

From the cell to the bedroom

For a rereading of the metaphor of the bedroom of the soul in the light of late-medieval devotional changes in the Low Countries

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The metaphor of the bedroom of the soul or of the heart is traditional in medieval spiritual literature, especially in Middle Dutch and in Middle German. It relates to a specifically medieval taste for allegory and, even further, to a distinctively Christian tradition of architectural and spatial tropes of interiority that can be traced back to Late Antiquity. Such metaphor and the related versions of the house, the cloister or the castle of the soul, have been studied mostly from a stylistic perspective by literature scholarship. However, one must not forget that the late-medieval period witnessed unprecedented changes as to religious practices with the emergence of domestic space as a legitimate place for devotion. In this respect, paintings and miniatures that represent the Virgin meditating in her bedroom at the moment of the Annunciation both mirror and idealize a contemporary reality. Indeed, the Virgin isolated in the intimacy of her bedroom appears as a model for devotion and perfectly responds to Christ's injunction in Matthew 6:6: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen". Furthermore, as pastoral literature testifies, lay people are invited to pray at home and very often to isolate themselves in the "secret" of their bedroom, just like monks in their cells. Interestingly, a medieval discourse of solitude develops in the form of a praise of the cell and some authors elaborate further on the relationship between the intimate character of a place and intimacy with God. In this talk, I would like to shed some new light on the metaphor of the bedroom of the soul by exploring it in the context of late-medieval devotional changes. It is from a spatial perspective that I propose to reconsider this metaphor in the context of private devotion. From the cell to the bedroom, in discourses and practices, the image of the bedroom of the heart unfolds at the hinge of interior and exterior.