

## Holly Flora

### **Empathy and Performative Vision in Oxford Corpus Christi College MS 410**

The *Meditations on the Life of Christ* or *Meditationes Vitae Christi* is among the best known devotional texts of the early Renaissance. Originally written in the fourteenth century in Tuscany by a Franciscan friar, perhaps John of Caulibus, for a Franciscan nun or 'Poor Clare', the *Meditationes* offered a charming and colorful narrative filling in certain anecdotal gaps left by the Gospel accounts. The author of the *Meditationes* distilled biblical stories into accessible vignettes, blending them with paraphrases from patristic writings as well as his own imaginative embellishments. Translated into half a dozen European languages and read by lay and monastic audiences alike, the *Meditationes* gained widespread popularity in part because of its extraordinary ability to connect readers to the life of Christ via an appeal to the emotions.

An extensively illustrated and beautifully illuminated manuscript copy of the *Meditationes*, Ms. 410, now in the library of Corpus Christi College at the University of Oxford, was perhaps made in Rome circa 1350, and contains a unique image program that capitalizes on the text's exhortations to empathetic piety. In this paper, I argue that the text and image program of Ms. 410 prescribes a performative experience of the life of Christ deeply connected to Franciscan ideas about the redemptive power of the devotional imagination. In its Infancy and Passion of Christ sections in particular, Ms. 410 promotes a highly personal and vividly visionary prayer life for its readers, who were likely female Franciscans.

Almost nothing so far has been surmised concerning this manuscript's original provenance and ownership. The dating is indicated only generally by the paleography of the Latin text and the style of the miniatures, which suggest that it was made in the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century in central Italy. Further circumstantial evidence for the origins of the manuscript can be found in its one possible donor portrait. In the border of the first folio, saints Francis is shown exposing the wound in his side to a female figure in the dress of a Franciscan nun. This figure could be a book owner or she could be Clare of Assisi herself, but the lack of halo or attributes of Clare render the image ambiguous. A coat of arms also appears on this folio, but its heraldry is obliterated and thus it sheds no further light on the manuscript's ownership. Whether or not the woman depicted here is Clare, however, the inclusion of the likeness of a Clarissan nun lends credence to the idea that the book owner was a female Franciscan. Even if we consider that the text of the *Meditationes* itself, originally written for a Poor Clare nun, emphasizes women, the editorial choices in Ms. 410 cannot not all be attributed to patterns in the text. In fact, we have strong evidence that the few other early illustrated manuscripts of the *Meditationes* feature image programs reflecting the gender and vocation of their audiences quite specifically. In conclusion, then, it seems that Ms. 410 may indeed have been intended primarily for the female supplicant depicted with Francis and Clare on the frontispiece. She would have been called upon to respond emotionally, prompted by the image program, and to use it to exercise her devotional imagination.