

H-France Review Vol. 9 (May 2009), No. 68

Logan E. Whalen, *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008. xii + 208 pp. Appendices, table, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 9780813215099.

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In the field of medieval studies, increasing numbers of books are reconsidering the relationship between visual and verbal forms of expression. Jessica Brantley's *Reading in the Wilderness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Sarah Stanbury's *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); *The Mind's Eye*, edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Suzanne Akbari's *Seeing through the Veil* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) are just a few recent examples. Into this critical conversation, which has focused largely on religious art and literature, Logan E. Whalen introduces a useful claim concerning a primarily secular literary tradition and its engagement with the visual realm.

In *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory*, Whalen argues that throughout her oeuvre, Marie's descriptive imagery encourages readers to process her material visually specifically in order to enhance their ability to remember it and to think more broadly about memory practice itself. Such an argument posits a horizon where poetic language might meet visual objects, and necessitates the exploration of this horizon. Whalen's cohesive interpretation of Marie's *Lais*, *Fables*, the *Espurgatoire saint Patriz*, and the *Vie sainte Audree* uses the theme of memory to raise an abundance of interesting questions about a visual imagination that inheres within reading.

Whalen's book begins with helpful introductory sections on the rhetorical foundations of medieval memory as well as the art of *descriptio*. He then initiates his inquiry into Marie by using her well-known prologues and epilogues to structure his discussion, a tactic often seen in Marie studies and used here to good effect. As Whalen points out, the General Prologue to the *Lais* incorporates several terms and images that signal her preoccupation not only with "the poetics of literary rhetoric" (p. 37), but also, and more specifically, with memory and visuality. He re-reads her citation of Priscian and her famous couplet "K'i peüssent gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre" (p. 43), suggesting that Marie might in fact refer not to Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*, as is commonly thought, but to his *Praexercitamina*. Part of this latter text focuses on "creating images that are visual to our imagination" (p. 47), illuminating Marie's own interest in visual imagery's role in the work of literary memory.

The chapter on the *Lais* develops Whalen's inquiry by finding intersections between visual information and narrative expression, and showing how these encourage memory. Whalen suggests that traditions of painting and manuscript illuminations influenced Marie's aesthetic in ways that cause her work to draw the reader into acts of visualization. For example, he notes that colors to which Marie alludes in her *Lais* resonate with certain twelfth-century artistic traditions (p. 68). Perhaps more fundamentally constitutive of the work of visualization is the fact that twelfth-century illumination in England, as Whalen describes it, experimented with the use of serial illustration to convey narrative forms of information.

This development potentially affected Marie's own thought processes concerning the relationship between a story told in language and one told through images (p. 64). As Whalen puts it, "one could say that the challenge in art of this period was to create an image that could be read as a narrative, whereas Marie's goal at the end of the twelfth century was to create a narrative that could be seen as an image in the mind's eye" (p. 71). In order to provide some further context for this cultural preoccupation, Whalen cites the thirteenth-century author Richard de Fournival's claim that reading romance can function analogously to seeing it—when one hears a romance read, "one understands the adventures just as if one could see them before one's eyes" (p. 48). Marie's work, Whalen argues, anticipates this model by using descriptive detail to allow the audience to see narrative in "the mind's eye" (p. 48), thereby remembering it.

The concept of "the mind's eye" is complicated for both medieval and modern readers, however, and Whalen's readings inspire provocative questions that must be addressed in thinking about how verbal information potentially becomes visual. As Jeffrey Hamburger puts it in the collection mentioned above, this phrase demands inquiry into "the relationship between thinking and seeing, perception and the imagination."^[1] Mary Carruthers, whose *Book of Memory* Whalen cites extensively, elaborates on the technique of creating images for the mind's eye in this same volume. She acknowledges the importance of the mechanics of continuing process in this rhetorical act, emphasizing in particular the element of movement.^[2] One strategy that Whalen employs to reveal a point of transition between verbal and visual modes involves what he calls verbal, non-verbal and quasi-verbal objects throughout the *Lais*. Here he develops terminology that Rupert T. Pickens earlier introduced. Verbal objects display written texts on their surfaces; non-verbal objects do not; and quasi-verbal objects refer to written text without specifying its contents (p. 27). Whalen argues that verbal objects such as the carved hazel branch in *Chievrefoil*, the letters between lovers in *Milun*, and the inscribed ring in *Le Fresne* all in different ways contribute both to the memory of past events and to the audience's own strategies for remembering the narrative. Equally importantly, such an object will often serve this purpose by taking on the function of a "visual cue for textual reference" (p. 90). In *Milun* and *Le Fresne* non-verbal objects, such as brocades and swans, accompany verbal ones in order to reveal information, reconstitute the memory of lost information (p. 84), and ensure that powerful tokens stay within the "sight" of Marie's readers (p. 86). *Laüstic* crystallizes the memory work that happens in associating visual images and language. In his reading of the famous dead nightingale wrapped in embroidered samite, Whalen suggests "that the association of the visible object with the oral discourse improved the potential retention of the episode in the mind of the knight" (p. 90). Thus these objects reveal a mechanism of interaction between visual and verbal information, particularly as this interaction pertains to memory.

At the same time, however, Whalen's readings of the object descriptions do not always fully address the question of how verbal information takes on this "more visual quality" (p. 110) in the mind's eye, and what that signifies beyond a kind of metaphoric or analogical invocation of terms related to looking and seeing. What, essentially, does it mean for writing to have a visual quality? This challenge arises in particular because Whalen examines the secular rather than the sacred realm. In medieval religious culture, the language of interaction between verbal and visual imagery seems more naturalized because of the conventions of contemplative and devotional practice. Reading secular work like the *Lais* and *Fables* might require other ways to move beyond a purely analogical relationship between verbal and visual. Considering Whalen's characterization of objects alongside not only Pickens, but also the work of Donald Maddox, can address this issue. In *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, Maddox points out that in the *Lais*, many of the objects that are either explicitly inscribed or contain narrative often reveal to characters something that they have not yet been able to see themselves about their own narratives.^[3] This argument specifies the particular kind of looking that takes place in many of these *lais*: a looking inward. It helps us to realize that the visuality Whalen discusses in his work exists on a boundary between looking inward and seeing what is external to oneself as part of this process of remembering. In addition, whereas sometimes Maddox sees the "specular encounter" between a

character and a narrative object as revealing information about the future, Whalen reads communicative objects as preserving information from the past.^[4] This distinction raises another question about the visualized memory that Whalen discusses: what information is being remembered? At some points it is “important moral and didactic lessons” (p. 25), while at others he sees Marie as hoping that her audience will “see’ the narrative” itself as well as its “precepts” (p. 39). Thinking about what we remember when we remember a text necessarily raises questions about the relationship between narrative and lesson. Using visuality as an instrument for memory practice highlights this ambiguity, in part because that mechanism of transition between linguistic and visual image is so elusive.

Whalen’s reading of the *lais* employs a tactic with suggestive potential for allowing a secular text to transcend its linguistic bounds, becoming something whose most important features are apprehended using the faculties of vision. This tactic involves reading the structure and form of the *lais*. Expanding on his earlier work, Whalen makes a compelling case for a formal *mise en abyme* at work in *lais* such as *Guigemar* (p. 96). Whalen’s discussion of the ways that the *lai* moves us through interior and exterior loci points out the importance of form for thinking about the visualization process. Through patterns and structures, we are most clearly able to conceive of text as a visual, material object. And the *mise en abyme* form in particular speaks powerfully to the interaction between the interiorized and exteriorized forms of seeing that Whalen’s overall argument about visual description and memory requires that we acknowledge.

The book’s argument makes an important turn in its examination of the *Fables*. In this chapter, Whalen explains that he will focus not only on the details in narrative imagery that encourage memory through descriptive visualization, but also on the *Fables’* manuscript tradition. As he argues, “the visual aspect of the tales as they were recorded on manuscript folios during the centuries following their composition helps to situate them within the broader context of a mnemonic architecture of description that reveals itself to be the hallmark of Marie’s literary talent” (p. 122). In order to make this case, Whalen concentrates on such components as illuminations and miniatures, as well as historiated initials and scribal practices that often set off the moral of the fable through color and *mise en page* (p. 126).

In many ways, this turn represents a natural extension of his argument. The terms shift from the mind’s eye to physical sight here and in this shift lie several potentially interesting contributions to the examination of memory and visuality. For instance, Whalen points out that the iconographic programs of the fable manuscripts include illustrations not only of the narrative, but also of the female author herself, sometimes pen in hand, and sometimes reading aloud. Incorporating the visual representation of Marie creates “an impressive visualization of the ambiguous world of oral and written culture in the twelfth century,” as Sandra Hindman notes.^[5]

The author portraits thus lend further suggestive dimension to Marie’s textual matrix of memory and visuality, as Whalen demonstrates. Lat. 3064, in which a group of figures listen to Marie while the space at the center of the scene boasts a table holding books and a miniature building. As Whalen points out, such iconography, with its architectural element, makes a powerful case for the centrality of memory arts (p. 134), which were often described in terms of rooms and built spaces. And the description of the illustration conjures an evocative network of literacy, orality, and memory.

But this discussion casts into relief a difficulty present throughout the chapter, which is the lack of illustrations as foundations for Whalen’s readings. Whalen’s description of this last image is so tantalizing, and also so central to his argument, that the reader’s inability to see it alongside his text creates some frustration. The image appears on the volume’s dust jacket, but most readers will presumably not have access to this in order to assess Whalen’s description for themselves. I direct these comments to presses rather than to the author, of course. As those of us who engage in interdisciplinary work know, academic publishers have had an increasingly difficult time finding resources for book

illustration; however, Whalen's work represents an excellent argument for the importance of including such detail, particularly in a field like medieval studies.

The kind of scholar who will be attracted by the multidisciplinary perspective Whalen brings to his material will want to see both the visual and the textual evidence. Again, the question of how verbal information moves into a visual realm—how this transition can transcend analogy or metaphor, what the relationship between seeing internally and externally involves – is deeply complex. For this reason, it seems especially important to make visual evidence itself an integral part of this book's interpretive program. At the end of the chapter, Whalen asserts, "the written text and the image on the manuscript page ultimately work together to ensure the performance of [Marie's] work" (p. 135). Performance seems like a crucial direction in which to take this investigation, but the reader might have a clearer sense of how that multivalent and extremely suggestive term is being used with a fuller spectrum of the relevant evidence.

Whalen's final chapters create a pleasing symmetry with his opening, because he is able to connect the references to memory evident in the *Espurgatoire sainte Patrice* and *Vie sainte Audree* to parallel references in Marie's prologues and epilogues in the *Lais* and *Fables*. In this way, he makes a case in the penultimate chapter (building in part upon June Hall McCash's work) for Marie's authorship of the purgatory narrative and the saint's life. He speculates that the generic preoccupation with memory in saints' lives might have made this genre especially appealing to Marie (p. 143). Whalen uses these two texts to highlight Marie's propensity for framing—both structurally and conceptually—all her works with the language and practices of memory. Whalen's conclusion situates Marie in the context of later medieval authors, such as Guillaume de Lorris, Dante, and Chaucer, who also privileged the intersection of visually vivid description and memory. This study elegantly enriches our understanding of Marie by illuminating her relationships to her literary communities, her successors, and her broader cultural contexts in the visual and plastic arts. Through all these contexts, we see more clearly the mechanisms underlying her ubiquitous preoccupation with memory.

NOTES

[1] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "Introduction," in Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché, eds., *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 4.

[2] Mary Carruthers, "Moving Images in the Mind's Eye," in *The Mind's Eye*, p. 291.

[3] Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 28.

[4] Maddox, pp. 43-4.

[5] Sandra Hindman, "Aesop's Cock and Marie's Hen: Gendered Authorship in Text and Image in Manuscripts of Marie de France's *Fables*," in Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor, eds., *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence* (Buffalo and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 52.

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ISSN 1553-9172