematic set of daily exercises for the laity” and “one of the most important Dutch devotional treatises on the Passion in the sixteenth century”, as it was one of the most frequently reprinted (Roest 2004, pp. 509–10). Its author was an anonymous Franciscan friar from the province of Cologne, but it was marketed by Weynsen, a very active intermediary between the literary-minded members of the order on the one hand, and printers and sympathetic laity on the other (Schmitz 1936, p. 108; Pleij 2000, p. 203). The earliest edition, printed in Delft by Hugo Janszoon van Woerden, dates from 1517. In addition to the well-researched texts produced in Observant Franciscan milieus in the Low Countries, texts like *Fasciculus mirre*, there still are many lesser-known ones. The

latter include an anonymous book entitled *Cransken van minnen* (Wreath of Love), which appeared more or less at the same time as its more popular counterpart.

## 2. Methodology and Research Question

In this paper, we will examine *Cransken van minnen* using a framework which unites visualisation to other aspects relevant to studying visualization in late-medieval meditative Passion literature: affective reaction, anamnesis and virtual witnessing. We will address the arguments for employing each of these aspects in the methodological discussion below.

There are two significant, interrelated aspects of interpreting a late-medieval meditation on the subject of the Passion, from the point of view of reconstructing a medieval reader's response, which come to mind at the outset. The first is the affective reaction triggered by the meditation. A key ingredient thereof is compassion, the evocation of which has been shown by McNamer (2010), for example, to be a central concern of authors of Passion meditations, including those from Franciscan circles. The second dimension is that of visual perception, which if elevated onto an interpersonal plane expresses itself in a special interaction between the one who sees and the one who is seen. In the Middle Dutch *Fasciculus mirre*, for example, the reader (or listener, if the book was read aloud) was invited to "see" specific scenes or actions. In one passage:

Siet hoe uut overvloedich uut storten sijns gebenedide bloets hem zijn mensche-like natuerlike cracht ontgaet ende hanct aen den touwen crimpende overmits zijn diepe wonden als een worm van grote onsprekelike pijn.

(Anonymous and Wentsen 1534)

See, how through the excessive loss of His blessed blood his human, natural strength abandons Him, as He is left hanging on a rope, shrinking like a worm in inexpressible pain on account of His deep wounds.

One can read this verb, phrased in the imperative, as an invitation, or even command, to picture this scene, which is traumatic but also with great power for evoking empathy, in one's imagination. The account of the changes to Christ's physical appearance during the Passion was rendered more dramatic by a simile (aligned theologically with the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53:3) that metamorphosed His figure into the image of a writhing invertebrate. In another passage, devotees were invited to "see" Jesus' head turning towards Mary during the last moments on the Cross, as if to bid her farewell (Anonymous and Wentsen 1534). Here the reader, presented with Mary's compassionate focalization, was guided by the text to internalize what she has seen. To paraphrase this situation in terms derived from narratology, Mary acts as an external "focalizer" of the scene (Bal and van Boheemen 2009, pp. 151–52). The effect is to create a multifocal perspective in which Mary, as a main protagonist, becomes a mediator on the level of sensory information about the events being described.

In the reading of *Cransken van minnen*, which follows below, both dimensions, empathy and the creation of sight perception, will be combined in a multi-aspectual approach, on the assumption that they are causally interrelated. However, in order to complete the account of this interrelation, other aspects also seem relevant. These are anamnesis and witnessing.

The idea of anamnesis, which is crucial to the conception of the liturgy in the Roman Church, not only in the Middle Ages, is inextricably linked to the Passion, because the central event of the liturgy, the Eucharist, is understood as a "recalling" (anamnesis) of the death and resurrection of Christ. In a broad sense, anamnesis is "a recalling of the steps of salvation history in the Old Testament, the life of Christ, and the time of the Church [...] the remembrance of God's past favors emboldens the petitioner to ask for new ones" (Metzger 1997, p. 152). While anamnesis technically refers to liturgical prayers, devotional Passion literature can be said to have the character of an anamnesis in that it presents a discourse that is also, for the believer, synonymous with "remembering" a central fact of faith. This is a powerful motive, for, as in the case of liturgical prayer, meditation on the Passion encourages the devotee to ask for new favours and holds in store a promise

of salvation, a fact emphasized by the authors of devotional manuals, including (as we shall see) *Cransken van minnen*. Passion devotions helped the late-medieval faithful to recapitulate the events that were a point of reference for the liturgy and the Gospels. An “aesthetic of recapitulation”, with anamnesis at its core, is not unique to prose Passion devotions, but as Andrzej Dąbrówka has argued, it underlies the relationship between literature and the sacred in other medieval genres, including drama (Dąbrówka 2019).

A further factor to be taken into account is witnessing. As we have seen, in a Franciscan devotion to the Passion such as the *Fasciculus mirre*, the devotee was invited to accompany Mary and, by sharing her gaze, to adopt her empathetic attitude. This is, not coincidentally, a feature shared by other Passion texts based on Pseudo-Bonaventure’s influential *Meditationes vitae Christi*, such as Nicholas Love’s *Mirror* (see McNamer (2010); a similar insight is formulated by Roest 2004, p. 479). A witness is a significant role in Christianity, endowed with profound theological significance (as evidenced, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11) as someone with the authority to proclaim the truth of the faith. It can be argued that the devotee reading or listening to such a meditation is systematically placed in the role of a virtual eyewitness. “Virtual witnessing”, a term used by (Shapin 1984), can be adopted here to describe a similar mechanism of how devotional texts of the late Middle Ages fostered a similar attitude on the part of their readers. Realistic visual cues made the experience of witnessing more authentic. Everyone was (or could become) a witness, of the Passion in particular, thanks to book-printing. The events that were the subject of the prayers, routinely recapitulated, became part of a collective experience. By allowing “ordinary” believers to see the Passion through the mediation of Mary as a compassionate focalizer, the narratives encouraged believers to share this account with others, thus becoming virtual witnesses themselves, making the sacred, mysterious and terrifying dimension of the Passion seem close, intimate and familiar.

Specific research questions, then, can be formulated as follows. Firstly, is there a correlation between visualization and affective reaction present in *Cransken van minnen*, and if so, how does it manifest itself? In this regard, we will particularly try to identify whether Mary, as a compassionate focalizer, is an important participant in this process. And secondly—is there a link between sensory stimuli, especially visual cues, and the goal of achieving the experience of anamnesis? If so, does the action of recalling the Passion, augmented by sensory means, have the added effect of making the devotee into a virtual witness? These questions will enable us to find out how a prayer book like the *Cransken van minnen* embodied a religious culture of imaginative meditation on the Passion through a discourse that was strongly charged with sensory elements.

All transcriptions and translations of Middle Dutch passages cited in this article, unless otherwise noted, are by the author of this article. In the transcribed passages, abbreviations have been expanded; the names of Christ, Mary, etc. have been capitalized. The distinctions between u/v and i/j/y have been preserved. Punctuation has been modernized for the sake of intelligibility.

### 3. *Cransken van minnen*

*Cransken van minnen* (Wreath of Love) is an anonymous vernacular devotional book published in Delft in 1518 by Cornelis Hendriczoon Lettersnijder for the Antwerp bookseller Michiel van Hoochstraten. Its full title is: *Een cransken van minnen is dit boecxken genoemt ende sijn al ghebedekens van die passie ons heren vergadert van eenen deuoten broeder vander obseruancien, wiens naem geschreuen moet staen in dat boeck des leuens* (A wreath of love is the title of this booklet, [containing] prayers on the passion of our Lord, collected by a pious Observant brother, whose name must be written in the book of life). According to the Universal Short Title Catalogue, the only copy of this book is in the National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague, shelf mark 227 G 13. Until recently, this devotional manual has not been widely studied. Beginning with Wolfgang Schmitz, it has been linked to devotional manuals from Franciscan Observant milieus; Schmitz was also the first to identify it as one of the Middle Dutch variants of the well-known *Anima Christi* prayer.

(Schmitz 1936, pp. 331–32; Van Mierlo 1940, p. 331; De Troeyer 1969, p. 41). Bert Roest recognized it as a compilation of a number of late-medieval sources, ‘reconfigured and translated into the Dutch vernacular’ (Roest 2004, pp. 508–9, n. 340). More recently, Koen Goudriaan has shed light on how printing facilitated its dissemination alongside other Franciscan devotional literature (Goudriaan 2016, p. 289), while Joanka van der Laan mentions it in her study of religious devotional reading (Van der Laan 2020).

That the prayer book is an amalgamation of different sources is demonstrated by the presence of a paraphrase of the well-known prayer *Anima Christi*, which is not treated as a separate text, but merged with a meditation on the significance of the crucifixion of Christ (prayer [46], see Table 1 below). The prayer *Anima Christi*, later often misattributed to St Ignatius Loyola, originated around the second or third decade of the fourteenth century in what Earl Jeffrey Richards describes as a milieu of Thomist scholars and ecclesiastics concerned with the theology of the Eucharist (Richards 2008, pp. 61–64). Adaptations in Middle Dutch and other vernaculars were widespread by the fifteenth century (Richards 2016). The appearance in *Cransken van minnen* testifies not only to its currency in Franciscan circles, but also to the eagerness of the Observants to disseminate Eucharistic devotion among the laity of the Netherlands. The prayer is characterised by a strong emphasis on transubstantiation and by the promotion of an attitude of inward, private receptiveness by an individual to the transformative power of Christ’s Passion. It is interesting to note that this is not the only paraphrase of the *Anima Christi* that appeared at about this time in a devotional book printed in Delft. *Die negen couden* (The Nine Colds), a devotional book focusing on the moments in Christ’s life when He suffered from cold, is another example. The minor differences between these texts show that divergent processes of adaptation had taken place.

**Table 1.** The prayers in *Cransken van minnen*.

No.	Contents	Foliation
[1]	Creation of the world and of man, incipit echoing John 1:1–3	3r–4r
[2]	The Holy Trinity	4r–5r
[3]	God the Father and Christ’s mission to redeem mankind	5r–6r
[4]	The Annunciation	6r–7r
[5]	The Visitation of Elisabeth	7r–8r
[6]	The Nativity	8r–9r
[7]	The Presentation in the Temple	9r–9v
[8]	The Adoration of the Magi	10r–10v
[9]	The Massacre of the Innocents; the Flight into Egypt	10v–11v
[10]	The finding of Christ in the temple	11v–12r
[11]	The beginning of Christ’s public life, baptism, in the desert	12v–13r
[12]	Mary as an intercessor	13r–14r
[13]	Christ’s miracles; Christ as a healer	14r–15r
[14]	Entry into Jerusalem	15r–16r
[15]	The cleansing of the temple; Christ and Mary Magdalene	16r–17r
[16]	Preparation for the Last Supper	17r–17v
[17]	Christ washes the feet of the disciples	17v–18v
[18]	The Last Supper	18v–19v
[19]	In the garden of Gethsemane	19v–20v
[20]	The betrayal of Christ	20v–21v
[21]	Christ before Annas	21v–22r
[22]	Christ betrayed by Peter and abandoned by other disciples	22r–23r
[23]	General meditation on Christ’s suffering	23r–23v
[24]	Christ appears before Caiphas	24r–24v
[25]	Christ appears before Pilate and Herod	25r–25v
[26]	Christ again appears before Pilate	25v–26v
[27]	Christ clad in a purple robe and crowned with thorns	26v–27v
[28]	Ecce homo; Barabbas chosen over Christ	27v–28r
[29]	Christ is condemned by Pilate	28v–29r
[30]	Mary meets Christ	29v–30r



Table 1. Cont.

No.	Contents	Foliation
[31]	Christ begins the Way of the Cross	30r-31r
[32]	The sorrow of Mary during the Way of the Cross	31r-32r
[33]	Christ stripped of his garments	32r-32v
[34]	Meditations on the sins of the narrator	32v-33v
[35]	Christ is nailed to the cross	34r-34v
[36]	Christ is crucified between two thieves	34v-35v
[37]	Christ's suffering on the cross	35v-36v
[38]	Mary under the cross	36v-37v
[39]	Christ speaks to Mary and John, and to the penitent thief	37v-38v
[40]	The last words of Christ on the cross; Christ given vinegar	38v-39v
[41]	Meditation on Christ's suffering and the redemption of mankind	39v-40v
[42]	First meditation on the death of Christ	40v-41v
[43]	Second meditation on the death of Christ	41v-42v
[44]	Meditation on the redemption of humankind through Christ's death	42v-43v
[45]	Meditation on the passion and on penitence	43v-44v
[46]	The heart of Christ pierced on the cross; meditation on Christ's holy blood (with the Anima Christi prayer) <sup>1</sup>	44v-45v
[47]	The sorrows of Mary	45v-47r
[48]	Christ's descent into hell	47r-47v
[49]	The burial of Christ	48r-48v
[50]	Mary's sorrow during the burial of Christ	48v-49v
[51]	Resurrection of Christ	49v-50v
[52]	The Eucharist and Pentecost	50v-52r
[53]	Meditation on Mary	52r-53r
[54]	Christ appearing to disciples after the Resurrection; Pentecost	53r-54v
[55]	Assumption of Mary	54v-55v

<sup>1</sup> Fol. 45v.

### 3.1. Form and Structure

The book contains a prologue, 55 meditations in five groups of eleven texts (sections) in a certain order (after a section with the Our Father, there are ten that end with the Hail Mary, etc.), followed by three prayers that serve as a conclusion: a paraphrase of the Hail Mary with a focus on Mary's sorrows, a prayer for the intercession of St Francis, and a concluding prayer to Christ ([Anonymous 1518](#), 56r-56v). Since the composition of this prayer book has never been analysed in detail and no critical edition has yet been published, it is advisable to take a closer look at the contents and arrangement of the meditations. See also Appendix A for an English translation of a sample meditation [35]. For the sake of clarity, numbers (which do not appear in the printed book) have been added in square brackets (Table 1).

The contents show that *Cransken van minnen* offered the devotee an exercise, one which could be used to meditate on the Passion, but which just as well could become part of the devotion of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary. Also, nearly one-third of the prayers (23 out of 55: until the Last Supper, and from the Resurrection to the Assumption) are not related to the Passion, but refer to other events from the Gospels. This meant that the prayers could be relevant throughout the liturgical year, similarly to the Rosary devotion, which was alluded to graphically on the title page.

On closer inspection, we see that almost all prayers share similar components:

1. An apostrophe to God the Father, Christ or Mary;
2. A narrative description of the scene from the Gospel which is the subject of the meditation, often addressed in the second person to God, Christ or Mary;
3. A meditation on the emotions or reactions of the addressee of the prayer (God, Christ or Mary);
4. A petition concerning the spiritual or (less often) the physical needs of the narrator.

Each component provides space for elements suggestive of sight perception to be inserted. This is especially true of Part 2, where events are not simply paraphrased, but embellished by the addition of small, concrete visual details. The effect is to make the reader feel more familiar with a particular scene and to discover and recognise its realism. Parts 3 and 4 offer similar spaces for imaginative engagement. Here the devotee is invited to reflect mentally and emotionally on the experience of the actors in the scene, especially Christ and Mary. Mary's unique position as a central participant and eyewitness often allows the narrator to explore the events from her perspective. In addition, the final passages of Part 4, which act as normative illustrations of the spiritual mechanisms of meditation, sometimes use references to sight perception and to visualized objects in order to make these mechanisms intelligible.

### 3.2. A Program of Meditation

At this stage it is useful to take a fresh look at the theological programme, structure and content of *Cransken van minnen*. As Joanka van der Laan has shown, *Cransken van minnen* belongs to a group of devotional works using the garland or wreath symbol. In the woodcut illustration on the title page (Figure 1), this symbol is combined with those of the Five Wounds of Christ, the Sacred Heart and the instruments of the Passion (*arma Christi*) (Van der Laan 2020, p. 249). The presence of a rose in this image and its mention in the prologue ("rose cransken", Anonymous 1518, 2r) places this manual in the context of Rosary devotion; for this reason, Van der Laan aptly calls it a "(mental) rosary" (Van der Laan 2020, p. 249; this connection is also made by Depestele 2010). In its structure (more on this below) the model of cyclic devotion is clearly visible, although the selection of themes to be meditated upon is more extensive than in a typical Rosary.



**Figure 1.** *Cransken van minnen* (Wreath of Love), title-leaf. Delft: Cornelis Hendriczoon Lettersnijder for Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten, Antwerp. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek (National Library of the Netherlands), 227 G 12.

The theological framework within which the devotional book was intended to function can be reconstructed from a prologue (Anonymous 1518, 2r–3r) which, as in many other late-medieval devotional manuals, reveals a specific range of ideas and beliefs. Like other similar paratexts, this prologue is normative, reflecting intentions and aspirations rather than the actual practices that would have resulted from following these instructions. Even so, it provides invaluable information about the compiler's understanding of the correct way of practicing the devotion and his ideas of the type of audience and the benefits this spiritual practice was to bring for devotees.

The book was promoted as beneficial to all sinners ("allen sondigen menschen") (Anonymous 1518, 2r). The intended audience was described as being, on the one hand, quite simply all those who wished to possess a devotional book, and, on the other

hand, every “devout contemplator” (“devoet contemplatoer”) of the Passion of Christ (Anonymous 1518, 2r). This combination of two profiles, one less demanding and one more demanding, suggests that the compiler was aware of varying degrees of interest in the devotion, but probably regarded those who were willing to undertake the task of meditating on the Passion out of inner conviction as forming an inner circle (as we shall see, however, the Passion is only part of the actual devotional programme realised in the booklet). The purpose of devotion is not to earn an earthly or eternal reward, but to offer Christ a token of gratitude for the work of salvation (Anonymous 1518, 2r–2v). This challenging goal removes the idea that meditative prayer could be an egocentric transaction and sets the expectation that it should ideally be a disinterested act of spiritual giving on the part of the faithful. Nor was it enough to recite the meditations mechanically, and the author of the prologue rejected such an attitude. Those who wished to practise devotion were urged to read the texts often and diligently, imbibing their “few words full of profound meaning” (“corte woerden vol van diepen sin”; Anonymous 1518, 2v). The goal was sincere, profound spiritual transformation, which was to be achieved by reading and reflecting on the Passion.

Anamnesis, the practice of remembering, provides a theological background to the practice of meditating on the Passion. In order to justify this practice from a pastoral point of view, the compiler ascribed to Ambrose, in what was probably a false attribution, the saying that it was better to say a simple prayer on the Passion of Christ than to mortify one’s body by rigorous fasting, and to Augustine the saying that that even a quick thought on the Passion (‘as quick as the time it takes a bird to fly over a roof’) was more profitable than the intercession of all the saints (Anonymous 1518, 3r). Both of these references elevated meditation on the Passion above the other popular forms of medieval piety with which readers of the booklet would no doubt have been familiar. Ultimately, however, none of these rival practices were in themselves an anamnesis of Christ, which ultimately justified their lesser status.

#### 4. Meditation and Visualization in *Cransken van minnen*: Revealing What Is Hidden

##### 4.1. Visualizing Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation

Superficially, *Cransken van minnen* does not have many references to sight perception in its prayers, as these do not resemble mystical visions, but are conventional apostrophes or petitions. Almost every prayer, however, except for those which act as a preface, focuses on a different episode from the Gospel (as we have seen), and it is there that the discourse becomes more attuned to visual stimuli. This is largely due to the use of specific images, sometimes similes, very often referring to commonplace objects, which, added to the topic of the meditation, make the experience of imagining a given scene more authentic and immediate.

In the section dedicated to the Visitation [10] (Luke 1:39–56), the opening apostrophe, phrased as a rhetorical question, addresses Mary in the following way “[. . .] Maria, hoe mocht gij doen in dijne maechdelike lichaem verborgen dragen so claren licht, so vuerigen vlamme, soe mogende cracht dat godlike wesen” ([. . .] “Mary, how is it that you could then, concealed in your virgin body, carry such a bright light, such a fiery flame, such a powerful force of that divine being?”) (Anonymous 1518, 7r). This phrase adds a new sensory dimension to the discourse, revealing that which was hidden in Mary’s physical body, and therefore invisible even to the participants in the Gospel scene, but which can only be perceived, as it were, through a “spiritual lens” during the process of reading and meditation: the divinity of the yet unborn Christ-child. Such an insight, which could be called mystical, gives the reader, through the medium of the narrative voice, the exclusive experience of being able to participate closely, even intimately, in the miracle of the Incarnation. In literary terms, this visionary interpolation is created by the use of images of light and fire, the effect of which is reinforced on a syntactic and prosodic level by the triple repetition of a noun phrase preceded by an adjective, coinciding with a marked change in the rhythm of the sentence. Such a sensory, theologically potent image would



have resonated powerfully in the mind of a devotee reading this booklet. It can be seen as a literary counterpart of the artistic images of “Our Lady of the Expectation”, such as the late-medieval figures of a pregnant Mary from Bogenberg (Austria) or the Visitation by Heinrich of Constance (ca. 1310–20) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA) (Bynum 1991, pp. 198–200), which present the baby in Mary’s womb as surrounded by flames or translucent.

In the meditation on the Nativity [6] we encounter a literary rendering of sight perception which is used to illustrate a specific theological dogma: the perpetual virginity of Mary, a theological doctrine stating that Mary remained “ever-virgin” (*semper virgo*) before, during and after the birth of Christ, as first proclaimed by the Lateran Council in 684. This is a strongly poetic passage which shows Mary immersed in contemplation, in other words, in a posture and emotional state very different from the common experience of mothers during childbirth, while the Christ-child leaves her body with ease and without pain. To illustrate this unique event, the compiler used the following simile: “O Maria, in wat wonderlike godlike contemplacie soe is dye soen Gods neder gedaelt doer dat maechdelike lichaem sonder wee of pijn, mer als die sonne dat glas doerschijnt, soe is voertgegaen dijn kint” (“O Mary, in what wonderful, divine contemplation did the Son of God descend through this virgin body without labour or pain, but similarly as the sun shines through glass, so was your child born”) (Anonymous 1518, 8r-8v). Different means are used for a similar effect in the revelation of what is hidden in the scene of the Annunciation in Love’s *Mirror*, where the narrator focuses on Christ’s physicality, already fully formed in Mary’s womb (Love 2004, p. 26). Similarly to the previous example from *Cransken* [10], an invisible or concealed reality is rendered visible for the devotee saying the meditation. This demonstrates how the technique of producing a visual stimulus through an added descriptive element which is not literally in the scene itself enlivens the process of imaginative meditation, increasing the reader’s receptivity to a well-known event from the Gospel, which then becomes familiar, and can also be more easily recalled in memory. It is worth noting that the compiler of *Cransken van minnen* did not avoid a delicate theological problem, but responded to it by arguing for Mary’s virginity by producing a visual analogy.

Other episodes were enriched using specific cues related not only to sight perception, but also to other senses, including tactile impressions: during her journey to Elisabeth’s home [5], Mary took “eenen grooten stenigen weg” (“a large stony road”) through the mountains, where this adjective, adding a sense of effort, contrasted with her delicate nature (Anonymous 1518, 7r). In the Nativity meditation [6], Joseph “nam [. . .] een weynich hoys ende leide dat voer [Maria] opter aerden” (took some hay and laid it in front of [Mary] on the ground) (Anonymous 1518, 8r). Such seemingly minor sensory details, thrown in almost in an off-hand way, increased the imaginative power of the prayer, adding an extra dimension of realism. A devotee following these tropes could develop an empathetic solidarity with Mary and Joseph on the grounds of human interest and awareness of the hardships of life.

#### 4.2. Visualizing Spiritual Processes

The effects of the process of meditation are rendered using visually charged, concrete metaphors in the prayers, with a particular focus on the heart of the narrator. For example, the act of receiving Christ into one’s heart is described in meditation [16], which deals with the events just before the Last Supper, as preparing a room for a feast, and decorating it with virtues (Anonymous 1518, 17v). The practice of imagining the inward self in such a way was typical of discourses of “spiritual housekeeping” shared by the visual arts and devotional literature, and as discussed elsewhere, the heart becomes a book. The narrator in meditation [43] implores Christ to “write [His] holy suffering in [the narrator’s] heart with [His] precious blood in order that [he] may read there [Christ’s] bitter pain and [His] divine love” (“scrijft alle uwen heylich lijden in mijn harte met dijnen preciosen bloede dat ic daer in mach lesen u bitter pijn ende oock u godlike minne”). In [44], the narrator petitions Christ to “wound [the] heart so the tears of penitence and regret, and of

love, may become [the narrator's] food day and night" ("dat die tranen der penitencien ende des berous ende oeck der minnen mijn spijs moet sijn bi dage ende bi nachte") (Anonymous 1518, 43r). In these passages, creating the impression of seeing objects is useful as a way of representing the self in order to perform a reflection on the psychological effects of devotion to the Passion, along with producing normative guidelines for one's thoughts and emotions.

#### 4.3. The Anamnesis of the Passion of Christ, Mary and "Virtual Witnessing"

The events of the Passion were narrated with a similar level of attention to concrete detail. The process of affixing Jesus' limbs to the cross is described in meditation [35] through such acoustic signals as "the sound of the iron hammer on the iron nails" ("dat gheluyt vanden yseren hamer op die yseren nagelen") (Anonymous 1518, 34r). The theological significance of this sound is amply clarified by the author, who states that it "penetrated the heart of Mary and reached heaven" ("dat sloech in die soete bedroefde moeders harte ende voert inden hemel") (Anonymous 1518, 34r). The physicality of Christ, and the scale of torment He had to endure, were presented in the same meditation [35] through the following simile, which appealed to sight perception, but also to an expectation of auditory stimuli: "Doen namen sy coerden ende bonden se aen u gebenedide handen ende voeten ende recten u ghebenedide lichaem so wredeliken uut dattet stont gespannen aenden cruys als een snaer op een herp" (Anonymous 1518, fol. 34r) ("Then they took ropes and tied them to Thy blessed hands and feet, and pulled Thy blessed body so cruelly that it was stretched out on the cross like the string of a harp"). This image, a topos derived from Cassiodorus, was a travelling motif which appeared in both Latin and vernacular devotional treatises, such as the Middle High German epic *Die Erlösung* (Viladesau 2006, p. 118). It may be interesting to compare this depiction with the one in Nicholas Love's *Mirror*. Although concrete in its description (*Of be crucifying of oure lorde Jesu atte be sixte houre. Capitulum xliij*, Love 2004, pp. 174–76), Love's text does not feature either the auditory cues or the harp simile. Such sensory (visual and auditory) cues added concreteness and depth to the Cransken's meditative recapitulation of the events of the Gospel, allowing an intensified reception of the spiritual experience in the course of a text-guided prayer.

The meditations on the Passion, not unlike the Nativity scenes, revealed what was usually hidden and added concrete details to enhance the understanding of the scenes, making them a complex imaginative environment. The crown of thorns, as explained in the meditation [27], had 72 thorns. This number appeared in other vernacular prayers on the same theme from the Low Countries (Rudy 2016, p. 274). Agony and torment were graphically expressed. The torturers pressed the crown of thorns on Christ's head, piercing the skull. This anatomical aspect was represented in the meditation: "the sharp thorns went through [His] blessed brain" ("die scarpe doornen gingen doer u gebenedide hersenen"), causing blood to flow from all sides (Anonymous 1518, 27r). While graphic representations of the Crucifixion in the late Middle Ages generally focused on the figure of Christ in a frontal view, the meditative discourse revealed the more hidden aspects of the Passion, such as Christ's shoulder wound. To quote Kathryn Rudy, who describes the devotion to this wound in medieval manuscripts from the Netherlands, "there was apparently no medieval tradition of representing the shoulder wound, and one did not emerge until the seventeenth century" (Rudy 2016, p. 76). The compiler of *Cransken van minnen*, however, attempted to fill this graphic gap by giving a verbal description of the wound in meditations [32] and [33]. First, the existence of the shoulder wound is reported at the moment when Christ takes up the cross (Anonymous 1518, 30v). Then, the wound becomes visible when Christ is stripped of his clothes on Golgotha (Anonymous 1518, 33r); the congealed blood is ripped off, and multiple gashes are re-opened, "especially the large wound that was imprinted on [His] blessed shoulder where [He] had carried the heavy beam of the cross" ("bisonder die grote wonde geparst was die op u gebenedide schouder stont daer ghi dat sware hout des crucen op droecht", Anonymous 1518, 32r), causing much pain and loss of blood. No such hidden details about this wound were present in Nicholas

Love's *Mirror*, although there, for example, the length of the cross was specified (Love 2004, pp. 171–73). Graphic images of trauma such as these helped to make the anamnesis of the suffering of Christ in *Cransken van minnen* a more vivid and immediate experience.

The meditations created the experience of being a “virtual witness” of the events that were at its centre. Where Mary is the central participant, alongside Christ, especially in the scenes of the Crucifixion, her figure is a mediator of sight perception. It is through her eyes, as it were, that the reader-devotee is invited to picture Christ. As a focalizer, Mary not only provides a physical point of view, but also acts as an emotional lens through which the perception of events is filtered. Her appearance as focalizer is often marked in the text by linguistic references to seeing. In meditation [32], when Mary “sees” Christ approaching her with the cross, in the company of the two thieves, her emotional response is fear, exhaustion and pain (Anonymous 1518, 31v). In meditation [37]:

O alder soetste moeder Maria dat swaert doersneet u reyne hart als ghi stont onder den cruys. Ende aensaecht dye vrucht dijns lichaems dijn gebenedide soen Jesum Cristum soe versmadeliken hangen tusschen twee dieuen. . .

(Anonymous 1518, 37r)

O sweetest mother Mary, that sword pierced your pure heart when you were standing under the cross. And you saw the fruit of your body, your blessed son Jesus Christ, hanging so despicably between two thieves. . .

Mary's mediation between the faithful and God (Christ) is not limited to the traditional area of intercession, but also occurs in relation to her visual (or, more broadly, sensory) experience of the Passion. Mary becomes a witness whose affective reaction (fear, exhaustion and pain) allows the narrator to introduce the theological trope of her pierced heart, which is derived from Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:35). Creating this role for Mary, *Cransken van minnen* is similar to, for instance, Love's *Mirror*. Mary's unique position in this respect also enhances the authenticity and credibility of the scene by creating a multifocal perspective. Along with Mary, the reader enters the scene and becomes a virtual co-witness. By seeing what Mary saw, a devotee praying the prayers from this book can achieve a complete experience of anamnesis, spiritually reliving her special physical and affective experience and thus vicariously assuming the role of a key participant in the Gospel narrative.

## 5. Conclusions

In the theoretical part we have outlined the three aspects which, combined with visualisation, are relevant to a discussion on late-medieval text-guided imaginative meditation on the Passion: an affective dimension, anamnesis and virtual witnessing. The reading of *Cransken van minnen* shows that all four aspects are represented in it. The connection between visualization and an affective reaction, with Mary as the central figure stimulating contrition thanks to her position as a participant and focalizer, is fully supported by the material found in *Cransken van minnen*. We have seen that the text fully reflects the idea of a Passion devotion as an anamnesis in that it allows the devotee, again through the widespread use of visual cues, to feel like a virtual witness. Likewise, the same prayer book allows us to recognize that the prayer discourse is systematically infused by visual elements, making the whole more concrete and engaging for the devotee, illustrating the significance of imaginative picturing in the religious culture of the Low Countries at the outset of the 16th century.

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[fasciculus+myrrae](#) (accessed on 25 July 2023), and Early European Books (ProQuest), <https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/eeb/> (accessed on 25 July 2023).

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#### Appendix A. Translation of Meditation [35–Christ Is Nailed to the Cross] from *Cransken van minnen*, fols. 34r–34v

O Jesus, most gentle Lord, when the cross was prepared, how cruelly they knocked You down on the cross, and stretched You out on it crosswise and lengthwise. And when Your blessed arms were thus stretched out, the holes [in the cross] were made. Then they took ropes and tied them to your blessed hands and feet, and pulled Your blessed body so cruelly that it was stretched out on the cross like the string of a harp. They pierced Your blessed hands and feet with coarse nails so that the sound of the iron hammer on the iron nails pierced the heart of that sweet, sorrowful Mother and reached Heaven. O most merciful Lord, the love You have shown us, ungrateful human beings, surpasses the understanding of any creature, for You loved us from the beginning of the world and by Your shameful and ignominious death You saved us from eternal death. O dear Lord, out of Your great love I ask You to give us grace, for You have shed Your precious blood for us, so that after this short, transitory existence we may join You in eternal life.

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