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From Meditation to Contemplation: Broadening the Borders of Philosophy

Abstract: The medieval 'meditations' genre invites its readers to imagine scenes from Christian Scripture, placing themselves at key moments in its narrative (such as the birth and death of Jesus). Wildly popular throughout the mid-13th to 15th centuries, meditation is meant to engage our senses and imagination as well as our intellects and wills, generating affective responses - humble joy, for instance, when viewing Mary's cradling her newborn child, and compassionate sorrow at her holding that same child's broken body after the crucifixion - that increase devotion and motivate virtuous behavior. In its emphasis on emotion and love, meditation was understood to be an activity particularly suited for women and their closer ties with the body. Meditation is originally viewed as an activity distinct from contemplation (which was portrayed as a 'higher', more intellectual pursuit), but as frustration with scholastic distinctions and elitist education builds in the late 13th century, the ultimate goal of contemplation is increasingly identified as love; in the process, the borders between the meditation and contemplation blur, and women such as Hadewijch, Marguerite Porete, Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich gain authority as contemplatives. In short, the development of the medieval meditation tradition opens up space for women to be heard because of (rather than despite) their association with emotions and the body.