

Spaces of Knowledge

Spaces of Knowledge:
Four Dimensions of Medieval Thought

Edited by

Noemi Barrera, Gemma Pellissa-Prades,
Delfi-Isabel Nieto-Isabel, Laia Sallés Vilaseca,
Georgina Rabassó, Ivo Elies
and Josep Bellver

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND TODAY

NOEMI BARRERA

Medieval thought, traditionally associated with great figures and with the works generated by an intellectual elite, encompasses, however, a much wider variety, and an extraordinary wealth, if we broaden our perspective to include all the individuals that made up the society in which it developed. This approach allows us to envision the many different ways in which the intellectual production of the Middle Ages manifests, but it also demands that we expand the meaning of what we understand as the thought, or knowledge, of an era. Next to major philosophical, theological, political and medical works and those related to other scientific areas, we find technical treatises devoted to various arts and disciplines, as well as practical writings—on food, health and body care, among many other examples—cultural works (including poetry, novels and other literary forms), propaedeutic and moral or spiritual treatises, the extensive legislative output, court proceedings, notarial documents, letters, the knowledge passed on orally from one generation to the next, etc. In short, the thought of an age consists of a rich diversity of elements, and branches into numerous expressions that involve all social strata.

“Esguardant e pensant qual era aquest món”.¹
The 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists

Extracted from the *Llibre dels Fets* by King Jaume I, this quote was chosen to head the announcement of the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists “Spaces of Knowledge: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Medieval Thought”, organized by the Association of Interdisciplinary Research and Diffusion of Medieval Cultures (ARDIT), formed by young medievalists connected with the University of

Barcelona.² With this statement, the organizers of the meeting wanted to encourage multiple views and thoughts on the various fields involved in the study of medieval thought. This included a wide range of aspects related to knowledge and its language, the arts, the ways of learning, knowledge transfer, and the objects and spaces where thought was stimulated and developed in the Middle Ages.

With this markedly interdisciplinary aim, the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists favoured the dissemination of innovative research in different but complementary disciplines, such as history, philology, literature, philosophy, and art history, among others. Our purpose was to provide a space for creation, transmission, and connection of knowledge within the academic world, often marked by specialization and the compartmentalization of knowledge. This space for encounter and discussion offered the possibility of establishing links between research topics and the different views provided by participants through the fifty contributions delivered at the congress.

The present volume pursues the same goals that brought us together in Barcelona in November 2012, namely: enriching individual investigations through debate and a cross-disciplinary approach. The ideas and synergies put forward during that meeting led to the proposal that culminates in this work, where, together with the most recent results of the research of our contributors, we present a journey through the complexity of medieval reality. Taking as starting point the eleven most inspiring papers delivered at the congress, which have been developed to conform the specific purposes of this book, *Spaces of Knowledge. Four Dimensions of Medieval Thought* combines different approaches and areas of study in order to weave a picture of the worldview of the Middle Ages.

Besides the theorizations of contemporary authors such as Edgar Morin or the late Georges Gusdorf—to cite but a couple of examples among the many scholars devoted to interdisciplinary research—and focusing exclusively on the context of universities and research centres, many scholars have voiced their concern for the abuse of the concept of interdisciplinarity in academia. Despite being a fashionable and ubiquitous notion in the Humanities, sometimes it comes with a certain degree of practical frustration due to the lack of guidelines that help focus research and make sure its results are indeed interdisciplinary. This situation has led some scholars to wonder if the interdisciplinary ideal is anything more than a chimera.³ The French philosopher and historian Georges Gusdorf, an author strongly related to the reflection on the possibility of interdisciplinary research, begins one of his articles on the subject with the following passage:

L'interdisciplinarité s'impose comme un thème d'époque dont on mesure l'importance à la fréquence des apparitions du mot dans le débat philosophique ou dans les discussions universitaires. Chacun se réclame de l'interdisciplinarité et nul ne se hasarderait à se prononcer contre elle. Succès d'autant plus brillant que ceux-là mêmes qui prennent le parti de la nouvelle figure du savoir seraient souvent bien en peine pour la définir. La revendication interdisciplinaire apparaît comme une panacée épistémologique, appelée à guérir tous les maux qui affectent la conscience scientifique de notre temps.⁴

Such question did not concern us during our meeting, nor will it be a sticking point in the following pages, which will not delve into the issues involved in this debate. Nevertheless, given that the interdisciplinary approach aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject of study, we strongly believe that its results describe the reality they aim to explain much better than those provided by any other research structure. That is the reason why ARDIT Medieval Cultures has invested its efforts in promoting activities that lead to truly interdisciplinary results, such as the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists, the starting point for this volume.

Order: The True Task of the Compiler

Once the benefits of an interdisciplinary—or, at least, cross-disciplinary—approach to the study of the Middle Ages have been established, we must tackle the presentation of its contents. The task of modern compilers, as that of their medieval counterparts, is to sort out the contents of their book so that the final result goes beyond the juxtaposition of its parts. While such parts are actually composed by different contributors, the editors, precisely in virtue of their classifying function, author the work as a whole. One of the most representative indications of the awareness of medieval authors about the importance of this task can be found in the *Libellus apologeticus*, the prologue of the *Speculum maius*, the great encyclopaedic work by Vincent of Beauvais (1190–1264). At the end of the fourth chapter, the Dominican does not hesitate to credit the authors of the doctrines he presents: they are the true *auctores*, whereas he is the *actor*.⁵ Vincent admits that he can claim for himself the authorship of the work because of his role as a compiler:

Presertim cum hoc ipsum opus utique meum simpliciter non sit, sed illorum potius ex quorum dictis fere totum illud contexui, nam ex meo pauca uel quasi nulla; ipsorum igitur est auctoritate, nostrum autem sola partium ordinatione.⁶

The question of the classification and arrangement of knowledge continues to be a problem, and the main solutions proposed in the Middle Ages are actually quite similar to those adopted now. Thus, the search for an organizing principle that structures our work brings us face to face with the same issues that medieval encyclopaedists and compilers had to confront when they first drafted their didactic reference books. What is the most suitable order? Is it advisable to focus on the entities and phenomena of reality, or is it more appropriate to turn to sciences and disciplines? In short, should we concentrate on the world, or on the tools with which human beings study it? The question is of no small significance, for our choice of an ordering principle shares the purpose of medieval compilers: which system will lead our work to become the mirror that most faithfully conveys the reality we want to address?

Spaces of Knowledge. Four Dimensions of Medieval Thought aims to show the wealth and complexity of the different expressions of medieval thought, to be useful and of interest to both the specialist and those readers who wish to venture into the worldview of the time. For that reason, the structure of this work has been a matter of the utmost importance for the editors of this volume.

The World or the Science that Studies it? Between the *Ordo Rerum* and the *Ordo Artium*

The elaboration of the programme of an academic conference, or the index of a miscellany composed of various contributions, usually entails a choice between two methods of classification, based on either the topic of study or the discipline. The first option builds on the structures suggested by reality itself (thus, in case of organizing a conference, we would put together in the same session papers whose objects of study could be included within a certain common category), while the second option classifies themes according to the science studying them (this principle would lead us to group contributions that share the same discipline: for example, all the papers dealing with literature, despite possible differences in the nature of their research).

As we have already mentioned, the organizational proposals of medieval authors were quite similar. The German philologist Christel Meier, in several studies where she questioned the order and objectives of medieval compilations, especially encyclopaedias, suggested a major division for these works into two organizing systems that correspond to two different systems of knowledge: the *ordo rerum* (a classification based on natural entities) and the *ordo artium* (according to disciplines).⁷ Here

we find a basic distinction, accepted and followed by specialists: the structure of the encyclopaedic work depends first on whether the author addresses knowledge through a natural classification or through a specific programme of disciplines or arts. Each of these systems is guided by different internal organizational principles.

Despite the temptation—caused by habit—to follow one of these two classic models, the present volume will ignore them, just as we did, as far as possible, during the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists. The problem with both models is that they do not guarantee the improvement that could come out of a more interdisciplinary approach, where the connections between individual research topics are encouraged. The challenge we undertook at the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists was to develop a programme, which, beyond disciplinary fragmentation and conceptual association, would prompt the establishment of connections between contributions that could be useful for the participants. The goal of the following pages is similar: finding the approach that best conveys the multiple dimensions of medieval thought to the reader.

Human Cognoscitive Powers and the Classification of Knowledge

How can we bridge the time gap between the medieval period and our own? Being aware that our study of medieval thought stems from our current structures of thought, our aim is to combine current didactic needs with the medieval spirit, that is, to arrange the following contributions in a way which is useful for the reader, but without recourse to organizing principles characteristic of our modern era, and, therefore, less suitable to mirror the reality of an earlier period.⁸

One classification principle stands out as the most suitable for our purpose, since it is at the same time close to reality (*ordo rerum*) and to human elaboration (*ordo artium*), medieval and present-day, and, especially, as philosophical as cross-disciplinary: the gnosiological model.

There is an old link between the capacity of the human being for knowledge and the classification and presentation of the content of compilations. This relationship has been expressed in various ways. The most genuinely medieval is the one that centres on the division of knowledge, or philosophy.⁹ Medieval authors reproduced and reworded the divisions of knowledge passed on by several works of Boethius (ca. 480–525)—two commentaries on Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and the *De trinitate*—and the first Latin encyclopaedic treatises focusing on the

liberal arts. Boethius, in his *De trinitate*, resumes the classic theme of the classification of knowledge, setting forth a division that will be maintained and replicated throughout the Middle Ages (even while not being fully understood), until 13th-century scholastics provided the necessary elements to comprehend its foundations. It is known as the Aristotelian division of philosophy: the starting point is a major division between speculative and practical philosophy; the former is divided into physics, mathematics (where the *quadrivium*, a term coined by Boethius himself, is introduced) and metaphysics, or natural theology; the latter, in turn, consists of individual ethics, family ethics or economy and, finally, politics.¹⁰ This classification combines elements derived from the Aristotelian doctrine with others whose origin lies in Platonic and Stoic theories.¹¹ Although all of them outline a certain path or gradation of knowledge by distinguishing some disciplines as preparatory, and others as superior, the Platonic classification is the one most closely linked with epistemology. It puts forward a true ladder of knowledge, from the study of the natural world, that is, physics (which belongs to the *doxa*), through mathematics, and up to dialectic, the knowledge of the eternal and immutable Ideas (according to Plato, both mathematics and dialectic belong to the *episteme*, that is, they are proper sciences). Human beings can gain a deeper understanding of those objects of study that are the most alien to the sensible world, which cannot be apprehended by means of scientific knowledge since it changes constantly. The only thing behind the study of physics is the confusion of the world of shadows; they both belong to the sphere of opinion (*doxa*).¹² However, the Boethian classification, based on ontological principles, is further away from gnosiology.

Latin authors perpetuated and attempted to combine the various systems of classification of sciences provided mainly by Boethius, and other authors such as Cassiodorus (ca. 485–ca. 580), in his *Institutiones* (based largely on the work of Boethius), or Isidore of Seville (ca. 556–636), in his *Etymologiae*. In turn, they picked up another tradition derived from a Greek methodological concept that they developed themselves: the set of disciplines that make up the liberal arts. Since Varro (116–27 B.C.) committed himself to pass on to the Roman world the Greek education system through the educational proposal embodied in his *Disciplinarum libri IX*, liberal arts formed the propaedeutic basis of medieval education, and were taken as a classification principle of the compilations of the time. Both the classification of philosophy and that of the liberal arts are directly linked to the organization of knowledge. In fact, despite their different origins, medieval authors took great pains to

combine them, as Hugh of Saint Victor's (ca. 1096–1141) *Didascalicon* shows.

The relationship between epistemology and disciplines becomes more significant when the classification of knowledge is justified by means of the cognoscitive faculties of the soul. This is the case with one of the most paradigmatic works of the Modern Era: Diderot and D'Alambert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772). The latter, in the *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*, reflects on the origin and the dynamic of knowledge, aiming to evince the close connection between sciences and the cognoscitive faculties of the human being (memory, reason and imagination), which leads these authors to present a classification of knowledge based on natural faculties:

Ainsi la mémoire, la raison proprement dite, & l'imagination, sont les trois manières différentes dont notre âme opère sur les objets de ses pensées . . . Ces trois facultés forment d'abord les trois divisions générales de notre système, & les trois objets généraux des connaissances humaines; l'Histoire, qui se rapporte à la mémoire; la Philosophie, qui est le fruit de la raison; & les Beaux-arts, que l'imagination fait naître. Si nous plaçons la raison avant l'imagination, cet ordre nous paraît bien fondé, & conforme au progrès naturel des opérations de l'esprit.¹³

In this passage we can see that the order of the disciplines is not random: the knowledge acquired through sciences is sorted out according to the faculties of the soul, according to the “natural progress of the operations of the spirit”. First, related to memory, we find history; second, related to reason, we find philosophy and all its subdivisions; last come the arts and poetry, which correspond to the imagination. The authors of the Enlightenment claim to have their precedent in Francis Bacon (1561–1626), with whom they find several points in common, except for the order between the faculties of imagination and reason. In fact, in the *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*, Francis Bacon also divided human sciences according to the faculties of the soul, associating history with memory, poetry and literature with fantasy and, finally, philosophy with reason. According to Bacon, this division of science is the truest precisely because of its connection with human cognoscitive powers. Contrary to the classic enumeration of these faculties—such as the one maintained by the English Chancellor—the men of the Enlightenment considered that reason precedes imagination, for the activity of the latter involves the action of the former.

Despite having established a system consistent with the empirical ideals that allowed them to reformulate the classification of sciences, and

introduce the novelties the inductive method was contributing to the scientific world, the French encyclopaedia presents information through entries arranged in alphabetical order. For the authors of the *Encyclopédie* the link between science and cognoscitive faculties is so important that they are forced to explain, in the *Discours préliminaire*, the reason for not following that method. Such reason was no other than the ease of use provided by the alphabetical system, which leads readers to find quickly what they are looking for and frees editors from the task of coming up with a particular order within each section. However, the true classification of knowledge is epistemological; hence the inclusion of a diagram of sciences and faculties at the beginning of the encyclopaedia: the work must ensure that the reader can use it to place each of the individual entries that compose it within the corresponding branch of knowledge, and to envision its relationship with the other sciences.

Although this explicit relationship between disciplines and the faculties of the soul is actually modern, its potential precedents have been identified in the Middle Ages, such as the *Speculum maius*. Christel Meier again suggests a link between the structure of this work and some of the epistemological concepts it discusses.¹⁴ Medieval works do not show the connection between the cognoscitive faculties of man and the classification of contents as clearly as the French encyclopaedia. However, we must not forget that the matters related to the psyche were highly appreciated in the Middle Ages, especially during the 13th century, when Aristotelian psychology and Arabic works gained a foothold in academic circles. Greek philosophical texts, and their Arabic commentaries and elaborations, enlivened the philosophical and scientific landscape. A modest *quadrivium* gave way to a rich classification of sciences, and to the development of certain materials that allowed the Latin West to finally understand the Aristotelian model that it had been passing on for centuries. Western authors integrated scientific innovations and reordered disciplines, concerned with finding the system that expressed their dignity (as the works of Hugh—the *Didascalicon*—and Richard of St. Victor (ca. 1110–1173)—the *Liber exceptionum*— show) or usefulness depending on their purpose—the *Tresor* by Brunetto Latini (ca. 1220–1294) is a good example—bearing in mind, either in its classification or in its content, the human way of knowing.

Human psychology and the classification of sciences and knowledge were central concerns of the medieval man; they related to each other and linked the entities of reality with the didactic dimension of their study. Therefore, while the trinomial “epistemology-disciplines-organizing

method” was not explicit, it responds to real issues and considerations that were addressed during the Middle Ages.

In the present volume, our organizing principle is inspired by a gnosiological model, for such classification is in line with the spirit of the medieval period, and underlines the need for interdisciplinarity in medieval studies—or, in any case, the need for an integrated multidisciplinary approach—avoiding the fragmentation of disciplines and expressing the complexity of medieval thought.

Our (Non-) Scale of Knowledge

In conclusion, delving into the thought of an age entails an exercise of interdisciplinarity in which different intellectual dimensions and expressions have their place. Bearing that in mind, we have structured this volume establishing a simile with a gnosiological classification, or scale of knowledge. Our scale, however, is not based on any epistemological principle, but on a narrative intuition that leads us to present the wealth of medieval worldviews through the distinction of four dimensions of thought. The spaces that we have identified here are the result of a general assessment—not derived from the academic study—that anyone could make on the basis of a reflection on the different expressions of thought, thus drawing an ascending line that leads from what is commonly regarded as the most basic knowledge to the most complex. Through this analogy with the degrees of cognition, we present four different—and at the same time interrelated—ways to approach medieval thought: the sphere of senses and experience; the dimension of opinion and language; speculation and the product of fantasy and, finally, intellectual activity and reason.

All knowledge that stems from the realm of senses and experience is addressed by practical knowledge. How did people feel in the Middle Ages? What did sensory practice encompass? Which pathways did experiential knowledge follow? This section focuses on the context of senses and the exercise of mainly practical activities, based on the knowledge of the natural and sensorial world. At the same time, enables us to address, from a different perspective, issues that maintain their prominence today, just as they did in the medieval period. In this section we will deal with suggestive topics such as the female transmission of medical knowledge—gained and exercised outside academic circles—religious expression through music, and the interest of medieval people in the effect of dietary habits on their health.

The second section is devoted to opinion and language. Approaching a specific culture and time requires questioning the vision people have of the

world around them; only thus can we gain a true understanding of the mentality behind their ways of thinking. The chapters in this section reveal the characteristic imagery and worldviews of different social groups in the Middle Ages through history and literature. While we delve into the prevailing worldviews of the medieval period, the authors of the historical documents that we will analyse bear witness to an approach to the Other that implies a value judgment of their beliefs and behaviour. We will exemplify it through two texts as unique as William of Tyre's *Chronicon*, where the Crusader mentality can be glimpsed, and a trial where the social power of reputation, rumour and public opinion are evinced. We will also have the opportunity to revise and go into detail about the medieval concept of citizenship through the interconnections between its theoretical, legal and cultural dimensions, for which we will focus on the case of the city of Barcelona.

Fantasy, a mediator in every process of knowledge acquisition, can produce creations that embody alternative ways of communication and understanding. Therefore, its study deserves particular attention. As regards medieval thought, this section approaches us to the sphere of the irrational and spontaneous, the appetites and desires. These concepts: fantasy and speculation, evoke the most suggestive part of the human being, which often finds its expression in literature. Along with the theoretical, moral, educational, and conceptual aspects that literary works may present, there is also room for a dialogue, addressing questions for which there is no simple answer and that attest to the curiosity of man through the centuries: what is love? What makes up our identity when the one defining the image of our group is the Other? What is the ideal context for the appearance of the Muses? The chapters in this third section will explore how the architectural context stimulates the creative process—taking the example of Almohad Granada—the image of Catalan identity in the poetic texts of Provençal troubadours and, finally, the extent to which public taste may have influenced the authors of sentimental romances, where the boundary between fantasy and creation is also an issue.

To conclude, the last part of this volume is dedicated to rational knowledge, traditionally conceived as the paradigmatic form of knowledge. Our aim in this section is to insist on several novel aspects and the least renowned expressions of intellectual activity: the possibilities of development of female *magisterium*, and the time perception related to the spirituality of certain groups considered heretical.

This volume is presented as a study that encompasses the different topics and areas related to medieval thought. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, it provides an ideal framework for researchers approaching the

worldviews of the medieval period from different fields and perspectives. The sections of this volume are based on the results of the most recent research, for they are the object of study of ongoing research projects involving our contributors; at the same time, as a whole, this is also an accessible study for the non-specialist who seeks to obtain a comprehensive idea of medieval thought.

Notes

¹ *Llibre dels feits del rei En Jaume*, 48. “Contemplating and thinking how this world was.”

² ARDIT Medieval Cultures is the association of graduate students linked to the Institute for Research on Medieval Cultures (IRCVM) and the Master in Medieval Cultures of the University of Barcelona. Its main goals are the research and diffusion of the cultural legacy of the Middle Ages from an interdisciplinary perspective. Since its foundation, at the beginning of 2012, the efforts of ARDIT have been focused on the exploration of innovative research lines based on the collaboration between researchers from different disciplines who devote themselves to the medieval world, as well as to the organization of training activities and the dissemination of research results. Among the numerous initiatives resulting from the collaboration between ARDIT and other entities and research groups stands out the organization of the 1st ARDIT International Congress of Medievalists “Spaces of Knowledge: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Medieval Thought”, held in Barcelona on 14-16 November 2012. More information can be found at <http://arditculturesmedievales.weebly.com/>.

³ Many studies note this debate around the actual possibility of interdisciplinarity. Examples can be found in works from different disciplines: “. . . the perennial nature of those problems mark interdisciplinarity as a chimera that will never find a stable form in the real world of the academy and its politics. ‘Interdisciplinarity, in short, has no inherent meaning’ Julie Klein concludes (*Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity*)”. Meriwether, *Studying the Dead*, 257–258. “Is it the case that interdisciplinary exchange represents another chimera that only presents the semblance of a conversation?” Newton, *Nature and Sociology*, 151. Along the same line, see Núñez de Castro, “Ciencia y post-utopia”, 35 n. 55.

⁴ GUSDORF, “Passé, présent, avenir de la recherche interdisciplinaire”, 31.

⁵ The concept of authorship in the *Speculum maius* and the dichotomy between the *actor* (as Vincent refers to himself in his work) and the *auctores* (the authorities he quotes in the encyclopaedia) have been studied by Paulmier-Foucart, “L’*actor* et les *auctores*”, 145–160.

⁶ Vincent de Beauvais, *Préface au Speculum Maius*, 119.

⁷ For an introduction to this topic, see, especially, an article by Meier in which she presents a general panorama of this topic: Meier, “Organisation of knowledge and encyclopaedic *ordo*”, 103–126.

⁸ Although these pages remark the fact that current classification methods are quite similar to their medieval counterparts, the exception to that rule would be alphabetical order. Many works point enthusiastically to the medieval precedents of alphabetical order, but we cannot liken them to our current conception, since the medieval scholars did not intend to distance themselves from the eventual subjective valuation of their object of study, quite the opposite.

⁹ Some authors use the term “philosophy” as an equivalent to “knowledge”, whereas others—most of them, in fact—provide it with a more restrictive meaning which would exclude revealed theological concepts. Franklin-Brown, *Reading the World*, 343 n. 103.

¹⁰ Boethius, *De trinitate*, II, 3.

¹¹ For a deeper study of the original Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic structures, and their elaborations and attempts at combination during the Middle Ages, see Mariétan, *Problème de la classification des sciences* and Weisheipl, “The natura, scope, and classification of the sciences”, 461–482.

¹² Plato, *República*, 6, 509d–511e. This explanation can be found in the famous Divided Line metaphor.

¹³ D’Alembert, *Discours préliminaire de l’Encyclopédie*, Wikisource.

¹⁴ Meier, “On the Connection between Epistemology and Encyclopedic *ordo*”, 93–114.

PART I:
SENSE AND EXPERIENCE

CHAPTER ONE

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PUBLICATION OF EARLY MIDWIFERY AND APOTHECARY BOOKS ON THE MEDICAL PRACTICES OF WOMEN

CÉCILE CODET

Introduction

According to many of those who, in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, tried to define the features of both sexes, the rational nature of men stood in contrast to the more sensual disposition of women. For instance, in the *Libro de las donas*, a Castilian version of the *Libre de les dones* written by the Franciscan theologian Francesc Eiximenis at the end of the 14th century, we can read the following description of what women had become after the original sin:

La muger no tiene freno alguno en sus passiones . . . Pues, síguese que en la muger reynan las passiones e malicias e maldades de la carne, pues non ay freno que las tiemple, e esta dize que es la razón por que las mugeres son comúnmente revesadas, ca siguen las pasiones corporales, las quales son contrarias a la razón natural.¹

Women were, therefore, more prone to be driven by their senses, and less capable of reasoning. As a consequence, rational knowledge was less accessible to them, at least in theory, which does not mean that they were unable to develop any form of competence, since, in particular, they were capable of observing an example and trying to imitate it. Juan Luis Vives, one of the greatest pedagogues of the beginning of the 16th century, considers that this is one of the most efficient ways for a young girl to know what she has to do: “tum colliget virgo, vel audiendo, vel legendo, sancta exempla virginum, quae sibi proponat imitanda”.² In other words, in accord with the medieval point of view, women could acquire

knowledge and skills through their senses (for they were much more developed than their rational capacity) and through experience, observing and reproducing what other people had done before.

These two specific aspects of female learning were particularly useful within the scope of medical practices. While current pharmacology, gynaecology and obstetrics are considered to be scientific areas and medical specialities, that was not exactly the case at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance. Actually, gynaecology and obstetrics were regarded as mechanical arts, in opposition to the medical theory taught at the university, whereas pharmacology was not the exclusive prerogative of the apothecary, but was also practised by all those who knew the virtues of plants. In past times, several famous figures would have recourse to the medical knowledge of female practitioners: in the 5th century, Saint John Chrysostom told Saint Olympias, in a letter (407) sent when he was in exile, how the remedies of Syncletion had been effective for his illnesses and had relieved his sufferings.³ A thousand years later, the peninsular successors of Syncletion were still able to prepare remedies for the most frequent diseases of the members of their household; an ability that was one of their responsibilities as mothers and wives, and implied that they had to acquire certain theoretical and practical skills. Therefore, we may wonder how a woman could learn how to prepare medicines, and how those recipes and techniques were transmitted between women of different generations and social backgrounds. One of the possible answers to this question is provided by the example of an experienced matron and her admonishments, weaving female networks that were more or less independent from the male society. Indeed, many scholars have stressed the importance of oral transmission for female sociability, staged, for example, in books such as *The Gospels of Distaffs*. Nevertheless, in contrast to this text, which is undeniably humorous and even satirical, many others were written in a serious and even scientific tone in order to transmit medical recipes or information related to gynaecology, midwifery or the proper treatment for newborns, to mention only a few of the numerous and varied elements listed in such books. They draw the attention of the researcher to the importance of writing for the circulation of knowledge related to pharmacology and obstetrics at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance. The process of writing down the oral tradition is fundamentally ambiguous, in so far as it prevented the recipes from being forgotten, yet it reserved their access to those who knew how to read. “Those who knew how to read”, in this case, could mean both women and men: indeed, putting female recipes and techniques in writing meant that men could have access to them much

more easily than before, and questioned the exclusive female property of such knowledge.

Therefore, the purpose of this contribution is to examine how the use of a specific medium—namely, books and all types of writing—influenced the female practice of medicine at the end of the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula, and illustrated the passage from an empiric knowledge based on experience, to one supposedly more rational and particular to the academic setting.

First of all, we are going to demonstrate that not only did women master a series of skills related to medication and cosmetics, but they also played, thanks to it, a decisive role in the household and in society in general. In the second part of the chapter we will examine how the written transcription of female medical experience and knowledge reflects a deeper change, namely the progressive masculinization and submission of the medical practices traditionally reserved to women to the control of the university.

Women Healers and their Social and Domestic Roles

At the end of the Middle Ages, whereas men were often the only ones allowed to study medicine at the university and to practise surgery, women were specialized in curing everyday ailments, minor injuries and, more particularly, the illnesses of the female body. Indeed, it was one of the aspects of the reproductive and conservative function of medieval women, in opposition to, but also in collaboration with, the productive and creative role of men. Thereby, preparing plasters, potions, electuaries and all types of medicines was not only a female custom in the Middle Ages: it was part of the responsibilities of women and, as a consequence, they were expected to acquire those skills considered essential for a future wife. In fact, all the normative texts of the time that dealt with matrimony, and the role each partner was supposed to play, clearly distinguished feminine and masculine functions. They attributed to women the task of looking after the house and all its inhabitants, which implied that they had to cure the most common ailments. Every woman, including those belonging to the highest classes, was compelled to adopt this role and, at the end of the Middle Ages, moralists were still emphasizing this point. For example, Juan Luis Vives, in the *Institutione foeminae christianae* (1524) [*Instruction of a Christian Woman*] writes, addressing Mary Tudor:

sed quatenus totius domus cura illa interior mulieri incumbit, tenebit remedia vulgaribus et paene quotidianis morbis, eaque in cellula habebit

parata, quibus marito, parvis liberis, et familiae, cum res feret, subveniat, ne accessere subinde medicum necesse habeat, et omnia ex pharmacopolio emere.⁴

Moreover, women had to be able to cook properly, in order to contribute to the health of all the members of the family. Cooking and medicine were, indeed, very closely linked, and, in the *Manual de mugeres en el qual se contienen muchas y diversas reçetas muy buenas* [*Women's Manual Which Contains a Great Variety of Very Good Recipes*], published at the end of the 15th century, one may find twenty-nine cooking recipes among indications regarding the elaboration of medicines and cosmetics. All of them are presented in a seamless fashion: a pastry recipe is surrounded by a method for the preparation of a washing solution, and by another one related to textile dyeing.⁵ In addition to the preparation of remedies and cosmetics, women also had to deal with all the aspects of gynaecology and obstetrics. As is well known, the female body remained an unknown territory for most physicians during many centuries, and it was considered indecent for a man to be in contact with it, especially as far as its more intimate parts were concerned. Physicians and women, thus, agreed in this point: the first wanted to remain apart from obstetrics and gynaecology, and the latter did not want to disclose the more intimate part of their lives to a man. Thus, midwives and women in general were in charge of curing gynaecological disorders, assisting women in labour, and taking care of the newborn. Those branches of medicine became female specialities, and Damián Carbón, in his *Libro del arte de las comadres o madrinas* [*Book on the Art of Midwives or Accocheuses*], published in Palma de Majorca in 1541, still affirms that all that is related to generation belongs to the feminine area,⁶ even if, at that time, some physicians had already assisted women in labour.

Therefore, women were, with a great variety of skills and duties, specialized in homemade remedies, gynaecology and obstetrics. Fulfilling all these medical roles implied that they had to use many ingredients and instruments, and, consequently, they needed to set up small laboratories in their own houses. As regards the Iberian Peninsula, it is impossible not to draw a parallel with Fernando de Rojas's character, Celestine, whose modest house hid a very well furnished laboratory.⁷ Without denying the comical and satirical aspect of this book, studying the practices related to homemade medicines allows us to put into perspective the supposed exaggeration of the *Comedia*. Once they had gathered all the ingredients they needed, women began to prepare their potions, and then they had to master a great variety of techniques, from distillation to spraying. They also had to be able to use all the measuring units mentioned in the recipes,

as in the case of the toothache remedy of the *Manual de mugeres*, for which it was necessary to mix, among other things: “media onça de piedra alumbre, una quarta de inçienso, medio quartillo de miel, medio açumbre de vino blanco”.⁸ In the *Flores del Tesoro de la belleza* [*Flowers of the Treasure of Beauty*], a Catalan manuscript composed at the beginning of the 15th century by Manuel Dies de Calatayud, the steward of King Alfons the Magnanimous, the number of ingredients for a single recipe can amount to more than thirty.⁹ If some of them seem rather strange to us, as it is the case of mice, which, after being captured, had to be cooked and then powdered, most of them were fairly common (for example, powdered shells, cow horns or urine) and the composite ingredients could be found in the apothecary. Nevertheless, the author of the *Flores del Tesoro de la belleza* mentions rather luxurious products, such as spices (cinnamon, cloves...), aromatic substances (musk, benzoin...) or stones (coral, marble and pearl, among others), only available to the noble women for which the treatise was meant, who did not mind spending a lot of money to prepare potions in order to conform to the cannon of beauty of the time.

According to the opinion of some moralists like Eiximenis, who deprecated the use of make-up, the fact that women not only prepared remedies but also cosmetics for their own use, involved a transgression. This seems to suggest that women were quite independent from the normative discourses that tried to control their behaviour. Moreover, some manuals tend to equate women with genuine physicians, employing some specific vocabulary. For example, explaining how to relieve a pain in the hip, the *Manual de mugeres* addresses its public with the words: “echaréis un tristel d’ello al paçiente y sanará”.¹⁰ The use of the word *paciente* (patient) implies that the woman who is trying to help him is a physician, who is able, according to the same manual, to cure diseases as serious as pestilence. Nevertheless, according to other authors, there is a clear distinction between the female art of preparing homemade medicines and the genuine medicine, as Juan Luis Vives states in his *Institutione foeminae christianae*:

neque vero mulierem velim arti se medicae dedere, aut sibi nimis hac in re fidere, frequentibus et paene quotidianis morbis . . . atque eam quidem peritiam discet potius ex usu aliarum prudentium matronarum, aut ex consiliis cujusquam propinqui medici, ex libello aliquot facile ea de re conscripto, quam ex magnis et accuratis medicorum voluminibus.¹¹

He establishes a clear difference between the empiric and limited knowledge derived from experience and suitable for women, and a scientific and deeper understanding, reserved to the physicians who study

at the university. Indeed, medicine was taught in universities and, as a result, disclosed in male networks—except for some exceptions, especially at the end of the 15th century—while women did not benefit from a similar institution to share knowledge and techniques linked to their pharmaceutical practices. As a consequence, to share their experience and their wisdom, they had to do it through unofficial and more discreet institutions, namely those properly belonging to the female sphere.

The Ambiguous Role of Writing

Since men were usually the ones to had access to university, women were forced to use other means to transmit their own particular knowledge, which thus became something mysterious and, eventually, perceived as dangerous in the eyes of some men. Moreover, the female capacity to prepare medicines or to attend to other women with gynaecological disorders or in labour was a widespread practice, and very few of those professional or occasional healers were able to read and write. This is one of the reasons why their knowledge remained unwritten during centuries, contrary to what happened in universities, where medical science was essentially based on written sources, whose authority was guaranteed by time. In the case of women, as Vives says, the youngest could learn from an older and more experienced woman, even within the family, for it was often mothers who taught their daughters how to prepare some particular mixture, especially cosmetics.

Of course, preachers did not agree at all, especially saint Vincent Ferrer, who, according to some scholars, harshly condemned the mothers who taught their daughters beauty tips: “San Vicente criticaba severamente a las madres que enseñaban a sus hijas a pintarse y a depilarse”.¹² Therefore, the line between what was allowed—and even recommended—that is, to cure the most common ailments by preparing medicines, and what was forbidden (the preparation and use of cosmetics, but also of love potions and abortive substances) was very thin, and women could easily fall into sin. Putting all the knowledge related to these practices in writing allowed men to have access to it and to take control over it, casting out its esoteric side and depriving women of its exclusive property. Therefore, to a certain extent, this transition to writing entailed, for the traditional owners, a disappropriation of their knowledge.

Obviously, such phenomenon did not occur exclusively in the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, the 12th-century famous manual of gynaecology and obstetrics known as the *Trotula* was conceived, according to Monica Green,¹³ as a pathway to the female art of medicine, in order to allow men

to have access to it and to become, in turn, experts in gynaecology and obstetrics. According to this author, the *Trotula* is actually a collection of three treatises, at least two of them written by male authors, although it is possible that the three treatises were authored by men. This medical compendium was written in Latin in the city of Salerno (whose physicians were renowned in all Europe) at the end of the 12th century. The use of this particular language reduces de facto the range of potential readers of a text, not only with regard to gender, but also to social classes. Damián Carbón, the author of the *Libro del arte de las comadres y madrinas*, seems to be aware of that fact when he proposes, in the tenth chapter of his book, a Latin recipe “para personas que pueden gastar”, and another one, in vernacular language, “para las otras”.¹⁴ Therefore, there is a clear association between Latin and those who can spend money in cosmetics—that is to say, the members of the upper class—and the vernacular language and those who cannot afford to.

However, the use of writing in the transmission of cosmetic and pharmaceutical recipes did not prevent women from sharing them as they had done up until then. Moreover, for upper class women, the book became a very interesting and convenient way to have access to this type of information. Actually, some activities, like cooking, remained quite unfamiliar to them, and, therefore, they had to acquire some skills in this particular field. Thus, according to Alicia Martínez Crespo in her introduction to the *Manual de mugeres*,¹⁵ the circulation of recipes in noble circles created a genuine network between women interested in exchanging them, since they used to be inspired by recipes allegedly created by other noble women. As in the case of the pastry recipe attributed to the marquise of Villena (“Receta que ensenya la marquesa de Villena para las pastas”),¹⁶ they could be sent in a letter or appear in collections. An example of this transmission of medical knowledge through writing can be observed also for the highest nobility; it is the case of the Latin manuscript entitled *Remedio contra las cosas beninosas* [*Remedies against Poisonous Things*] that Queen Isabel the Catholic had in her library, according to Ruíz García.¹⁷ When the Queen died and some of her possessions, among which several books, were sold to pay her debts, this manuscript was bought by a lady, Mencía de Guevara,¹⁸ which is quite significant, since the fact that it was a text written in Latin did not prevent it from passing from a female owner to another.

What was, then, the role of men? The transcription of all the knowledge related to pharmacology, cosmetics, gynaecology and obstetrics not only made it available to men, but also turned them into unpredictable intermediaries. As a matter of fact, as we have seen, the manuals were

written by men, as in the case, for instance, of Manuel Dies de Calatayud, who created an anthology based on a *Tresor de Beutat* [*Treasury of Beauty*], in order to make it available to “vosotras, muy honorables señoras”.¹⁹ In other words, he chose to establish himself as the mediator between the female members of the upper class and a lore, which, maybe, they could not have accessed easily.

On the contrary, Damián Carbón adopts a different attitude: in the dedicatory epistle with which the book begins, he confesses his preoccupation regarding the fact that midwives, to whom women appeal for all the questions related to pregnancy, do not receive adequate training anymore and, as a consequence, they make many mistakes, leading to a great number of catastrophes.²⁰ The author, therefore, decides to write the *Libro del arte de las comadres o madrinas* to teach them their own art, for it is not enough to learn it from some experienced midwife. Nevertheless, this book presents various surprising aspects. Most of the midwives came from popular classes, that is to say, precisely those for whom writing represented an obstacle in the acquisition of knowledge, and even more when many of the technical words were written in Latin. Moreover, the author evokes several times his own experience, as when he alludes to the possibility of a woman giving birth to monsters. This assumption is based on “lo que en diversos auctores he leydo como aun por lo que de mis ojos humanos en el tiempo de mi plática he visto y tratado”.²¹ Thus, the author alludes to his own professional experience, suggesting that, at the beginning of the 14th century, and perhaps before, men started to be interested in gynaecology and obstetrics in the Iberian Peninsula. Actually, on various occasions, Damián Carbón does not address a female audience, but relies on “la discreción de vosotros”.²² These few words are quite revealing: the author is not talking only to midwives, but also, and, perhaps, mainly, to those men who wanted to master their art in order to succeed them. Undoubtedly, those men were more used to reading and to Latin terminology. However, Damián Carbón’s book was an element of a wider movement, summed up by Bárbara Mujica in these terms:

Most women learned their craft through apprenticeship and experience, but as medicine became increasingly professionalized, women were gradually excluded, at least in large cities. In rural areas, midwives continued to deliver babies, much as they had since biblical times. In urban areas, obstetrics (or midwifery), which had always been a woman’s field, came to be considered a medical specialization and, as such, was reserved for university-educated male physicians.²³