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Aden Kumler, *Translating Truth: Ambitious Images and Religious Knowledge in Late Medieval France and England*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011. xiii + 290 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-16493-0.

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Acts of translation are essential to the practice of art history, particularly for medievalists who work on religious images. Not only must we decipher a visual and iconographic language often completely unknown to modern viewers, but we must also parse the complex scriptural, theological, and devotional texts central to Christian tradition. The resulting scholarship is unavoidably interdisciplinary, a juggling act of sorts in which word and image are always in play. For art historians, the challenge is to capture this dynamic interaction while allowing images to assert themselves as independent generators of meaning. In Aden Kumler's *Translating Truth: Ambitious Images and Religious Knowledge in Late Medieval France and England*, the translation of text and image is central as a methodology and as an overarching argument that reflects the vernacular religious culture of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Anglo-French world. The author is especially interested in a problematic class of illuminated pastoral manuscripts designed to instruct lay viewers in the subtleties of liturgical and theological knowledge. Her interest in these *pastoralia* is partly motivated by a broader disciplinary critique. From the onset, Kumler positions her study as a corrective to the ontological emphasis of recent medieval art history, especially investigations of cult images. Instead of issues of the "visual and material articulation of forms of presence" (p. 3), she seeks to understand how images communicate truths that are more purely epistemological in nature. [1]

The historical and conceptual bases of Kumler's argument are clearly articulated in the book's introduction and first two chapters. Chapter one, "From Necessary Truths to Spiritual Ambitions," explores the context of the widespread pastoral reform movement and the impact of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Relying on a kind of "trickle-down" approach (p. 20), the council's directives included the reform of both the clergy and the laity under their charge by setting strict standards for religious knowledge, especially the "canonical repertoire of prayer and gesture" (p. 37), including the Creed, the Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer and the proper way to cross oneself. Crucial to these reform goals was the annual requirement of receiving the Eucharist, along with its prerequisite of confession. Indeed, confession became an essential pedagogical opportunity for the examination and instruction of the laity. But for the sophisticated and literate elite class, the basic requirements (the "necessary truths") were not enough. As Kumler asserts, "new spiritual ambitions desired new forms of spiritual excellence" (p. 42). These aspirations can be charted partly through the proliferation of various instructional texts and images combined in luxury manuscripts.

The dynamics of confession provided a framework for these illuminated books, as explored in chapter two, "Translating the Modus Confitendi." In Kumler's view, confession's "dialogic" structure impacted not only the act of reading but also the act of viewing, turning it into a "sacramental exercise couched in questions and answers, designed to produce representations of sin and religious truth" (p. 46). She is especially concerned with how these "dialogic modes of address" impacted the ways in which images translated truth (p. 46), as well as the penitent's evolving role as a contributing partner in the

confessional process, a more active role that corresponded to new aspirations for spiritual development. In Kumler's effort to prove the dominance of the dialogic model, several twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastic and lay manuscripts are explored, including the *Speculum virginum* (London, BL, Arundel MS 44), the *Vrigit de solas* (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 9220), Jean de Joinville's *Romans as ymages* (Paris, BnF, MS n. a. fr. 4509), and a set of images added to the Lambeth Apocalypse (London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 209). Although many pages are devoted to explicating the confessional model, its application is not completely convincing, nor is the idealized characterization of the reader-viewer as a kind of eager, hardworking student, who comes "prepared with contrition and with knowledge of the pastoral syllabus" (p. 59).

Almost all of the manuscripts treated here represent pastoral compendia, that is, compilations of seemingly disparate texts and images often classified as "miscellanies." Kumler is right to avoid this misleading label and she should be praised for her willingness to engage with these collections as serious works that were carefully edited and arranged to highlight visual and textual connections. As becomes clear, these compendia are full of fascinating texts and innovative image programs, all brought to life through Kumler's analysis. The book is especially useful at filling in the visual gaps in our knowledge of these manuscripts, some of which are known only through one or two oft-published miniatures. And the illuminations are beautifully documented in eighty-two figures, all integrated into the text, many reproduced full-page and the majority in color. However, Kumler's primary accomplishment is her commitment to making the Latin and French texts accessible through diligent transcription and translation. And instead of relegating the original texts to endnotes or appendices, they are given ample space within the text proper.

Kumler's approach to both text and image is most fully demonstrated in the last two chapters, which provide in-depth case studies of manuscripts that aim to translate complex liturgical and devotional knowledge--the purview of clerics and monks--for a lay audience. Chapter three, "Translating the Eucharist," explores the ways in which the experience of the Mass, specifically the "phenomenal paradox" of the Transubstantiation (p. 103), was clarified for the laity. Central to this project was the use of vernacular and visual languages to "translate Eucharistic truth from the Latinate spaces of ritual performance and theological debate to the surface of the painted page" (p. 104). After outlining the Church's efforts to craft a "normative vision of the Eucharist" (p. 104), the bulk of the chapter is devoted to the explication of a Mass tract illuminated by the Queen Mary Psalter Master in the 1320s (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 13342). The manuscript's text and images lead the lay reader-viewer through the liturgy by providing a kind of "script" of "corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual participation" (p. 122).

Most importantly, as Kumler argues, the manuscript perfectly exemplifies the "relationship between seeing and salvation, between vision and divine verities" (p. 104). Not only do the images present a richly detailed picture of Christians visually experiencing the truths of the Mass, but the text also emphasizes the specifically visual power of the Eucharist. Below the scene of the priest's communion (where the congregation simply looks on as the celebrant ingests the host), the text directs the reader-viewer to pray "that he may give you the grace of the Holy Spirit" and further "[t]ruly believe and hope that you shall be spiritually communicated even if you only receive the sacrament visually..." (p. 141). As Kumler points out, the illumination above reinforces the text's assertions through a formal correlation of the host consumed by the priest with the dove of the Holy Spirit with its "host-like halo" descending on the assembled laity (p. 141).

Chapter four, "Translating the Cloister," offers an engrossing analysis of two illuminated texts: the *Somme le roi* (London, BL, Add. MS 28162) and the *Sainte abbaie* (London, BL, Yates Thompson MS 11). These were originally combined with four other texts in one manuscript, offering a "program for spiritual improvement" that presented the "space of the cloister as a paradigm for the reformed

interiority of the reader-viewer" (p. 162). In terms of the illuminations, Kumler traces the iconographic sources to the façade sculptures of Notre-Dame de Paris, opening up a rich context of manuscript production in the neighborhood near the cathedral. She also makes more conceptual links to ecclesiastical structures in her exploration of microarchitecture. Based on the literal "enclosure of the sacred," these miniature architectural elements clarify the manuscript's focus on, as Kumler puts it, a "moral interior" or, more precisely, a "spiritual interiority" or "architecture of interiority" (p. 185).

In the *Somme le roi*, architectural metaphors dominate the text, as the reader is guided through a series of "progressively more interior spaces": the castle, the house, and the cloister (p. 188). Ultimately, interiority is expressed in terms of the heart: "When you shall pray to God, enter within your bedchamber, that is, within your heart, and close the door upon yourself" (p. 193). Domestic architecture plays a role as well in the tract *Four Loves and the Three Heavens*, which is also included in the *Sainte abbaïe* manuscript. In this instance, the journey to perfection involves the denial of the comforts of family and home so that the soul can attain the "third heaven," that is, a state of being "entirely enclosed in God" (pp. 226-227). Joined with these complex and poetic descriptions, Kumler interprets the images as "independent" visions "of spiritual ascent" (p. 228) that are as profound and "spiritually ambitious" as the texts they accompany (p. 230). Yet there is an unexpressed tension as these two languages—textual and visual—are translated by Kumler. Specifically, the texts conjure up a special class of images of their own, images that are often beyond representation. How can an artist really depict a person entering his own heart and closing the door on himself? Or the state of being "entirely enclosed in God"? Notwithstanding their beauty and their iconographic subtleties, images sometimes can only hint at what words so deftly describe.

Ultimately, Kumler's book hinges on questions of reception, that is, the specific ways in which text and image communicate and guide the reader-viewer toward knowledge and truth. For the author, these illuminated manuscripts survive as products of pastoral guidance and clear evidence of the audience's pious aspirations, proof of a concerted effort and process of self-fashioning. Yet Kumler makes clear in the introduction that her study is not about the "success or failure" of these manuscripts since there is no evidence of "direct reader response" (p. 13). Indeed, Kumler primarily locates reception within the parameters of the texts and images, treating them as self-sufficient mirrors of their reader-viewers. Thus she is content with a purely theoretical, idealized notion of reception. However, one doesn't need literal traces of use in order to discuss issues of patronage.

Throughout her book, Kumler acknowledges the obvious: these beautiful manuscripts were made for elite, perhaps even royal, patrons. But she seems reluctant to explore the implications. Seen as products of authors and artists hired to do the bidding of powerful nobles, these manuscripts take on an additional complexity that demands a critical distance. In the treatise that ends the *Sainte abbaïe* manuscript, the author announces that the reader has arrived at a state of bliss through joining with the spouse Jesus: "But you who are enclosed in our Lord, to whom he has revealed his secrets, fix there your spirit, and sate yourself on the delights of your spouse and thus share with us, who are beggars, the crumbs that fall from your table" (p. 227). For Kumler, these words agree with the manuscript's idealizing depictions of visionary encounters and progressive perfection. Thus they reveal that the author "not only affirms his confidence in the possibility of complete union with the deity, but even expresses his conviction that his reader has already attained this divine enclosure" and even "surpasses the author in spiritual authority" (p. 227).

Here, the relationship of author and elite patron (perhaps a king or queen) and the dynamics of the manuscript's production are impossible to avoid. Instead of a pure articulation of spiritual ascent, the texts and images may reflect another more compelling goal of the author and artist: to flatter their patron by crafting an ideal state of being, one that fits the patron's elevated station and sense of self.

Kumler is equally hesitant when dealing with other aspects of patronage, such as gender, which represents a persistent, yet unresolved, subtext throughout her study. In the *Sainte abbaïe* miniatures, for instance, female devotees are the main actors and Kumler specifically highlights the text's "feminine form of address" (p. 205). However, she refuses to commit to this line of inquiry, finally referring to the manuscript's viewer-reader as "him or her" (p. 222).

Although aspects of patronage remain unclear, Kumler seems fully committed to the nuances of text and image. Yet even here, she can be overly selective, sometimes even leaving out key iconographic elements. In light of the book's many meticulous translations from Latin and French, these oversights are especially noteworthy, the equivalent of skipping a word in a textual translation and with similar ramifications for the resulting reading. Unlike the original manuscript texts (for which we must rely on the author's transcriptions), we are given a more direct access to the illuminations through the book's many color plates, especially several enlarged, full-page details. At times, these reproductions attract attention in ways that compete with Kumler's analysis. For example, in chapter two's discussion of the images appended to the Lambeth Apocalypse, only four of the fifteen illuminations are explored, and the scene of Mary Magdalene and the resurrected Christ (*Noli me tangere*) only fleetingly (p. 85). But the full-page reproductions allow us to linger. Although unmentioned in Kumler's discussion, a large tree dividing the Magdalen from Jesus is clearly linked to a tree depicted four folios later (as well as to the chapter's broader discussion of tree diagrams). In addition, the author resists analyzing the Lambeth leaves as a sequence; instead, each is examined independently and out of order. When imagined as a series, motifs of trees and birds gain importance, as does the repetition of female protagonists and Jesus' shifting morphology (as child, resurrected Savior, and iconic Veronica veil).

In chapter four's detailed analysis of the final quadripartite illumination in the *Sainte abbaïe* manuscript, Kumler fails to mention the repeated depiction of the sun and moon--held by angels in the second scene and floating among rippled clouds in the fourth. On one level, these heavenly bodies seem holdovers from more conventional representations of divine revelation. Yet, they are also explicit markers of time, in terms of the rhythm of the devotional hours. Furthermore, they resonate with the text in a profound and specific way unacknowledged by Kumler. In a passage nine folios earlier, the moon and the sun play metaphoric roles in an explanation of the Eucharist: "This sacrament is just like the moon which does not shine by day, but by night; for as long as we exist in the night of this world we are illumined by this sacrament, but when the day of eternal life shall come, then the sun of divinity shall shine" (p. 225). When these words are read in relation to the culminating scene with its "revelation of divine presence" in the form of the trinity floating over the altar (p. 234), the roles of the painted moon and sun (as Eucharistic and theophanic tropes) become clear. The sun is even highlighted with gold leaf while the moon is a shadowy grey. In this case, these overlooked visual elements not only clarify the ways in which text and image are related but also enrich the author's interpretation.

Such oversights might seem minor in the book's larger scheme. But once recognized, they potentially undermine the author's arguments and conclusions. Since Kumler posits the illuminations as sophisticated epistemological constructions that go beyond accompanying texts to present the "most radical arguments" (p. 236), her visual exegesis must be thorough and precise. Moreover, in several instances the author's overarching model of textual translation results in overconfident or unnecessarily narrow readings of images. At times, these readings refuse to grant visual representations an ambiguity that is often central to their power and ability to communicate in multiple ways.

This is the case in Kumler's analysis of the illuminated Mass tract (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 13342) in chapter three. As mentioned above, the manuscript was designed as a guide to the liturgical performance in terms of lay participation. Several scenes present key moments in the liturgy, each punctuated by the revelation of divinity in various forms, from a disembodied head or hand of God the Father or Son to the

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Trinitarian Throne of Mercy. Kumler classifies these visualizations in terms of three levels of spiritual engagement and insight: “iconic” image (p. 129), “visionary apparition” (p. 128), and “direct,” unmediated experience of the divine (p. 144). However, based on the internal logic of the illuminations, these differentiations remain tenuous.

Although apparitions are consistently signaled by a framing band of clouds, there is no sure visual cue that divides iconic images from direct experience. This uncertainty is most clearly revealed in the climactic scene of the elevation of the host before an altar on which there appears to stand a crucifix (f. 47r). Kumler insists that this is not a crucifix but a representation of the direct experience of the “fully human and fully divine savior present in the sacrament” (p. 137). In this case, she agrees with the conclusion made years ago by Michael Camille.<sup>[2]</sup> But for me, the crucified Christ is meant to be read as a sculpture. When identified as such, the issue of vision and the Eucharist intersect with the issue of images and their use in liturgical spaces. Paradoxically, it is the immediate materiality of such visual objects that allow direct experiences of the divine (as suggested by the crucifix literally bleeding on the altar). Thus, the crucified Christ on the altar is purposefully ambiguous, challenging perceptions of the visual world vis-à-vis the spiritual realm.

Furthermore, Kumler construes the elevation scene as a demonstration of “two modes of vision” (p. 137) corresponding to different levels of spiritual insight. Through the proper preparation and mindset, one is able to achieve a “direct and doubled contemplation of Christ” (p. 135) by seeing “beyond--or through--the host to Christ’s bleeding body” (p. 137). Again, the fine color plates dispute the certainty of this argument. Chapter three’s frontispiece consists of an enlarged detail of the elevation scene. Held in the priest’s hands, the host is revealed to bear an image: an imprint of a bust-length Man of Sorrows, his slumping head and grey tonality matching the body on the nearby cross. In terms of Kumler’s analysis, this additional image-within-the-image is a complicating element. Instead of a “doubled contemplation,” should we perceive a triple iteration of Christ? As such, the congregants see Jesus quite literally *in* the host and *through* the host.

Along with the issue of repetition, the host-bound Man of Sorrows introduces the issue of scale. The miniature and seemingly hidden nature of the rendering was perhaps designed to challenge the manuscript’s original viewers to see it clearly on the page. Moreover, within the image’s fictive liturgical space, seeing the little Man of Sorrows becomes a matter of proximity (based on the relative positions of the celebrant, deacon, and each row of congregants). Viewed as an iconic image (and not a divine revelation), the imprinted host joins the crucifix as an artistic, material reminder of the reality of Real Presence. Both are sanctified and transformed at the liturgical climax when streams of blood and water spill from the crucifix’s corpus into the chalice and onto the host.

In the book’s brief conclusion, Kumler sums up her ultimate subject as the “visual translation of religious truth” and characterizes the manuscripts she examines as “demanding objects” that challenged their makers and viewers in new ways (p. 241). Seen in total, her book suggests that these objects are no less demanding of the scholars who seek to translate them, both textually and visually. Although Kumler’s efforts are laudable, her study makes clear that translating images is not only different than translating texts, but at times more challenging.

## NOTES

[1] Kumler follows the lead of Jeffrey Hamburger and others; see Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché, eds., *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[2] Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 109.

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