

---

Original Article

# Out of sight, but not out of mind: A Middle Dutch religious allegory as guide towards the absent Christ

Lieke Smits 

University of Antwerp, Ruusbroecgenootschap, Prinsstraat 13, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium.

**Abstract** The Daughter Zion allegory has previously been interpreted as a failed allegory for mystical union, both because it relies on personification allegory and because some versions do not actually portray intimate union between the soul and God. Focusing on the Middle Dutch incunable *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie (A Devout Exercise on the Daughter of Zion)*, printed by Gheraert Leeu in 1492, I will offer a different interpretation that is based on what the narrative does, rather than on what it does not do. By creating complex characters with inner lives and by fuelling speculation about their motivations, the text creates potent candidates for an intense, mediated relationship with the divine that is similar to parasocial relationships with fictional characters. The text helps the (likely female) reader to develop the devotional skills that will aid her in her spiritual progress.

*postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2023)14, 179–201.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-022-00259-7>

- 1 I use *Vander dochtere van syon* to refer specifically to this printed version of the text. References are to folios in the incunable. I have consulted The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KW 150 B 66. A second copy is Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus, R 47.3. For a facsimile, see van Mierlo (1941).
- 2 English translations of verses from the Song of Songs are from the translation of the Vulgate by E. Ann Matter, which takes into account the medieval understanding of the Bible text (1990, xvi–xxxv).
- 3 Visual parallels can be found in a miniature of the Sponsa/Caritas wounding Christ in the Rothschild Canticles (Hamburger 1990, 7276; Smits 2019, 6–7) and images of the Crucifixion of the Virtues, with usually Caritas and sometimes the Sponsa piercing Christ’s side (Kraft 1976).
- 4 On the use of allegory and personification in printed devotional books from the Low Countries, see van der Laan (2020). Another devotional book making use of allegory printed by Gheraert Leeu is *Van die gheestelike kintscheyt ihesu ghemoraliseeret* (*On the Spiritual Childhood of Jesus Moralised*, Antwerp 1488).

In the devotional booklet *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie* (*A Devout Exercise on the Daughter of Zion*), printed by Gheraert Leeu in 1492, the reader is presented with a religious allegory.<sup>1</sup> It is based on medieval mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs, especially verse 4.9: ‘You have wounded my heart, my sister bride, you have wounded my heart by one of your eyes and in one hair of your neck.’<sup>2</sup> The protagonist is the Daughter Zion, or the loving soul, who has been wounded with love by someone of unknown identity. Personifications of virtues and faculties of the soul come to her aid: *Cognitio* (Knowledge) searches the earth but cannot find the one who wounded her mistress and *Spes* (Hope) and *Fides* (Faith) try to comfort the Daughter, all to no avail. Eventually, it is revealed that *Caritas* (Love) has wounded the soul on behalf of Christ, also referred to as ‘the King.’ The Daughter expresses her desire to wound Christ in return, and *Caritas* offers to act as emissary, taking *Oratio* (Prayer) with her as companion. In a perhaps unexpected turn of events, the narrative does not culminate in a meeting of the two lovers; instead, *Caritas* and *Oratio* bring honey from Christ’s wound to the Daughter as cure for her lovesickness. The story is illustrated with woodcuts (Borms 1946), and in the illustration of this dramatic climax the protagonist is markedly absent: we see *Caritas* wounding the enthroned Christ, while *Oratio* collects the liquid spouting from his wound (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Two short meditations on Christ’s life and Passion follow the allegory.

The text belongs to the so-called ‘Daughter Zion tradition,’ which dates back to ca. 1200 and has been extensively studied by Annette Volfing (2017).<sup>4</sup> Previous scholarship has generally interpreted it as an allegory for mystical union, for in many versions Christ descends to earth for a union after being wounded and sometimes embraces the Daughter. As such, scholars have criticised the prominent role of personifications in the allegory, arguing that this narrative element stands in the way of the intimate relationship between Christ and the soul, apparently denying her agency in the story of her own mystical progression. The lack of a meeting between the lovers in the version printed by Leeu would seem to undermine the intimacy of mystical union even more.

In this article, I offer an interpretation of *Vander dochtere van syon* based on what it does, rather than what it does not do. My analysis illuminates how the booklet encourages the reader to cultivate a mediated relationship with Christ. Even though Christ remains an absent lover for the Daughter-soul, the allegory’s characters are brought to life for the reader, who is encouraged to speculate about their hidden motivations, their inner lives, and about their actions outside of the events narrated in the booklet. They become ‘real,’ potential candidates for an intense mediated relationship that can be called ‘parasocial.’ The allegory does not only offer the characters for such a relationship but also encourages the



Fig. 1: Caritas shoots an arrow at Christ. Title page of *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie*, Antwerp: Gheraert Leeu, 1492. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 150 B 66, fol. a1. Reproduced courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

reader to maintain a mediated relationship through meditative practice. Before turning to my own analysis, I will elaborate more on *Vander dochtere van syon* and the allegorical tradition to which it belongs.

### ***Vander dochtere van syon* and the Daughter Zion tradition**

The Daughter Zion tradition started out with a late twelfth-century or early thirteenth-century Latin prose text (Schmidtke 1995; Volting 2017). German verse adaptations followed, and several German and Dutch prose adaptations, mostly drawing on the Latin sources, were written in the

- 5 Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, LTK 315, fols 80r–89r, second half of the fifteenth century.
- 6 An edition is provided by Willeumier-Schalijs (1950). For descriptions of the manuscripts, see 1–4.
- 7 On female religious communities from the Low Countries as owners of incunabula, see Dlabáčová and Stoop (2021); on the urban laity as readers of printed devotional books, see van der Laan (2020).

fifteenth century, for laypeople and for different religious orders and communities (Volfing 2017, 53). There are two extant Middle Dutch versions. The so-called *East Middle Dutch Daughter Zion* survives in a single manuscript.<sup>5</sup> A second version, which Volfing names the *Devotio Moderna Daughter Zion*, survives in several manuscripts that belonged to female religious communities and in the incunable printed by Leeu as *Vander dochtere van syon een devoet exercitie*.<sup>6</sup> The printed booklet might have reached a wider readership including not only religious women but also the urban laity (van Mierlo 1941, 9).<sup>7</sup>

The allegorical narrative makes use of prophetic Old-Testament books mentioning the Daughter Zion, the personified city of Jerusalem. Moreover, it draws heavily on the love dialogue of the *Song of Songs* and its Bernardian, mystical interpretation, which stages female companions of the bride-soul that are reflected in the allegory's personifications of virtues and faculties. It can also be seen as part of the tradition of philosophical allegory (Whitman 2013; Van Dyke 2019). The personified virtues have their roots in Prudentius' early fifth-century *Psychomachia* and might have been inspired by the more recent *Anticlaudianus* by Alan of Lille (Schmidtke 1995, 953; Volfing 2017, 22, 307).

In most versions of the allegory, the soul eventually meets her divine bridegroom. In the Latin prose, for example, Christ descends to earth for an embrace of the Daughter (Volfing 2017, 28–30). The so-called Alemannic version has the Daughter traveling with Caritas to the heavenly king herself. The *East Middle Dutch Daughter Zion* describes an inner embrace and encourages the soul to continuously wound Christ, one wound after another (Volfing 2017, 189, 77–78). In *Vander dochtere van syon*, however, the narrative does not culminate in a meeting of the two lovers. The Daughter sends emissaries to her beloved, Christ does not descend to earth, and the reader is not made part of their union, which is only alluded to as taking place in heaven.

As noted above, scholars have criticised the portrayal of mystical union in the Daughter Zion tradition. Dietrich Schmidtke, for example, has argued that unmediated union between the soul and God is not well represented in an allegory that involves mediators between the two (1995, 954–55). Volfing has noted a trend of increasing agency and 'room for movement' for the Daughter-soul in the German and Dutch versions, allowing her 'to take responsibility for her own salvation – and towards making the love story more psychologically satisfying' (2017, 42, 45). Volfing fits the *Devotio Moderna Daughter Zion* within this trend by pointing out the Daughter's relatively high level of self-awareness and her expression of the desire to wound Christ herself (66–67). She does state, however, that the text does not follow other versions in allowing an unmediated encounter between the soul and Christ.



Yet, as I argue below, by considering the imaginative activity of readers called forth by the allegory as well as the woodcuts and additional texts in the incunable, it is possible to offer new perspectives on how *Vander dochtere van syon* approaches mysticism. Thus my study contributes new observations to the trends identified by Volfing. First, I will argue that the allegory's resolution, in which Christ remains absent to the loving soul, is significant not only because of its divergence from the allegorical tradition (with which medieval readers might not have been familiar), but also because it breaks with the expectations created by the cognitive schema of 'lovesickness' that structures the narrative. Then, I will show that the Daughter and Caritas function as complex characters, about whose motivations readers are encouraged to speculate beyond what is predicated in the text. In this respect, these figures seem to break down any strong division between allegorical personifications and literary characters. Their complex and independent nature makes them potential candidates for a parasocial relationship, as will be argued in the last section. The booklet encourages the reader to engage with the characters in a manner that makes them 'real,' creating a bond with the divine. Moreover, it instructs the reader to sustain such a bond through reading, prayer, and meditation. As such, it functions similarly to what Joshua Landy has called 'formative fictions,' which not only offer a story to read but also contain implicit information on *how* to read them. The reader can directly apply these instructions to the two meditative texts that follow the allegory.

## Subverted scripts

In this section I argue that the Daughter's failure to meet with Christ would have stood out as surprising and thus potentially meaningful for medieval readers, and I begin to explore that significance. I have already stated why it is significant to modern researchers: as a departure from the Daughter Zion tradition, it is likely a conscious decision on the part of the author. A medieval reader of the booklet, however, would not necessarily have been familiar with previous versions of the allegory. By analysing how the allegory breaks with particular cognitive schemata, or culturally specific paradigms for organising experience, I will show how *Vander dochtere van syon* plays with and subverts the reader's expectations about its ending. This means that the mediated relationship with an absent Christ, which I argue is at the core of the narrative, is emphasised for the reader.

The notion of a 'schema' was developed in cognitive psychology for mental structures that people use to organise generic knowledge (Bartlett

1932; Rumelhart 1980). These structures are culturally specific. For instance, a late-medieval schema of ‘medical cure’ would perhaps include bloodletting, while today we would instead think of pills developed by the pharmaceutical industry. Literary theory has used the notion of cognitive schemata to explain how a reader processes narratives: these paradigms function to help readers in filling in details that the text does not provide, thus aiding in the process of interpretation (Alexander and Emmott 2014). Moreover, they can set expectations for a story’s progression. For such predictions, readers not only make use of the schemata to which the narratives refer but also ‘story schemata,’ or knowledge about the general structures of stories (Rumelhart 1975).

Appropriate sequences of events that belong to a schema are referred to as ‘scripts’ by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson (1977). The script for ‘medical cure’ can, for example, involve visiting a physician, receiving a diagnosis, and obtaining medicine. A script includes ‘roles’ (doctor, patient, apothecary), ‘props’ (medical instruments, medicine), ‘entry conditions’ (being in ill health), and ‘results’ (in case of success, restored health). Knowledge about the conditions that will lead to the desired result and the different choices a person can make on their way towards this goal constitute the ‘plan.’ By finding the plan in a story, readers can make guesses about the intentions behind characters’ actions.

With its emphasis on wounding love—a double wounding, framing the narrative at beginning and end—*Vander dochtere van syon* makes use of the schema and script of ‘lovesickness’ to structure its narrative. Because schemata are culturally specific, it is necessary to take into account the medieval discourses in which lovesickness featured. Below I discuss three overlapping versions of lovesickness relevant to the allegory and its readers: that articulated in medical discourse, in secular poetry and romance, and in mystical and devotional discourses.<sup>8</sup>

8 On ‘conceptual blending,’ in which different cognitive schemata are combined into a composite schema, see Fauconnier and Turner (2002).

The medical discourse on lovesickness has been elaborately studied by Mary Frances Wack (1990). Late medieval physicians saw lovesickness as an illness related to melancholia, potentially leading to madness and even death. Psychologically, lovesickness was associated with an obsessive, dysfunctional imagination which could lead to extreme emotional states (Beecher and Ciavolella 1990, 71–72–80–81; Wells 2007, 36; McCann 2018, 135). The illness constituted an excessive inward focus on a mental phantasm of the object of desire (Wells 2007, 9–10).

In line with this medical discourse, the allegory portrays the Daughter’s lovesickness as at once a physical illness and a psychological state. When she hears that *Cognitio* has failed to find the one that wounded her on earth, her physical symptoms are emphasised as ‘she swooned and fainted and lost her speech and her colour, and seemed sad in her countenance.’ (Doe si dit hoirde soe viel si in onmacht ende sy quam van haer seluen ende



Fig. 2: *Cognitio* finds the Daughter wounded with love. *Vander dochtere van syon een deuot exercitie*, Antwerp: Gheraert Leeu, 1492. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 150 B 66, fol. a2. Reproduced courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

sy verloes haer sprake ende haer verwe, ende sy scheen droeuich van ghelaete, fol. a7.) The woodcuts emphasise the physicality of her suffering, visualising her wounded body, her fainting, and her bed-ridden state (Figs. 2, 3, and 4).

In *Vander dochter van syon* the intense and complex state of the Daughter's emotions becomes apparent, more so than in other versions of the Daughter Zion allegory (Volfing 2017, 64–66). For instance, when she addresses *Spes*' expression of hope that she will find her beloved, the Daughter says: 'Ay, go away from me, for you renew my mourning and increase my desire' (Och gaet van my want ghi vernieuwet mynen rouwe ende ghi vermeerdert mijn verlangen, fol. a8 ).



Fig. 3: Cognitio, Fides, and Spes attend to the fainted Daughter. *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie*, Antwerp: Gheraert Leeu, 1492. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 150 B 66, fol. a6. Reproduced courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

The medical treatises on lovesickness describe symptoms and offer cures that can lead to healing (Beecher and Ciavolella 1990; Wack 1990). Thus, the medical script sets the expectation that the ill protagonist will receive a diagnosis, obtain a cure, and that a successful ending means she will be healed. The allegory more or less conforms to this expectation. The Daughter is wounded and after failed attempts at healing (Cognitio's quest, Spes' and Fides' comfort) she receives a diagnosis from Sapientia (Wisdom), who examines the Daughter's condition in the manner of a physician (van Mierlo 1941, 5): 'Oh lady, you need to reveal your illness in order to receive a medicine.' (O vrouwe ghi moet nochtans die siecte openbaren suldi medecijn ontfaen. Fol. a12.). The passage in which the



Fig. 4: Cognitio, Fides, and Spes gather around the bed-ridden Daughter. *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie*, Antwerp: Gheraert Leeu, 1492. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 150 B 66, fol. a11. Reproduced courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

Daughter relates her symptoms is another indication of the complexity of her emotional state, which Volfing characterises as ‘moodswings’:

See, at times I am so sad that I cannot control myself. And then, when I believe to be completely lost, joy returns and pierces me fiercely in my heart through all my powers, and then I become delighted and light. Hereafter sweet tears emanate from my eyes, and at times my heart becomes so filled with love that I can neither pray nor desire. And then I find a readiness in my powers to do or leave everything that God wants me to do or leave. And meanwhile I arrive at a calmness that my reason cannot dispute and my created being cannot obstruct.

(Sich bi wylen so ben ick alte seer bedroeft also dat ic mi seluen niet bedwinghen en kan. Ende dan als ic waen altermael vergheten te wesen so coemt die vruechde weder ende dringhet mi met eenre druysticheyt in mijnre hertten doer alle mijne crachten Ende dan so worden sy vroen ende licht Hier na so comen soete tranen wt mijn oghen. ende by wilen so wort oec mijn herte also vol minnen dat ic niet bidden noch begheren en kan Ende dan so vinde ic een bereytheyt in mynen crachten: te doen of te laten al dat god van mi gedaen oft ghelaten wil hebben Ende onder wylen so come ick tot eenre stilheyt daer mijn reden niet disputeren en kan noch mijn gescapenheyt niet meer merren en kan. Fol. b1).

After the Daughter has thus laid out her symptoms, Sapientia reveals that Caritas has wounded the Daughter in service of the King. Caritas and Oratio are sent off to wound him in return and in this process they fetch a cure from Christ, who thus functions as an apothecary. The cure is brought to the Daughter, and heals her from her suffering.

In the medieval secular-poetic discourse, lovesickness was also a prominent theme. Whereas in the medical discourse lovesickness is a typically male disease, in the classical literature of Ovid and Vergil women were also lovesick, and this tradition was adopted in Arthurian romances such as those of Chrétien de Troyes. In these romances, there is a narrative pattern of quests for the beloved, with a successful quest leading to union with the beloved constituting a happy ending (Wells 2007). At the same time, religious allegories often drew on secular literature—for example, Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pelerinage de la vie humaine* was modelled on the *Roman de la rose* (Zeeman 2010, 148–150, 161). The figure of Lady Love for example, central to *Vander dochtere van syon*'s narrative plot, was a result of the merging of spiritual conceptions of love and the armed figure of Cupid from secular literature (Newman 2003, 138–189; Newman 2005). Barbara Newman states that love's overpowering of the faculties is 'more at home in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* than in the New Testament' (2003, 149).

*Vander dochtere van syon* follows the secular romance's narrative pattern of quests: an initial failed quest of Cognition, followed by the successful quest of Caritas and Oratio. An important part of these quests is the search for the lover's identity, a motif we also find in secular love narratives. The figure of the Fair Unknown, originating in an Arthurian romance by Renaut de Bage, had already influenced one thirteenth-century devotional text, *Quinque incitamenta ad deum amandum ardentem* (*Five Incitements to the Ardent Love of God*). In this text, Christ was likened to the Fair Unknown in order to suggest that many people do not fully know his identity (Newman 2003, 153). The Daughter Zion tradition, with its



emphasis on the desire to know the beloved, likewise plays with the hidden identity of the beloved. Only about two-thirds into the text, the Daughter learns that the king who has wounded her is actually Jesus Christ. The final quest of Caritas and Oratio breaks with the schema of the secular-poetic discourse by not letting the Daughter meet her beloved. In contrast to secular romances, the two lovers in *Vander dochtere van syon* do not belong to the same realm.

As Barbara Newman and Travis Stevens have shown, theologians borrowed from both the medical and literary concept of lovesickness (Newman 2003, 149–150; Stevens 2021). The mystical-spiritual notion of lovesickness was heavily shaped by the Victorine Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), who, building on Bernard of Clairvaux's exegesis of the Song of Songs, drew parallels between worldly and mystical love in a treatise titled *De quatuor gradibus violentae caritatis* (*On the Four Degrees of Violent Love*). These four degrees are wounding love, binding love, languishing love, and weakening love. The theologian states that 'with spiritual desire the extent to which the number of degree is higher is also the extent to which the degree itself is better; in fleshly desires the extent to which it is higher is the extent to which it is worse' (In desideriiis spiritualibus quanto major tanto et melior; in desideriiis carnalibus quanto est major tanto est peior. Richard of St-Victor 1955, 145; translation 2012, 282–283). Hence, Richard turns lovesickness, seen as a damaging state of mind in the secular context, into something that can fruitfully turn the reader towards God. His work was particularly influential for the mysticism of the thirteenth-century Low Countries, where the Daughter Zion tradition likely originated. Mystical women, in the tradition of the Song of Songs, described their longing for union with God in terms of illness and lovesickness (Bynum 1987; Wack 1990, 110–11, 174; Langum 2018). This lovesickness often alternated with moments of mystic unity.

*Vander dochtere van syon* follows the mystical tradition of lovesickness as a force turning the soul to God. This becomes clear when Caritas explains why Christ instructed her to wound the Daughter and to quickly walk away, increasing her suffering: 'For as long as a lover is with their beloved, the lover does not know how dear the beloved is. But only when the lover has lost their beloved, the lover knows how dear the beloved is.' (Want alsoe langhe als lief bi lief is so en weet lief niet hoe lief dat lief is Maer als dat lief sijn lief verloren heeft; soe weet dat lief ierst hoe lief dat lief was. Fol b5). The moments of mystical union with the beloved, that we know from the mystical tradition, are something which the Daughter does not get to experience. Thus, in light of the mystical discourse, the ending-without-meeting stands out.

Thus, *Vander dochtere van syon* subverts the expectation of the secular-poetic and the mystical discourses by presenting a successful ending, in

which the protagonist proclaims her satisfaction and the conflict is resolved, without a meeting of lovers. This subversion of the script will have alerted the reader: something significant is going on. Christ is no ordinary, mortal lover with whom one can have a face-to-face relationship. In line with the medical discourse, there are cures to alleviate suffering. Christ is absent in earthly life, but there are satisfactory solutions available for one's lovesickness: meditation and mediation. Before further elaborating on such mediated relationships with the divine, I will discuss how the allegory's characters are presented as candidates for such a relationship.

### Complex characters

In this section I argue that the way the allegory's characters are portrayed, with an inner life, intentions behind their actions, and with a life that extends beyond the events that are narrated, presents these characters to the reader as complex and real. This makes them candidates for a mediated, parasocial relationship, as will be discussed in the next section. The discussion of complex characters requires references to *fictionality*, as such characters are usually associated with fiction, and theorization of literary characters is mostly found in scholarship on fiction and narratology.

Julie Orlemanski has studied the nature of characters in a mystical text through the lens of fictionality, in an article on Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (2021).<sup>9</sup> This was a foundational text for the tradition of bridal mysticism, to which the Daughter Zion allegory can be said to belong. The fictionality in Bernard's text lies, according to Orlemanski, in not shying away from the literal characters in the text of the Song of Songs, emphasising their fictional bodies and creating new metaphors and narrative coherence. To illustrate her argument Orlemanski discusses, among others, Bernard's 7<sup>th</sup> sermon. Here, the mystic speaks about the who, what, and why of the Song's first verse: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.' He speculates about the bride's motivations to ask for such a kiss and about what might have happened prior to her request. Thus, he alludes to a world outside of what the text narrates, and demands that readers think beyond what the text directly attributes to the bride, imagining an extended world beyond the biblical text. This demand is in line with Kendall Walton's theory of representational arts (including but not limited to literature) as props in games of make-believe, that open up fictional worlds in the mind (Walton 1990; Fludernik 2018, 71). They make certain imaginings, in which we can participate as characters, appropriate by authorising them. Bernard can speculate about the bride's

<sup>9</sup> See also the discussions of premodern fictionality in Reuvekamp-Felber (2013); Glauch (2014); Orlemanski (2019); Contzen and Tilg (2020); Karnes (2020).



motivations, because in his sermons he establishes a fictional world in which these fictional truths can exist.

The Daughter Zion tradition not only builds on Bernard's tropological exegesis of the Song as expression for mystical longing; the text also seems to be inspired by his focus on character development. A fictional world is created in which imaginings are made possible. We can see the whole narrative as an exploration of the Song's verse 'You have wounded my heart,' asking questions, in a fashion similar to Bernard, about who was wounded, why, and how. These questions are vocalised by the protagonist, when Spes tries to comfort her after Cognitio's failed quest:

Oh, who has wounded me thus? And when shall I be able to see him?  
Ay, how long shall I have to wait for him [...]. He shot me with an  
arrow, and he hastily walked away and took all ointments with him.  
And therefore no one can comfort me, and no one can heal me but  
him alone.

(O wie mach mi aldus gewont hebben. ende wanneer sal ic hem eens  
mogen sien Och hoe lange sal ick na hem beyden [...] Hy scoet my  
met eenre stralen ende hi is haesteliken henen gelopen ende hi nam  
alle die salue met hem Ende hier om en mach mi niemant troesten  
ende oeck en mach my niemant gesont maken dan hi alleen. Fol. a8).

After failed attempts at comforting by Spes and Fides, the narrative seems to have reached an impasse, but then Sapientia enters the scene. After the Daughter has described her symptoms in detail, Sapientia makes the diagnosis that Caritas must have been the one who wounded her mistress. The Daughter is surprised, as Caritas belongs to the ladies in her service. But Sapientia reveals: 'Oh my Lady, I believe that she is closer to the King than she is to you' (O vrouwe ic geloue wel dat sy den coninc vele naerder is dan sy v is, fol. b4). Thus, both the Daughter and the reader receive a revelation: not only that Caritas was the one who wounded the loving soul, but also that she did this in the service of a certain king. The reader will be able to deduce the identity of this king: paratextual elements such as the image of Christ being wounded on the title page, and the full title *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie*, allude to a heavenly bridegroom. Moreover, a quote from Augustine relatively early in the narrative reveals to the reader that the Daughter was wounded by an 'uncreated master' (onghescepen meyster, fol. a5). Although not a surprise to the reader, the moment of revelation can function as an opportunity to pause one's reading and reflect on these revelations, visualising what happened when the Daughter was wounded and speculating about the reasons behind the wounding and about possible courses of action that would lead to the desired goals of healing and reciprocal love.

In the following scene Caritas is fetched to explain herself, and she makes a comic, lukewarm attempt at denying the whole affair:

Caritas was fetched: and when she came to her Lady she showed her a joyous countenance and a happy face. And she spoke to her Lady: ‘Oh Lady, are you ill? Why did I not know about this?’ Then the Lady spoke: ‘Why have you wounded me thus and walked away, and left me without comfort?’ Love said: ‘Oh Lady, are you wounded? Why have you waited so long before you came to seek my advice?’

(Men dede die minne halen: ende doe sy quam tot harer vrouwen doe toende sy haer een blide aensicht ende een vrolijk ghelaet Ende sy sprack tot haerre vrouwen O vrou sydi sieck hoe en heb ick dit niet eer gheweten Doe sprac die vrou: Waer om hebstu mi aldus ghewont ende doe liepstu oec wech ende du lieste my aldus onghetroest. Die minnen seide O vrou sidy ghewont hoe hebdi dus langhe gemerret eer ghi tot my gecomen sijt om raet te soeken. Fol. b4).

If the reader encountered this text purely through the allegorical truths it communicates, this passage would have little meaning. The feigned ignorance of Caritas seems to say very little about the teachings of Divine Love. When the reader encounters the story as containing fictional characters, however, the passage has a clearer purpose: it plays with the intentions of the characters and with the social information they have about each other. It becomes an instance of characterisation and psychological interpretation: the reader is aware of the fact that the Daughter knows that Caritas has wounded her, but Caritas does not yet have access to this piece of information. This passage serves a function in encouraging the reader to reflect on the character’s motivations and differing access to information, turning them into more complex characters with an inner life.

Thus, the Daughter and Caritas are given a rich inner life. In the case of the Daughter the reader learns much about her inner feelings, intentions, and desires. In the case of Caritas, whose identity can be seen, as Volting notes, to overlap both with the Daughter and Christ (2017, 66), her motivations and intentions are revealed. Although Christ is absent for large parts of the narrative, the reader is also encouraged to speculate about his identity and intentions. The fact that the reader is encouraged to think about what the characters did *before* the start of the narrative gives them a life independent of the text. This turns them into potential candidates for mediated or parasocial relationships.



## A parasocial relationship with the divine

In the previous two sections I have established that the conclusion of the allegory, in which the lovers do not meet but nevertheless experience a satisfying outcome, formed a break with cognitive schemata and hence gained significance for the reader; and that the main characters of the story, the Daughter and Caritas, are portrayed as having a complex inner life. Here, I will argue that this combination of ‘real’ characters and a distance in the relationship could be meant to forge a mediated relationship with the divine.

The centrality of fictional representations to religious practice has been demonstrated in recent works by anthropologist of spirituality and the mind Tanya Luhrmann (2020). Luhrmann studies the practices modern religious people engage in to make the divine present, a transformative process she calls ‘real-making’ or ‘kindling.’ She argues that prayer and similar meditative practices change one’s awareness of one’s inner world. According to Luhrmann, religious people train themselves in thinking with their ‘faith-frame’: an awareness of the invisible divine other. This can be compared with play: ‘an as-if frame in which someone acts according to the expectations of the play frame, while still remaining aware of the realities of the everyday world’ (22). The faith frame requires a paracosm, which can be defined as a detailed ‘private-but-shared imagined world,’ and is also used to describe childhood imaginary worlds or world-building in fiction (25). Here, Luhrmann uses the notion of ‘parasocial relationships.’ This term for imaginary reciprocal relationships and interactions with mediated, sometimes fictional characters has striking resemblance to the relationships forged with the divine in medieval spiritual role-play:

A relationship with a god or spirit is a parasocial relationship, like relationships with all invisible others. One cannot have an ordinary face-to-face relationship with invisible others; they have no faces. A god is not of course thought to be a fictional character by persons of faith. Nonetheless, the relationship is parasocial because its content occurs largely inside the person’s head, using his or her imagination, and what must be imagined about the god emerges from the rich stories in which that god is embedded. (30)

This relationship is deepened through plurimediality; a character being presented in different ways, so that one can personalise the relationship by choosing with which manifestations one engages, forming a personalised inner landscape (31).<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to Luhrmann’s model of faith, the relationship with the divine is shaped through mechanisms closely related to play, make-believe, or fiction, with fictionalised manifestations of the divine creating personal and deep relationships. *Vander dochtere van syon*

10 Luhrmann builds on the work of Sarah Iles Johnston, who argues that when Divine Others are plurimedial characters, meaning they are represented in different manners, or even in different media, they will become more ‘real,’ as they enable the creation of a personalised image of the divine (2018, 170).

uses the Daughter's fictionalised lovesickness to make the pain felt as a result of God's absence a driving force behind a mediated, parasocial relationship with the divine.

Christ himself recommends such a mediated relationship. In the dramatic climax of the story – the scene in which Caritas shoots Christ – a medicine for the Daughter is procured. But this is not the whole remedy, as Christ instructs Caritas:

Take this ointment and bring it to her who suffers because of me, and tell her to anoint with it the strength that she has used up for my sake. And tell her to send her emissaries frequently: devout prayer and ardent desire for our dear lord. And after a little labour, she will in the end come herself and fulfil her desire. And then I will free her from all sadness.

(Neemt deze salue ende brentse der gheenre die om mynent wille quelet, ende segt haer dat sy hier mede salue die crachten die sy om mijnre minnen wille verteert heeft. Ende segt haer dat sy dicke al hier haer boden sende, dat is innich gebet ende vierighe begheerten tot onsen lieuen here. Ende nae een luttel arbeys soes al sy int laetste selue comen ende vervollen haer begheerten. Ende dan so sal icse vry maken van alre droefheyt. Fol. b10.)

The ointment will alleviate only some of the Daughter's pains. She will still have to perform the spiritual labour of prayer and desire. What this prayer should look like is suggested by the meaning of Caritas' bow and arrows, which she uses to wound Christ on the Daughter's behalf: the bow stands for, respectively, 'meditation on all the pains that Christ suffered for our sake' (een ouerdencken all dier pinen die christus om onsen wille geleden heeft), and the two arrows for 'a kind pliability of the self-will that comes from true humility' (een vriendelike bughelijcheyt des eyghen willes die wt rechter oetmoedicheyt comet) and 'loving meditation on God's hidden benevolence and kindness' (een minlijc ouerdencken der verborghenre goedertierenheyt ende goetheyt gods, fol. b7). Especially this first item, meditation on Christ's suffering, would involve the reading of Passion meditations which were widespread, and provided in the booklet following the allegory. Such practices are deemed necessary for the soul, who is unable to meet her divine bridegroom in her earthly life.

With its devotional directions, *Vander dochtere van syon* might be characterised as what Joshua Landy has termed 'formative fictions' (2012). These types of texts contain implicit instructions on how to read and use the text, thus training the reader's interpretive skill. They presuppose a certain level of reading competence needed to distill these instructions from the text. A case study that is relevant to the topic at hand



Fig. 5: Cognitio searching the earth. *Vander dochtere van syon een deuoet exercitie*, Antwerp: Gheraert Leeu, 1492. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 150 B 66, fol. a4. Reproduced courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

is Landy's discussion of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Mark (2012, 43–68). Jesus, Landy argues in his reading of the text, does not use metaphorical language in order to make his message more easily understandable, but rather to make it accessible only to those capable of reading figurative language, and to further train them in doing so. The Parable of the Sower is, he argues, a 'meta-parable' that contains instructions for reading, focused on 'the ability to handle figurative language' (61). This ability is essential to faith, as practicing going from the literal to the figurative level also trains one to proceed from earthly to divine matters (60). One might say, it enables one to enter the kingdom of God while still on earth.

*Vander dochtere van syon* can be called formative because Christ's encouragement that the Daughter send frequent emissaries in the form of prayer and desire functions not only as an instruction for the reader to those very things herself; it can also be read as a promotion of the healing qualities of a parasocial relationship with the divine. The allegory presents personifications as necessary mediators, with Caritas as the faculty closest to the divine, and the mediated relationship with Christ as the cure for negative feelings about his absence. Like the narrative, the woodcuts portray the personifications more often than the Daughter. She is present in five out of the seven woodcuts, but always accompanied by one or more personifications. There are two woodcuts without the Daughter's presence; one of Cognito searching the world for the one who has wounded her mistress; she is shown looking into what seems to be a tavern (Fig. 5), and the illustration of Caritas wounding Christ, printed three times. Whereas the Daughter is denied a meeting with and perception of Christ, the reader is granted the privilege of looking at Christ as spectator with the aid of the woodcut illustrations and through identification with Caritas, which fuels the reader's imagination with the visual information contained in the image. This visual information breaks the identification with the protagonist. It teaches the reader something about the process of reading and meditating: one can move in and out of characters, from actor to spectator and back again. Even though one cannot perceive Christ with corporeal eyes in this world, one can use devotional books to imagine him. While the Daughter is being cured, the reader, through both identification and disidentification with the protagonist, is taught the skills to overcome feelings of 'lovesickness' regarding Christ's absence, which include exercising the imagination and directing it at Christ.

Taking into account Landy's notion of formative fictions, *Vander dochtere van syon* can thus be seen as a reading manual that instructs the reader to cultivate a mediated, or parasocial, relationship with the divine through devotional reading. These instructions can be applied not only to the allegory itself, but also to other devotional texts, and the booklet offers two of those for further practice. The first text following the allegory is headed 'Hier beghint een gheestelike oefeninge hoe men dat soete kindeken Jesus besoecken verblijen visiteren sal van kersdach tot lichtmisse' (Here begins a spiritual exercise how one should visit, delight, and attend the sweet child Jesus from Christmas Day until Candlemas, fol. c1). The reader is invited to visit Mary and her child in the nursery each day from Christmas to Candlemas, and to bring a basket with sweet, ripe fruits that will delight the holy family. For each day of the week a fruit is specified, connected to meditation on an episode of Jesus and Mary's lives. Just as *Vanden dochtere syon*, the text operates on two levels of reality: while the allegory combines the highly fictional narrative of the Daughter



with allusions to Christ's crucifixion as a historical event of the past, the spiritual exercise combines the metaphorical fruit baskets with scenes from the Gospels. And just as the instructions to pray and meditate in *Vander dochtere van syon* presuppose the reading of other texts, so does this exercise, insofar as the episodes on which the reader needs to meditate are only mentioned briefly. In order to stimulate the imagination, further details would be required, which could be supplied by more elaborate meditations on Christ's life, images, or preaching, for example.

The second text following the allegory is a prayer that will advance the salvation of a soul in Purgatory. This prayer contains a more straightforward meditation on the Nativity and events of the Passion. Bodily fluids (sweat, blood, saliva) play a prominent role in the meditation, which can be seen to mirror the roles of tears and the ointment from Christ's side in the allegory.<sup>11</sup> Being a Passion meditation that stimulates the imagination with detailed descriptions and sensory images, this prayer is the kind of text that would be needed to carry out the meditations on Christ's life and Passion encouraged in the two previous texts.

## Conclusion

Rather than a failed narrative of mystical union, *Vander dochtere van syon* can be read as a religious allegory with a clear goal: encouraging the reader to forge a bond with God during their life on earth, to cultivate a parasocial relationship with the divine through the mediated contact of engagement with Christ in textual and visual form. By breaking with existing cognitive schemata, the narrative emphasises its ending without union between the soul and God as significant and as a satisfactory condition as long as one has recourse to the right means for a mediated relationship. Theories on narratology and fictionality can further our understanding of medieval spirituality by revealing how allegory, metaphor, and other textual devices function not only as signifiers for divine truths. Rather, literal characters and images contribute to the purpose of this devotional book. By encouraging readers to speculate about its characters' intentions and desires, *Vander dochtere van syon* brings them to life.

With its explicit instruction to pray and meditate on Christ's life, and its more implicit instructions on how to read a text by adopting different perspectives and to enter a paracosm, *Vander dochtere van syon* functions similarly to formative fictions. Thus, while the Daughter's agency is limited, the reader's is not; the reader is given the tools and techniques to manage and develop their spiritual skills.

11 One manuscript containing *Vanden dochtere van syon* is preceded by a paratext recommending it to be read during *Die laet feest*, which can mean the 'feast' following bloodletting. If this is the case, readers would have seen their process of bleeding and healing reflected in the narrative (Volfing 2017, 63–64).

## Acknowledgments

This article is the result of projects funded by the Stichting Elise Mathilde Fonds/Leiden University Fund and the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), file number 12R5922N. I thank the anonymous reviewers, the editors of *postmedieval*, and Veerle Fraeters for their constructive feedback.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

## Open Access

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## About the Author

Lieke Smits is an FWO postdoctoral fellow, conducting her research at the Ruusbroec Institute of the University of Antwerp. In 2020, she obtained her doctorate from Leiden University. She is a medievalist and art historian, interested in the late medieval religious imagination and devotional practices. E-mail [lieke.smits@uantwerpen.be](mailto:lieke.smits@uantwerpen.be).



## References

- Alexander, Marc, and Catherine Emmott. 2014. 'Schemata.' In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al. Hamburg: Hamburg University. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/schemata>
- Bartlett, Frederic C. 1932. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beecher, D.A. and M. Ciavolella, eds. 1990. *A Treatise on Love Sickness by Jacques Ferrand: Translated and Edited with a Critical Introduction and Notes*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Borms, Jan. 1946. 'De houtsneden uit "Vander dochtere van Syon" (Antwerpen. Gheraert Leeu 1492): Een Leekebijdrage.' *De Gulden Passer* 24: 41–53.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- von Contzen, Eva, and Stefan Tilg. 2020. 'Fictionality before Fictionality? Historicizing a Modern Concept.' In *Traveling Concepts: New Fictionality Studies*, edited by Monika Fludernik and Henrik Skov Nielsen, 91–114. Berlin, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Dlabačová, Anna, and Patricia Stoop. 2021. 'Incunabula in Communities of Canonesses Regular and Tertiaries Related to the *Devotio Moderna*: Toward an "Inclusive" Approach of Late Medieval Book Ownership in the Low Countries.' *Quaerendo* 51: 219–48.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. 2002. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2018. 'The Fiction of the Rise of Fictionality.' *Poetics Today* 39: 67–92.
- Glauch, Sonja. 2014. 'Fiktionalität im Mittelalter: Revisited.' *Poetica* 46: 85–139.
- Hamburger, Jeffrey F. 1990. *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles. 2018. *The Story of Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Karnes, Michelle. 2020. 'The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction.' *New Literary History* 51: 209–228.
- Kraft, Heike. 1976. *Die Bildallegorie der Kreuzigung Christi durch die Tugenden*. Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin.
- van der Laan, Joanka. 2020. *Enacting Devotion: Performative Religious Reading in the Low Countries (ca. 1470–1550)*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Groningen.
- Landy, Joshua. 2012. *How to Do Things with Fictions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Langum, Virginia. 2018. 'Medicine, Female Mystics and Illness Experience.' In *Revisiting Gender in European History, 1400–1800*, edited by Elise M. Dermineur, Åsa Karlsson Sjögren, and Virginia Langum, 100–120. New York: Routledge.
- Luhrmann, T.M. 2020. *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



- Matter, E. Ann. 1990. *The Voice of my Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McCann, Daniel. 2018. *Soul-Health: Therapeutic Reading in Later Medieval England*. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.
- van Mierlo, Jozef. 1941. *Vander dochtere van Syon: Fac-simile-druk*. Antwerp, Belgium: Nederlandsche Boekhandel.
- Newman, Barbara. 2005. 'Love's Arrows: Christ as Cupid in Late Medieval Art and Devotion.' In *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché, 263–286. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Newman, Barbara. 2003. *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Orlemanski, Julie. 2019. 'Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages.' *New Literary History* 50: 145–170.
- Orlemanski, Julie. 2021. 'Literary Persons and Medieval Fiction in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*.' *Representations* 153: 29–50.
- Reuvekamp-Felber, Timo. 2013. 'Zur gegenwärtigen Situation mediävistischer Fiktionalitätsforschung: eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme.' *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 132: 417–444.
- Richard of St-Victor. 1955. *De quatuor gradibus violentae caritatis*, edited by Gervais Dumeige. In *Ives: Épître a Séverin sur la charité, Richard de Saint-Victor: Les quatre degrés de la violente charité*, 126–177. Paris, France: Vrin. 1955. Translated by Andrew B. Kraebel. 2012. In *On Love: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St-Victor*, edited by Hugh Feiss, 261–300. New York: New City Press.
- Rumelhart, David E. 1975. 'Notes on a Schema for Stories.' In *Representation and Understanding: Studies in Cognitive Science*, edited by Daniel G. Bobrow and Allan Collins, 211–235. New York: Academic Press.
- Rumelhart, David E. 1980. 'Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition.' In *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*, edited by Rand J. Spiro, Bertram C. Bruce, and William F. Brewer, 33–58. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schank, Roger C., and Robert P. Abelson. 1977. *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schmidtke, Dietrich. 1995. 'Tochter Sion-Traktat.' In *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, edited by Kurt Ruh et al, 2nd ed., vol. 9, 950–960. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Smits, Lieke A. 2019. 'Wounding, Sealing, and Kissing: Bridal Imagery and the Image of Christ.' *Medium Aevum* 88: 1–22.
- Stevens, Travis. 2021. 'Christian Lovesickness: Richard of St. Victor's *The Four Degrees of Violent Love*.' *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 47: 21–46.
- Van Dyke,Carolynn. 2019. *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Volfing, Annette. 2017. *The Daughter Zion Allegory in Medieval German Religious Writing*. London: Routledge.
- Wack, Mary F. 1990. *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.



- Walton, Kendall L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wells, Marion A. 2007. *The Secret Wound: Love-Melancholy and Early Modern Romance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Whitman, Jon. 2013. *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press.
- Willeumier-Schalij, J.M. 1950. 'Vander dochtere van Syon.' *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 68: 1–23.
- Zeeman, Nicolette. 2010. 'Medieval Religious Allegory: French and English.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, 148–161. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.