When monks and nuns prayed in the Middle Ages, they did so with their minds and their bodies. The act of worship combined reading, prayer, and meditation, sometimes referred to as meditative prayer or contemplative meditation. Meditation was central to monastic life. In her book, the *Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers has described the process of meditation: “Monastic meditation is the craft of making thoughts about God.”¹ Monks based their meditations on the sacred texts of the Bible—they used biblical images and stories to formulate their ideas about God. These texts remained in their minds and inspired creative action such as literature, art, and prayer.² The end purpose of meditation was to aid religious men and women to become closer to God. This goal, as Jean Leclercq has explained, embodied the overriding purpose of monastic life. Religious men and women participated in many activities—charity, prayer, and study, but they did so in order to eventually attain knowledge of heaven.³

I consider the degree to which the contemplative meditation of religious women was gender specific.⁴ To grapple with such a huge subject, I take four twelfth-century prescriptive texts and analyze some of the most prominent imagery. These texts, composed respectively by Conrad of Hirsau, Osbert of Clare, and Goscelin of St. Bertin, were

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² Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, p. 68.


designed for the benefit of religious women. They are certainly not the only such texts from the period, (the letters of Peter Abelard to Heloise and her nuns at the Paraclete will immediately spring to mind) and I could have chosen others. These texts work well grouped together, however, in that each author represented the process of prayer through a series of intriguing images, particularly bedchambers, mirrors, tabernacles, and feasts. Some of these images were common to texts for men as well but as I demonstrate, these authors tailored their advice to respond to what they considered the specific needs of religious women.

I next consider two texts that women themselves were involved in creating, the vita of Christina of Markyate and the visionary writings of Elisabeth of Schönau. There were several other texts that would have been relevant, but I have chosen these because meditation played an important role in the lives of Elisabeth and Christina from early adolescence. I explore their accounts of praying, reading, and immersion

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