

The Role of Sex in Medieval and Early Modern Mnemonics

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Abstract: Using sources in Latin, Italian and Hebrew as well as visual art, the present study pinpoints to an elusive mnemonic practice: the visualization of sexual acts as a means for creating memorable mnemonics scenes. It further suggests that the introduction of sexual mnemonics into the classical system of “local memory” (*memoria localis*) occurred most likely in the Middle Ages and may have been inspired by the imaginative aesthetic of two forms of art used in conjunction with mnemonics at that time: architectural statuary and manuscript decoration.

Keywords: Mnemonics; Sex; Early Modern; Medieval.

O papel do sexo na mnemônica da Idade Média e Moderna

Resumo: Usando fontes em latim, italiano e hebraico, bem como artes visuais, o presente estudo aponta para uma prática mnemônica elusiva: a visualização de atos sexuais como um meio para criar cenas mnemônicas memoráveis. Sugere ainda que a introdução da mnemônica sexual no sistema clássico de “memória local” (*memoria localis*) ocorreu provavelmente na Idade Média e pode ter sido inspirada pela estética imaginativa de duas formas de arte usadas em conjunto com a mnemônica naquela época: a estatuária arquitetônica e a decoração de manuscritos.

Palavras-chave: Mnemônica; Sexo; Idade Média; Idade Moderna.

It is a truth universally acknowledged among modern competitive mnemonists that “when forming images, it helps to have a dirty mind” (Foer, 2011, p. 100). The present study will trace possible sources for the use of the obscene in mnemonic practices, suggesting genuinely sexual content served in medieval and early modern mnemonics and is not a modern evolution of the classical rules. Our challenge is twofold. First, mnemonic treatises intentionally avoided giving detailed examples, claiming the creation of an efficacious mnemonic image is deeply dependent on the specific psyche and life experiences of the individual mnemonist. Thus, if they are to give detailed examples the ensuing potential failure may lead the reader to erroneously believe the system itself is at fault.¹ The second challenge is conventional to the study of the history of sexuality. Although medieval ecclesiastics were sometimes less prudish than some of their modern intellectual successors, the likelihood of finding explicit recommendations to meditate on sexual images as a legitimate intellectual tool drops dramatically when a text is written by celibate academics for a similar audience.

Thus, when seeking evidence to the use of sex in early mnemonics, most treatises leave only a faint trail to follow. By not working in chronological order and examining the more explicit mentions of erotic mnemonics in early modern treatises before examining earlier subtle references to such techniques, I hope to persuade that it is highly likely the genesis of sexual mnemonics was medieval.

Introduction and terminology

This article will refer to the mnemonic system historically called the “art of memory” (*ars memorativa*), and also known as “local memory”, the “place system” or “Herennian memory” (Carruthers, 2009, p. 89). It evolved from three main classical sources: Cicero’s *De oratore* (2.86-88.351-360; 55 BCE), the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (3.16-24; 86-82 BC) and Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (11.2.1-70; 95 CE).² The two underlying assumptions of the most common form of this technique are simple: people naturally remember spaces well, and strange and unusual things tend to cling to memory more readily than mundane things. A mnemonist wishing to remember a list, needs to have in his mind a familiar space, divided into stations through which he is to take a mental “walk” in a fixed predetermined order. These stations are called “places” (*loci*), and it is after them that the

¹ See *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Pseudo-Cicero, 1954; henceforth RaH) 3.23. On sparsity of examples in mnemonics, see Yates (1992, p. 124).

² For an introduction to these sources, see Yates (1992, p. 17-41); Carruthers (2009, p. 89-98).

system is sometimes referred to as “local memory” (*memoria localis*). In each such place the mnemonist deposits a representation of what he wishes to remember by imagining a scene symbolizing each item from his list. These scenes are called “images” (*imagines*).

The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* lists rules for the creation of a striking and memorable image (Pseudo-Cicero, 3.22.35-37). A powerful mnemonic image is active rather than static and is supposed to illicit an emotional reaction, assuming violent, disconcerting, ridiculous, and surreal scenes will facilitate better retention. A mnemonist wishing to retrieve information from his so-called “memory palace” need only to take a mental walk in this predetermined route and interpret the meaning of the various strange symbolic scenes that his mind’s eye sees in each mnemonic place.

Most memory treatises also distinguish between ideogrammic mnemonic images meant to represent an idea (*memoria rerum*), as the anchor meant to represent seamanship in Quintilian’s example (11.2.19), and logogrammic mnemonic images meant to represent the sounds that make a specific word (*memoria verborum*). The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*’s example (3.21.34) explains that in order to facilitate the memory of the phrase “*domum itionem regem*” one imagine a man called Domitius being lashed by members of the Rex family. A violent and memorable scene that spells out the syllables of the phrase.

To conclude, if we were to take the ancient understanding of memory rather than a modern neuroscientific one as our guide, the use of sex in mnemonics would be deemed effective since a sexual act has all the classical qualities needed for a powerful mnemonic image: it is “active” and it has the potential of being violent, perturbing, outlandish, and grotesque. However, ancient tractates do *not* suggest one could visualize sexual acts or eroticized bodies in one’s mnemonic practices. In fact, the first explicit mention of the erotic in relation to mnemonics seems to be from 1335, and the first actual mention of coitus in relation to mnemonics is from 1583.

Nudity and sex in Early Modern mnemonics

In 1425, an anonymous religious mnemonic treatise from Bologna³ provided a detailed example of how to divide a long narrative into small easy-to-memorize ‘chunks’ (the practice known as *divisio*). The example used the hagiography of St. Marina the Syrian, a gender-bending monk who was revealed to be a woman only after death, when stripped naked to be washed for burial. The mnemonist wishing to commit Marina’s hagiography to mind

³ A critical edition was created by Pack. The treatise’s most important copy is Vin.4444, ff. 313-327v, which also provides the date of its compilation as 19 July 1425 (f. 327v); Pack (1979, p. 221-281).

is told to visualize the washing of her naked female body in the tenth mnemonic *locus* of his memory space.⁴ The author then warns that one should use an “honest virgin” (*honestam virginem*) by the name of Marina, already known to the mnemonist while taking care not to arouse one’s lust (*excitatur concupiscencia carnalis*) through this meditation.⁵ In no place does the treatise suggest the visualization should be intentionally pornographic, however it does seem to hint that mnemonic practices did have a sexual underbelly, and that authors were well aware that sensual thoughts may intentionally or unintentionally contaminate them.

In 1491, Pietro Francesco Tommai da Ravenna (c.1448-1509) published a short treatise on mnemonics titled the *Phoenix*, which provides a more substantial mention of erotic mnemonics (Ravennensis, 1491). Pietro was a Professor of Law at Bologna, Ferrara, Pavia, Pistoia and Padua and also taught as far as Wittenberg and Greifswald. His lasting fame, however, was not for his skill in jurisprudence, but for his prodigious memory, which – coupled with his inexorable public relations and self-promotion – made him a mnemonic sensation, touring Europe and invited to courts and universities.⁶

The *Phoenix* was instrumental in spreading the interest in mnemotechnic north of the Alps, and among lay audiences, and was printed many times.⁷ Much of the *Phoenix* follows the tradition of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, with one important deviation that is worth explaining in detail.

Pietro suggests that in each mnemonic place, one imagine a permanent human resident. This person is not an “image” in the mnemonic sense, he does not represent contents to be remembered, but rather is fixed to the scenery of the place. The bodies of such “place-guardians” (*locorum custodes*) serve as hosts interacting with the items to be remembered.⁸ Pietro further suggests bolstering the place-guardians’ logistic value by choosing people whose names create an alphabetical series, adding what would become a sensational statement to his readers, a secret technique he claimed to have kept secret out of shame: one can “set

⁴ The description of that locus is “*corpus lavantes <et> videntes <esse> feminam in eam se peccasse deplorant*” (Pack, 1979, p. 255); Vin.4444, f. 323v.

⁵ Pack (1979, p. 256); Vin.4444, f. 324r.: “*Similiter nota quod in talibus hystoriis posses operari cum ymaginibus notis, ut puta, capiendo quondam honestam virginem tibi notam, cui imponas hoc nomen ‘Marina’ ab effectu... nec ita cito excitatur concuposcencia carnalis, que mentis oculum impuritate turbat, unde et securius est operari cum ymaginibus hominum in commune conceptorum et non notorum tibi in speciali.*” See also Bolzoni (2001, p. 149-150, 291 n37).

⁶ On Pietro Tommai da Ravenna’s biography and on early editions of the *Phoenix*, see Rossi (2006, p. 21, 254 n43); Girgensohn (2001, p. 230-231); Fabricius (1859, p. 360-362). On Pietro’s supposed mnemonic feats, see Ravennensis (1491, f. 12v); on his international fame, see Rossi (2006, p. 21); Eisenhart (1887, p. 529-539).

⁷ On the dissemination of the *Phoenix*, see Rossi (2006, p. 20, 22; 2008, p. 316). On its contribution, see Yates (1992, p. 120). Its many editions include Bologna, 1492; Cologne, 1506 and 1508; Venice, 1541 and two editions in 1600; and Vienna 1541 and 1600.

⁸ The term and function of *custos loci* appears as early as the 1425 Bolognese treatise (Pack, 1979, p. 237; Vin.4444, f. 316r).

with the letters beautiful girls,” an act that will supposedly excite one’s memory. More specifically, Pietro explains that “very frequently I positioned in places Junipera of Pistoia, one most dear to me when I was young; and believe me [when I say that] I have used these images beautifully and with ease to recite the [material placed with the] beautiful girls whom I placed in the *loci*.”⁹

Why is the use of beautiful girls (*pulcherrimae puellae*) such a novelty, and why did Pietro apologize that he had long held on to this secret mnemonic technique out of shame?¹⁰ The sensual nature of this practice seems unequivocal since Pietro begs pardon of “religious and chaste men” stating that “this useful precept cannot profit those who hate women or despise them,”¹¹ hinting that men who do not know women carnally – or are not intimately familiar with female anatomy – cannot use this technique. Pietro does not mention coitus explicitly. At best he implied some form of immodesty or nudity. How can one ascertain whether he truly hints at something he does not explicitly state? A closer look at what Pietro suggests as examples for this technique is useful, and a more explicit description by a later author from the same mnemonic tradition will render Pietro’s hints clearer.

Pietro’s writing is not very coherent or didactic. The beautiful girls in his examples do not seem to be consistently sensual, nor even memorable, nor is their function consistently that of a place-guardian.¹² One horrifying and explicit example suggesting the words “*rapio*” and “*spolio*”, the first meaning to seize and carry off or to rape, and the second meaning despoil, ransack and rape, be represented by “a friend” committing them to “someone”.¹³ And a tamer, yet baffling illustration, meant to facilitate the memorization of the juridical imperative to have two witnesses in order for a testament to be binding, includes a virgin tearing the testament up (“*virginem unam illud lacerare*”).¹⁴ Frances Yates (1992, p. 121),

⁹ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio III, f. 8v): “*ego communiter per litteras formosissimas puellas pono, illae enim multum memoriam meam exitant & frequentissime in locis lunimperam Pistoriensem mihi charaissimam, dum essem juvenis collocavi, & mihi crede si pro imaginibus pulcherrimas puellas posuero facilius, & pulchrius recito, quæ loci mandavi*”.

¹⁰ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio III, f. 8v): “*Secretum ergo habe utilissimum in artificiosa memoria quod diu tacui ex pudore*”.

¹¹ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio III, 9r): “*hoc autem utile præceptum prodesse non poterit illis, qui mulieres odiunt, & contemnunt, sed isti artis huius fructus difficilis consequentur veniam tamen mihi dabunt viri religiosissimi, & castissimi præceptu enim, quod in hac arte mihi honorem, & laudem attulit tace re non debui cum successores excellentissimos relinquere totis viribus nitar*”.

¹² Ravennensis (1491, conclusio VIII, f. 10v) provides three examples that use girls as symbolic representation of content: the Clementines (decrees in Canon Law), “penitence” and “interrogation”. In only three examples do they function as neutral place-guardians.

¹³ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio VII, f. 10v): “*pro verbo enim spolio amicum pono qui alium spoliat, pro verbo rapio amicum per vim aliquid rapientem*”. Cf. Engel, Loughnane and Williams (2016, p. 50). One should note that he does not use the feminine, but the masculine and the neuter.

¹⁴ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio VIII, f. 10v): “*nam pro allegatione quæ sit per distinctiones ponitur puella, quæ pannum, vel chartam laceret*”.

in her seminal book on early modern mnemonics, was perplexed by this latter example failing to see why such a mnemonic image was considered especially memorable. While the violence of some of the examples is obviously memorable, others do not seem to be especially memorable.

The data becomes even more perplexing in another portion of Pietro's treatise in which he describes his *memoria verborum* system. This system allows one to recall the Latin cases of various nouns using the different parts of the place-guardian's physique. The guardian of the specific place holds a symbol representing the word one needs to remember. If the object to be remembered is in the place-guardian's right hand it should be remembered in the genitive, if under his right leg it is in the accusative, while his breast is the ablative and so on.¹⁵ The sensual underbelly of the system is in the idea that the singular is denoted by stripping the place-guardian naked, while the plural is denoted via clothing, though Pietro's example is a naked girl touching bread with her right foot ("*Si rem ut panem puellam nudam in loco sibi pedem dextrum cum pane tangentem*"), Pietro does not explicitly mention any sexual "interaction" between place-guardian and object.

What seems to be a similar *memoria verborum* technique preceded Pietro da Ravenna in Jacobus Publicius's *ars memorativa* (1475).¹⁶ His mnemonic treatise was originally a portion of his *Institutiones oratoriae*, and was first printed in Toulouse in 1475-1476 (Yates, 1992, p. 125). In it, the author dwells, rather sensually, on how to imagine a memorable human body: "just as a long neck, and great length of hair, fingers, and the entire body, produce in us admiration and amazement, so daintiness of the nostril, mouth, ears, breasts, belly and feet provides an ornament to them; if in this way they are demure, you may think [them] the better. Breadth and dignity of the forehead, eyes and chest should be added to them as an honor" (Carruthers, Ziolkowski, 2002, p. 239). Publicius's *memoria verborum* technique is explained in his famously Pythian style¹⁷ leaving a modern reader baffled by the exact method. Though he does not write explicitly about place-people, he does suggest that the human body can be used as a mnemonic *locus*, and refers the reader to a figure (*hac figura*) that should elucidate his meaning (Carruthers, Ziolkowski, 2002, p. 244; Publicius, 1485-1490, unnumbered folios, counting from title, on f. 66v). It depicts a naked man and woman, seemingly presenting themselves to the reader with arms outstretched (Figure 1).¹⁸

¹⁵ Ravennensis (1491, conclusio VI, f. 10r).

¹⁶ On Jacobus's biography, see Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 226-227).

¹⁷ Romberch first compared Publicius's vagueness to the Oracle of Delphi's, see Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 253).

¹⁸ The figure here is rendering based on the image in Publicius (1490, f. 57v), based on the copy available via Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum.

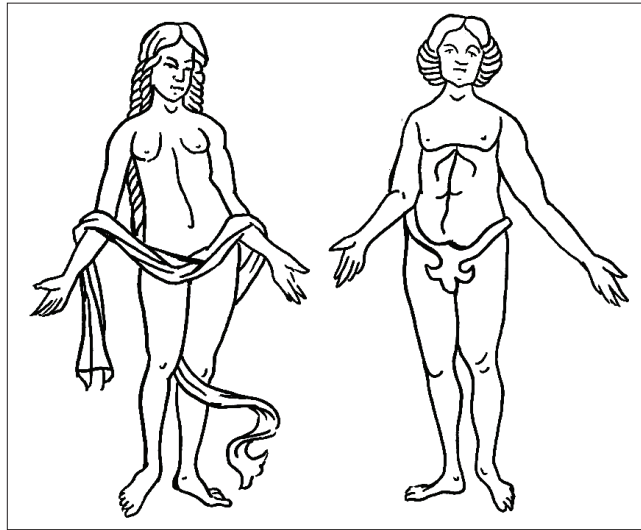


Figure 1 - Jacobus Publicius. *Institutiones oratoriae* (Cyrillus Caesar, Augsburg, 1490, f. 57v.)

In 1520, the Dominican German mnemonist Johann Host von Romberch cited Pietro da Ravenna's *memoria verborum* system as the source for his slightly different version, and also included his own illustration of Latin case-mnemonics in which the singular nouns are presented on the nude body of what seems to be Julius Caesar (Figure 2).¹⁹ Similarly, in 1579 the Dominican Florentine Cosimo Rosselli would decorate his mnemonic treatise with no less than six nude male bodies to be used as a mnemonic “switchboard”, although not in relation to Latin cases. One of Rosselli's examples includes no less than three numbered *loci* on a naked man's derriere alone (Figure 3),²⁰ the sacral, buttock and anus. Such imagery from Pietro da Ravenna, Publicius, Rosselli and Romberch testifies to a wide use of nude bodies in early mnemonics, but there is only mixed or vague clues as to whether later-fifteenth-century mnemonists imagined sexual acts as memory aids. And yet, as Yate's noted, there seems to be something that excited them in those rather tame examples. A century after Pietro da Ravenna's *Phoenix*, post-reformation Elizabethan England was embroiled in an intellectual, cultural and religious war between “Papists” and Puritans. One of the fronts of this war was mnemonics, where Puritans supporting Ramist memorization claimed the “papist” system of places was idolatrous.²¹ One Cambridge theologian,

¹⁹ The figure here is rendering based on the image in Romberch (1520, ff. 67v-69r).

²⁰ De Rosselliis (1579, ff. 66v-67r.; 99v-100r.; 100v-101r).

²¹ For a wider context of the conflict between Ramist and Brunian mnemonics, see Yates (1992, p. 260-278).

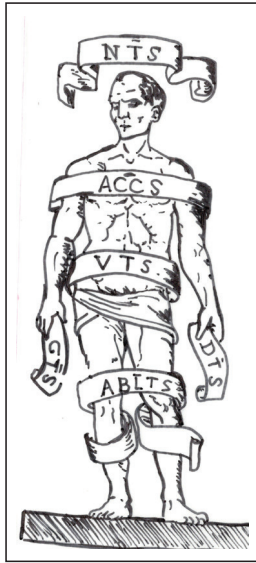


Figure 2 - Johannes Romberch de Kyrspse. *Congestorium Artificiose Memoriae* (Venetis: Gregorii de Rusconibus, 1520, f. 61r.)

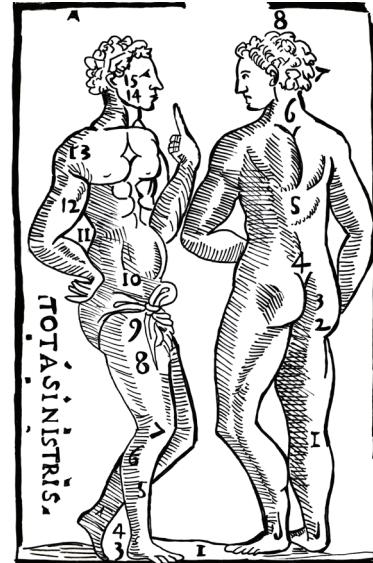


Figure 3 - Cosmas de Rosselliis. *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae* (Venetiis: Antonium Padvanium, 1579, f. 100v.)

the Puritan William Perkins, left us clear evidence that the abovementioned techniques were indeed understood to be lewd and sexual.

The outraged Perkins mentions Pietro by name in two of his works claiming the Italian's mnemonic techniques use images to excite lust (*cupiditatem*),²² and that “the animation of an image” in such systems is “impious, as it requires (...) bizarre thoughts, and foremost [ones] that inflame and sharpen depraved carnal affections” (*quae pravissimos carnis affectus exacuunt et incendunt*).²³ Could Perkins be implying a sexual mnemonic practice, not explicitly stated in Pietro da Ravenna and Jacobus Publicius, one prevalent in Pietro's Italy, one that may have migrated with him on his tours north of the Alps and found its way to Perkins's England?

In 1583, Giambattista della Porta (c. 1535-1615), the Neapolitan polymath and magus, provided us with what I believe to be a definitive affirmative answer to these questions. Della Porta's memory treatise was published in the vernacular Italian as *L'arte del ricordare* (a year before Perkins's diatribe) and published again in Latin as *Ars riminiscendi* in 1602 (Della Porta, 1602). The latter is a slightly censored version of the original, but both claim to present a new and original mnemonic system. Under scrutiny, this system turns out to

²² See Perkins (1584, p. 45); “*faciamus imaginem excitare affectus, iram, odium, timorem, cupiditatem...*”

²³ Perkins (1592, sig F viii recto; Chapter 8). The edition I used was Perkins (1602, p. 123). Cf. Yates (1992, p. 269). Original text reads: “*animatio imaginis, quae clavis est memoriae, impia est; quia requirit cogitationes absurdas, insolentes, prodigiosas, easque; inprimis, quae pravissimos carnis affectus exacuunt et incendunt*”.

be an elaborate version of Pietro da Ravenna's *Phoenix*, and true to the non-existing proprietary notions of the period, it also manages to plagiarize other authors as well. The most obvious appropriation is Della Porta's claim that permanent place-guardians are his own novel idea. Such fortuitous "similarities" to Pietro's work seem to demonstrate that Giambattista della Porta was continuing what can be dubbed the Ravennese mnemonic tradition.²⁴ When Della Porta then provides explicit descriptions of sexual mnemonics, one may reasonably assume his explication to be relevant to some degree to our understanding of earlier texts, solving the mystery of Perkins's antagonism, providing an answer to Yates's perplexity, and corroborating that the nudity in Pietro's treatise and in Publicius's system was indeed sexual.

The first mention of the effects of sex on mnemonic retention is given in chapter III, where Della Porta describes the anecdote of King Darius's horse, who "passing by that place where the evening before he had pleased himself with a mare, remembered that event, and by his whinnying caused his rider to be adorned with the crown of Persia."²⁵ This anecdote teaches that even in dumb animals, sexual acts stick to memory. Later, true to the treatise he plagiarizes, Giambattista della Porta suggests one should imagine people positioned permanently in each mnemonic place stripped or clothed (*AdR*, VI:12-14; Della Porta, 1996, p. 68; Della Porta, 2012, p. 96) and that one should use beautiful women that were loved or admired for this mnemonic setup.²⁶ He then explains in no uncertain terms that when a place-guardian happens to be a prostitute, one must imagine her engaging in sexual acts with the object to be remembered. Since his classical aesthetics dictate mythological examples, Della Porta notes that if the word "bird" (*ucello*) is to be remembered when it "falls to a prostitute, we will imagine her clutching the bird to her womb, just like we saw Leda hold Jove" (*ad una meretrice, la fingeremo tenerlo nel grembo stretto, come abbiam visto Leda tener Giove*) and if the word "bull" falls to a prostitute then we should imagine "as the poets describe Pasiphae joined to it" (*qual ne descrivono i poeti Pasife congiunta con quello*) (*AdR*, X:28-30, 35-36; Della Porta, 1996, p. 76-77; Della Porta, 2012, p. 101). The discreet vocabulary choices of "grembo" (womb) and "congiunta" (joined) cannot hide the direct reference to two of the most famous bestiality acts in Greek mythology, both leading to conception and offspring. The fact that the "actresses" in these mnemonic tableaux are prostitutes supports the notion that one should not imagine them posing statically like a painting in the Uffizi. These tableaux are lewd and pornographic scenes euphemized via a mythological

²⁴ Another form of plagiarism in Della Porta is mentioned in Bolzoni (2001, p. 93).

²⁵ *L'arte del ricordare* (*AdR*), III:30-35; *Ars reminiscendi* (*ARim*), III:30-35 for the critical edition and translation, see Della Porta (1996, p. 12, 62; 2012, p. 91); cf. Bolzoni (2001, p. 147-148).

²⁶ *AdR* (VII:5-6); *ARim* (V:5); for the location in the critical editions and translation, see Della Porta (1996, p. 15, 70; 2012, p. 97).

vocabulary. Simply put, the author is instructing his vernacular reader to visualize prostitutes having sexual intercourse with animals when animals are the objects to be remembered. One may assume that if a person or inanimate object were the item to be remembered, then different acts would be performed in the mnemonist's imagination, but all the same, the acts would be sexual in nature. In the next chapter, he euphemistically notes again that it is easier to remember the episode of the noblewoman and the donkey in the *Golden Ass*, than the more respectable events surrounding Regulus or Scaevola (Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, X:19-22; *AdR*, XI:30; *ARim*, IX:29-30; Della Porta, 1996, p. 24, 79; Della Porta, 2012, p. 103). The classically literate reader would know the details of the extremely graphic depiction of bestiality from Apuleius's work, and readily take the meaning of his statement: there should be little doubt that coitus, and scandalous sexual behavior, were indeed part of the mental accouterment of a mnemonist's mind. That mnemonic images could be understood not merely as iconographic, but also as slightly pornographic, seems to be confirmed by the fact that all the abovementioned examples, bar the mention of Apuleius, were censured out of the subsequent Latin version of the treatise along with the censoring-out of an example for a mnemonic image of "bare-breasted Lucretia" and another of "naked Andromeda."²⁷

Della Porta's unambiguous textual reference, I believe, exposes a practice that already existed as an unspoken clandestine tradition of sexual mnemonics. This practice was hinted towards in Pietro da Ravenna's "beautiful girls" (*pulcherrimae puellae*) and in his statement that the celibate would not be able to effectively use this technique. This practice was perhaps also reflected in the angst of the anonymous author of the 1425 Bolognese treatise, and in the Puritan Perkins's zealous antagonism to mnemonics that "inflame and sharpen depraved carnal affections". The fact that such a tradition was relatively well-known, despite the lack of a clear paper trail to it, is lent supporting evidence from an unexpected source: the writings of a Jewish rabbi in seventeenth-century Venice. Leon Modena da Venezia (1571-1648),²⁸ aside from being a subversively progressive thinker and a peculiar figure in Jewish Italian history, was the very first Jewish author that we know of to dedicate an entire treatise to mnemonics. *Treatise of the Lion's Heart* (מאמר לב האריה) was

²⁷ For the censoring of the prostitutes, see *AdR* (VIII:15-17, 25-28); *ARim* (VI:20-24, 28-31); See Della Porta (1996, p. 17-18, 72-73; 2012 (p. 98).

For the censored Andromeda and Lucretia, see *ARim* (VIII:24-32); Della Porta (1996, p. 21-22).

Della Porta also mentions nudity and a stripping of all place-guardians as a method of clearing one's places for new information. See *AdR* (IX:29-30); *ARim* (VII:25-27); Della Porta 1996, p. 19, 75; 2012, p. 99). "*personas omnes nudas contemplari oportet*," "*vediamo tutte le persone ingude*."

²⁸ Older studies erroneously name him Leone da Modena, but he used Modena as a family name, calling himself Leon Modena of Venice, see Adelman (1985, p. 182-184).

finished on December 1611 and was already in print by May 1612. In the portion dedicated to Herennian mnemonics, Modena (1612, f. 10r.) warns that one should not use prostitutes as place-guardians (*Treatise of the Lion's Heart* 2:6):

"ותברח בכל יכלתך לקחת לא למקום ולא לצורה דבר אסור לך מן התורה ולא אשה יפה או זונה ולא ביתה ולא קלפים של צחוק וכדומה כי מלבד שיטרידו מזמותיך תעבור על הכתוב בתורה 'ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם' ומצות חז"ל על טהרת המחשבה, והזהר מהרהורי עבירה והגם כי יש מי שאמר לעשות המקום והצורה דבר נבלה ומכוער ביותר כי כן יעורר הרבה ויזכיר, לא כאלה חלק יעקב כי קדוש הוא לאלוהיו."

[Y]ou should flee with all thy might the usage as a place or as an image of a thing that is prohibited in the Torah, not a beautiful woman, nor a prostitute, nor her house,²⁹ nor playing cards and such, as aside from their confounding of your [mnemonic] craft, [by doing so] you shall transgress against what the Torah says: “and you are not to follow after your own heart” [Numbers 15:39] and against the commandments of the Sages of Blessed Memory on purity of thought, and you should beware of sinful reflection and even though there are those who said that making the [mnemonic] place and image something immodest³⁰ or exceedingly ugly would rouse memory, [this is not to be done as] “they who are the Portion of Jacob are not like these” [Jeremiah 10:16] “for they are holy to their God” [Leviticus 21:7].³¹

Two things are worthy of analysis in this short mention. First, this prohibition seems to imply such practices were not esoteric but were assumed to be easily obtainable knowledge. Modena clearly assumed that his scholarly Jewish reader has already heard of such “dangerous” techniques. His choice to mention prostitutes implies he believed the danger posed by ignoring these techniques outweighed the danger of inadvertently promulgating them to innocent readers. The second point of interest is his choice to base his prohibition on Numbers 15:39: “not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to *whore* after”³² (ולא תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זנים אחריהם). Jewish scholarly understanding of this verse sees it as a prohibition against intentional or unintentional sexual thoughts.³³ It is thus reasonable that Modena would enlist this particular prohi-

²⁹ The Hebrew could reasonable be translated as “nor her brothel.” This interpretation is especially likely given the proximity to the mention of playing cards, as in Modena’s native Italian, *casino* means both brothel and gambling den.

³⁰ The word *n’vala* (נבלה) in Biblical Hebrew, clearly relates to sins of immorality and sex, see Judges 19:23; 2 Samuel 13:12; Genesis 34:7; Deuteronomy 22:21.

³¹ All English translations are based on the New International Version.

³² The emphasis is mine.

³³ Popular interpretations of this prohibition, preceding Modena’s work, and linking it to forms of sexual contemplation, include *Talmud Bavli, Berakhot* 12:1; *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 1:5; Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvoth* (12th century), 47;

bition when confronting the praxis of meditation on sexual scenes in the pursuit of better mnemonic retention. But Modena also implies that sexual mnemonics (and mnemonics utilizing playing cards)³⁴ are only prohibited to Jews (“the portion of Jacob”). One may infer from this that Modena assumed that basing his prohibition on universal moralistic grounds would fail, since the legitimacy of such mental practices was already well within the unwritten consensus among mnemonists. By making his prohibition an identity-based injunction meant for Jews alone, Modena bypassed any contradictory arguments on the part of readers who may have already learned of the efficacy of such mnemonic tricks.

Since the earliest treatises on mnemonics, mnemonists were expected to pay attention to the architecture, streets, and cities they visited, to meander and “harvest” sites for their ever-expanding thesaurus of mnemonic places. This practice was called “furnishing places” for later mnemonic use (*locos comparare; locos sumere; locos capere*) (RaH, 3.19.31; Pseudo-Cicero, 1954, p. 210-211). It’s highly likely that a Venetian mnemonist practicing the method utilizing permanent place-guardians to each locale would be tempted to incorporate sex workers into his mental cityscape, since seventeenth-century Venice was a city synonymous with prostitution and gambling, where prostitutes stood at regular doorways and passages, and with entire streets dedicated to the oldest profession.³⁵ Modena’s attention to this danger is therefore understandable.

It is worth noting that there is also evidence to another kind of antagonism to nudity in mnemonics of a more practical nature. Girolamo Marafioti (1567-1626) was a Calabrian Franciscan humanist. In his treatise on memory, he advocated scrutinizing beautiful women in the street for mnemonic purposes, a suggestion that is a testament to the ubiquity and approval of similar techniques (Bolzoni, 2001, p. 149). Yet he also explained that imagining them naked is a bad practice, not for any religious reason, but rather because people of similar sex, age and build, when imagined naked, would be literally stripped of distinguishing features, and would thus merge in one’s mind, causing confusion and a failure in recollection.³⁶

As the above analysis lays bare, we may firmly assume early modern mnemonists indeed

Jonah Gerondi, *Sha’arey T’shuvah* (13th century), 364; *Sefer HaHinnukh* (13th century), 387 etc.

³⁴ A century before Modena’s treatise Thomas Murner published his *Logica memorativa*, a deck of playing cards meant to teach the *Summulae logicales* of Petrus Hispanus via mnemonic images added to regular playing cards, an idea possibly based on an existent mnemonic practice using playing cards. See Murner (1507).

³⁵ On prostitution statistics and their reliability, and on the ubiquity of prostitution in Venice and other Italian cities, see Brown and Davis (1998, p. 6, 31-32); Davidson (1994, p. 93); Rosenthal (1992, p. 11); Labalme and Sanguineti White (2008, p. 321n101); cf. Sanuto (1879-1903, 8:414).

³⁶ “*Si etenim nudaе sint imagines, earum differentiae videri nequeunt... si nudaе sint imagines eorum, disparitas inter eos, vix per idea reminiscantiae discerni potest*” Marafioti (1602, f. 5r., 1610, p. 283).

turned a pornographic gaze on the naked body in their mnemonic practices, the gaze Pietro da Ravenna claimed unattainable to the celibate, and which later Modena and Perkins were preaching against.

Mnemonic alphabets

With the explicit avoidance of most mnemonic treatises from giving examples for effective mnemonic images, it is less surprising that most of the abovementioned examples came from chapters dealing with places, and specifically with place-guardians. There is, however, one type of mnemonic image that is exempt from that didactic avoidance. Authors focusing on the memory of words (*memoria verborum*) sometimes provide a mnemonic alphabet in which each image represents a letter combination. In some cases the verbal description is even complemented with illustrations. The technique is straight forward, the images from the alphabet are placed in a series of mnemonic places to spell out any word, sentence or name. With the scarcity of detailed examples in mnemonics, one would hope that if evidence of sexual mnemonic imagery exists outside the Revennese sub-system of place-guardians, it would be found in these alphabets.

The most influential mnemonic alphabet was created by Jacobus Publicius and was coupled with drawings, which became a sensation and copiously plagiarized by later authors. One mnemonic image in this alphabet, an image for the letter V, is scandalously sexual in nature. It depicts a grown bearded man, lying on his back, his legs in the air and his tunic hitched up. In the center of the composition are his exposed genitals and anus facing the viewer in what should very probably be construed as a sexual invitation (Figure 4).³⁷ Johannes Romberch, who censured the nude female Latin-case figure from Publicius turning her into a naked Julius Caesar, also toned down this image in his version of it, transforming it into an almost baby-like obese man, the rendering of whose genitalia seems to play the sexual nature of his gesture down (Figure 5).³⁸ It may also be relevant to interpret this image keeping in mind the three mnemonic places on the derriere of one of Rosselli's nude figures mentioned earlier (Figure 3), though these were not part of a mnemonic alphabet (De Rosselliis, 1579, f. 100v.). Sexual graphics also appear in Giambattista della

³⁷ Editions of Publicius with this mnemonic alphabet include: Publicius [1490, f. 57v.; 1485-1490, II, unnumbered folios (f. 60v)]. The same alphabet is reproduced in Leporeus (1523, f. 21r).

³⁸ Romberch's image clearly describes the image as a "*vir extensis cruribus*" ("man extending his legs"), see Romberch (1520, tractate III, cap. IX, unnumbered folios [ff. 45v.-46r.]); cf. Romberch (1533, ff. 51v.-52r).

The famous printer Lodovico Dolce copied the same alphabet and image in his 1562 vernacular rendering of Romberch's work, see Dolce (1562, f. 55v.-56r.); On Dolce's *Dialogo* being a version of Romberch's work, see Bolzoni (2001, p. 149, 220).



Figure 4 - Jacobus Publicius. *Institutiones oratoriae* (Cyrillus Caesar, Augsburg, 1490, f. 57v.)



Figure 5 - Leporeus, Gulielmus. *Ars memorativa Gulielmi Leporei Avallonensis* (Toulouse: Ioannis Fabri, 1523, f. 21r.)

Porta's original visual mnemonic alphabets for the 1602 Latin version of his treatise. One such alphabet is made up of contorting men, some dressed and others nude.³⁹ The letter A, is formed from two nude men kissing and holding hands (Figure 6). The figures for the letters

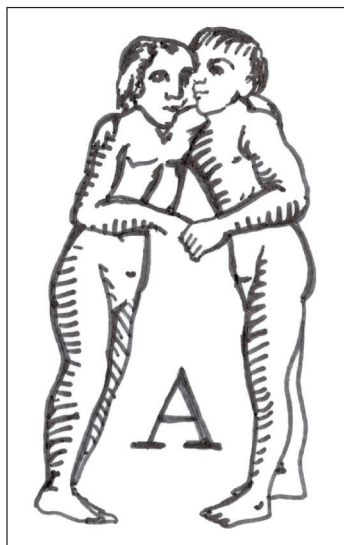


Figure 6 - Giambattista della Porta. *Ars reminiscendi Ioan. Baptistae Portae Neapolitani* (Neapoli: Apud Ioan. Baptistam Subtilem, 1602, p. 40)

³⁹ The nude alphabet is on ARim (XXI); See Della Porta (1602, p. 40; 1996, p. 49).



Figure 7 - Giambattista della Porta. *Ars reminiscendi Ioan. Baptistae Portae Neapolitani* (Neapoli: Apud Ioan. Baptistam Subtilem, 1602, p. 40)

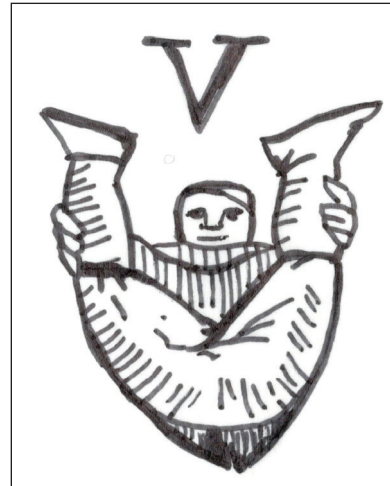


Figure 8 - Giambattista della Porta. *Ars reminiscendi Ioan. Baptistae Portae Neapolitani* (Neapoli: Apud Ioan. Baptistam Subtilem, 1602, p. 40)

“M” and “V” are reminiscent of Publicius’s lewd “V”, but are dressed and more dignified (Figures 7 and 8). Indeed, the fact that letters “A” through “H” are naked as well as “O” and “Q”, while the rest are fully or partially dressed, only serves to emphasize the sexual nature of the nude same-sex fondling and kissing in the depiction of the letter A. The text itself describes the figures in a rather benign way: “for A [one is to imagine figures] conjoined together in the head, in legs distant, in arms embracing” (*pro A coniuges capite haerentes, cruribus distantibus, ac se brachiis complectentibus*).⁴⁰ One is almost tempted to buy into this ‘respectable’ non-sexual verbal summary and to “not see the man behind the curtain,” so to speak. This, however, would be a mistake. This type of understated textual description of lewd images seems to be customary to many of these treatises and should not be taken at face value. Publicius’s anus – and penis – exposing man is verbally described in Romberch’s version simply as “*vir extensis cruribus*” (“man extending his legs”), and in Dolce’s vernacular as “*huomo che alza le gambe*” (“man who raises his legs”) (Romberch, 1520, tractate III, cap. IX, unnumbered folios (f. 46r.); Romberch, 1533, f. 52r.; Dolce, 1562, f. 56r.). These are clearly understatements as the mnemonic image for the letter “S” clearly reveals. The “S” is rendered in all of these alphabets comically and scatologically as a serpentine lump of fecal matter presented on a stylish, tasseled cushion (Figure 9).⁴¹ Its verbal description however,

⁴⁰ The text is from ARim (XXI:18-19); See Della Porta (1602, p. 37; 1996, p. 46).

⁴¹ For the letter “S”, see Romberch (1520, tractate III, cap. IX, unnumbered folios - f. 45r.); cf. Romberch (1533, f. 51r.); Dolce (1562, f. 55r.). The Dolce and Romberch depictions are slightly more naturalistic.



Figure 9 - Jacobus Publicius. *Institutiones oratoriae*
(Cyrillus Caesar, Augsburg, 1490, f. 57r)

explains the image simply as “cushion/bedding” (“*Pulvinar*” in Romberch’s Latin, and “*letto*” in Dolce’s vernacular).⁴² Needless to say, the true subject of the image is the serpentine object with its similarity to the morphology of the letter “S”. This image is memorable, not because of the cushion referred to in the text, but because of the incongruous lump upon it, to which the text does not refer at all. Similarly, the “man extending his legs” will not be remembered because of his legs, but because of what’s between them, and the two “conjoined together in the head” (i.e. kissing), will probably be remembered for their nudity while fondling each other, whether or not the text mentions this fact explicitly. It is possible that this discrepancy between image and text was meant to bypass a censorship of the text that was stricter than the censorship of the engravings accompanying it, but such a claim would be difficult to validate.⁴³

A sensual mnemonic alphabet in the Middle Ages

Classical mnemonic techniques seem to have survived in stunted versions through the Middle Ages. However, the method of “local memory” in its fuller form, as described in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, was revived only in the mid-thirteenth-century after Albert the

⁴² For the textual descriptions of “V” and “S”, see Romberch (1520, tractate III, cap. IX, unnumbered folios - f. 46r); cf. Romberch (1533, f. 52r); Dolce (1562, f. 56r).

⁴³ On the uneven censorship of images and text and the problems it posed, see Fragnito (2001, p. 74-75).

Great (c. 1200-c. 1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) coupled the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* with the rising interest in Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscencia*. Thus, only two and a half centuries span between the beginning of genuine interest in this system and the publication of the first abovementioned printed editions. Medieval treatises have nothing as explicit as the mentions of Pietro da Ravenna's old flames or the prostitutes mentioned in Giambattista della Porta and in rabbi Leon Modena, but one medieval treatise comes close.

Thomas Bradwardine (c.1280-1349) was a gifted mathematician, philosopher, and theologian at Merton College, Oxford. He was also chancellor of St. Paul, confessor to King Edward III, and was even elevated to the archbishopric of Canterbury, a position he tragically held for a single month before succumbing to the Plague. Bradwardine is important to the present study as his mnemonic treatise *De memoria artificiali acquirenda* (c.1335) contains some of the earliest extensive instructions on visualizing letter combinations and other mnemonic images.⁴⁴ In his detailed example on how to remember the Zodiac, Bradwardine begins by suggesting having a ram (Aries) bloodily kicking a bull (Taurus) in the bovine's engorged gonads ("*super testiculos eius magnos et ultra modum inflatos*").⁴⁵ Visualizing such an image was sure to illicit an emotional reaction in the perennially male mnemonist, making it easier to recall when beginning the list of signs. The Twins (Gemini) he contends, should be visualized as being born from the exaggeratedly rent genitalia of a woman "ripped open up to her breast" ("*mulier quasi laborans in partu, et in utero eius quasi rupto a pectore*").⁴⁶ As perhaps expected in a theoretical treatise by a priest, the vulva itself is not explicitly named; however, the visual of a woman *in partu*, being sliced from her unnamed nether-regions to her (named) breast, implies the mnemonist dwell on the most intimate parts of female physique, to acquire the benefit of this mental procedure (Carruthers, 2009, p. 168). He is required to dangerously "wander" with his mind's eye, a practice Modena and the anonymous Bolognese treatise would warn against later, on the two female-specific bodily features, and through the mixing of the sexual with the grotesque and morbid the mnemonist is to create an effective and memorable image. Perhaps even more disturbingly, Bradwardine suggests that the bull representing Taurus, described earlier as being kicked in his "great testicles, engorged in the uttermost manner" (*testiculos eius magnos et ultra modum inflatos*) could be made to horrifically replace the rent woman and give birth to the Twins in her place, presumably through its tortured genitals, "in a miraculous manner" ("*de tauro*

⁴⁴ On Bradwardine's life and work, see Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 205-214); Carruthers (1992, p. 37; 2009, p. 163-172).

⁴⁵ The critical edition of the original Latin is Carruthers (1992, p. 37); English translations from Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 209-210).

⁴⁶ Carruthers (1992, p. 37); Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 210).

mirabili modo nasci") (Carruthers, 1992, p. 37; Carruthers and Ziolkowski, 2002, p. 210), a visualization more disturbing, and thus more memorable.

In his description dedicated to *memoria verborum*, Bradwardine suggests different letters, vowels and vowel-consonant combinations be remembered using premeditated images. The basics of his system are those that will be repeated two centuries later by early modern authors, the main difference being that Bradwardine does not provide drawings of the images in any of the surviving manuscripts of his work. The letter A, so he explains, can be remembered using "Adam covering his naked genitals with leaves" ("*Adam nuda verenda sua foliis tegentem*"). In the oldest extant manuscript the treatise, Harley 4166 (late fourteenth-century or early fifteenth-century), E is rendered using "Eve, naked, hiding her prominent breasts with her long hair and her genitals with green leaves" ("*Evam nudam pudenda cum viridibus foliis longis crinibus mamillas prominentes abscondentem*") (Carruthers, 1992, p. 39; Carruthers and Ziolkowski, 2002, p. 211). By stressing the size of Eve's breast, implying a failure to cover them, Bradwardine creates a sexualized and more memorable version of the standard iconographic depiction of Eve. Interestingly, the key word "prominent" was censored out from all later copies of this treatise, which may imply the sexual undertones of this depiction did not go unnoticed (Carruthers, 1992, p. 33-34; see Har.4166, ff. 72-73).

Though Bradwardine avoided explicit sexual references as those found in Della Porta, he does seem to hint that mnemonic images, which include naked bodies with sensual undertones (Eve's prominent breasts), would possess powerful retentive qualities. One could understand Bradwardine's letter E as a medieval forerunner of the tradition that would later evolve into Publicius's lewd letter V, or of Giambattista della Porta's letter A.

The possible medieval sources to later sexual mnemonics

Hints to sexual mnemonics seem absent altogether from the classical texts and from earlier medieval non-Herennian treatises, such as Hugh of St. Victor's *De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum* and *Libellus de formatione archæ* (first half of the twelfth century). It would thus seem the genesis of sexual mnemonics may have occurred in the High Middle Ages, and that this contribution matured gradually in the abovementioned early modern methods before reaching its current use.

I would like to tentatively suggest that the addition of the sensual aspect to Herennian mnemonics in the High Middle Ages was in part a continuation of the liberty of expression found in medieval marginalia and architecture. Both types of art are explicitly mentioned in mnemonic treatises as aids, and both bear a curious similarity to mnemonic imagery.

Medieval art seems to particularly revel in the imaginative invention of hybrid creatures, and the margins of manuscripts dealing with the most serious of subject matters are

often decorated with violent, irreverent, and ridiculous scenes. As early as a century before the revival of Herennian memory, authors on mnemonics, such as Hugh of St. Victor emphasized the importance of manuscript layout to recollection (“the color, shape, position and placement of the letters”).⁴⁷ Similarly, page decoration serves a practical purpose by making each folio unique, and thus the contents read from it more memorable (Carruthers, 2009, p. 177; Nikulin, 2015, p. 118). By the mid-thirteenth-century stylized *tituli* became not merely a tool to highlight verses of interest, but also intentional mnemonic aids (Carruthers, 2009, p. 309-324).

Similar attention to architecture and décor is required by both early and late treatises. A mnemonist is counseled to commit actual places – “a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch or the like” – to memory, and to “harvest” such spaces as future mnemonic places (*RaH* 3.16.29; 3.19.31; Pseudo-Cicero, 1954, p. 208-209; 210-211).⁴⁸ While classical authors such as Quintilian suggest focusing on the features of a Roman house (*Institutio oratoria* 11.2.17), medieval authors suggest one carefully inspect real-life monastic and ecclesiastical edifices for the same purpose (Carruthers, 1998, p. 255, 359).⁴⁹ Indeed, even well before the revival of Herennian memory, medieval monastic mnemonics used real and imagined spaces as similarly tools for rhetorical *inventio* (Carruthers, 1998, p. 254-276).

Both the margins of medieval manuscripts and the carvings of medieval architecture contain strange, violent, vivid and humoristic images akin to the images of classical Herennian mnemonics. Both also depict exceptionally lewd imagery. It is not unreasonable to assume that people working regularly with decorated manuscripts, and counseled to pay attention to decoration, would note that obscene or cringeworthy imagery leave a strong impression. The man exposing his anus and genitals to the reader in the margins of the Gorleston Psalter (Figure 10),⁵⁰ the naked woman riding a giant phallus through a codex of Gratian’s *Decretals* (Figure 11),⁵¹ or the endowed man decorating a copy of Justinian’s Codex (Figure 12)⁵² are as memorable as (if not *more* memorable than) the other non-sexual imagery decorating other folios. It is also not unreasonable to assume that people regularly examining architecture and counseled to pay attention to its decoration would note the almost identical lewd artwork

⁴⁷ Complete commentaries to *RaH* were available in since the 12th century, but interest in the mnemonic chapter took time to develop. Caplan (1954, p. xxxv); see Carruthers (2009, p. 154-155, 169-170, 281-293). On Hugh’s emphasis, see Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 38). On similar contemporary ideas circulating in Europe, see for example in Halévi (1865, p. 19); Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 203).

⁴⁸ More on Roman mnemonic attention to architectural features Carruthers (1998, p. 261), quoting Onians (1988, p. 58).

⁴⁹ Albert the Great (*De bono* 4.2), Bradwardine, Eiximenis, and Publicius all make such suggestions. Carruthers and Ziolkowski (2002, p. 199, 201, 239). Cf. *RaH* (3.19.31); Pseudo-Cicero (1954, p. 210-211).

⁵⁰ Lon.49622, f. 61r.

⁵¹ Lyo.5128, f. 100r. *Decretum Gratiani Causa*, II, *Quaestio* VI. Cap. XXVIII-XXIX.

⁵² Ang.339, f. 282r. *Codex Iustinianus* 8.57 “*De infirmendis poenis caelibatus et orbitatis et decimariis sublatiis*.”

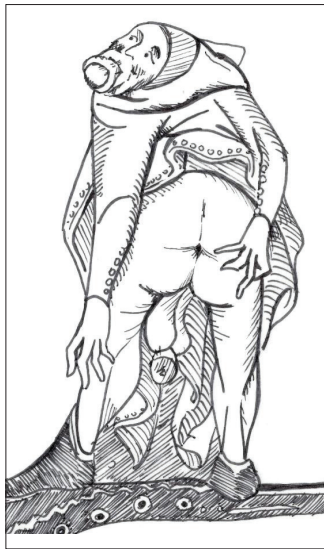


Figure 10 - Norfolk, *Gorleston Psalter*, 1310-1324
(London, British Library, AA 49622, f. 61r.)

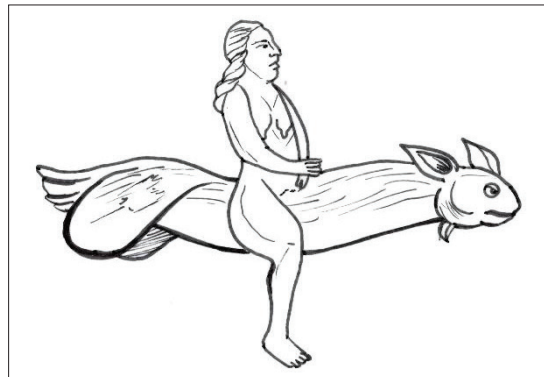


Figure 11 - Italy, *Decretum Gratiani*, 1340-1345
(Lyon, Bibliotheque Municipale Lyon, MS 5128, f. 100r.)



Figure 12 - Bologna, *Codex Justinianus*,
13th century (Angers, Bibliothèque
Municipale, MS 339, f. 282r.)

carved into choir stalls and masonry. A stone corbel from St. Mary in Cley in Norfolk, for example, features a man exposing his back side, which bears striking similarity to the *Gorleston Psalter*'s exhibitionist, and other such carvings are well attested (McIlwain Nishimura, 1999, p. 29).⁵³ A rather common sexual corbel bears a design almost identical to Publicius's letter "V", with the exhibitionist laying on his back.⁵⁴

Most of these carvings are Romanesque and precede the revival of Herennian mnemonics by centuries. Their invention has absolutely no relation to mnemonics, in the same way there is likely no intentional relation between the origins of sexual marginalia and mnemonics. There is little consensus as to the purpose of such bawdy art. Some scholars believe it is mostly apotropaic, a ward against evil, much like Greek *Herma* pillars, the Isle of Delos's phalli, and Roman *tintinbula* and *fasci-*

⁵³ Similar carvings include "Le père Tricouillard." Ang.Tric.; Lug; EothH. See Gaignebet and Lajoux (1985, p. 201, 211).

⁵⁴ Examples of "V" type exhibitionists, see Lim. and Montil; see Gaignebet and Lajoux (1985, p. 194-195, 211). For similar examples, see Montb., Maur., Weir and Jerman (1986, p. 42, 80-82, 88, 93-96, 100, 102, 114-115 passim); and Gaignebet and Lajoux (1985, p. 196).

na carvings. Others see it as a remnant of pre-Christian religions, or as a product of the initiation process into the trade of masonry. Others claim a humoristic or pornographic intent, or convincingly argue its vulgarity was meant to dowse erotic passion rather than to inflame it.⁵⁵ Whatever its mysterious aim was, to accept my final argument, one merely needs to allow that vulgarity is in the eye of the beholder, regardless of artistic intention and original purpose, and that a mason's mark or an apotropaic image can potentially be viewed as lewd by different audiences. Such an understanding is lent viability by the various cases in which such art was mutilated by more conservative viewers that did not care for the possibly honorable intentions of those who had commissioned it.⁵⁶

I do not believe the decorations of churches or public buildings were conceived of with a mnemonic function in mind. However, it would stand to reason medieval mnemonists examining arches, statues, recesses and corbels would not only notice the existence of striking sexual decorations, but also become aware that much as in the case of obscene marginalia, sexual carvings made a place more memorable and distinct from the next place in one's mnemonic route. What could have started as a distinguishing feature for a mnemonic place (due to its being a part of a real location a mnemonist inspected), could have allowed for the insight that sex is an efficacious attribute of mnemonic images. Such origins could explain why the more explicit mentions of sex in mnemonics appear in the chapters dealing with mnemonic places. Here it is worth noting that even though examples of pornographic and apotropaic Roman décor abound, and even though it has been suggested that ancient Roman frescoes were used in relation to mnemonics,⁵⁷ unlike their medieval and early modern counterparts, there is not a crumb of textual evidence, either in the form of instruction or of interdiction, to suggest sexual content played any part in classical mnemonics.

Final considerations

It seems lewd medieval artistic expression in both marginalia and architecture, after serving as a thesaurus of mnemonic places, may have migrated to the mental spaces early mnemonists visualized in their minds' eye, and consequently affected the design of both

⁵⁵ On exhibitionist art as apotropaic, see Feldherr (2004, p. 1288-1289); Bougoux (1992, p. 64, 66) etc. On exhibitionist art as humorous or lewd, see Craplet (1972); On exhibitionist art as didactic and moralizing, see Weir and Jerman (1986, p. 10-11, 23, 151-154).

⁵⁶ On such 'righteous' vandalism, see Weir and Jerman (1986, p. 10, 15, 18, 38-39, 79, 86-87). An Italian example is the so-called "Whore of Modena" (*Ja Potta di Modena*) metope, see Mod.

⁵⁷ Herwig Blum suggests Roman frescoes were used as mnemonic backgrounds, see Blum (1969, p. 8-9).

mnemonic images and mnemonic places (via the ubiquitous place-guardians of early modern treatises). This could explain in one fell swoop why an image of a man exposing his anus, for example, could appear not only on buildings and in marginalia, but also in mnemonic alphabets, in almost the exact same format. The image's conception may have been as part of a mason's joke or may have been conceived to serve an apotropaic purpose, however a common denominator of all manifestations of this exhibitionist seems to be that they were studied by mnemonists.

As strange as it may seem to us, sexual, outrageous, outlandish, violent, and funny images were all considered legitimate mental tools in the quest for better mnemonic retention, and even as tools for "pious functions" (Carruthers, 2009, p. 171), such as preaching and religious studies, which is precisely why some authorities deemed them dangerous, even in the service of Godly practices.

In this essay, I sought to demonstrate several points. First that early modern mnemonists, and perhaps also earlier ones, did indeed meditate on sexual acts in order to create memorable scenes as part of their local memory techniques. Second that this practice was not esoteric, despite the rarity of direct mentions of it. Third, that this type of provocative mnemonic imagery was not in fact a professional secret crafted by Pietro da Ravenna as he suggests, but possibly an evolution of a practice implied in medieval treatises as early as the fourteenth century. And lastly, that such imagery may have originated in the irreverent and imaginative aesthetic of two forms of art, both explicitly used in conjunction with mnemonics at that time.

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MANUSCRIPT ABBREVIATION TABLE

Ang.339 - Angers, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 339 (Bologna, 13th century)

Har.4166 - London, British Library, MS Harley 4166, ff. 72-73

Lon.49622 - London, British Library, AA 49622 (Norfolk, Gorleston Psalter, 1310-1324).

Lyo.5128 - Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale Lyon, MS 5128, f. 100r. (Italy, 1340-1345).

Vin.4444 - Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 4444.

ARTWORK

Ang.Tric. - Angers, France, Maison d'Adam "Le père Tricouillard", timber carving, 15th century.

EotH - Easton-on-the-Hill, Northamptonshire, England, All Saints Church, 12th century.

Lim. - Limoges, France, Museum of Limoges, corbel, 12th or 13th century.

Lug. - Lugaigac, France, Church of St. Martin, corbel exterior to apse, 12th century,

Maur. - Mauriac, France, Basilica of Notre Dame des Miracles, corbel on the façade, 12th century.

Mod. - Modena, Italy, Santa Maria Assunta in Cielo e San Geminiano, 12th century (today in the Museo Lapidario in Modena).

Montb. - Montberault, France, Church of the Visitation, apse frieze, 13th century.

Montil. - Montiles, France, Church of St. Suplice, corbel exterior to apse, 12th century.