THE VIRGIN MARY'S

Book at the Annunciation

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Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England

Introduction

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Introduction

Luke 1:26–38 preserves the only canonical telling of the Annunciation, when Gabriel arrives to announce to Mary that she will become the Mother of God, and Christ becomes incarnate in her womb.[1] For many Christians the Annunciation is an historical event faithfully recorded by the disciple Luke, an 'educated Greek Christian believer', directly from Mary's telling.[2] We learn next to nothing about the setting, situation or appearance of this young woman – only that she is a virgin, betrothed. Indeed, nothing actually *happens* explicitly in this passage. It is exclusively speech-act, *pârole*, out of which centuries of exegesis has spun the mystery of the hypostatic union, the indescribable, ineffable union of God and human.

Despite the gospel's lack of detail we can instantly picture the scene because of its nearly ubiquitous representation throughout western art history over the last two millennia. Since the episode is discourse-driven, concrete iconographic imagery helps to identify it visually. While the setting may vary from chapel to bedroom to study to garden, it is almost always Gabriel flying in, Mary with her book.[3] Thousands of manuscript illuminations, altar paintings, sculptures, relief carvings, rood screens, wall paintings, stained glass, textiles and pilgrim badges depict the Annunciation scene, pervading pre-modern art in the West.[4] As a representative example, the altogether typical Annunciation scene of a fifteenth-century book of hours, Walters Art Museum, MS W.249,

1 On other surviving versions of the Annunciation story, including the apocryphal gospels and the Qu'ran, see Gary Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary and the Annunciation: From Luke to the Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015), ch. 2, 'Multiple Texts, Multiple Stories'.

2 Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary*, 60.

3 On the varying settings of late-medieval Annunciations, especially from the Continent, see David M. Robb, 'The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *The Art Bulletin* 18:4 (1936): 480–526.

4 In Byzantine art Mary spins instead of reads; see, for instance, Maria Evangelatou, 'The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation', in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. A. Eastmond and L. James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 261–79.

fol. 37r (Figure 1), shows Mary in her aristocratic bedroom with one hand still on her open book, the other hand raised in greeting to the angel, while Gabriel wields the banderole of his words to the Virgin which also form the *Ave Maria* prayer. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and shafts of light represent divine conception. As in many Annunciation illuminations, Mary's book contains writing that is just barely *illegible*: its unreadability leaves it open to interpretation and allows it to bear multiple layers of meaning. The long, rich tradition of these layers of meaning of Mary's book forms the basis for this study.

On one level Mary's reading could be the Old Testament prophecies foretelling the Incarnation, such as Isaiah 7:14, 'ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium' (Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son) or Psalm verses interpreted allegorically to relate to the Annunciation. On a deeper level Mary's book symbolically represents the theological belief of Christ as the Word of God, as *Verbum* or *Logos*. 'in principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum' (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God) opens the first two verses of John's Gospel, and he soon after explains the phenomenon of the Incarnation in these terms: 'et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis' (and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us) (John 1:14).[5] Because Mary gave her flesh to Christ, Mary's book represents the Word conceived out of her body, the Book of Christ on which the world can be written, and the New Testament conceived out of the Old. Her reading symbolizes not just specific prophecies but the entire exegetical interpretation of every word of the Old Testament as a typological foreshadowing of the coming of the Messiah. And this weighty symbolism is in addition to the weighty symbolism of any representation of this scene: 'The Annunciation is therefore more than just the iconography of a biblical passage, for it thematizes and comments upon the beginning of the figurative process as something that flows forth from the principle of incarnation – the becoming flesh, and thus "becoming image," of Christ himself,' comments art historian Barbara Baert.[6] The hypostatic union of God and man does not just evoke acts of interpretation and figuration: it literally embodies them.

[5] Often modern discussions of the Incarnation and Christ as 'Word made flesh' do not include Mary at all; for only two recent examples, see, for instance, Emily A. Holmes, *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Mystics, Writing, and the Incarnation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014) and Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[6] Barbara Baert, 'The Annunciation and the Senses: Late Medieval Devotion and the Pictorial Gaze', in *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects, and Practices*, ed. Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan and Laura Katrine Skinnebach (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016), 122.

Figure 1. Annunciation; margins: various scenes from Mary's life. Matins, Hours of the Virgin. Book of Hours. France, Troyes, c. 1470. Walters Art Museum, MS W.249, fol. 37r.

Today all this theology might seem rather esoteric – something only for theologians to play with. And likewise we rather take for granted the ability to have meaning behind language. Of course it is possible to draw multiple layers of interpretation out of a text. But in the Augustinian mindset of the Middle Ages, such interpretation was only possible because of God. 'Per ipsum pergimus ad ipsum, tendimus per scientiam ad sapientiam' (through Him we reach on to Himself: we stretch through knowledge to wisdom) explains Augustine (d. 430) in *De Trinitate*.[7] Michelle Karnes summarizes Augustine's influential epistemology: 'For Augustine, understanding is an act enabled by God, self-understanding resembles God, and from both one might understand, in part, God.'[8] Because the human takes on the divine, signs can take signification, concrete can take on the abstract. Words can work, metaphors can work, interpretation can work – cognition itself can work. This theology was far from obscure; while it was developed by theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure, its ramifications infiltrated all levels of cultural belief and production. Could we imagine a world where all understanding of meaning was contingent upon a single girl in the distant past saying 'yes' to an angel? To wrap our heads around such a profoundly different attitude towards interpretation we must pay attention to how the Annunciation moment functioned in medieval culture and, in particular, the significance of a very concrete image: Mary's book.

This book (the one currently being read) offers a new contribution to the history of reading, one centred on a reader alone in a room with *her* book, perhaps looking much like the reader reading at this moment. That sense of reflexivity is crucial to this story: because the Virgin saw herself reflected in the virgin of Isaiah's prophecy, medieval readers could see themselves reflected in their books, whether that was the Bible, retellings of the Bible, or other devotional texts. Just as Mary's book merges with all books, so does the conception of Christ in her reading body offer a model of transformative reading for all bodies. She conceives physically, spiritually and intellectually, opening up a rich paradigm of metaphorical conception that medieval authors and theologians embraced. According to Mary's model, Christ could be conceived in the reader's soul, but also a complex new awareness of the self could emerge into the reader's existence. In many ways, devotion centred on the Annunciation, with its combination of divine embodiment and Mary's self-reflective reading, becomes a medium for the production of identity. Literature and art

[7] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII.xix.24, from *De Trinitate libri XV, CCSL* 50A, ed. William J. Mountain and François Glorie (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968, 2001), 417. Translation from Gareth B. Matthews, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132. Quoted in Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 69.

[8] Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition*, 75.

that promote a participatory piety, such as lives of Christ, often open with the Annunciation scene as a mimetic moment where the meditant is formed in the mould of the praying Mary, thus ensuring his or her successful approach to the devotional exercise. Through Mary, meditants learn how to pray, how to move with Christ's humanity to his divinity, how to move from the bodily to the spiritual. All of this transformation was channelled through the maternity of Mary. David Linton has suggested that medieval art makes Mary's reading 'a marginal act, one which was peripheral to her role as Mother of God, an act of devotion she did in her chamber while waiting for the really important job to begin, that of being a mother'.[9] Actually, Mary's first 'really important job' was that of expert reader, exegete and *maistress* of Scripture, a role that continually undergirds her later 'really important job' of mother. As the following chapters will prove, her textual engagement was in no way marginal: it provides a theologically and devotionally significant representation of the transformation happening in her body, and offers a crucial metaphor for what could happen metaphorically in each believer's soul when they practised an *imitatio Mariae*. While for centuries the Crucifixion had dominated (and would continue to dominate) Christian devotion to Christ in his suffering and Mary in her grief, from the long twelfth century through the early sixteenth century the Annunciation offered an alternative subject for and model of imaginative prayer. The scene of Christ's Incarnation made available a very different *imitatio Mariae*, one devoid of her pain, sorrow and weeping at the scene of Christ's death. Most importantly, the devotional site of the Annunciation offered something the Passion could not: a praying figure engaging a text in an enclosed space – in other words, a suggestively close mirroring of actual meditative practices of medieval men and women.

Like the Incarnation, the iconography of the book in Mary's hands also functioned on the concrete level, as a symbol of medieval women's reading practices. The evidence I gather below shows how the book's function as a theological symbol does not preclude its function as an icon of female literacy, both legitimizing and promoting women's reading of scripture. While texts certainly encouraged her imitation by both men and women, Mary held a different signification for readers who shared her gender. In a society where women generally had more limited access to education and books than men, such a female model of independent literacy could be taken literally by female readers who otherwise had few precedents of literate women. If Mary's saintliness was to be imitated, and she read the Bible unmediated by any man, could medieval women do the same? Could Mary's book challenge the patriarchal hold on textual production and consumption that continues to shape culture

[9] 'Reading the Virgin Reader', in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Falmer Press, 1999), 274.

today? I will show how Mary's book was not only spiritually transformative – it could be culturally radical, disrupting gendered power dynamics that undergirded the medieval world. Thus the new history of reading presented in this study also offers a new history of women readers and women authors that changes how we understand the last 1000 years of literacy.

The story of Mary's book

To contextualize the impact of the motif of Mary's book in the later Middle Ages and beyond, we must reach back a further thousand years to trace its evolution.[10] None of the canonical gospels give us any details on Mary's life or literacy prior to the Annunciation. The non-canonical *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, possibly compiled in the sixth century from various earlier apocryphal texts including the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, presents her as a virgin dedicated to the temple, where no one was 'In sapientia legis dei eruditior, … in carminibus dauiticis elegantior' (more learned in the wisdom of the law of God, … more elegant in the songs of David) than she was.[11] Of all the church fathers, Ambrose (d. 397) most thoroughly develops the portrait of this learned virgin. In a sermon written for a congregation of virgins, he describes Mary as 'legendi studiosior' (most studious in reading) and surrounded by books when Gabriel arrived.[12] Later in his commentary on Luke, Ambrose specifies that Mary had read the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 prior to the angel's visit, and that she believed it but did not yet know how it would come to pass. The Venerable

[10] For a more detailed early history of the motif and further references for the sources included here, see Laura Saetveit Miles, 'The Origins and Development of Mary's Book at the Annunciation', *Speculum* 89/3 (2014): 632–69. On the visual art history, see other sources cited in that article, as well as Klaus Schreiner, 'Marienverehrung, Lesekultur, Schriftlichkeit: Bildungs- und frömmigkeitgeschichtliche Studien zur Auslegung und Darstellung von "Mariä Verkündigung"', in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien: Jahrbuch des Instituts für Frühmittelalterforschung des Universität Münster* 24, ed. Hagen Keller and Joachim Wollasch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 314–68, as well as his later book, *Maria: Jungfrau, Mutter, Herrscherin* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1994). For briefer discussions see also Linton, 'Reading the Virgin Reader', and on the German tradition, Winfried Frey, 'Maria Legens – Mariam Legere: St Mary as an Ideal Reader and St Mary as a Textbook', in *The Book and the Magic of Reading*, 277–93, as well as Melissa R. Katz, 'Regarding Mary: Women's Lives Reflected in the Virgin's Image', in *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts*, ed. Melissa R. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19–132, esp. 37–41.

[11] *Pseudo-Matthew* 6.2, in *Libri de natiuitate Mariae: Pseudo-Matthaei Euangelium*, ed. J. Gijsel, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 335–6, lines 8–11. See also Miles, 'The Origins and Development', 638.

[12] *De virginibus ad Marcellinam*, 2.2.7; PL 16: 209A. On Ambrose and Bede see Miles, 'The Origins and Development', 639–42.

Bede (d. 735) reiterated Ambrose's detail of Mary's reading, but it would not be further popularized for at least another century and a half.

The real momentum of pictorial and textual references to the Virgin's reading at the Annunciation emerges from male monastic and clerical contexts in the ninth and tenth centuries and can be linked with the new spiritual ideals defining successive waves of religious reforms. On the continent in the mid-ninth century, ivory carvings like the Brunswick Casket and an Old High German gospel harmony by Otfrid von Weissenburg (*c*. 800–871) pick up the motif of the book, while in the 900s, Annunciation manuscript illuminations from both sides of the Channel begin to feature Mary reading.[13] From out of the surge in Marian devotion on the continent at the turn of the millennium came sermons by Fulbert of Chartres (*c*. 952–1028) and Odilo of Cluny (*c*. 962–1048) that perpetuate Ambrose's suggestion of Mary reading the Old Testament prophecy of the Incarnation. Mary, Odilo explains, was reading when Gabriel arrived; 'Quid legebat?' (What was she reading?) he asks. 'Forsitan occurrebant ei divinae Scripturae testimonia ad illud ineffabile sacramen- tum quod in ea gerebatur sine dubio pertinentia' (Perhaps the testimonies of divine scripture occurred to her, concerning that ineffable sacrament that was born in her, of which there is no doubt), including Isaiah 7:14 among others.[14]

Within the next hundred years the Annunciation iconography of a book in Mary's hands, on a stand, or in her lap would permeate art across Europe and England. Its meteoric rise in popularity can be pinpointed to the late eleventh century – a rise concurrent with a dramatic growth in the cult of the Virgin, the expansion of women's religious life and an increase in women's overall literacy and access to books. While representations of Mary's solitary reading were initially directed towards male clerics and monks, in the long twelfth century the use of the motif shifted to include its prominent use as a mimetic devotional moment for enclosed religious women. The symbolic power of a literate Virgin took on new complexities with its new audiences. Mary's engagement with the Bible, long positioned by men and for men as a symbol of monastic reading practices, suddenly became an explicit emblem of literacy for women readers – particularly anchoresses.[15]

Mary's reading could now function in a way it could not for men, as a means of appropriating for a female audience acts normally portrayed as masculine: scriptural study and interpretation. After all, there was no shortage of male iconographic models for reading and writing: portraits of Matthew,

[13] Miles, 'The Origins and Development', 643–7.

[14] *Sermon 12, De Assumptione dei genitricis Mariae,* PL 142: 1024B. See also Miles, 'The Origins and Development', 653–4.

[15] Miles, 'The Origins and Development', 659–69, offers a closer analysis of these claims, which are also further explored in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

Mark, Luke, John, Augustine and Jerome (to name just a few) with their books heavily populated medieval manuscripts. When female readers opened the anchoritic texts discussed below, they witnessed a portrait of a female reader, perhaps for the first time. When female visionaries sought an inspiration for their channelling of the divine and their own participation in literate culture as both consumers and producers of books, their texts testify that they turned to Mary at the Annunciation. As the only biblical female figure represented reading, by far the most frequently portrayed female reader and the common ideal behind any medieval female saint who might have been able to read, by the end of the twelfth century Mary had come to dominate the readerly self-conception of the medieval religious woman.

Mary's reading at the Annunciation also influenced other relevant aspects of her cult. The late medieval image of St Anne teaching her daughter the Virgin Mary to read is essentially a back-formation to explain her literacy at the Annunciation, and succeeded in offering an unusual and powerful model of women teaching and reading together.[16] The full-page illumination in Figure 1 surrounds the Annunciation with scenes in Mary's life leading up to that decisive moment, including St Anne reading to her daughter in the top right-hand corner. Mary leads an erudite life. Less common but related iconographical traditions include her representation with a book at nearly every other episode in her life shared with Christ: the Nativity, resting beside the infant Christ; at the Visitation,[17] when she meets her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant (with John the Baptist); the Flight into Egypt; at the foot of the cross at the Passion; and at Pentecost, with a book and surrounded by the disciples.[18] In

[16] The earliest images of Anne teaching the Virgin to read are from the late thirteenth century; it was not until the fourteenth century that St Anne's feast day was celebrated throughout England. Pamela Sheingorn makes an argument parallel to mine when she claims that the image of Saint Anne teaching the Virgin Mary 'should be associated with female literacy' and that 'representations of women with books in medieval art have been overlooked, so their implication for female literacy has been neglected'. See '"The Wise Mother": The Image of St Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary', *Gesta* 32, no.1 (1993): 69–83 (69). Also on St Anne, Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, eds, *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990) and Virginia Nixon, *Mary's Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); on images of St Anne and Mary reading, see Miriam Gill, '*Female Piety and Impiety: Selected Images of Women in Wall Paintings in England after 1300*', in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), 101–20.

[17] There is also a rare tradition of depicting Mary writing the Magnificat; see Susan Schibanoff, 'Botticelli's Madonna del Magnificat: Constructing the Woman Writer in Early Humanist Italy', *PMLA* 109.2 (1994): 190–206.

[18] For various examples see Susan Groag Bell, 'Medieval Women Book Owners', *Signs* 4 (1982): 742–68 (762), and Lesley Smith, 'Scriba, Femina: Medieval Depictions of

addition, if the book at the Annunciation constitutes the foremost material expression of the Virgin as the Mother of the Word made flesh, Mary's model of transformative reading and linguistic interpretation underpins her medieval role as 'queen' over the three liberal arts of the *trivium*. It is little known today that in the Middle Ages she was 'imagined to be present as a teacher, muse, and orator at many levels of liberal arts instruction'.[19] Mary's early association with the scriptural figure of Wisdom/Sapientia or the goddess personification of Sophia hovers behind all these facets of Mary's later medieval cult, including Mary's reading.[20]

The current study follows this story through to the eve of the Reformation and focuses on these literary and artistic traditions as they developed in England, or 'Oure Ladyes dowre', in the words of the anonymous fifteenth-century poet of the Pynson ballad, about the Shrine at Walsingham.[21] John Lydgate (d. 1451) similarly invites Mary to 'Entyr in Englond, thy dower with reverence' in his Marian hymn *Ave Regina Celorum*.[22] To think of 'England's green and pleasant land' as Mary's marriage portion expresses the feeling of familial participation which prompted the English not only to recreate Mary's little room on their soil as the shrine at Walsingham, but also in their souls, as they replayed the Annunciation scene over and over again in their devotions. 'The Marian fervor that we associate today with Italy or Spain – or link with the Gothic cathedrals of Our Lady that glorified the plains and the Capetian politics of medieval France – was in the Middle Ages of English renown,' Gail McMurray Gibson rightly claims. Rosemary Woolf, in her study of the English religious lyric, likewise argues that early medieval England was one of the chief

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Women Writing', in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. Jane H.M. Taylor and Lesley Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 22.

19 Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 5.

20 From the turn of the millennium readings from the sapiential books of Proverbs, Sirach and Ecclesiastes mark Marian liturgy; Barbara Newman, *Gods and Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 190–206.

21 J.C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham* (Cambridge, 1956), Appendix 1: The Pynson Ballad, 129, stanza 19. On Mary in medieval England, see Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and for the earlier period, Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

22 *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H.N. MacCracken, EETS e.s. 107 (London, 1911), vol. 1: Lydgate Canon and Religious Poems, 291–2; quoted in Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 212, n. 3.

originators in western Europe of many forms of Marian piety.[23] Both continental texts adapted for English audiences and new English vernacular texts all testify to a growing insular desire for Marian-centred devotional practices. I explore how writings and art originating from both within and outside England influence each other in their representations of a literate, authoritative Mary, together weaving a distinctively English story.

This study begins with an overview of how polysemy and biblical hermeneutics can help explain the importance of the Word, and the book as an object, to our understanding of Christ and Mary in the Middle Ages. The multiple meanings of the verb *to conceive*, in turn, give us a view into the history of the idea of conceiving Christ or God in the soul and its relation to Mary's reading. But could her reading be more than a symbol, and actually imitated by normal men and women? I introduce the long tradition of *imitatio Mariae* to show that it could be a model, and often was, and to provide a foundation for the following chapters proving this claim. Chapter 2, 'Performing the Psalms: The Annunciation in the Anchorhold', focuses on eleventh- and twelfth-century England by examining a series of Latin and vernacular texts and linked images, all associated with enclosed solitary women, which identify Mary's reading as the psalms. I argue that in this period Mary emerged as the foremost model of female literary devotion for anchoresses, or urban recluses, even as she came to resemble an anchoress herself in the literary tradition. Goscelin of St Bertin's *Liber confortatorius* (*c*. 1080) and the anonymous Middle English *Ancrene Wisse* (*c*. 1200–30) invoke the Virgin at the Annunciation as an appropriate model of solitary, enclosed reading for their anchoritic readers. Christina of Markyate's *Vita* (*c*. 1150), meanwhile, describes a scene where the holy woman reacts to a supernatural visit not of an angel, but of demonic toads, with loud chanting of the psalter in her lap – a kind of counter-image of the Annunciation illumination found in the beautiful St Albans Psalter, likely made for Christina herself. In all three texts the vocalized performance and assertive voice of the Virgin offer the anchoress a more sophisticated, transformative engagement with the Word than modern critics have previously acknowledged. As a contrast to the idea of the meditative silence of their enclosure, these female readers find a bold, vocal identity in Mary's example.

From the twelfth century on, however, Mary usually read not the psalms but the prophecies of Isaiah foretelling the Incarnation – the focus of Chapter 3, 'Reading the Prophecies: Meditation and Female Literacy in Lives of Christ Texts'. Mary reading Isaiah can be seen in another text written for anchoresses: Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Institutione Inclusarum* (*c*. 1160), which jump-started a

[23] *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 114.

popular genre of medieval literature, so-called 'lives of Christ' or spiritual biographies that invite readers to participate imaginatively in the life of Christ as a meditative exercise. I connect Aelred's Annunciation scene with similar ones in the late-medieval pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* (*MVC*), Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (*c.* 1415) and the anonymous *Speculum Devotorum* (*c.* 1425–50) in order to argue that each encourages their readers to join Mary at the Annunciation in reading the Old Testament prophecies, but with subtle, yet significant differences. This chapter analyses how these depictions of Mary reading Isaiah's prophecy evolved over the twelfth to fifteenth centuries in response to England's shifting religious climate and tolerance of women's reading habits. In fact, her Bible reading was sometimes controversial enough in late-medieval England to warrant its restriction – and even omission, as in one of the later vernacular translations of Aelred's *De Institutione.* Tracking the presence of Mary's book in these devotional texts offers an innovative case study illuminating the history of control over biblical reading and women's literacy in the Middle Ages.

Some medieval Christians took the invitation to participate imaginatively in the Annunciation to a whole new level: they experienced visions where they join Mary in the scene itself. In Chapter 4: 'Writing the Book: The Annunciations of Visionary Women', I shift to consider Mary's role in the visionary writings of four women: Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples (d. 1322) and Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373), continental visionaries whose works were translated into Middle English; and Julian of Norwich (d. *c.* 1416) and Margery Kempe (d. after 1438), English visionaries who were very much influenced by Elizabeth and Birgitta as continental foremothers shaping the insular tradition. I discuss how these female authors are united by an *imitatio Mariae* where the Virgin's reception of the Annunciation functions as the primary model for their reception of divine revelation. The process of documenting this mystical presence in a text likewise found a model in Mary: as she conceives and gives birth to Christ, so they conceive the vision and birth a text – their written visionary account. She becomes a visionary just like them. The inherent 'textuality' of the Annunciation – the Virgin's (in)corporation of the divine Word into the speaking 'text' of the corporeal Christ – offered a way for holy women to conceptualize their visionary authorship as an act authorized by God.

Chapter 5 begins by focusing on a single treatise to demonstrate how the devotional traditions and the visionary traditions of the previous two chapters come together to centre Mary in the development of meditational practice in late-medieval England. This previously unrecognized shift is exemplified in a fascinating yet neglected text examined in depth for the first time in this chapter: the fourteenth-century Middle English *Of Three Workings in Man's Soul*, a short prose treatise teaching the basics of meditation for readers new to the practice. The first half of the treatise offers a translation of part of Richard of

St Victor's *Benjamin minor*, and the second half a detailed description of Mary reading and then imagining herself as part of that scripture, contemplating and in ravishment – all just before Gabriel's arrival. Readers are encouraged both to meditate *on* her and meditate *like* her. Here I will present new support for the argument for Richard Rolle's authorship of this work, and its original intended audience of religious women – and also show how manuscript evidence proves it was later adapted for male readers. This unique Annunciation scene was later interpolated into a longer life of Christ compilation, *Meditationes domini nostri*, another understudied Middle English text. This borrowing demonstrates the significance of Mary's model for reading and meditating on the very texts within which she appears.

Through this common locus of Mary's reading, these interconnections between the genres of meditational treatises, lives of Christ and visionary texts change the way we understand late medieval devotion. Chapter 5 moves beyond the previous chapters in showing how Mary's book worked for mixed gender audiences, as demonstrated by both *Of Three Workings* and *Meditationes domini nostri*. By no means was an *imitatio Mariae* of her reading limited only to female readers, though its significance might have varied between men and women, and between lay and enclosed readers. These points are supported by comparison between *Of Three Workings* and a series of unusual Annunciation illuminations from Books of Hours, where the moment *before* Gabriel's arrival is captured, and then the female – or male – reader/owner is added to the scene, re-visioning the imaginative experience of the life of Christ text.

All the Annunciation traditions in England examined thus far – as a part of solitary enclosure, participatory piety, women's devotion, visionary experience and lay spiritual practices – come together in one of the most famous pilgrimage destinations in late-medieval England, the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, the subject of Chapter 6. The shrine claimed to be a re-creation of the house where the Annunciation took place, originally built by an eleventh-century Anglo-Norman noblewoman, Richelde de Faverches, upon the command of a divine vision. The final chapter offers a close reading of the 'Pynson Ballad', a late-fifteenth-century poem that tells the shrine's story. I demonstrate how the shrine's little building provided for pilgrims a simulacrum of the Virgin's private, devotional space. In offering an actual building that pilgrims could inhabit with their physical bodies, the Shrine at Walsingham endorsed the devotional value of envisioning one's self as present at the Annunciation. The vicarious experiences of participative piety, with lives of Christ and other texts, transform into actual performances in this sacred extra-liturgical space – that also represents Mary's womb and her spiritual motherhood of all Christians. In the poem's telling of Richelde's vision, I contend, Mary's interpretive power (rooted in the tradition of her reading at the

Annunciation) enables the construction of the shrine, and connects with the official identification of the building as the place of the Incarnation.

To conclude, the Coda looks forward in time to the Reformation and post-Reformation period in England, and how Mary's image changed in a period of shifting literacies. I end with a challenge to scholars of later periods: how must we re-think the exemplarity of Mary in the intervening centuries, now that we know she offered the Middle Ages such a complex model of reading, interpretation and devotion?

The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation

Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England

Chapter 4
Writing the Book:
The Annunciations of Visionary Women

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Writing the Book: The Annunciations of Visionary Women

Lives of Christ texts like Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum*, the *MVC* and Love's *Mirror* transformed how meditation worked in medieval Europe. Readers were encouraged to respond to the scriptures by imagining themselves as part of scriptural stories, as witnessing first-hand Christ's life, transported there by the power of the imagination – a cognitive power itself enabled by the Word made flesh. Seeing Mary see herself in the psalms or Isaiah's prophecy offered the perfect impetus to this new kind of participatory piety. Just as Mary imagined herself part of a prophetic future, so could readers imagine themselves part of a biblical past. The Annunciation scene likewise appears in some medieval visionary accounts, where instead of the devotee going to a book to read about Mary and the angel, Mary herself often appears to the visionary to relay the miracle of the Incarnation from her point of view. Such immediacy was exactly the goal of the imaginative meditation. The textual genres fed off each other, with visionary accounts influencing devotional treatises and vice versa. Both types of mystical re-visioning of the scriptural story, can, in their own ways, offer 'a kind of direct access to God that sometimes bypasses – or at least supplements – clerical structures, reminding the reader of the extra-liturgical presence of the divine'.[1] Both the visionary and meditation genres take the opportunity to present the Virgin as a powerful authority in her own right, independent of – and sometimes superseding – male authority figures.

While in the previous chapter I argue that the Virgin's role in the Incarnation is formative for the reader of devotional texts, in this chapter I demonstrate how her role is equally formative for the visionary who produces a text to be read. Chosen because of the unique centrality of their representations

[1] Jessica Barr, 'Visionary "Staycations": Meeting God at Home in Medieval Women's Visionary Literature', *Medieval Feminist Forum* 52(2) (2016): 75.

of the Annunciation scene, the visionary accounts of four late medieval holy women are the focus of this chapter: Elizabeth of Hungary, the nun of the Dominican house in Naples (*c*. 1260–1322), Birgitta of Sweden (*c*. 1303–1373), Julian of Norwich (*c*. 1342–after 1416) and Margery Kempe (*c*. 1373–after 1438). I explore how these women all participate in an *imitatio Mariae* wherein the Virgin's reception of the Annunciation functions as the primary model for their own reception of the visionary gift, and how they understand their identity as female visionaries. Mary's conception of the Word of God thus becomes the paradigmatic ideal for the presence of Christ in the female visionary's physical heart and spiritual soul. While each visionary experiences a different, idiosyncratic vision or visions of the Annunciation, in every case the scene functions as a kind of mirror in which they are able to see reflected different core aspects of their visionary vocation. Elizabeth's text carefully crafts a literate, contemplative Mary, quite distanced from physical motherhood; Julian finds in Mary a hermeneutic key for interpreting her visions and ultimately construing a maternal Christ; Birgitta and Margery, in their own distinct ways, maximize the scene's potential to validate a maternal authority rooted in channelling the divine, through prophecy. All of them, however, reconfirm their identities as visionaries at the moment that Mary is confirmed as mother and Christ is formed in her womb. By means of the Annunciation scene, these four visionaries witness Mary discovering her own vocation, not only as Mother of God, but as a visionary and prophet, focii of Marian devotion that come to the fore in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mary's identity solidifies as the events of the Annunciation unfold and are relived by both the Virgin and the visionary, so that the spiritual powers of the two women emerge simultaneously.

The process of embodying the divine presence on parchment likewise found a model in Mary, traditionally depicted with a book open to the prophecy she will engender. By combining textual engagement with the maternal, or maternality, these Marian moments radically re-gender the literary and the interpretive as female. This chapter examines how the inherent 'textuality' of the Annunciation – a textual scripture of the oral exchange which accompanied the Virgin's (in)corporation of the divine Word into the speaking 'text' of the corporal Christ – offered a way of situating the visionary experience of medieval women within literary discourse, usually male-coded. Not all of these women describe visions where Mary actually reads at the Annunciation. In fact, only the earliest considered here, Elizabeth, explicitly describes Mary reading Isaiah 7:14. If the book's absence marks unease with female scriptural engagement in the male-authored texts of the previous chapter, what does its absence mean in these female-authored texts? In one way, these women can be seen to forge their own relationships to the Virgin that do not explicitly rely on her book (and textual culture); but I would argue that, in fact, the

book is still present, silently and invisibly, as a locus for their Marian piety and visionary vocation. Remembering Mary's reading helps explain much about these women and their visions. As a symbol, its representation of the Incarnation drives how all four women relate to the Virgin. All their visionary accounts revolve around the link, implicit or explicit, between Incarnation and Word, between womb and text, between vision and book – all bringing Christ into the world through revelation, turning revelation into text and validating that act in a society that habitually denies women literary and theological authority. Maternal fecundity becomes linked to textual production and female textual subjectivity. Likewise, as Alexandra Barratt points out, 'medieval women visionaries, themselves engaged in the activity of spiritual autobiography, are so ready to construct the Virgin as engaged in a similar activity'.[2] The Virgin's narration of her experiences, as in the visions of Elizabeth, Birgitta and Margery, validates their own narration of their experiences, as they, like Mary, channel God to the world. The iconography of Mary's book (not only the theological metaphor it stands for, but also the actual image itself) hovers in the background as an important presence for Birgitta, Julian and Margery's Annunciation scenes.

Witnessing the Annunciation in a vision was not overly common in the Middle Ages. These four particular visionaries have been chosen for this chapter because their accounts feature the most specific, characteristic Annunciation visions in the insular and even continental traditions.[3] I do not claim that this particular kind of *imitatio Mariae* was widespread, but rather that it was significant for certain female visionaries, and that its power and complexity has been overlooked. It is important that Elizabeth, Birgitta, Julian and Margery's uses of the Annunciation are not seen as disconnected anomalies; the first two, after all, were majorly influential in late medieval devotional culture, especially in England, while the latter two reflected major influences of that culture. Margery and Julian are connected by more than just a common devotional tradition – they met in person. By comparing these four visionaries together, we can nuance our understanding of how Mary functioned for medieval holy women, moving beyond Caroline Walker Bynum's claim that

[2] Alexandra Barratt, 'The Virgin and the Visionary in *The Revelations* of Saint Elizabeth', *Mystics Quarterly* 42 (1992), 129. See also Kate Greenspan, 'Autohagiography and Medieval Women's Spiritual Autobiography', in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. by Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 216–36.

[3] As far as I am aware, no such particular Annunciation episodes can be found in the visionary accounts of other major European visionaries, such as Margeurite d'Oingt, Hildegard von Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Mechtild of Hackeborn, Elizabeth of Schönau, Catherine of Siena, Richard Rolle, Richard Methley, Henry Suso, or Meister Eckhart.

> the fullest elaboration of the notion that Mary is a model for women or the notion that women are models for each other was found in biographies written by men (for example, those of Clare of Assisi and Columba of Rieti). Where we can compare the biographer's perspective with that of the subject (as we can in the case of Clare), we find that the woman herself tended to ignore the female model to discuss instead the imitation of Christ.[4]

Of course *imitatio Christi* is important for all medieval saints, to some extent; however, Bynum's position elides how a powerful *imitatio Marie* was developed by certain holy women (and not their male confessors). Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples barely mentions Christ in her visions, for instance. These women also looked to each other as models, even as models of imitating Mary. Before an *imitatio Christi* became possible there was an *imitatio Mariae* in which the visionary saw reflected in the Virgin her own female body and its power to channel the divine, and trusted that precedent enough to trust their own calling. Bynum also argues that 'in fact and in image, suffering (both self-inflicted and involuntary) and food (both eucharist and fasting) were women's most characteristic ways of attaining God'.[5] As this chapter will show, the Annunciation (including but not only the Incarnation), which has nothing to do with either suffering or food, shows how maternality (i.e. expressing or resembling the maternal) should also been seen as a characteristic way for women to attain God. And not just maternality, but maternality as a way of *making female* textual engagement and interpretation – that which is usually marked male. Certainly there were men who embraced the metaphor of maternality as a way to attain God, as Bynum amply demonstrates; but it remained just that – a metaphor. For women it could be literally true because they share their female body with Mary, whether or not they bore children. Contrary to some arguments, this chapter (and this study) demonstrate how Mary's impossible body as both virgin and mother could still make her a possible model to all women, both virgins and mothers, and they did have a special mimetic relationship to her, different than men.

These four texts also come together in a coherent trajectory crossing from the continent to England and showcasing the insular story of the visionary tradition. Continental visionaries like Elizabeth and Birgitta, whose influence was widespread throughout Europe, likewise shaped the English visionary tradition, which can no longer be seen as operating in some kind of 'English mystical vacuum'.[6] Julian and Margery were without a doubt 'inheriting and

[4] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 153.
[5] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 172.
[6] Liam Peter Temple, 'Returning the English "Mystics" to their Medieval Milieu: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden', *Women's Writing* 23(2) (2016): 142. Temple is one of the latest in a 'growing body of literature which insists

participating in a rich and diverse movement of female religious experience' transmitted over the Channel from all over Europe.[7] While Margery's *Book* explicitly identifies several continental holy women as influences, including Birgitta and Elizabeth, Julian is more circumspect about all her sources; however, while she was writing the *Revelations* later in her life, she was likely exposed to the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century burgeoning of vernacular religious writing of which Birgitta and Elizabeth's texts were a part.[8] The revelations of both continental holy women circulated in England in Latin as well as the vernacular; the English holy women likely would have encountered Middle English versions, which is why they are used in this chapter.[9] While Birgitta knew Elizabeth through her book, and Margery knew both Birgitta and Elizabeth through their books, Margery actually knew Julian in person – though we have no evidence she knew of the anchoress' writings when she visited her anchorhold. This is a community of women who rely on each other's precedents as much as they rely on the Virgin for precedent; all are equally imitable. Not one is an unreachable model, the texts insist. The way the Annunciation operates in these visionary accounts helps to counter the misunderstanding that Mary was primarily a source of subjection and silencing for medieval women.

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that these "English mystics" did not exist inside an "English mystical vacuum"' (142), including Nicholas Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 539–65; and Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, 'Writing a History of British Women's Writing from 700 to 1500', *The History of British Women's Writing, 700–1500*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 1–30.

7 Temple, 'Returning the English "Mystics"', 144. Temple demonstrates how Julian and Margery 'can be seen as part of a transnational tradition of feminized affective piety' by comparing their texts to Birgitta's *Liber Celestis*, focusing only on Christ's crucifixion and the motherly suffering of Mary, but not on the parallels between Annunciation representations.

8 Nicholas Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum* 68 (1993): 682. Denise Baker also argues for the need to look more into Julian's continental influences rather than her insular ones: 'Julian of Norwich and the Varieties of Middle English Mystical Discourse', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich,* ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 56.

9 While Elizabeth and Birgitta are of course very international writers, consideration of their engagement with the Annunciation in the context of their impact across Europe (i.e. more than just an English phenomenon) remains outside the scope of this study, as does a more extended engagement with the various Latin and vernacular forms of Birgitta's *Liber* that circulated in England.

The *Revelations* of Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples

The name 'Elizabeth of Hungary' has caused confusion for over seven hundred years and counting. Two Middle English translations of the *Revelations of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* survive (as well as versions in Italian, Spanish, Catalan and French), and up until Alexandra Barratt's pioneering work on the text, most medieval and modern readers attributed the Latin original to St Elizabeth of Hungary, also known as Elizabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231).[10] Elizabeth of Thuringia was well-known from her life in the *Legenda Aurea* as a widowed mother of three, devoted to poverty and an active life caring for the sick and poor, as a lay member of the Third Order of St Francis – but not, according to any early sources, inclined to mysticism. Moreover, the *Revelations* themselves strongly suggest the visionary was enclosed, living a contemplative life, evidence for which I will examine in this chapter. Then Alexandra Barratt and Sarah McNamer put forth a stronger candidate for the Elizabeth of these visions: her lesser-known great-niece Elizabeth of Töss (1294–1336), a Dominican nun of the Swiss convent of Töss. According to her *vita* written by fellow nun Elsbet Stagel, she fostered a deep devotion to the Virgin Mary and was admired for her extreme piety and her visions. It could have been Stagel who recorded Elizabeth's revelations – as she famously did those of Henry Suso, the Dominican mystic.[11] Peter Tóth and Dávid Falvay dissented from this conclusion, in my view unconvincingly, but their pressure on the assignation led Sarah McNamer to return to the issue in her 2018 edition of the earliest version of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *MVC*.[12] Here she effectively refutes the

[10] Alexandra Barratt offers an excellent introductory bibliographical sketch of the text in 'The *Revelations* of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary: Problems of Attribution', *The Library*, Sixth Series, XIV(1) (1992): 1–11. She discusses more of the text's content in 'The Virgin and the Visionary', and excerpts passages in her *Women's Writing in Middle English* (London: Longman, 1992). Sarah McNamer corroborates Barratt's identification in her earlier article, 'Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*', *Franciscan Studies* 50 (1990): 235–61; in her side-by-side edition of the two Middle English versions and their closest surviving Latin exemplar, *The Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St Elizabeth of Hungary* (Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 1996); and 'The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*', *Speculum* 84 (2009): 905–55. (For her recent re-consideration, see below.)

[11] On Suso and Stagel, see Barratt, 'Problems of Attribution', 8, and 'The Virgin and the Visionary', 125; Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 12.

[12] Peter Tóth and Dávid Falvay, 'New Light on the Date and Authorship of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*', in *Devotional Culture in Late Medieval England: Diverse Imaginations of Christ's Life*, ed. Stephen Kelly and Ryan Perry, MCS 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 17–104; and also Dávid Falvay, 'St Elizabeth of Hungary in Italian Vernacular Literature: *Vitae*, Miracles, Revelations, and the *Meditations on the Life*

key arguments that diminish the authenticity of the *Revelations* as a genuine visionary account by a woman named Elizabeth, and she puts forth a new candidate for the visionary woman behind the text: the Dominican nun Elizabeth of Hungary (*c.* 1260–1322), daughter of King Stephen V of Hungary and Elizabeth the Cuman, and prioress of the Dominican Abbey of San Pietro a Castello in Naples.[13] Because of 'this Elizabeth's early years in a Dominican convent, her life as a nun in Italy, and the confluence of Dominican and Franciscan cultures around the Naples court and Santa Maria Donna Regina', she could well prove to be the most viable candidate, according to McNamer.[14] This would mean that it would be quite possible for the *Revelations* to be circulating in Italy soon after her death in 1322 (and thus incorporated into the *MVC* soon after).

McNamer's new hypothesis of the Dominican nun Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples, as I shall dub her for clarity's sake, rings true with the analysis of the *Revelations* I deploy below. Any identification of this Elizabeth with a historical figure must take into account the content of the visions themselves: how the text shapes the Virgin Mary as an enclosed contemplative in a conscious reflection of the visionary herself. The Annunciation, with its long tradition of framing Mary as a contemplative model and mirror for enclosed women, becomes the central axis around which the entire *Revelations* turn.

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of Christ', in *Promoting the Saints: Cults and the Contexts from Late Antiquity until the Early Modern Period: Essays in Honor of Gábor Klaniczay for his 60th Birthday*, ed. Ottó Gecser et al. (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 137-50. Tóth and Falvay dispute Barratt and McNamer's assignation to Elizabeth of Töss because it contradicts their larger argument about the origins of the *MVC*, which borrows a large section on 'the seven petitions to God' directly from the *Revelations*; they reject McNamer's later *terminus post quem* of 1336 (Elizabeth of Töss's death) and revive the option of Elizabeth of Thuringia as the visionary behind the *Revelations*, supporting their earlier *MVC* date of composition at *c.* 1300, and even suggest there was no historical Elizabeth behind the text at all and that the text is an invented fiction. While the complex details of the *MVC* versions and origins are beyond the scope of this chapter, much of the evidence Tóth and Falvay provide to disprove the later nun's authorship of the *Revelations* remains deeply problematic. For instance, it is unlikely, as they argue, that a corruption in the title meaning *virgo* refers to Mary and not Elizabeth in all three surviving instances (56); it is irrelevant that Hungarian royal origins were sometimes assigned to women in romance literature and unwise to dismiss the label 'Hungarian princess' as merely a literary tool (56–7); it underestimates of the translation efforts and transmission networks of fourteenth-century Dominicans and Franciscans to claim that the *Revelations* could not have made its way to Italy between 1336 or even latest 1360 (Stagel's death) and 1381 (their *terminus ante quem*) (57–8). Much longer texts travelled much greater distances in far less time – such as Catherine of Siena's *Dialogo* and Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelationes*.

13 Sarah McNamer, ed., *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), cxxxix–cxlvi. Here she deals with some of the issues I list in the footnote above as well as others.

14 McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, cxliii.

So even if it is not this particular Elizabeth of Hungary, though I suspect it is, it is much more likely to be some other Elizabeth living a contemplative life than the active Elizabeth of Thuringia, whose cult focused not on her private prayer but on her helping the sick and poor. In addition, in comparison to the visions of mothers Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe, where Mary's representations are very much shaped by her motherhood of Christ, the *Revelations* almost completely ignores Mary's maternality in preference for her contemplative lifestyle – suggesting against the visionary's identity as a mother or even acting in a mothering way towards others, as Elizabeth of Thuringia does.

Like many visionary narratives, the *Revelations of Saint Elizabeth* is written in the third person so that 'the authoritative voice of the narrator appears to emanate from a detached position separate from the visionary herself'.[15] While this can sometimes be an extremely complicated issue (as with Margery Kempe) in Elizabeth's case I concur with Barratt's consideration of the text as the written record of 'an originally oral authentic first-person narration' and thus a kind of 'pseudo-third person narrative'.[16] The text gives us little reason to understand the amanuensis as more than scribe and/or editor or Elizabeth as less than author. Both translations into Middle English, the first appearing in manuscript in the second half of the fifteenth century and the second printed by Wykyn de Worde in 1493, likely derive from a common Latin version.[17] Scholars of Middle English visionary literature have given little attention to this text and its focus on the Virgin Mary, although its influence on medieval religious culture in England from Margery Kempe to Love's *Mirror* has been briefly discussed.[18]

The *Revelations* are almost entirely centred around the Virgin Mary; Elizabeth converses with the Virgin in the first nine of thirteen individual visions, and with Christ in the last three. Christ's Passion or any Eucharistic devotion are conspicuously absent from the text, save for the penultimate paragraph containing a brief vision of Christ's side wound. Rather it is the Annunciation event – reconfigured, extended and carefully detailed – that powers Mary's

[15] Barratt, 'The Virgin and the Visionary', 125.
[16] Barratt, 'The Virgin and the Visionary', 125, 126.
[17] McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 16–20.
[18] See McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 40–8 on 'The *Revelations* in England'; as well as Alexandra Barratt, 'Margery Kempe and the King's Daughter of Hungary', in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 189–201; and Carol M. Meale, '"oft siþis with grete deuotion I þought what I mi3t do pleysyng to god": The Early Ownership and Readership of Love's *Mirror*, with Special Reference to its Female Audience', in *Nicholas Love at Waseda: Proceedings of the International Conference, 20–22 July 1995*, ed. Shoichi Oguro, Richard Beadle and Michael G. Sargent (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 19–46.

transformation into a model visionary living the life of a contemplative. Practice evokes theology and vice versa: her bodily conception of Christ is contextualized within her spiritual conception of God through prayer and reading, coupled with visionary experiences explicitly parallelling Christ's coming alive in her womb. Essentially Mary mirrors the visionary Elizabeth herself, in a kind of metatextual mimesis that reveals as much about the medieval holy woman as about medieval Marian traditions. In her examination of the *Revelations*, Barratt considers this mimetic reflection a rather conscious manipulation of the narrative, in that 'it is noticeable that the text models the Virgin on Elizabeth rather than vice versa, so that the Virgin, like Elizabeth, is constructed as an ecstatic visionary communicating her spiritual experiences to a third person'.[19] As Mary's paradigmatic moment of channelling God, the Annunciation becomes the main paradigm for expressing the visionary contemplative identity shared by the two women.

The *Revelations* constantly weaves the words and gestures of Mary at the Annunciation throughout the text, so that the moment of the Incarnation is both foreshadowed and recalled as pivotal for Elizabeth's conception of herself as a visionary woman. The first eight chapters prominently feature elements tied to the Annunciation and Incarnation, such as the motif of the handmaiden, or the study and prayer which together prepare Mary for Christ's conception, or the ecstatic experience that marked the Incarnation itself. A brief outline shows the shape of the text and its pervasive Annunciation motives:

ch. 1 Mary invites Elizabeth to be her handmaiden.
ch. 2 Mary encourages Elizabeth to greet her like Gabriel greeted her.
ch. 3 Elizabeth responds to Mary, imitating Mary's response at the Annunciation.
ch. 4 Mary teaches Elizabeth her prayer from the temple (the seven petitions).
ch. 5 Mary describes reading Isaiah and her prayer; vision of God's voice.
ch. 6 Mary describes the Annunciation scene, promoting it as an imitable moment.
ch. 7 Mary challenges Elizabeth to compare herself to saints.
ch. 8 Elizabeth desires to pray like Mary prayed, and Mary explains a detailed allegory for the act of prayer.
ch. 9 God sends St John the Evangelist to be Elizabeth's confessor.
ch. 10 Christ praises her devout prayer on behalf of a wicked woman.
ch. 11 Elizabeth hears a voice urging hope in God, etc.
ch. 12 Christ speaks to Elizabeth of his sacrifice and mercy.
ch. 13 Elizabeth has a vision of Christ's bleeding hand and side.

[19] McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 129.

Chapters 1–8 inaugurate Elizabeth into her visionary vocation with Mary as 'mistress' and guide, in effect preparing her for chapters 9–13 where Christ takes over from Mary as the main visionary interlocutor. This pattern parallels Mary's own role in the story of the Bible and apocrypha, where she nurtures her spiritual vocation in preparation for the coming of Christ, whom she ends up bearing herself in her own body. The Annunciation as that transformative moment of vocational and divine conception is woven into the overall structural fabric of the *Revelations*.

From the opening of the text, the recurring motif of 'handmaiden' (*ancilla*) links together Elizabeth and the Virgin by echoing the language of the Gospel itself, where Mary identifies as *ancilla* in her final response to Gabriel in Luke 1:38: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word' (ecce ancilla Domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum). In the first paragraph of the first chapter Mary invites Elizabeth to be 'myn handmayden' (*ancilla*), after which, 'Seynt Elyȝabeth, fallyng doun to þe erþe, worschepyd here, and stondyng vp aȝen, bowhede here knes and puth here hondys and ioynede [hem] to þe hondys of Owre Lady' (I, 58).[20] Facing with their hands clasped together, the two women's bodies mirror each other, establishing their close identification that will shape the rest of the text. Mary then confirms her as 'my dowtyr, my discyple, and myn handmaydyn' and explains that 'qwanne þou art suffysently tawt and reformyd of me, I schal brynge þe to my Sone, þy spouse, þe qwech schal resseyue the into ys hondys as I aue take þe now' (I, 58). By drawing attention to the physical position in which they remain, Mary highlights the symbolic importance of their gesture of joined hands as one Elizabeth will share with both Christ's mother and eventually Christ himself – a triple mirroring. While holding hands in such a way imitates the rite of feudal obedience on one level, as McNamer notes,[21] I would argue that its dominant meaning here is to foreshadow Mary's physical submission as *ancilla* at the Annunciation later on in the *Revelations*.

While the motif of becoming the 'handmaiden to the handmaiden of God' is fairly unusual in the late thirteenth century, it is not without precedent. Over 700 years earlier, the Spanish saint Ildefonsus (*c*. 607–67), Archbishop of Toledo, mentions this kind of *imitatio Mariae* in his influential tract *Liber De*

[20] All quotations are taken from McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, cited by chapter and page number from Cambridge, CUL MS Hh.i.11, the earlier of the two Middle English translations, compiled around the second half of the fifteenth century. Compared to the later 1493 Wynken de Worde printing, this earlier manuscript is closer to the periods in which the other visionary texts in this chapter were written and circulated. Parenthetical references to the Latin text are from Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS F.4.14 as edited by McNamer.

[21] McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 104.

virginitate perpetua Beatae Mariae. After an extended discussion of the Incarnation, Gabriel and the Annunciation, he prays to the Virgin:

> Ideo ego seruus tuus quia tibi filius Dominus meus. Ideo tu domina mea, quia tu ancilla Domini mei. Ideo ego seruus ancillae Domini mei quia tu domina mea facta es mater Domini tui. Ideo ego factus seruus, quia tu facta es mater factoris mei.[22]
>
> (Thus, I am thy servant because thy Son is my Lord; thou art my Lady, because thou art the handmaid of my Lord; I am the servant of the handmaid of my Lord, because thou, my Lady, wast made the Mother of thy Lord; I was made servant, because thou wast made the Mother of my Creator.)

Ildefonso repeats Mary's reply to Gabriel, that she is the *ancilla Domini* (handmaid of the Lord), and when he mirrors her own servitude in imitation of hers, he switches to refer to himself as *seruus*, the masculine slave or servant. His emphasis is on his servitude to Christ *through* Mary: 'So that I might be the devoted servant of the begotten Son, I eagerly desire servitude to the mother' (Ut sim deuotus seruus filii generantis, seruitutem fideliter appeto genitricis).[23] Ildefonso had a large influence on the development of the cult of the Virgin in the early Middle Ages, and not just in Spain; *De virginitate* was a well-known text through the thirteenth century, and Latin copies surviving from Spain, France, Italy, Germany and England.[24] He anticipated the more affective devotional trends of those later centuries, and his imitation of Mary in this way was ahead of its time. It is possible that Elizabeth was exposed to this text, though she certainly didn't need a source to have originated the idea herself. Elizabeth takes the motif far beyond Ildefonsus' passing mention, integrating it more pervasively and profoundly into her text as a way of shaping her own identity as a female visionary.

Thus it is important to note that the *Revelations* uses not Ildefonso's masculine word *seruus*, servant, but particularly the feminine *ancilla Christi* (handmaiden of Christ) and *ancilla Dei* (handmaiden of God) to refer to Elizabeth, which highlights the shared gender of Mary and Elizabeth as well as Elizabeth's vocation as a nun. After being established as Mary's handmaiden in

[22] Ildefonso of Toledo, *De Virginitate Beatae*, ed. Vicente Blanco García, Textos latinos de la edad medina española – Sección 3 (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Historicos/Rivadeneya, 1937), 162–3. Translation from Sister Athanasius Braegelmann OSB, *The Life and Writings of Saint Ildefonsus of Toledo* Volume IV (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1942), 152. Robert Deshman discusses this aspect of Ildefonsus' text in 'Servants of the Mother of God in Byzantine and Medieval Art', *Word and Image* 5/1 (1989): 39.

[23] *De Virginitate Beatae*, ed. García, 167; translation from Deshman, 'Servants', 39.

[24] See García's edition for a list of manuscripts, 7–30, and Braegelmann, *The Life and Writings*, 133.

the opening scene, the text takes seriously Mary's promise to substitute Christ for herself and refers to Elizabeth as *ancilla Dei* at the beginning of chapter 2, and *ancilla Christi* at the beginning of chapters 3 and 5–13.[25] This insistent repetition draws attention to the epithets' dominant meaning in the Middle Ages: the specific combinations of *ancilla Christi* and *ancilla Dei* denote a nun, according to definitions relevant to the period of the *Revelations*.[26] Elizabeth is not only a metaphorical servant of Christ or God – she is a vowed servant, the text emphasizes; her position as *ancilla Dei* and *ancilla Christi* insists she lives a life of enclosure, contemplation and virginity, just like Mary's life in the temple that she describes in such detail.

While Elizabeth becomes Christ's handmaiden almost right away, some suspense builds within the *Revelations*. In chapter 3 the text offers another allusive moment recalling the Annunciation, before Mary recalls the original scene itself. After Mary offers to make a charter and have St John the Evangelist as her confessor, Elizabeth responds with gesture and words perfectly foreshadowing Mary at the Annunciation: 'Þanne blessyd Eli3abeth fel down on here kneys, and handes ioned on þe herte, and worchypt here, and seyde, "Of me, my lady, as of yowr andmaydyn, dooth qwat 3e wyln"' (III, 60). It is not until three chapters later that this moment's importance becomes clear, when we read Mary's response to Gabriel and recognize the rhetoric on which Elizabeth's words are modelled: Mary 'keste myself into the erthe, & knes lowed and handys ioynyd, I worschypt and seyde, "*Lo þe handmaydin of Owr Lord, be yt do to me aftyr þy word*"' (VI, 80). Now the Annunciation scene emerges as the original, with Mary's words translating directly the account in Luke 1:38, and her detailed posture all aligning with Elizabeth's words in the previous two scenes. Elizabeth mimics Mary's physical and spiritual obeisance, taking her handmaiden position in relation to God, now to Mary. This recurring motif of imitating Mary emphasizes her immediate relevance as a model for holy women, in this case, especially related to her role at the Annunciation – to

[25] Other examples can be found within the chapters as well, for example V, 70. The earlier Middle English translation does not retain the *ancilla* in the openings of chapters 9, 10 and 11.

[26] See *ancilla* 1.c. '(w. *Dei* or sim.) nun' in *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin in British Sources*, ed. R.E. Latham, D.R. Howlett and R.K. Ashdowne (London: British Academy, 1975-–). Also for 'ancillæ Dei', 'monasteriales' in DuCange, et al., *Glossarium mediæ et infimæ latinitatis* (Niort: L. Favre, 1883–7). The entry for *ancilla* in both sources can be found online at http://logeion.uchicago.edu/index.html#ancilla (accessed 17 August 2019). McNamer points out the significance of the word in *Two Middle English Translations*, 14. On the term *ancilla Dei* as referring to the cloistered woman in religious literature, see Michael Goodich, '*Ancilla Dei*: The Servant as Saint in the Late Middle Ages', in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Handy*, edited by Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 120.

engage with the scriptures as a way of bringing Christ into the world, and to channel him spiritually through visionary experience.

Paradoxically, Mary herself models for Elizabeth how to be a handmaiden to the Mother of God, not only to God or Christ, and at the centre of this service is a particularly literary kind of prayer. The visions present an innovative interpretation of the tradition of the Virgin's reading Isaiah 7:14 in advance of the Incarnation that the verse prophecies. In chapter 5, Mary explains:

> Sothly, on a day qwanne I adde a confort of God and so wondyrfully þat I adde neuer felth swych before, and qwanne I was coum a3en to myself, I began to þynke wyt most brennyng herte and to wish þat Y mite sumwhat doon & han in me wherfore God schulde neuere suffre me departe fro hym. And qwanne I adde þowt þys, I ros vp and wente to a bok and redde. And in þe ferste opnyng of þe bok cam to myn eyin þys word of Ysaye þe prophete: *Loo, a maydyn schal conceyve and bere a chyld &c.* Qwanne I thowte þat maydynheed schulde mich plese God, for he wolde ys Sone be bore of a maydyn, I purposede þanne in my herte and in my thowt my maydynheed for to kepe in reuerence of here, þat 3yf yt befeel me for to se here, þat I mayte in maydynheed seruyn here al þe tyme of my lyf and go on pilgrymage wyt here throw al þe world 3yf yt nede. (V, 72)

Mary describes herself in a mystical state of ecstatic joy – recalling its Latin roots of 'ex-' and 'stasis', standing outside one's self – having to 'coum a3en to myself' before turning to the scripture for guidance on how to maintain that kind of closeness to God. She is destined, as the commentary tradition suggests, to open the book in an act of sacred prognostication at the exact prophecy which foretells her own conception of Christ, Isaiah 7:14. But this time Mary herself gives insight on her twofold interior response to the prophecy: she will keep her own virginity in reverence of this virgin maiden, and she would serve her and accompany her on pilgrimage (not yet knowing, of course, that she herself will be that woman). Earlier in chapter 4, Mary lists a similar desire as the fifth of her 'seven petitions to God': 'þat he schulde make me to se þat tyme in þe qwech þe blessyd maydyn schulde be born þat aftyr tellingis of prophetis schulde bere ys Sone' (IV, 64). Echoing behind the words *maiden* and *maydynheed* is the word *handmaiden*, highlighting the important element of virginity as part of the service of handmaiden into which both women offer themselves. Mary and Elizabeth become parallel figures: at the opening of her revelations Elizabeth has promised her virginity and her service to Mary the Mother of God, just as Mary does here. Elizabeth becomes what Mary wished to become; the mirroring cycle is complete, with the book itself as the mirror reflecting each woman's new identity back for her to imagine and inhabit.

While the image of Mary reading would seem to cue Gabriel's entrance and the Annunciation scene, what happens next comes as a surprise. The

night after she has prayed concerning the maiden who will bear his son, Mary experiences a corporeal vision and locution in which God the Father speaks directly to her:

> After þys in þe nyth folwyng as I preyde wyt a deuowt mende, askende God þat he wolde lete me se þe forseyde maydyn or I deyde, sodeynly beforn my eyin qwanne I was in þe derke swych a syte apperede to me þat in comparisown of þat þe sonne ys no3th. And fro þat lyth I herde a voyse clerly seying to me, 'Maydyn of Dauit kyn, þou schat bere my Sone.' And he seyde also, 'Certaynly, wyt þou wele that þat honor and þat reuerence þat for loue of me þou desiredyst to do to anoþer maydyn, of oþer schal be do to þe. For I wele þat þu be þat same maydin þat schalt bere my Sone.' (V, 72–4)

Mary's *active* seeking of God's favour, her assiduous reading, devotion and prayer initiates divine contact and the pre-emptive revelation that the woman Mary prays to see is in fact herself: 'þu be þat same maydin þat schalt bere my Sone'. Prayer, with reading, in effect mirrors the self and facilitates Mary's discovery of her true identity as the Mother of God. This echoes a longstanding contemplative tradition wherein, as Gregory the Great explains, reading 'presents a kind of mirror to the eye of the mind' so that we 'transform what we read into our very selves'.[27] Here, the effect is doubled. Mary reads the prophecy *about herself* just as Elizabeth reads *about Mary*. Through reflective acts of reading, both women succeed in creating (or rediscovering) the self in accordance with the text. Mary's seeking out of a mystical experience, and God's validating words, justify Elizabeth's own visionary experiences and the profitable self-discovery which might result from such experiences – she, too, like the Virgin, can discover her true holy purpose through the message of the *visio*. Such powerful reading experiences in turn strengthen the authority of the material book of the *Revelations* itself and its spiritual value for its readers.

God the Father's message to Mary, his first and only recounted by her in this text, functions as a kind of pre-Annunciation announcement of the Incarnation: when Gabriel visits Mary in the next chapter, she already knows the punchline. By pre-empting the biblical Annunciation episode with God's own announcement, Mary circumvents the intermediary role of Gabriel, demonstrating a direct access to the divine not documented by Luke. Mary thus grants Elizabeth a first-hand account of a new narrative of divine communication preceding the Annunciation, supplementing scriptural narrative and

[27] From the preface to *Moralia in Job*, Iii and I.xxxiii, translated in Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 159, and quoted in Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 79.

the ecclesiastical tradition which privileges its male-authored accounts. For Elizabeth, this vision within a vision of God's pre-Annunciation goes beyond the example of Gabriel's visit as *visio* to reconfirm the primacy of visionary experience for the holy woman's relationship with God. Mary is not only a visionary herself, but moreover a mystic: she receives a divine locution directly from the Father. This passage, I would suggest, demonstrates that Mary's active mysticism is foundational to her successful divine motherhood.

Set structurally and figuratively at the centre of the text, Mary's recounting of the Annunciation establishes the moment as an ideal model of visionary and mystical experience. She describes exactly how it felt, worth quoting here in full:

> Þerfore qwanne I was all brennyngg in þe loue of God and so mich swetnesse felte of hym þat for hym al þe world was vanyte to me, I stode wyt a deuowt sowle alone in a priuy chambere; and sodeynly þe angyl Gabriel apperede to me and, as þe gospel seyth, grette me seying '*Heyl, ful of grace, Owr Lord ys wyt þe. Blessyd be þou among all wommen.*' Qwanne I adde herd þys, I was ferst abascht; buth aftyrward, throw ys lowely and homly spech, I was confortyd and mad sekyr, noþyng dowtyng þat yt was trowthe þat he seyde, and keste myself into the erthe, & knes lowed and handys ioynyd, I worschypt and seyde, '*Lo þe handmaydin of Owr Lord, be yt do to me aftyr þy word.*' And whanne I hadde seyd þys word, I was all takyn owt fro myself, and so gret plente of Godys grace beschynyd me þat I felde all þese comfortes and swetnesses of my sowle. And in þys rafchyng Godys Sone tok flesh and þe clenneste dropys of my blod wytowtyn felyng of me or ony fleshly delite. (VI, 80)

Luke's dialogue has been stripped down to Gabriel's greeting (crucial to the *Ave Maria* prayer) and Mary's final response (crucial to the theme of 'handmaiden-hood' in the *Revelations*). Added details depict the ecstatic nature of Mary's piety: she is 'brennyng in þe loue of God' in her initial devotion, she casts herself onto the ground before speaking, she is taken out of herself and, at the moment of the Incarnation, experiences a ravishing, 'rafchyng' (*raptu*). The fullness of God's grace, 'plente of Godys grace', which marks Christ's conception gives her the same feelings of 'comfortes' and 'swetnesses' which define her mystical experience – and Elizabeth's mystical experience as well. Elizabeth's own feelings of God's mystical ravishing echo this paradigmatic moment, which establishes the legitimacy of the female body to channel God both spiritually and physically.

Another small detail draws our attention: Mary is praying 'alone in a priuy chambere' (*in secreto thalamio*). This no doubt alludes to the idea of Mary in a private room when Gabriel arrives, an element of Annunciation iconography with a long tradition outlined earlier in this study. For example, in Bernard of

Clairvaux's third homily *De Laudibus Virginis Matris*, the angel went 'into the private chamber of her modest room where, I suppose, having shut the door she was praying to the Father in secret'.[28] Throughout Elizabeth's *Revelations* explicit references to physical space or context are sparse: in the fifth revelation 'oon of Eli3abethys felaws (*socialibus*)' interrupts her prayer (V, 68), implying she is in a place accessible by her fellow nuns, as *socius* is a term often used to refer to a member of a monastic community;[29] but otherwise the only time/space context might be a passing reference to the liturgical feast on which Elizabeth receives a revelation. Yet in the opening sentence of the text there is a significant, though subtle, echo of Mary's 'priuy chambere'. The Latin reads, 'Una dierum cum beata Elizabeth … in secreta oracione' (I, 56). In Cambridge, CUL MS Hh.i.11, the translation has 'On a day as Seynt Ely3abeth, being in deuwt preyowr', missing the meaning of *secreta*. However, the other surviving Middle English translation, the Wynken de Worde print of *c*. 1493, has 'On a day whan Saynt Elisabeth was in preuy prayer', capturing the importance of *secreta* with the more precise translation *preuy*, or private. The Latin draws a clear rhetorical parallel between Mary *in secreto thalamio* and Elizabeth *in secreta oracione*, so that Mary's appearance to Elizabeth becomes an annunciation of its own to an enclosed woman. Elizabeth, like Mary, initiates her special communion with the divine by drawing inward, seeking solitude, withdrawing from the outside world in order to enter the world of Christ and his mother.

Beyond her example of solitude, Mary explicitly presents her speech at the Annunciation as a model of revelatory reception for Elizabeth to emulate. After describing the event, Mary declares to Elizabeth:

> Why dede God þys grace princepaly to me? Yt was faith and mekenesse þat I wyt full feyth trowede to þe angelys seinnges, and al mekede myself, & schop me al to Godys wyl; þerfore deynede he to 3yue me so mich grace. Ryth so þou, dowtyr, in all þyng þat he behotyth to þe or doth, be nowt vnstable in þys triest, ne a3enstonde hym nowt, seyhyng, 'Lord, qey dost þou þus to me?,' buth be ensawmple of me, say, '*To þe handmaydin of Owr Lord be yt do to me aftyr þy word*.' (VI, 82)

As we have seen, Elizabeth heeds Mary's advice: three chapters earlier, Elizabeth has responded to Mary with precisely this posture and rhetoric ('Of me, my lady, as of yowr handmaydyn, dooth qwat 3e wyln' (III, 60)), putting herself in the same handmaiden position to Mary that Mary herself wished for after

[28] *De Laudibus virginis matris*, Homily III, 33; see Chapter 2, 49–50.

[29] McNamer makes this connection, *Two Middle English Translations*, 14; see *socius* (7, b) as 'member of a *collegium* or similar association; b. monk', in R.E. Latham, et al., *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin*; online at http://logeion.uchicago.edu/index.html#socius (accessed 17 August 2019).

reading Isaiah. Ventriloquizing Mary and mimicking her bodily movement are only two of the ways that Elizabeth incorporates the Annunciation scene into her spiritual life: she also learns proper prayer practice from both the Virgin and Gabriel.

Gabriel's greeting to Mary at the Annunciation provides Elizabeth with efficacious words to use in prayer. Mary's recounting of the scene privileges Gabriel's initial greeting, 'Heyl, ful of grace, Owr Lord ys wyt þe. Blessyd be þou among all wommen,' above the rest of his speech, and its power assists Elizabeth in various ways. In the second revelation Mary advises Elizabeth: 'Buth fehth stable a3en vicys, and sey oones þe gretyng of þe awngyl wiþ þe wech Gabriel, Goddys messager, grette me, & all þy trespassys schal be frely for3euyn to þe of my Sone' (II, 60). Elizabeth soon finds out for herself the power of the *Ave Maria* prayer; its recitation has the power to prompt visits from the Virgin: 'Anoþer tyme in þe vygilie of þe berthe of Howre Lord, whylys sche preyde wyt a streght vp mende and seyde þe gretyng of þe Virgine Marye wyt hey voys and mych deuociown and droppyng terys, vysibly Owr Lady aperede to her' (IV, 62). Mary also remarks concerning her petition for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit from her time in the temple as a young girl: 'Alle þese, my dere dowter, þat I askede wer grauntyd to me, as þou mayst vndirstonde of þe salutacyoun of þe angyl, wyt whech I was gret of Gabriel þe archangyl' (V, 76). Indeed, the discourse of the Annunciation provides for Elizabeth the ultimate key to an *imitatio Mariae*, to understanding and imitating the Virgin's life of prayer, revelation and intimacy with God.

But the model extends beyond personal piety and into realms of earthly power: the main premise of Elizabeth's *Revelations* is based upon Mary's assertion of her superior authority, superior even to priests. At the opening of the first revelation, Elizabeth despairs of the unusual absence of 'here spouse Iesu Cryst' and considers going to a male authority figure for help, when Mary quickly intervenes:

> And as sche dysposyd hyr in here preuy thowt for to gon to sum gostely brothyr for to haue cunsseyl (*consilio*) of þys þyng, Owre Lady Seynte Marye apperede to here and seyde, 'Eli3abeth, 3yf þu wyth be my disceple, I schal be þy maystresse; and 3yf thow wyth be myn handmaydyn, I schal be þy lady.'
>
> To qwom sche sayde, 'What be 3e, lady, þat woldyn han me to 3ow discyple and andmaydyn?'
>
> And Owr Lady answerde, 'I am þe modyr of Goddys Sone lyuynng, swych þou ast chosyn to þy lord and to þy spouse.' And sche seyde eueremor, 'Þer ys no broþer in þys world þat of þy spouse kan betere enforme þe þan I.'[30] (I, 56)

[30] Interestingly, of the two Latin manuscript witnesses which compose 'Group II' from which the English versions are derived, one omits this last sentence entirely;

In the nick of time Mary takes over the position of spiritual authority from the 'gostely brother' (implying a monastic brother rather than a sibling brother). This brother is one of two mentions or (non)appearances of mortal men in the entire text: the second is in chapter 9, when Elizabeth is in 'greth gostly torment' because she did not have frequent enough access to her confessor. These are not especially flattering representations of male authority figures. No other men feature in the narrative; the only other humans are women. Although Christ, God the Father and St John the Evangelist operate as male spiritual guides, they exist outside her priestly sphere which evidently falls short of Elizabeth's needs. Mary most explicitly fills this power vacuum by offering herself as an 'alternative maternal authority … superior to that of the institutional Church' – an authority not only maternal in the sense that she behaves maternally towards Elizabeth, as Barratt suggests, but also maternal in the sense that her authority is granted to her because of her position as Mother of God.[31] When Mary offers herself as 'maystresse' and pointedly explains, 'Þer ys no broþer in þys wor[l]d þat of þy spouse kan betere enforme þe þan I', she claims the role of learned master – in the female form *maystresse* – expert in both *consilio* and *discretio spirituum*. In the visionary realm, there is no doubt of female expertise, and no need for male worldly authority. The setting of the *Revelations*, I suggest, mirrors the visionary's historical environment where such female authority would have been endorsed, such as a convent like the Dominican one Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples belonged to. Bynum makes a similar argument when she points out that 'women sheltered by special religious status, especially those raised in convents, rarely spoke of female weakness as a bar to theological expression or religious practice'.[32] No bars, not to mention woman's weakness, stand in the way of Elizabeth; in contrast, women are powerful, even more powerful than men.

In stark contrast, the *vita* of the lay, widowed Elizabeth of Hungary from the *Legenda Aurea* emphasizes almost the opposite: she constantly obeys a series of confessors who hold full power over her, and there are no women of authority present in the narrative. Mary never counteracts men's power over the holy woman, or even appears as an authoritative figure. In fact, Elizabeth's efforts to find female spiritual company are denied by the powerful men in her life. The *vita* explains a startling scene concerning a confessor named Master Conrad:

> On a time because she went into a cloister of nuns, which prayed her diligently for to visit them, without licence of her master, he beat her so sore therefor that the strokes appeared in her three weeks after, by which she

see the textual apparatus, McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 57.

31 Barratt, 'The Virgin and the Visionary', 133.

32 Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 167.

> showed to our Lord that her obedience was more pleasing than the offering of a thousand hosts. Better is obedience than sacrifice.[33]

Such male domination finds no parallels in the *Revelations* text, where in fact the visionary is explicitly encouraged to model herself on the cloistered life, and to obey not male priests but Mary herself. The two examples seem incompatible.

Another important factor in the question of the visionary's identity is the way that throughout the text Mary suggests how Elizabeth may 'be ensawmple of me' and imitate her contemplative customs. Like in the anchoritic and monastic texts of Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum* and Goscelin's *Liber confortatorius*, Mary is the ideal contemplative: devout, solitary, focused, literate and studiously following the monastic practices of *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio*. An important difference with Elizabeth is that she is a woman proposing Mary as literary contemplative, confirming late medieval shift of this kind of *imitatio Mariae* from men to women.[34] In a vision in chapter 4, the Virgin appears to Elizabeth as she prays during the vigil of the Nativity, declaring herself as the visionary's teacher: 'I am coum to þe to tech þe þe preyowr þe qwech I made qwan I was a maydyn yong in þe temple' (IV, 62). Mary describes how she studied the law and commandments, and regularly rose in the night to pray before the altar, commanding Elizabeth to 'do as I dede in þe begynyng of my 3oyugþe in þe temple' (IV, 64). Then follow the seven petitions, a motif that found later popularity through the *MVC*. In the next chapter Mary exhibits a more private, literary mode of prayer, when she opens and reads a book in which she finds Isaiah's prophecy of the Incarnation. Finally, in chapter 8 Elizabeth yearns to know 'in what wyse the blyssed Mayde prayed'; Mary responds with an involved allegory of the digging and construction of a new well to explain how she learned to love God by means of 'redyng, thynkyng, and prayeng' – the monastic *lectio*, *meditatio* and *oratio* (VIII, 87). Mary's time as a young virgin in the temple expands to define all of her life; there is no mention of later years outside religious enclosure, as an active mother of Christ, or even at Christ's Passion. Barratt, working with her claim that the Elizabeth behind these visions is the young nun Elizabeth of Töss, argues that 'the picture of the life the Virgin leads in the temple is clearly based on Elizabeth's own life as a

[33] From 'The Life of S. Elizabeth', in Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Caxton, vol. 6, reprinted (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1900). Available at the Fordham Medieval Sourcebook: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume6.asp#Elizabeth (accessed 17 August 2019).

[34] On this shift of Mary's reading as a model by and for men in the early medieval period to a model by and for women in the later medieval period, see Miles, 'The Origins and Development'.

nun'.[35] With the visionary's identity now under debate again, this contemplative representation of Mary offers compelling evidence in support of the historical visionary also leading a contemplative life, where she pursued this particular *imitatio Mariae* – such as in the Dominican Abbey where Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples was prioress.

In fact, the only act explicitly attributed to the visionary is the act of prayer (with its attendant weeping and crying); and while prayer is obviously an act shared by both lay and enclosed holy women, it is not detailed in the lay woman's *vita* on the same scale as the *Revelations*. The total absence of any of the activities emphasized by the *vita* of Elizabeth of Hungary such as serving the poor and extreme ascetic penance would seem quite unusual if these were her visions. The setting in which the visionary is described bears little resemblence to the outside, secular world so crucial to the shaping of Elizabeth of Thuringia's holiness – there is no interaction with lay people or secular authorities. In contrast, it resembles the secluded convent, as Elizabeth is only described as interacting with women identified as *sociae*, a term used to refer to a member of a monastic community.[36]

Moreover, in the *Revelations*, the Virgin's contemplative, monastic mode completely overshadows the kind of domestic maternality that drives representations of Mary in the visions of lay mothers such as Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe, as we will soon see, and that we might expect to mark any visionary accounts of Elizabeth of Thuringia, wife and mother. Birgitta and Margery gave birth to and raised eight and fourteen children, respectively; each woman engages with Mary in complex ways – but definitely including the nativity of Christ and its practical aspects as resonating with their personal experience. The *Revelations*, however, explores at length the spiritual and visionary aspects of conceiving God, but never moves from the metaphorical to the practical aspects of Mary's motherhood: no pregnant belly, no birthing scene, no swaddling the Christ child. Rather the visions linger on Elizabeth's solitary devotions, Mary's devotional techniques and their profound shared desire to channel Christ through the soul by means of devout 'privy' prayer. Just as Mary's mothering body takes a silent supporting role to her visionary and devotional prowess in the *Revelations*, Elizabeth's body remains unremarked and uninscribed in the text, only a source of tears, invisible and inviolable in its virginity. If we see the Annunciation scene as a mirror in which visionary women can see their visionary vocation reflected, this Elizabeth emerges as an enclosed, literate contemplative, a 'mayde … yonge and beyng in the temple' just like Mary.

[35] Barratt, 'The Virgin and the Visionary', 129.
[36] McNamer, *Two Middle English Translations*, 14.

The *Liber Celestis* of Birgitta of Sweden

Like Elizabeth's *Revelations*, the *Liber Celestis Revelationes* of St Birgitta of Sweden (*c*. 1303–1373) was transmitted to England and met with a public voracious for more visionary accounts by holy women. Bridget, as she was called by English speakers, was born into an influential noble family in the Swedish town of Vadstena, married at thirteen and managed a large and wealthy household of eight children. Within days of her husband's death in 1341 Birgitta received a calling vision in which God stated her role as bride and channel of Christ. By 1350 Birgitta had permanently relocated to Rome, as instructed by Christ in her visions, in order to petition for the Pope's return to the city and await the pontiff and emperor's simultaneous presence there. Over the next twenty-seven years Birgitta worked tirelessly as ecclesial, political and social activist. She undertook several more pilgrimages to both holy sites and royal courts in need of reform, and she succeeded in founding her divinely mandated new monastic order, the Order of St Saviour. Despite some controversy, she was canonized in 1391.[37]

Her record of over seven hundred visions, the *Liber Celestis Revelationes*, was created with the help of several confessors. The *Liber Celestis* achieved wide circulation throughout Europe even during Birgitta's lifetime. Its wide-ranging themes – from vivid descriptions of biblical scenes; to direct discourse from Christ, Mary and a range of saints; to calls for moral reform; to prophecies about the past, present and future – made it popular reading in Latin and many vernaculars.[38] Birgitta's *Liber*, *Extravagantes, vita*, *Sermo Anglicus* and various other texts circulated in England in both Latin and Middle English. These works were transmitted as wholes and as excerpts integrated into other compilation texts and manuscript anthologies, thus ensuring a widespread influence on insular vernacular devotional traditions.[39]

[37] An excellent biography is Bridget Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999); see also Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 13-33, and Païvi Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood: The Case of Birgitta of Sweden* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

[38] On Birgitta's prophetic vocation, see Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden,* and Rosalyn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (York: York Medieval Press, 1999).

[39] On Birgitta's influence in England, see Laura Saetveit Miles, 'St Bridget of Sweden', in *History of British Women's Writing, Vol. 1: 700–1500*, ed. Diane Watt and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 207–15; Roger Ellis, '"Flores ad Fabricandam ... Coronam": An Investigation into the Uses of the *Revelations* of St Bridget of Sweden in Fifteenth-Century England', *Medium Aevum* 51 (1982), 163–86; Ellis, 'Text and Controversy: In Defence of St. Birgitta of Sweden', in *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale: Essays in Honour of Anne Hudson*, ed. Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 303–21; and Julia Bolton Holloway, 'Bridget

While Christ as holy spouse occupies most of Birgitta's revelations, the Virgin Mary introduces herself early in the text as a vital divine voice, and acts as instructor, intercessor and guide in at least a third of the revelations. Birgitta's Marian piety has slowly received more and more attention since Claire Sahlin's 1993 observation that studies of that aspect of her spirituality 'remain in their early stages'. Sahlin's work on Birgitta's *imitatio Mariae* remains the most exhaustive. She examines the prominent devotion to the heart of Mary documented in Birgitta's texts; the many themes used to link Birgitta as Mary's successor, making Christ visible on earth; and the ways that gender relates to prophetic authority.[40] Birgitta's Marian self-identity is tightly linked to Vadstena and her Order, Samuel Fanous explains in an article where he also examines the significance of images of birthing.[41] Børresen argues for Birgitta's 'exemplary feminist intention', though somewhat compromised by the 'androcentric impact' of Birgitta's writings.[42] More recently, Mary Dzon probes the ways in which Birgitta's texts transmit a private female discourse where Mary 'reveals intimate details about the Holy Family to another woman in whom she trusts'.[43] In contrast, Yvonne Bruce sees Mary's role in the *Liber* as part of the Birgitta's 'very indifference' to larger issues of female agency and misogynist patristic doctrine.[44] Mary's role as mother of Christ, and what this means for Birgitta, recurs in Birgittine scholarship as an obvious focus of analysis, but

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of Sweden's Textual Community in Medieval England', in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 203–21.

40 See Claire Sahlin, '"His Heart was My Heart": Birgitta of Sweden's Devotion to the Heart of Mary', in *Heliga Birgitta – budskapet och förebilden*, ed. Alf Härdelin and Mereth Lindgren (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1993), 213–27; 'The Virgin Mary and Birgitta of Sweden's Prophetic Vocation', in *Maria i Sverige under tusen år. Foredrag vid symposiet i Vadstena 6–10 oktober 1994: I*, ed. Sven-Erik Brodd and Alf Härdelin (Skellefteå: Artos, 1996), 227–54; 'Gender and Prophetic Authority in Birgitta of Sweden's *Revelations*', in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 69–95; and *Birgitta of Sweden*, ch. 3, 'Mystical Pregnancy and Prophecy in the *Revelations*: Birgitta's Identification with the Virgin Mary'.

41 Samuel Fanous, 'Becoming Theotokos: Birgitta of Sweden and Fulfilment of Salvation History', in *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*, ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith (Ashgate, 2011), esp. 274–80.

42 Kari Elisabeth Børresen, 'Birgitta's Godlanguage: Exemplary Intention, Inapplicable Content', in *Birgitta, hendes værk og hendes klostre i Norden*, ed. Tore Nyberg (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1991), 23.

43 Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 187.

44 Yvonne Bruce, '"I am the Creator": Birgitta of Sweden's Feminine Divine', *Comitatus* 32(1) (2001): 20.

where and how exactly this role originates as a major authorizing force in the *Liber* has not yet been scrutinized.

I suggest that the Annunciation and the mystery of the Incarnation provide the foundation for Birgitta's imitative relationship with Mary. In this visionary Annunciation scene, the text depicts a vivid *imitatio Mariae* wherein the Virgin's reception of the divine functions as a major model for Birgitta's own reception of the visionary gift. Twice the Virgin Mary describes the Annunciation scene to Birgitta, the first within the first few pages of the massive collection and the second several hundred pages in. The two narratives are distinguished by an important shift: from humility and obedience, to assertion and authority. The first narrative legitimates her visionary vocation and the obedient humility undergirding the authority it grants her, while the second carries out that authority by assertively exercising her prophetic power in the world – appropriate for the development of her revelatory career. Both representations of the Annunciation parallel Mary's conception of Christ with his presence in Birgitta's visions, but it is a final scene of Birgitta's mystical pregnancy that brings the parallel to its conclusion: that the book of the *Liber Celestis* is Christ physically brought into the world through the same maternal power to channel the divine that Mary models at the Annunciation. Interestingly, nowhere does Mary explicitly read a book in these two versions of the scene; instead, the text positions both Birgitta and Mary outside of traditional book learning so that they can wield a differently powerful, divinely granted wisdom that circumvents the patriarchal hold on intellectual knowledge and simultaneously places them above and beyond that patriarchy. Far from disqualifying or dirtying their spiritual agency, the female body and its generative maternality authenticate Mary and Birgitta's ability to effect transformations between divine body and divine book. Birgitta evokes such a position in one of her early meditations, *Quattour oraciones*, which survives in medieval Swedish. The prayer directly addresses Christ:

> Praise be to you, God's body, for the Virgin who bore you, for all that you did with her, for the word became flesh and blood in her inwards, by her flesh and blood, and by the conception and increase of the holy spirit, with virginity whole and intact and without any kind of contamination.[45]

John 1:14, 'And the Word was made flesh' (et Verbum caro factum est) reverberates in these lines, where flesh – specifically female flesh – is not fallen but fecund. Birgitta is well aware of the scriptural resonances between *verbum* and *virgo*, and the rich potential of the conception of Christ as a metaphorical vehicle for expressing the conception of her revelations.

[45] Bridget Morris, 'Four Birgittine Meditations in Medieval Swedish', *Birgittiana* 2 (1996): 184.

Though Mary's virginity is stressed in the Swedish meditation, Birgitta's own non-virginal flesh and blood does not prevent the visionary from mimicking Mary's 'flesh and blood'. The two Annunciation scenes, when closely compared together for the first time, bring new insight to a passage that has been studied by several scholars: Birgitta's mystical pregnancy, where she feels Christ moving within her womb, or heart. Critics agree that this experience suggests that Birgitta 'saw her task of broadcasting God's words to the world as analogous to Mary's motherhood', as Sahlin writes; Børreson likewise describes the mystical pregnancy as manifesting Birgitta's identification as 'revelatory instrument in the sense that she imitates Mary's role in the incarnation of Christ'.[46] However, in these examinations the significance of Mary's *interpretation* of the mystical pregnancy goes unmentioned. For Mary's role in the Incarnation of Christ not only offers a model of revelation to Birgitta, but also a model of authoritative interpretation, both of the revelation itself but also of truth in the world. I argue that because of the way that scriptural prophecy works in the Annunciation scene – its typological fulfilment interpreted by Mary with/in the conception of Christ – we need to see Birgitta's mystical pregnancy as also a demonstration of a maternal *interpretive* power.

Birgitta, very similarly to Elizabeth, first encounters the Annunciation scene through the mediating narrative of the Virgin describing her early life, beginning already in Book 1, chapter 10. In fact the build-up to the two Annunciation scenes presents some fascinating parallels and departures between the two women's visionary accounts. Birgitta's Mary moves quickly over her time in the temple; for Elizabeth's Mary, this period of study, meditation and prayer dominates her life story (reflecting Elizabeth's own vocation as a nun, I believe). While Elizabeth's Mary reads Isaiah directly and then desires to be the handmaiden to that maiden mentioned in the prophecy, Birgitta's Mary does not read Isaiah but rather hears of the prophecy second-hand: 'when I *herde* þat he, þe same God, suld bi againe þe werld, and suld be born þareto of a maiden, I had so grete a charite to him þat I thoght of noþinge, ne desired noþinge, bot him' (I.X.17; my italics).[47] In Birgitta's visions book learning is not

[46] Sahlin, 'The Virgin Mary', 237; Børresen, 'Birgitta's Godlanguage', 38.

[47] Birgitta of Sweden, *Liber Celestis of St Bridget of Sweden: The Middle English Version in British Library MS Claudius B i, together with a life of the saint from the same manuscript*, ed. Roger Ellis, EETS o.s. 291 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). All references will be to this edition and book, chapter and page number will appear parenthetically in the text. For the standard edition of the Latin, see St Birgitta, *Revelaciones* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1956–2002); *Book I, with Magister Mathias' Prologue*, ed. by Carl-Gustaf Undhagen. Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, Ser. 2, vol. 7:1 (Uppsala: Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, 1977), online at https://riksarkivet.se/crb (accessed 27 August 2019), Book I, Chapter X, verse 2. Modern English translation: *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden, Volume 1: Liber Cælestis, Books I–III*, trans. by Denis Searby

part of the young Virgin's portfolio of skills.[48] While she is clearly inspired by the prophecy, she is not depicted as encountering it as part of a literate prayer practice. Replacing Mary's unmediated reading of scripture with the generic reference to the prophecy points to how Birgitta's *Liber Celestis* will find the power in the Annunciation scene not through modelling bookish prayer, but rather through modelling a maternal access to divinity, one that authorizes the mothering of a book of visions.

Yet the texts continue on to important similarities. A few sentences later in the *Liber Celestis* Mary proclaims a familiar sounding vicarious aspiration (my italics highlight the parallels): 'þarefore I *desired euir in my herte* þat I mighte leue and se þe time of his birth, if I might *happeli be a worthi handmaiden to seruis* of his modir. Also, I vowed in mi herte euir *to kepe maidenhede if it plesed* and suld be acceptabill *to God*' (I.X.18). This closely echoes the words of Elizabeth's Mary in direct response to Isaiah: 'Qwanne I thowte þat *maydynheed schulde mich plese God*, for he wolde ys Sone be bore of a maydyn, I *purposede þanne in my herte* and in my thowt my maydynheed for to kepe in reuerence of here, þat 3yf yt befeel me for to se here, þat I mayte *in maydynheed seruyn here* al þe tyme of my lyf' (V, 72). It may be possible that the tight verbal parallels here – especially the purposing or vowing in the heart to keep maidenhead, and that maidenhead pleases God – originate in Birgitta's exposure to Elizabeth's *Revelations* in Rome, since the text did circulate in Italian religious circles in the mid- to late fourteenth century.[49] Though the seven petitions of God that were borrowed from the *Revelations* into the popular *MVC* – undoubtedly read by both Birgitta and Margery – describe Mary's fifth petition to 'se þat tyme in þe qwech þe blessyd maydyn schulde be born þat aftyr tellingis of prophetis schulde bere ys Sone' (IV, 64), the specificity of serving in virginity cannot be gleaned from that excerpt. Regardless, they show how in their early visions both holy women encountered a Mary who imagined herself part of a prophetic future, and whose desires to interact vicariously with the Mother and Son of God could be imitated – or even carried out 'spiritually' – by means of visions. Such an *imitatio Mariae* emphasizes the foundational importance of the Annunciation to the formation of the visionary self.

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with introductions and notes by Bridget Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66. I will note only meaningful departures from the Latin in this Middle English version, the only full translation currently edited.

48 Nor was it necessarily one of Birgitta's own strengths, as she reportedly struggled to learn Latin as an adult. See Christine Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 62–4, 94–100.

49 Falvay demonstrates the influential presence of Elizabeth's *Revelations* in medieval Italy, in 'St Elizabeth of Hungary in Italian Vernacular Literature', 143–4.

Later in the same chapter and just before the Annunciation scene, the *Liber Celestis* carefully sets up Mary as a model visionary whose mystical experiences culminate in the conception of Christ. When she is alone in her devotions, she 'saw thre grete meruails': a star, a light and a sweet smell, all otherworldly. Finally she 'herd a voice, but no3t of mannes mouthe', immediately after which Gabriel appears (I.X, 18). This vaguely echoes Mary's mystical experience in Elizabeth's *Revelations*, where an extraordinarily bright light appears right before God's voice speaks to her to announce the Incarnation (V, 72). In both cases the parallels between the visionary vocations of the holy woman and the Virgin are explicitly drawn just prior to the Annunciation moment, in order to establish Christ's physical conception as a way of understanding his appearance in the holy woman's visions as a kind of visionary conception. These women channel Christ; his power flows through their bodies and words. The Annunciation and Incarnation provide a crucial framework for legitimating the rest of the visionary text.

In the next paragraphs of Birgitta's *Liber Celestis*, Mary's Annunciation account generally follows Luke's Gospel even as it omits some verses – and supplements scripture with brief first-person, introspective commentaries angled to frame Mary as an authorizing prophetic model for Birgitta. The repeated emphasis on Mary's unworthiness, culminating in the perfect alignment of her will with God's, demonstrates the ideal state of humility for spiritually conceiving the Son in the heart or soul:

> Bot onone þare aperid ane aungell of God, as a man of soueraine bewte, noght clethed, and he said to me, '*Ave gracia plena et cetera*: haile, full of grace, þe lorde is with þe. Þou art more blissed þan all oþir women.' When I had herd þis, I was astoned, merueilinge what þis suld betaken, or whi he profird to me swilke a salutacion. I wist wele and trowed miselfe vnworthi ani swilke, for I held me no3t worthi ani gude; bot I wiste wele it was no3t vnpossibill to God for to do what him liked. Þan saide þe aungell againe, 'Þat sall be born of þe is hali, and it sall be called þe son of God; and as it hase plesed him, so it sall be.' Neuirþeles I held me no3t worthi, ne I asked no3t of þe aungell, 'Whi or when sall it be?', bot I asked þe maner, 'How it sall be þat I, vnworthi, be þe modir of God, þe whilke fleshli knawes no man.' And þe aungell answerd to me as I saide, 'To God is noþinge vnpossibill, but what he will be done, sall be done.' (I.X, 18–19)

Mary essentially ventriloquizes Luke, speaking scripture in a woman's voice through the voice of a living woman, Birgitta. In this vision the direct discourse of the Vulgate, what Mary says to the angel, returns once more to her own mouth, accompanied by further insights into her state of mind at the moment: consistent humility in the face of great honour. Mary follows Luke closely until she adds the point that 'I wist wele and trowed miselfe

vnworthi ani swilke, for I held me no3t worthi ani gude.' Here she makes clear that humility drives her reaction to the angel's greeting; likewise, throughout the *Liber, vita* and supplementary texts, accentuating humility, passivity and obedience are common verbal justifications for Birgitta's legitimacy as female prophet.[50] Rosalynn Voaden points out that, generally, '*vitae* of women visionaries and accounts of their visions placed enormous emphasis on the humility, obedience, chastity, patience, and prudence of the visionary, and her willing submission to her spiritual director; these qualities, of course, are all important criteria of *discretio spiritum*'.[51] Thus it is entirely appropriate for such an emphasis on humility to occur at the beginning of Mary's introduction to both Birgitta and the reader. Yet the Virgin's next words more boldly foreshadow the words that Gabriel will utter a few lines later: 'bot I wiste wele it was no3t vnpossibill to God for to do what him liked'. In using this phrase Mary asserts that this knowledge is hers already before Gabriel imparts it to her, and hers to offer to Birgitta – and the reader – first. Though this passage primarily emphasizes Mary's humility, it gives a hint of the later chapter where the Annunciation recurs in order to demonstrate not Mary's humility but her powerful authority.

In fact, the Virgin's explanation of her humility and faith subtly functions to distinguish her response from someone else's failure in the face of divine revelation: Zachariah, husband of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. In Birgitta's vision Mary explains her inner thoughts behind the question, emphasizing her unworthiness, and that humility helps her avoid the wrong questions – 'whi or when sall it be?' – that doomed her relative Zachariah at his angelic visit. Earlier in Luke 1, Gabriel visits Elizabeth's husband in order to announce that she will bear a son named John (Elizabeth already knows). Zachariah questions the angel, 'Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.' The angel responds unequivocally:

> Et dixit Zaccharias ad angelum unde hoc sciam ego enim sum senex et uxor mea processit in diebus suis. Et respondens angelus dixit ei ego sum Gabrihel qui adsto ante Deum et missus sum loqui ad te et haec tibi evangelizare. Et ecce eris tacens et non poteris loqui usque in diem quo haec fiant pro eo quod non credidisti verbis meis quae implebuntur in tempore suo.
>
> (I am Gabriel, who stand before God: and am sent to speak to thee, and to bring thee these good tidings. And behold, thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass, because thou hast not believed my words, which shall be fulfilled in their time.) (Luke 1:18–20)

[50] Claire Sahlin, 'Gender and Prophetic Authority', 77.
[51] Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices*, 71.

As Bernard of Clairvaux explains in his fourth sermon *De Laudibus Virginis Matris*, 'We read that this same angel punished Zechariah's doubt, but we never read that Mary was blamed for anything.'[52] Mary's two examples of 'whi or when' parallel Gabriel's reprimand that Zacharias 'did not believe my words' (the 'why') 'which will come true at their proper time' (the 'when'). Instead of arrogantly challenging Gabriel's prophecy, Mary recalls her own unworthiness, and her humility averts Gabriel's rebuke. She not only models the correct reply to such an announcement but also warns against the wrong ones, useful guidance for anyone receiving angelic or divine visitations, such as Birgitta herself. Here Birgitta learns from Mary how to respond properly to her visions and ensure her voice is not silenced like Zachariah's.

However, Mary's actual reply to Gabriel in the *Liber* presents a fascinating divergence from scripture:

> Eftir þe whilke worde of þe aungell, I had þe moste feruent will þat might be had to be þe modir of God. And þan spake mi saule þus for lufe: 'Lo, I here redi: þi will be done in me.' At þe whilke worde anone was mi son conceiued in mi wombe with vnspekeabill gladnes of mi saule and of all mi partis. (I.X, 19)

Her response here departs meaningfully from her response in the Vulgate, Luke 1:38: 'Ecce ancilla Domini: fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum' (Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word). Even though earlier in the chapter Mary had picked up the theme of the handmaiden from the prophecy, here the verbal parallel to the *ancilla* or handmaid in Isaiah is omitted, and replaced with a new parallel with the Lord's prayer, derived from Matthew 6:10: 'Fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra' (Thy will be done, in heaven as it is in earth). Except now God's will is done not in heaven or in earth but 'in me', the female body now a new site of God's will, which aligns with Mary's own 'moste feruent will'. Also significant is the omission of the Vulgate references to the 'word', *verbum*, in Mary's final response (Luke 1:38, 'fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum'). Through this small change from 'word' to 'will' the text shifts the emphasis from God's incarnate Word onto the efficacy of Mary's uttered words: 'at þe whilke worde anone was mi son conceiued'. It is at the moment of *her* spoken agreement that Christ becomes incarnate by the Holy Ghost. Mary shows herself to be fully in control of the narrative, now *her* gospel, when she pinpoints the moment of Incarnation – after *her* reply to Gabriel. The repetition of the first person insists on the Virgin's agency over her body, her will and her story: 'mi saule', 'I here', 'in me', 'mi son', 'mi wombe', 'mi saule', 'mi partis'. Immediate and personal, these few sentences make the Incarnation become not just about the dramatized humility of this particular

[52] Saïd, *Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mary*, 51.

mother, but also about the mutual willingness of both her corporality and her spirituality to undertake the will of God.

The significance of the Annunciation for Mary and Birgitta is dramatically amplified in its second recurrance much later in the *Liber*, in Book III: this presentation much more explicitly uses the Incarnation to legitimate female access to God, female prophecy and female authority.[53] Birgitta describes a vision in which Mary revisits the Annuciation scene, where the Virgin slightly changes her description of the moment to support a different set of priorities for Birgitta. At this point it seems the visionary no longer needs a model of humility in the face of divine visitation, but a new model of intellectual assertiveness in the face of earthly male authority. Evidently, Birgitta has been challenged by a master of divinity and Mary counsels her on how to respond to him. She subtly, but meaningfully, shifts the tone of her recollection of the Annunciation:

> I was so brenninge in þe lofe of God, and þe fire of God was so feruent in mi hert, þat þare plesed me nothinge bot þe will of God, þat shewed to me his grete charite, insomikill þat he sent to me his messagere to make me knawe þat I suld be þe modir of God. And fro I wist þat þat was þe will of God, I assentid in mi hert, and of a grete charite I spake oute and saide vnto þe messagere, 'Be it done vnto me eftir þi worde.' (III.VIII, 208)

Gabriel's words are completely subsumed here and only Mary's speech is direct discourse. This time she quotes more precisely her response recorded in Luke 1:38, and this time the phrase 'eftir þi worde' (in Luke, *secundum verbum tuum*) is necessary for underscoring the power imbued in her because God's word takes on her flesh. The importance of this renewed emphasis on the *Logos* becomes clear as Mary explains how her conception of Christ changed her:

> And in þat same instans was God within me made man, and Goddes son mi son. And so þe fadir and I had bothe one son, þat was both God and man, and I bothe modir and maiden. Bot fro þe time þat he was conceiued within mi bodi, as he was full of wit, he filled me full of wit, insomikill þat no3t oneli I vndirstode þe grete wit of maistres, bot also wheþir it come of letterure or elles of þe charete of God. (III.VIII, 208)

The word Mary utters at the Annunciation ('May it be done according to your word') aligns with both the divine Word, the *Logos* (λόγος) or *verbum* of John 1:14, 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (*et verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*), and now the 'words' of the scholars. While

[53] The following passages are also discussed in relation to the significance of the Virgin Mary for Julia Kristeva in her well-known essay 'Stabat Mater'; Miles, 'Looking in the Past'.

not mentioning the tradition of Mary reading the scripture at Gabriel's arrival, the passage nonetheless taps into its invisible presence, as it thereby underscores the miraculousness of her superiority *above* those who read: her power comes not from book learning but from God himself.[54] Physical conception of the Word grants Mary immediate authority in the scholastic realm of letters, texts and books, otherwise generally closed to women; through her maternal body she becomes exempt from the patriarchical requirements that make 'maistres' out of men. She is impregnated with wit, with understanding, with a doctrinal and theological conception of knowledge that can only come from conception of the Godhead (whether physical or spiritual). With this wisdom Mary instructs Birgitta on what questions to ask the master on her behalf, and tells her how to interpret the master's answers; thus the visionary woman exercises this same maternally sourced authority when she interrogates him and, depending on his responses, may find him 'more like to an asse þan to a maistir' (III.VIII, 208).

Mary's special power is essentially an act of interpretation. She becomes an expert in a kind of *discretio* not of spirits, but of intellectual learning, of 'wit'. This 'grete wit of maistres' stems either *indirectly* from 'letterure' (which would include Latin religious literature, as in the writings of the patristic fathers, biblical commentaries, sermons, etc.) or *directly* from the 'charete of God' – i.e. spiritual gifts. Mary, as mediatrix to Christ, is positioned to distinguish the mediacy or immediacy of human knowledge of spiritual things. Through her proximity to her Son Mary accesses this literate realm, but through these visions she passes it on to a daughter, Birgitta, in effect creating a female lineage outside the male-dominated scholastic or ecclesiastical hierarchy. Birgitta will be Mary's spokeswoman on earth. Birgitta, in turn, by writing her visionary text, passes at least the demonstration of this female power over men's 'wit' on to generations of readers.

It is important to understand that because Mary's interaction with Gabriel and her impregnation with the Word of God were both essentially verbal events, she commands the special ability to discern agreement between what is spoken and what is thought by humans:

> For I, þat bare him þat is verrai treuthe, knawe wele if his mouthe and his hert accorde. I haue asked of þe maistir thre þinges, to þe whilke if he had answerde treuli, I suld haue knawen it: for, eftir þe message was saide to me fro þe mouthe of þe archangell Gabriel, treuthe tuke in me both fleshe and

[54] At the same time, illustrations of Birgitta receiving divine revelation via rays of light and simultaneously writing it down clearly mean to evoke images of the Annunciation where Mary also has a book in her lap as she receives the same kind of heavenly rays of the Holy Ghost symbolizing Christ's conception. For discussion and illustrations of this deliberate visual parallel see Miles, 'Looking in the Past', 57–9.

> blode, and þe same treuthe, both in godhede and manhede, was born of me. And þarefore I knewe wele wheþir in þe mouthe of men be treuthe or noght. (III.8, 208–9)

Her motherhood, her physical carrying of Christ 'þat is verrai treuthe' inside her womb, enables the Virgin to *read* the inner thoughts of men while judging the truth of their oral utterances. 'Treuthe', incarnate in the Son of God, becomes a standard Mary is specially sanctioned to judge against. When Mary emphasizes, 'For I, þat bare him þat is verrai treuthe, knawe wele [the truth of men]', she connects her experience bearing Christ in her body to her ability to discern theological truths. Through the duty of her womb Mary wields a spiritual perspicacity which sets her (and Birgitta, her mouthpiece on earth) in a unique position of authority over the men of the world, with the power to interpret their textual or oral utterances, and to balance them against the truth of their hearts. According to the *Liber*, the Virgin 'was filled with the wisdom of God and given the gift of prophecy', as Sahlin describes her, and I would argue that Birgitta comes to understand the incarnation of Christ as the moment when that transformation happens.[55] By extension, then, for Birgitta the Annunciation represents the conception of herself as a prophet in Mary's image, able to speak the words of Mary's prophecies because of their shared maternal ability to bring Christ into the world.

The particular emphasis on the Virgin's powers given her as a result of the textual/verbal nature of the Annunciation and Incarnation illuminate the textual implications of Birgitta's own experience of mystical pregnancy. This is a fascinating episode that has attracted considerably more critical attention than the dual Annunciation scenes, which have gone mostly unremarked, but all three passages should be read together as a cohesive programme of Mary as model, connecting the Word of God to the maternal female body in order to authorize Birgitta's power. At nearly the end of the *Liber Celestis*, the entirety of chapter 76 in Book VI explains what happened to the visionary on the eve of Christ's nativity one year, in a rare focus on Birgitta's physical body:

> It fell on þe Cristemas night þat þe spouse, with one passing gladsomnes of hir hert, felid as it had bene a whike childe sterringe in hir herte. And at þe hye mes, þe modir of merci apperid to hir and saide, 'Doghtir, right as þou wote no3t how þat gladnes and stirynge com so sodanli to þe bi þe sone of Gode, so þe comminge of mi son to me was wondirfull and sodaine. And also sone as I assentid to þe aungels message, I felid in me a wondirfull whilke stering child, with a gladnes þat mai no3t be saide. And þerfore haue comforthe, for þis gladfull stiringe sall laste with þe and incres in þe, for it

[55] Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 96; also 97–8 on the tradition of Mary as 'prophetess'.

> is þe comminge of mi son into þi herte, and þou sall shewe to mi sonnes frenndes, and mine, oure will.' (VI.76, 460)

At the time of the liturgical celebration of Christ's birth, Birgitta becomes seemingly physically pregnant in a modelling of Mary's maternity. This impregnation corporally manifests itself as if a living child were moving 'in hir herte' with 'passing gladsomnes of hir hert' – fitting with the medieval understanding of a physiological conflation of womb and heart.[56] In a fascinating mirroring of Luke's Annunciation scene, Mary then appears to Birgitta to announce the parallel between her sensations of pregnancy and the Virgin's own pregnancy with the Son of God. Mary interprets, or 'reads', Birgitta's impregnation as a 'sign' of her son's coming. Through her previous visionary narratives of the Annunciation scene, Mary has carefully prepared Birgitta for the unique feelings that signal conception of the divine: sudden, unspeakable joy; gladness of heart, soul and body; complete absence of pain. Now the 'modir of merci' arrives as the messenger, bypassing Gabriel and passing on a kind of holy women's lore of mystical pregnancy, becoming a mother to a mother, both bearing the same Son. Just as the Virgin became pregnant with the Word made flesh so Birgitta finds herself pregnant not with a child but with the Word of God, with Christ present in her visions and speaking again to the world.

Several critics have picked up on the importance of Birgitta's mystical pregnancy for her prophetic vocation.[57] Sahlin considers at length the phenomenon of the mystical pregnancy and its function in Birgitta's life, arguing that Birgitta does intend to claim that she truly somatically experienced the stirring feeling of a child (it was not simply metaphorical or 'felt' within a vision) and that she considered this as a physical correlation to her visionary incarnation of Christ. Birgitta, of course, was well acquainted with pregnancy, having had

[56] On the conceptual conflation of womb and heart in medieval religious literature, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. 158–61; Jacqueline E. Jung, 'Chrystalline Wombs and Pregnant Hearts: The Exuberant Bodies of the Katherinenthal Visitation Group', in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Bruce Holsinger and Rachel Fulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), esp. 227–8; and Margaret Bridges, 'Ubi est thesaurus tuus, ibi est cor tuum: Towards a History of the Displaced Heart in Medieval English', in *The Heart*, ed. Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Micrologus* 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 501–18.

[57] See Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 78–107; Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood*, 81–90; Bruce, '"I am the Creator": Birgitta of Sweden's Feminine Divine', esp. 38–40; Børresen, 'Birgitta's Godlanguage', esp. 38–9; and Joan Bechtold, 'St Birgitta: The Disjunction Between Women and Ecclesiastical Male Power', in *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 88–102.

eight children, although when she received this vision she had been widowed and celibate for several decades. Sahlin convincingly suggests that Birgitta was not at all expressing a 'longing to return to the time when she gave birth to her physical children' as presumed by some critics but rather that she 'felt authorized through the maternal role to serve as an outspoken prophet and vehicle of divine revelation'.[58] Samuel Fanous pushes beyond these conclusions to argue that this passage presents Birgitta as a new *theotokos*:

> While Birgitta's spiritual pregnancy appears to be a sign of contemplative union, a formula reiterated by Christ, it is limiting to confine her mystical pregnancy to the level of signification. For *imitatio* is not merely a matter of exciting the affections through signification, but of union with the sign through prolonged contemplation, of becoming. Birgitta therefore does not merely *identify* with Mary, in a real sense she *becomes* the God Bearer.[59]

Directly equating Birgitta as a kind of new Mary suggests the profound power of Birgitta's *imitatio Mariae* to surpass metaphor and radically form her visionary vocation. This interpretation finds echoes in a medieval discussion of Birgitta's sanctity, a Latin treatise by an unknown continental Franciscan friar, written sometime between 1391 and 1409.[60] A defence of the authenticity of Birgitta's revelations, the text contends that 'it was theologically necessary for God to have used a woman as a medium of divine revelation', in part because both Birgitta and the Virgin Mary 'fulfill similar functions in salvation history as mediators of spiritual life'.[61] God returns to earth, again through a woman, and not coincidentally. Such an explanation was an uncommon defence of Birgitta's authenticity.[62]

Indeed, mystical pregnancy such as this was not unusual in the later Middle Ages, but Birgitta's experience stands out as exceptional for several reasons.[63] Not only is it unlikely she was aware of or heavily influenced by other vision-

[58] Sahlin, *The Voice of Prophecy*, 84.
[59] Fanous, 'Becoming Theotokos', 276–7.
[60] Sahlin discusses this little-known text in her article 'The Virgin Mary', 228–32. It is found in Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Chapter Library, MS 114, fols 18vb–24va, and remains unedited.
[61] Sahlin, 'The Virgin Mary', 229.
[62] Sahlin, 'The Virgin Mary', 231.
[63] Sahlin elaborates on Birgitta's exceptionalism; see Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 86–8. On other examples of medieval priests, nuns and holy women experiencing mystical pregnancies, see Sahlin, *Voice of Prophecy*, 86–8; Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 225–7; Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 203–4, 256–8; and Rosemary Drage Hale, 'Imitatio Mariae: Motherhood Motifs in Late Medieval German Spirituality', in *Medieval German Literature: Proceedings from the*

aries' similar experiences, she stood out from them as a mother among female virgins or celibate men. Significantly, the pregnancy physically manifested Birgitta's prophetic voice, authenticating her words through a bodily sign – a meaning unique to this saint. Most significantly, however, is the unusual situation where the meaning of her mystical pregnancy was explained to her by Mary herself, the figure of imitation. Salmesvuori proposes that Mary's interpretation and authorization of the phenomenon from within the context of the vision itself would have encouraged Birgitta and assuaged her confessors in the face of the danger that it was in fact diabolical and not holy, 'since she had felt that Peter's and Mathias's [her confessors] first reactions to her belly's movements were indeed somehow skeptical'.[64] This is another example of how Mary provides the proper interpretation, superceding men's understandings, endorsing Christ's presence in the world not simply as a mother but as the mother whose body fulfilled – interpreted – scriptural prophecies. Mary's comforting words to Birgitta at the time of the mystical pregnancy validate the *maternality* of the role of outspoken prophet, which, I would add to Sahlin's argument, also extends to the maternal role of author – of textual creator.

Just as the result of the conception of the Word of God is the body of the living Christ, so the result of Birgitta's channelling of God's word is the body of written revelations, the *Liber Celestis* text itself.[65] Writing offers embodiment to her transitory visionary experiences, giving a material codex body to the transmission of the divine through her fleshly body. Fanous also makes this connection, extending it beyond the visionary text: 'As Mary gave birth to the Word, Birgitta becomes the Theotokos, re-birthing the *Logos* through her revelations, begetting spiritual children through her personal witness, and bringing forth Vadstena and the Order.'[66] The last line of the mystical pregnancy passage, I think, unlocks the full convergence between Annunciation, Incarnation and Birgitta's visionary vocation: as Mary explains, the mystical pregnancy – indeed all the visions – are 'þe comminge of mi son into þi herte'. Birgitta has a divine mandate to promulgate them because by their means 'þou sall shewe to mi sonnes frenndes, and mine, oure will'. The

23rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 5–8, 1988, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1989), 129–45.

64 Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood*, 84.

65 Sahlin, *The Voice of Prophecy*, 84. Similarly, the *Offenbarungen* (*Revelations*) of German Dominican nun Margaretha Ebner (1291–1351) records her mystical pregnancy and 'giving birth' to a speech in great pain, as well as feeling a strong desire to suckle the baby Jesus when in the material presence of her own book; see Philipp Strauch, ed., *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Mystik* (Freiburg/Tübingen, 1882), 59 and 120. (My thanks to Ricarda Wagner for this reference.)

66 Fanous, 'Becoming the Theotokos', 277.

mystical pregnancy functions as a sign for the world of Christ's true presence in Birgitta's visions, and it also entails the birth of a book to bring to term these signs. Thus Birgitta will fulfil Mary's command not just by passively receiving the revelations, but by actively transforming them into texts to be shown to 'frenndes' of Christ and Mary: fellow readers. Birgitta's progeny are now prophecies; her children are her books; her incarnate Christ is captured on the page for all the world to read.

Julian of Norwich and her texts

A few years after Birgitta's death at sixty-eight, a thirty-year-old English woman rested in her sickbed waiting to die. Surrounded by her mother, priest and others, she suddenly received a divine revelation which she would spend the next four decades contemplating, interpreting and writing. We know little about Julian of Norwich (*c.* 1342–after 1416) except the testimony of her own texts, the shorter *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and the longer *A Revelation of Love*, and some sparse evidence of surviving wills. She became the anchoress in the church of St Julian's, Norwich, no later than 1393/4, about the age of fifty, and was still enclosed until at least 1416, into her seventies. Julian's life before her anchoritic enclosure remains a mystery: the current consensus leans towards her enclosure as a nun at Carrow, but there remains the possibility she was a laywoman – possibly married with children – before she became an anchoress.[67] In any case most critics agree with Nicholas Watson's argument that her initial account of her visionary experience, *A Vision* (aka the Short Text), was written sometime in the middle of the 1380s, while its extensive rewriting and expansion as *A Revelation* (aka the Long Text) was probably begun in the 1390s and concluded some time between then and her death.[68] Unlike Elizabeth and Birgitta, Julian does not appear to have had any intermediary in the production of her texts, and their use of the first-person point of view gives them an unusual autobiographical immediacy. They are tightly structured, delicately crafted works that operate as cohesive wholes, far from episodic or fragmented. In content, style and tenor, Julian's visionary accounts differ dramatically from Elizabeth and Birgitta's: she painstakingly describes a series of striking visual images and aural messages received during

[67] On Julian's life and writings, for a current introductory overview see Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich:* A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman *and* A Revelation of Love (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 1–10; Grace Jantzen's *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1987; new ed., 2000); and Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999).

[68] See Watson, 'The Composition', 666–7, 678.

her visionary experiences, from which she spins out abstract, conceptually sophisticated theological meanings. But at the same time, this anchoress and her writings are clearly part of the broader English movement in women's spirituality that brought Elizabeth and Birgitta's texts to England, and it is entirely possible that Julian knew of them, as Margery Kempe did. And like the other three holy women examined in this chapter, Julian also relies heavily on Mary as a formative figure who appears in her visions in order to affirm Julian's authority *as a woman*, not only as a visionary.

Critics have given enormous attention to Julian's innovative presentation of God as Mother, and less attention to the Mother of God and her presentation. In *A Revelation*, Julian writes that Christ showed her the Virgin Mary three times: 'the furst was as she conceived; the secunde was as she was in her sorowes under the crosse; and the thurde was as she is now, in likinge, worship and joy' (*Rev.* 25: 31–3).[69] The first view of Mary, when she conceived Christ, is part of the first revelation in both texts, located in section four in *A Vision* and in the fourth chapter in *A Revelation* (which will be the initial focus here).[70] Julian presents the Annunciation scene stripped of all its usual iconographical decorations: no study, no open scripture, no books, no ray of light, not even Gabriel himself:

> In this, he brought our lady Saint Mary to my understanding. I saw her ghostly in bodily likenes, a simple maiden and a meeke, yong of age, a little waxen above a childe, in the stature as she was when she conceivede. Also God shewed me in part the wisdom and the truth of her soule, wherin I understood the reverent beholding that she beheld her God, that is her maker, marvayling with great reverence that he would be borne of her that was a simple creature of his making. For this was her marvayling: that he that was her maker would be borne of her that was made. And this wisdome and truth, knowing the greatnes of her maker and the littlehead of herselfe that is made, made her to say full mekely to Gabriel: 'Lo me here, Gods handmaiden.' In this sight I did understand sothly that she is more then all that God made beneth her in worthines and in fullhead. For above her is nothing that is made but the blessed manhood of Christ, as to my sight. (*Rev.* 4:24–35)

The scene is stripped down to the solitary figure of Mary, newly pregnant with God – and pregnant with wonder about this event. Only her final response to

[69] Quotations from Julian's writings are identified as either from *Vis.* (*A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, the Short Text) or *Rev.* (*A Revelation of Love*, the Long Text) and cited by chapter and line number from the edition by Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*.

[70] The relationship between the Short and Long Text's versions of this vision will be discussed below.

Gabriel remains from the biblical version: *Ecce, ancilla domini* (Luke 1:38). In Julian's texts, the moment of the Incarnation is not about modelling female literacy, or practical prayer habits, nor is it even a 'crude claim for the orthodoxy and authority of her vision'.[71] Rather, this Annunciation scene draws on what Mary's book, here implicit, otherwise represents: the transformation of Old Testament to New, the interpretive act of the Incarnation itself, transforming Word into flesh. She witnesses Mary's reverent beholding at the moment of the Incarnation, and sees in it a model of how to see, conceive, interpret and thus transform into text her own revelations. The visionary moment supplies a necessary paradigm of *how* to interpret the visions themelves, and indeed how to process all things ineffably divine into human comprehension: an incarnational hermeneutics. Julian utilizes the metaphor of Christ as God made man (the ultimate joining of signified and sign) as a hermeneutic tool with which to understand the theological meanings behind her visions (the signification behind the sign). With Mary as interpretive key, I would argue, Julian was able take *A Vision* and 'unlock' its fuller, deeper meanings, to interpret their theological significances and present them in the radically expanded *A Revelation*. This understanding of Mary in Julian's texts positions the Mother of God as very literally embodying a mode of seeing, reading and writing the divine, a mode necessary to the comprehension of the divine on earth.

While such a claim has not been made directly before, several critics have briefly acknowledged the importance of the Annunciation scene and its relevance to Julian's reception and understanding of her visions. Maud Burnett McInerney suggests that Mary's 'pregnancy is still invisible, latent, known only to Mary herself – and to Julian. The emphasis is not therefore on the visible pregnancy but on the experience of wonder and joy at the conception of Christ, which at this moment unites Julian and Mary in secret knowledge.'[72] Elisabeth Dutton also distinguishes the Virgin's body from her behaviour: 'It is not Mary's motherhood *per se* which interests Julian, but rather her responses to God, which Julian appropriates as models for devotional response.'[73] Yet, I would argue, the Annunciation scene does underscore the vital connection between Mary's motherhood and her responses to God: the physical conception of Christ coincides with spiritual and intellectual conception of God. In their notes to their edition of *A Revelation*, Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline

[71] Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, 'The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, V, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 64.

[72] Maud Burnett McInerney, '"In the Meydens Womb": Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure', in John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds, *Medieval Mothering* (London: Garland, 1996), 166.

[73] Elisabeth Dutton, *Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 154.

Jenkins support this claim when they point out that 'Mary's reverent marveling parallels Julian's "wonder and marvayle" … suggesting a wider parallel between Annunciation and revelation, as both in different senses bring Christ to birth in the world'.[74] Mary undoubtedly serves as a model for receiving the divine, but also as a model specifically for the centrality of obedience and humility in devotion in general, Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross have argued. They describe how 'her exploration of a traditional image allows, and indeed requires, the reader to make the connections and parallels between the acts of obedience and humility that bind together Christ, Mary and Julian in a trinity of homely reverence and self-emptying humility'.[75] In a later article Gillespie and Ross shift to emphasize the broader methodological potential of this obedience and humility:

> Julian's re-enactment in ch. 4 of Mary's yielding of control and self-will in the Annunciation was the key to her own openness to the showings, and her willingness to 'conceive' of their truth (the gynecological pun is Julian's, not ours), and that readers of her text needed to aspire to the same condition, which Julian calls 'mekenes': 'Lo me, Gods handmayd.' In modern terms, this translated into a willingness to listen to the text without preconceptions and without a pre-formed interpretive agenda.[76]

Thus obedience and humility become a prerequisite for successful interpretation of the text not only by herself but also by us, its readers and critics. Such a metatextual function begins to point to the expansive importance of the Virgin as hermeneutic key.

Yet there is a missing link in scholarly understanding thus far of the Annunciation scene, a link that ties together these individual points to reveal the profundity of Julian's *imitatio Mariae*: the present absence of Mary's book. I suggest that here Julian silently draws upon the tradition of the Virgin's transformative reading of the Old Testament into a conception of the New in her womb. Fully developed by the late fourteenth century, this tradition would have surrounded her, and was prevalent in visual art, in the liturgy, in devotional texts and in anchoritic texts Julian likely read: Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum* and *Ancrene Wisse*.[77] Both before and even after her reclusion she would have encountered Mary as a reader in some form

[74] Watson and Jenkins, 136, note to *Revelation* ch 4, ll. 28–9.

[75] Gillespie and Ross, 'Apophatic Image', 64. Also, 'the individual soul longing for the incarnation of meaning must take as its paradigm the humble obedience of Mary at the Annunciation in yielding control and self-will, in submitting to the imperatives of becoming God's meaning' (55).

[76] Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, '"With mekenes aske perseverantly": On Reading Julian of Norwich', *Mystics Quarterly* 30 (2004): 131.

[77] On how these texts deal with the Annunciation, see chapters 1 and 2 of this book.

or another, such was its ubiquity; yet even without her book, the Virgin still functioned as an interpreter of texts. The textuality of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, lingers behind Mary's stripped-down representation as a 'simple maiden' in *A Revelation*. Christ is in many ways an interpretation of and into language and so, to use that as a methodological impetus, in pursuing these questions I advance with Gillespie's caution in mind that 'Julian's Long Text always requires us to attend deeply and suspiciously to the texture of the writing.'[78] Mapping out the paradigmatic power of this scene requires our own attention to be focused (like Julian's) simultaneously on the micro-level of syntax and diction and on the macro-level of abstract theological conclusions – two levels woven together not unlike the fleshly letter and the spiritual Word that come together in Christ. Only very close reading can reveal the depth of Julian's careful, innovative construction of her text's 'tone of seeing', the linguistic framework which defines the prime spiritual, intellectual and physical state for receiving revelation – and understanding its full meaning. The Annunciation passage, I suggest, establishes the significance of the key verbs *to behold*, *to conceive* and *to marvel*. These words function throughout her writing as 'word-knots', wherein Julian 'takes a nucleus word and winds around it strands of homonyms, grammatical variants, near-puns and half-rhymes that constitute the genetic code of her theology'.[79] I will, as much as it is possible, disentangle these word-knots – not with the goal of deciphering, but rather of mapping. Only then can we see the structure of how Julian connects Mary's pregnant body with her soul's beholding and marvelling, building a zeugmatic bridge between visionary experience and its (re)vision on the page through the creation of a text.

Something significant has been overlooked: that the verb *to behold* and its gerund *beholding* appear for the first time in *A Revelation* with reference to Mary at the Annunciation, when Julian is granted a view of Mary's soul wherein Julian 'understood the reverent *beholding* that she [Mary] *beheld* her God' (my italics). Thus the Virgin's reception of the divine operates as the paradigmatic model of *beholding*, what many critics agree is, in Gillespie's words, 'the core work of Julian's response to her showings'.[80] Gillespie, McNamer and Michael Raby, among others, underscore the importance of *beholding* and its web of meanings for not only the devotion portrayed in Julian's texts but also for late medieval English devotion in general. 'To behold', from OE *bihaldan*, 'to give regard to, hold in view', retains the etymological sense of understanding

[78] Vincent Gillespie, '"[S]he do the police in different voices": Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich,* ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 195.
[79] Gillespie and Ross, '"With mekenes aske perseverantly"', 135.
[80] Gillespie, 'Pastiche', 194.

'by' means of 'holding' in the sight or mind (from *healdan*, to hold); thus the Middle English *biholding*, 'the act of looking', as well as 'the act of applying one's mind'.[81] As with Mary's example, it is both seeing visually and comprehending intellectually. In addition, however, a specifically spiritual connotation pertains; Gillespie explains how in Julian's texts 'beholding' 'emerges as a transactional state in which God constantly beholds and comprehends us and we struggle fitfully to behold him, but fail to comprehend in him this life'.[82] The exception to this mortal failure is, of course, Mary, the only one of all humans fully able to comprehend – behold – conceive – God himself, by means of carrying Christ in her womb. She models the most complete beholding that the rest of Christianity could strive for, Julian included. The bidirectional exchange that Gillespie refers to, beholding both by and of God, likewise first occurs in the text as the object of Mary's own marvelling: 'that he that was her maker would be borne of her that was made'. The mutual indwelling theme that drives nearly all of *A Revelation* emerges originally at this moment and elegantly concretizes the abstraction of 'beholding'.[83]

'Beholding', Gillespie asserts, 'is also a viable critical methodology for reading Julian's account of that work.'[84] Julian herself uses Mary as a hermeneutic model to behold first her own visions and, second, to behold the Short Text itself in order to produce the more advanced interpretations contained in the Long Text. We, as readers, likewise must use this interpretive tool of beholding in order to fully engage the depth of meaning in Julian's texts; or, rather, to allow the texts to guide us into their meaning. In his discussion of how attention and beholding works in *A Revelation*, Raby comments that there is only one explicit imperative of *behold* directed at the reader; 'instead, Julian engages readers by aligning their sight with her own, and, in doing so, helps them to see as she saw'.[85] But how is beholding truly different from the normal acts of 'seeing' and 'understanding', beyond being marked by obedience and humility?

The trick is in the polysemy of the Annunciation itself, demonstrated by Mary holding God in sight, mind – *and* womb. Beholding is comprehending

[81] MED entry for *biholding*, (ger.)1, and 2. As McNamer points out, the MED fails to consult Julian's texts for examples of usage; Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 136.

[82] Gillespie, 'Pastiche', 194; see also Gillespie and Ross, '"With mekenes aske perseverantly"', 137.

[83] For more on mutual indwelling and motifs of space, see Miles, 'Space and Enclosure'.

[84] Gillespie, 'Pastiche', 194.

[85] Michael Raby, 'The Phenomenology of Attention in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*', *Exemplaria* 26(4) (2014): 358.

corporally as well as intellectually. McNamer discusses this physical aspect of the term in other Middle English devotional works:

> In its original context, this Middle English term may have functioned as a mechanism for generating sensory perception itself: for generating a specific way of seeing, in other words, that had the potential for producing – in the body, as well as in the mind – an impulse toward a particular form of compassion: the protective and ameliorative action of holding.[86]

She pushes beyond the definitions offered in the MED to suggest that beholding functions 'as a distinct, Middle English way of seeing' where it is not just a synonym for 'to see' or 'to look at' but 'the sense of seeing empathetically'.[87] In gospel meditation narratives, the physicality of (imaginative) devotion generates an emotional response: 'the repeated practice of holding Jesus (as infant, child, then grown man) in a protective or loving way is what produces the perceptive habit of "beholding" him, which in turn produces an impulse to hold in an ameliorative embrace'.[88] In making this important and interesting point McNamer nevertheless overlooks how in all these vernacular representations, including Julian's texts, the first holding of Christ is *not* as an infant in arms, but as a fetus *in utero*, held within a female body. Mary's womb enveloping God made man functions as the ultimate ameliorative embrace – or rather, generative embrace. The physical compassion of Mary's motherhood, so frequently cited in reference to her gaze or weeping at the Passion, should be seen as deeply rooted in her womb's beholding at the moment of the Incarnation, where she – and the readers – first learn how to see, feel and embrace compassionately through a polysemous conception of Christ.[89]

Crucial to Julian's spinning of the word-knot *behold* is that it carries the same punning doubleness as the Middle English verb *conceiven*, 'to conceive', and indeed the metaphorical potential of both words work in tandem in the texts. Julian deliberately uses the Latinate verb for its parallel meanings 'to become pregnant' and 'to form in the mind', both inherent in its Latin cognate, the verb *concipere* (pp. *conceptus*), to take in and hold (*con-*, with + *capere*, to take); she stands at the forefront of these vernacular usages, which according to the examples from the MED emerged in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, when she is actively writing.[90] Before the vision of Mary, Julian has

[86] McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 135.
[87] McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 135.
[88] McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 137.
[89] McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 138; 'In Love's *Mirror*, the Virgin's gaze is specifically maternal and empathetic, holding with her eyes much as she bodily holds her son at his death.'
[90] Lewis and Short, *concipere*, v. (1); MED, *conceiven* (v. 1, 5, 6) (through Middle French *concevoir*).

already used the verb *to conceive* in its conceptual meaning twice in *A Revelation*, first in the second chapter to describe the development of her wish to receive three wounds (*Rev.* 2:33–4, 'I conceived a mighty desire to receive thre woundes in my life') and later at the opening of the fourth chapter to describe her understanding of the validity of her vision of Christ's bleeding head (*Rev.* 4:4–5, 'I conceived truly and mightly that it was himselfe that shewed it me').[91] Then we have the first – and only – instance of the word used in its concrete sense: Mary appearing 'in the stature as she was when she conceivede' (*Rev.* 4:25). What might at first seem like a default word choice actually reveals itself as a core syntactic strategy for highlighting the Virgin's role as hermeneutic key. She embodies the dual meanings of *conceive* in the pattern of the Incarnation. Using the polysemous power present in 'to behold' and 'to conceive' parallels the acts of mental understanding and physical pregnancy, so that when Julian receives visions 'in her sight' she becomes like Mary receiving Christ in her womb. Thus even on the etymological level, Barr's claim holds that 'physicality is inextricable from the cognitive processes that are nonetheless necessary for her attainment of transcendent knowledge. For Julian, analytic reflection and interpretation, the cognitive work that gives rise to the fullest understanding of her visions, are interdependent with physicality.'[92] With each word Julian carefully builds the parallel between Annunciation and revelation; or rather, the parallel permeates every level of her visionary experience and the texts it engenders.

The Annunciation passage utilizes another word-knot that motivates the text in much the same way as *to behold*: the verb *to marvel* and its gerund *marvayling*. Julian comprehends Mary's '*marvayling* with great reverence that he would be borne of her', continuing on to elaborate that 'this was her *marvayling*: that he that was her maker would be borne of her that was made' (*Rev*. 4:28–31; my italics). 'Marvelling' is as core to Julian's critical vocabulary as the term 'beholding', and indeed both terms, when used in the Short Text,

[91] The pun on 'conceive' takes on startling force when we also realize that this Middle English word 'meane' ('without any meane') denotes 'sexual intercourse' (from OE *gemaene*) as well as 'an intermediary' (from OF *mëain*); see MED *mene*, n.(1) a, and n.(2), b. Like the Incarnation, sex is missing from this conception. On the polysemy of the word 'mean' in Julian's writings see also Gillespie and Ross, '"With mekenes aske perseverantly"', 137–8; 'Apophatic Image', 61–2, fn. 28: 'Julian's lexical exploration of the word *mene*, as a noun, adjective, and verb, is one of the most dazzling illustrations of her verbal dexterity in creating semantic clusters of 'word-knots'… Julian's exploitation of the polysemousness of this word means that it becomes the meeting place for many of her key ideas, perceptions, responses and expressions.' See also Dutton, *Julian of Norwich*, 70–5, especially about its relation to the Dutch *minnen*, to love.

[92] Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Athans, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 118.

consistently survive unchanged in the Long Text. The force of this word is again illuminated by its non-English cognates. Etymologically speaking, Mary marvels twice-over here: the Middle English verb *merveillen*, 'to marvel', and the noun *merveille*, 'marvel' came through the Anglo-French *merveille*, from the Latin adjective *mirabilis* which derived from the Latin deponent verb *mirari,* to wonder, marvel at, admire (ultimately from Greek *μειδάω*).[93] This is the same origin as the English word 'mirror' (again through Anglo-French), and the same, too, for our word 'miracle', from the Latin noun *miraculum*, also from *mirari*.[94] Thus as a word-knot Julian's 'marvel' offers a rich semantic cluster: it is an act of wonder, admiration, miraculousness, reflection, self-reflection, sight and insight. It is not only awe, but also appreciation; it is not only perceiving the other, but conceiving the self. Mary's marvelling acts like a mirror for Julian, enabling her to see herself in the Mother of God, and to mimick Mary's model of reverent reflection. Emerging out of this word *marvel* is the mirroring function of Julian's *imitatio Mariae*, where in the Annunciation she can conceive of her identity as visionary and interpreter of visions.

Moving forward in *A Revelation* reveals the full force of the Annunciation passage and its undergirding of these terms, *behold*, *conceive* and *marvel*. Once Mary has modelled them through her response to God, Julian returns to them again and again as ways of defining the ideal reader response to both her text and to God's presence in the reader's own life. The words which first describe Mary's reaction at the Annunciation – beholding, marvelling – become linguistic signals for proper devotion, driving the prose itself. Julian goes so far as to explicitly point out this connection when she returns to expand upon the interpretation of her showings in the sixth and seventh chapters of *A Revelation*, long passages that are not present in *A Vision*. Towards the end of the sixth chapter she sums up one overriding lesson from her interpretation thus far of her revelations: 'And therefore we may, with his grace and his helpe, stande in gostly *beholding*, with everlasting *marveling* in this high, overpassing, unmesurable love that oure lorde hath to us of his goodnes' (*Rev*. 6:46–8; my italics). Here 'we' encompasses Julian and all of her 'even-cristen', fellow Christians, towards whom she directs her book. So for both author and reader, proper devotion is actually simply standing and paying attention to the divine in two specific ways: beholding and marvelling, so clearly modelled by the Virgin at the Annunciation, and explicitly linked linguistically by the repetitions of these key word-knots. In a typically circular fashion, Mary as

[93] See Lewis and Short, entries for *mirari*, *miraculum*, *mirabilis*; OED entries for 'to marvel' (v.) and 'mirror' (n.); MED entries for *merveillen* and *merveille*.

[94] On mirrors in literature and mirror-titled texts, increasingly popular in England from about 1200 on, see Bryan, *Looking Inward*, 80–3, and more generally, Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

hermeneutic key enables Julian to reach this conclusion that Mary is hermeneutic key – enabling interpretion of all of her visions in order to draw out 'this lesson of love shewed' as she describes it at the end of the sixth chapter.

Julian utilizes the natural breath of the break between the sixth and seventh chapters to shift focus from the 'lesson' back to its visionary origin.[95] The seventh chapter immediately picks up to explain the source of this proper devotional attending; in its opening reproduced below, **this** refers especially to the recent guidance to 'stande in gostly beholding, with everlasting marveling', but also all the interpretations of the sixth chapter the reader has just absorbed:

> And to lerne us **this**, as to my understanding, our good lorde shewed our lady, Sent Mary, in the same time: that is to meane, the highe wisdom and truth that she had in *beholding* of her maker. This wisdom and truth made her to beholde her God so gret, so high, so mighty and so good. This gretnesse and this nobilnesse of her *beholding* of God fulfilled her of reverent dred. And with this she sawe herselfe so little and so lowe, so simple and so poor in regard of her God, that this reverent drede fulfilled her of meknes. And thus by this grounde she was fulfilled of grace, and of alle maner of vertues and overpasseth alle creatours. (*Rev*. 7:1–8; my emphasis and italics)

The Annunciation becomes a tool for teaching, for learning, for re-vision – and also, in itself, a model of devotion. The specificity of the words 'to lerne *us* this' underscores how Mary's example of beholding now extends outwards as a demonstration for the inclusive *we*: Julian herself, the individual reading or hearing the text and all Christians. Beholding not only characterizes a correct response to revelation and divine visitation but also extends to all worship of God, a position that unites her 'even-cristen'. In this reinterpretation of her previous vision Julian logically outlines the process of reverent beholding as Mary demonstrates it: wisdom and truth prompt beholding of God; beholding of God fills her with reverent dread; reverent dread fills her with meekness; meekness fills her with grace. Thus Julian's interpretation fulfils Gabriel's greeting to Mary from Luke 1:28, 'Ave, gratia plena' (Hail, full of grace). Verbal parallels intimately connect the original description of the showing and its interpretation several chapters later, providing a hermeneutic guide to each shared word that earns new, deeper meaning through the Long Text reflection.

The impact of the Annunciation as an interpretive paradigm helps explain some significant changes between the earlier Short Text, *A Vision*, and the later Long Text, *A Revelation*.[96] Mary's example of beholding teaches Julian how to

[95] Dutton convincingly argues that the chapter divisions in *A Revelation* are the author's and not later scribal additions; *Julian of Norwich*, ch. 1.

[96] On *A Revelation* and its differences from *A Vision*, see Barry Windeatt, 'Julian's Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition', in *A Companion*, 101–15; and Nicholas

behold her own textual production – the Short Text – and conceive the Long Text. Annunciation parallels revelation; incarnation of the Word of God parallels textual creation, that generative mothering of books. Proof of this ranges from minute edits to larger structural rearrangements. For example, it can be as subtle as the change of one word, the only word substantially altered (as opposed to added) between the Short and Long Text in the Annunciation passage. Mary responds to Gabriel, 'Lo me here, Gods handmaiden', and Julian's narrative voice continues on:

A Vision 'In this sight I *sawe* sothfastlye' (*Vis.* 4:30)
A Revelation 'In this sight I *did understand* sothly' (*Rev*. 4:33)

In the intervening years between the texts it is Mary's exemplary beholding that has drawn Julian to examine the difference between 'seeing' and 'understanding,' and to reflect this hermeneutical advance in this targeted edit. From first to second version Julian has advanced from passive observation to active comprehension – parallelling Mary's transformation from reader to interpreter of God's word when she conceives it.

Most dramatically, however, Julian shifts the entire structural location of the Annunciation scene between *A Vision* and *A Revelation*, suggesting its central importance as hermeneutic key for the deeper interpretation of the visions in the Long Text. The modified order of the visual images in the first revelation, when charted side by side, reveals the shift's magnitude:

A Vision
(1) Blood trickling down Christ's forehead (section 3, ll. 10–17)
(2) Little thing the quantity of a hazelnut (section 4, ll. 6–20)
(3) Mary at the Annunciation (section 4, ll. 21–32)

A Revelation
(1) Blood trickling down Christ's forehead (ch. 4, ll. 1–5)
(2) Mary at the Annunciation (ch. 4, ll. 24–35)
(3) Little thing the quantity of a hazelnut (ch. 5, ll. 7–13)

Placing the Annunciation closer to the beginning of the text perhaps expresses a realization on Julian's part that she needs to witness Mary's reverent beholding as a demonstration of how to receive her own revelations, and that this demonstration is so foundational to her interpretational model that it must be set as early as possible in the text – especially before the vision of the hazelnut, that bears so much signification and elicits so much interpretation on Julian's part. Similarly, the reader must be shown this correct way of reading her text before further visions are presented. Another edit proves how careful and

Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*'.

deliberate this change is in the ordering of the visions in the two texts (deleted words in bold, following Watson and Jenkins' editorial practice):

> *A Vision* 'This litille thinge that es made **that es benethe oure ladye Saint Marye, God shewed it unto me als litille as it hadde been a haselle notte.** Methought it might hafe fallene for litille.' (*Vis.* 4:33–4; my emphasis)
>
> *A Revelation* 'This little thing that is made, methought it might have fallen to nought for littlenes.' (*Rev.* 5:19–20)

It seems like Julian realized that if 'this litille thinge' is in fact beneath Mary epistomologically, it should be so textually, later in the document itself. Only then can Mary's beholding supply the necessary model for Julian's (and our) beholding of the hazelnut, and facilitate the extensive, detailed interpretation that follows in *A Revelation*, chapters six and seven.

Not only hermeneutically, but also theologically, the re-ordering clarifies the role of the Virgin. Both the Short and the Long Text conclude the Annunciation scene with the statement that 'For above her is nothing that is made but the blessed manhood of Christ' (*Vis.* 4:31–2; *Rev.* 4:34–5).[97] Applying that hierarchy to the structure of the text, it makes sense that Julian would re-order the visions in *A Revelation* to present 1) Christ in his manhood as bleeding crucifix; 2) Mary; 3) the hazelnut, representing everything 'that is made'. Thus that statement can also self-reflexively refer back to the text itself, offering a cue to the rightful order of the showings: *above her* (the first showing of Mary) *is nothing that is made* (written) *but the blessed manhood of Christ* (the opening crucifix showing). 'Made', in that reading, would include the act of writing, of making a text come alive – exactly like Christ, the Word of God, coming alive in Mary's womb. Julian is mother to the text of the revelation. In this passage I think we see her succeed in what McAvoy suggests she aims towards throughout her writing: 'Julian is striving to construct a female body which functions as both metatext and semiotic framework and which, in its doubleness, will eventually overlay *and* integrate traditional "paternal" narratives and interpretations.'[98] Mary provides that model female body. The narrative bends to the pull of her power. The Virgin's womb (re)makes the text.

[97] *A Revelation* adds 'as to my sight'.

[98] Liz Herbert McAvoy, '"For we be doubel of God's making": Writing, Gender and the Body in Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. McAvoy, 172. McAvoy also writes, 'just as modern feminist commentators such as Kristeva and Cixous have seen the bodily impact of mothers as a powerfully subversive tool in the struggle to oppose the phallogocentric discourse of traditional western thought, so Julian also recognised and exploited its potential as exegetical tool and means towards establishing her own authority as interpreter of the ineffable love of God',

Making as writing, making as creating, making as mothering: the Annunciation scene provides a powerful and flexible base from which Julian can explore and exercise her own textual activity as a woman. Like the elasticity of the word-knots *to behold* and *to conceive*, the multiplicity of meanings behind the verb *to make* is central to Julian's understanding of the Incarnation and Mary's role in it. Julian plays on a three-way pun: *maiden* (young woman, virgin)/*made* (created)/*made* (led to do something). Italicization reveals the subtle but insistent repetition of the related words in the Annunciation passage:

> I saw her ghostly in bodily likenes, a simple *maiden* and a meeke, yong of age, a little waxen above a childe, in the stature as she was when she conceivede. Also God shewed me in part the wisdom and the truth of her soule, wherin I understood the reverent beholding that she beheld her God, that is her *maker*, marvayling with great reverence that he would be borne of her that was a simple creature of his *making*. For this was her marvayling: that he that was her *maker* would be borne of her that was *made*. And this wisdome and truth, knowing the greatnes of her *maker* and the littlehead of herselfe that is *made*, *made* her to say full mekely to Gabriel: 'Lo me here, Gods hand*maiden*.' In this sight I did understand sothly that she is more then all that God *made* beneth her in worthines and in fullhead. (*Rev.* 4:24–34)

What Mary marvels over is the fact that Christ/God 'that was her *maker* would be borne of her that was *made*'; what Julian marvels over is the fact that Mary 'is more than all that God *made* beneth her in worthines and in fullhead'. God is the ultimate creator, the maker, and yet it is a creature that must help Christ become 'created' by giving him his flesh; the comprehension of this contradiction 'made' Mary (that is, led or compelled her) to offer herself as 'Gods handmaiden'. Mary's servanthood is implicit in her creaturelyness; because she is made, she is a maiden to her maker (not to say that Julian necessarily intends this alternate meaning for the word 'maiden', but that this punning semantic overlap spins out from artful proximity to its homonyms).[99] While being 'made' to do something or acquiesce may seem like a passive mode, Julian complicates any simplication of the moment by emphasizing that Mary's active beholding creates in her the will to accept God's will; it is an active obedience and an active humility, not an apathy. For Julian, and Mary at the Annunciation, beholding *is* making: it is a mirroring of the creation of God, and in that reflection something of God may be held, and reflected again in the creation of the text. Interpretation comes from the

in *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 95.

[99] Likewise, *maiden* (OE *maegden*) and *to make* (OE *macian*) do not share any etymological relation.

Incarnation, and the Incarnation's reliance on the female body makes the womb a powerful interpretive mechanism.

The Annunciation's construction of the womb as a powerful interpretive mechanism corresponds with interpretations of both the hazelnut motif and the motif of God as Mother, in conjunction with the Lord and Servant parable. Liz Herbert McAvoy contextualizes how the hazelnut image functions in terms of a feminized mutual indwelling:

> When examined in association with Julian's other use of gynaecentric imagery, the hazelnut encompasses perfectly all the patterns which we have seen emerge so far. Like the womb (and like Mary and all women generally) this 'litill thing' is small and intact and yet it is capable of housing within its walls future promise and growth. … Such was the womb of Mary which housed the world's salvation within it and such is the womb of those women who will give birth to future generations of 'evencristen'.[100]

While Julian develops the womb as a metaphor, in our assessment of her works it is quite important to return to the concrete womb of Mary and 'those women who will give birth', something the Virgin's pregnant body does quite effectively in the text, returning as it does in the seventh chapter expansion. It unfurls into metaphor again as Julian discusses Christ or God as mother, describing the Trinity in similar ways. This Trinitarian work of creating can be understood as 'womb-work', described by Julian as keeping, enclosing, increasing, knitting and oneing.[101] This is one way of linking the hazelnut vision with the development of the understanding of God as mother:

> The locus of this double enclosing is the maiden Mary who simultaneously encloses and is enclosed by God. As a surrogate mother, Mary provides the physical womb in which the divine mother knits and births his incarnate self. Mary's 'poor flesh' enables the divine mother to do her motherly work … So, the incarnation is complexly the womb-work of two mothers, one the incarnate divine mother, the other the maiden Mary. In fact, all womb-work is the co-working of two mothers, since Julian sees the generation and nurturing of all human life in the wombs of all mothers as the works of both a human mother and the divine mother.[102]

We might also conclude, thinking in a Julian way, that the importance of Mary as mother (specifically at the Annunciation), both generates and is generated by the idea of Christ as Mother. Mary's maternality, of course, does more than

[100] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 84.
[101] Patricia Donohue-White, 'Reading Divine Maternity in Julian of Norwich', *Spiritus* 5(1) (2005): 27.
[102] Donohue-White, 'Reading Divine Maternity", 28.

underlie the profound development of an unusual (but not unique) metaphor of a maternal God: it also transforms how gender works in general.

Several scholars have articulated this effect in *A Revelation*. In his article on 'remaking "woman"' in the Long Text Watson argues, in sum, that 'to be "woman" in this sense is, for Julian, simply to be human; it is the inevitable, the proper metaphor for all life that is lived as flesh'.[103] This constitutes a simple yet disruptive claim for a woman to make in the patriarchical Middle Ages. Catherine Innes Parker explains this idea's roots in the God as Mother motif:

> By applying the imagery of motherhood to the incarnate Christ, Julian makes the feminine normative for the Word made Flesh, and thus all flesh. By fundamentally redefining, in feminine terms, who God is, Julian thus also redefines what it means to be created in the image of God. The human ideal, therefore, becomes feminine.[104]

By giving the Annunciation vision its due attention, we can better understand how Julian reaches such a radical conclusion through decades of beholding and marvelling; through imitating the woman who bore God; through conceiving with soul and body, despite the fallenness and femininity of that body – indeed, because of it. In turn, our critical capacity to interpret her interpretations would, in Julian's paradigm, be likewise facilitated by the very act that made God man: the conception of conception *as a cognitive process* can be located in Mary's conception of Christ. And while she never says so explicitly, Julian's *imitatio Mariae* extends to her putting quill to parchment (as we believe she did): bringing Christ alive in the world just as Mary's reading parallelled the inscription of the living Word in her womb.

These arguments about the Annunciation's significance for Julian expand considerably on many of the important arguments about the maternality of the motifs of the hazelnut and Jesus as Mother that have been made by other scholars, particularly Liz Herbert McAvoy and Nicholas Watson. Such analyses have already pushed far beyond the foundational work on Julian's development of Jesus as Mother by Caroline Walker Bynum and Sarah McNamer, and put a new broader emphasis on 'the concept of motherhood as a literal truth, metaphorical tool, textual matrix, religious ideology and philosophy'.[105] This kind

[103] Nicholas Watson, '"Yf wommen be double naturelly": Remaking 'Woman' in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Exemplaria* 8(1) (1996): 25.

[104] Catherine Innes-Parker, 'Subversion and Conformity in Julian's *Revelation*: Authority, Vision and the Motherhood of God', *Mystics Quarterly* 23(2) (1997): 22.

[105] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 75; see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Sarah McNamer, 'The Exploratory Image: God as Mother in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*', *Mystics Quarterly* 15(1) (1989): 21–8; these are among the earliest and most influential of many publications on this topic.

of research has effectively rendered outdated any critical position that might assume that 'Julian actively resists aligning herself with the feminine, nor does she exploit any sense of female subjectivity for hermeneutical or authoritative purposes.'[106] The Virgin, in fact, does exactly that in Julian's texts; and yet even in the recent scholarly progress, Mary's power continues to be underestimated. This is in part because, I think, the absence of her book – her reading – in Julian's Annunciation scene occludes the crucial link between Word made flesh and vision made word (i.e. written text), that lies implicit behind Julian's understanding of the showing. Although Julian does not describe Mary with scriptures in hand, her texts bear out the assumption that she saw herself as a reading and writing woman reflecting the image of a literate Mary likewise conceiving the divine.

The *Book* of Margery Kempe

About 1393, as Julian entered the anchorhold in which she would spend the rest of her life, Margery Kempe of Lynn (*c.* 1373–after 1438) married and embarked on twenty years of childbearing. Fourteen pregnancies later, she convinced her husband to break off sexual relations so she could fulfil the spiritual life to which she converted some time before. What followed was a series of visions, roarings and cryings, pilgrimages, court trials and visits with prominent ecclesiastics and holy people, filling the pages of what many consider the first autobiography in English. *The Book of Margery Kempe* was written in stages by several amanuenses taking dictation from Margery.[107] She purportedly did not know how to write and acquired most of her extensive knowledge of con-

[106] David Aers, 'The Humanity of Christ: Reflections on Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', in David Aers and Lynn Staley, eds, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 92; as summarized by McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 167.

[107] A long, ongoing critical tradition explores issues of the textual production of the *Book*, including: Anthony Bale, 'Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *The Chaucer Review*, 52(2) (2017): 173–87; Sebastian Sobecki, '"The writyng of this tretys": Margery Kempe's Son and the Authorship of Her *Book*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015): 257–83; Nicholas Watson, 'The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds, *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434; and Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), especially the first chapter, 'Authorship and Authority'. While Staley's distinction between the character Margery and the controlling author Kempe continues to be influential if debated, for the purposes of my discussion I simply refer to the single 'Margery' as simultaneously the character, main author of the text and historical figure.

temporary devotional literature by hearing it read aloud. Her book reflects a myriad of genres, most strongly the hagiographical discourse of the virgin martyrs with which she was clearly familiar. Throughout the narrative of her book, Christ continually visits and comforts Margery in her visions, as does the Virgin Mary. While it is her 'mystical marriage to the Lord which defines and endorses her vocation as visionary and prophet',[108] Margery feeds off the persecution and humiliation she earns by living according to God's command, challenging the authority of the Church on earth and refusing to limit herself to the social expectations of wife and mother. As Windeatt explains, 'behind this is the notion that in enduring slander and abuse Kempe is re-enacting in her own experience a kind of crucifixion'.[109] Ultimately, recording these trials in a text offers a consolation to complement the consolation offered by Christ, to both Margery and her readers.[110]

Though many scholars have studied the *imitatio Christi* at work in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, its *imitatio Mariae* has received only sporadic attention. For instance, according to Gail McMurray Gibson, Margery exercises an *imitatio Mariae* inspired by the devotional model of the *MVC*, and her emulation of Mary is 'deliberate and self-conscious'.[111] In Tara Williams' ground-breaking article on the *Book*'s maternal and textual authority, she goes so far as to argue that compared to *imitatio Christi*, 'the more significant devotional model in the *Book* is the lesser-known *imitatio Mariae*' and that Margery uses motherhood, the common ground of her identification with Mary, as a source for spiritual authority.[112] Similarly, Georgiana Donavin emphasizes that while Margery's access to Mary is not through the Latinate liturgies, she nonetheless 'understands the Virgin's power over language in physical terms and according to maternal performances' especially with the multi-valent idea of 'labowr'.[113]

[108] Barry Windeatt, ed., 'Introduction', *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 13.

[109] Windeatt, *The Book*, 'Introduction', 23.

[110] As argued by Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[111] Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 50.

[112] Tara Williams, 'Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe', *Modern Philology: Critical and Historical Studies in Literature, Medieval through Contemporary*, 107(4) (2010): 531, 543.

[113] Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 286. Other substantive discussions of Margery's *imitatio Mariae* include Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, chapter 1, 'Motherhood and Margery Kempe'; Nanda Hopenwasser and Signe Wegener, '*Vox Matris*: The Influence of St Birgitta's *Revelations* on *The Book of Margery Kempe*: St Birgitta and Margery Kempe as Wives and Mothers', in *Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers*, ed. Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia

These important studies demonstrate how Mary is important to Margery in a complex web of ways that still need further mapping.

Margery, like Elizabeth, Birgitta and Julian, receives a vision based on the Annunciation episode in Luke, which I would suggest is far more central to understanding this powerful *imitatio Mariae* than has been yet recognized. But hers is not a momentary glimpse of the profundity of the moment, or a recollection offered by the Virgin herself; rather, as usual in the *Book*, Margery participates actively in re-enacting, and rewriting, the scriptural story. One day as Margery is engaged in her meditation she enquires of Christ, 'Jhesu, what schal I thynke?', and at his reply, 'Dowtyr, thynke on my modyr, for sche is cause of all the grace that thow hast,' Margery experiences her first vision of the Virgin:

> And than anoon sche saw Seynt Anne gret wyth chylde, and than sche preyed Seynt Anne to be hir mayden and hir servawnt. And anon ower Lady was born, and than sche besyde hir to take the chyld to hir and kepe it tyl it wer twelve yer of age, wyth good mete and drynke, wyth fayr whyte clothys and whyte kerchys. And than sche seyd to the blyssed chyld: 'Lady, ye schal be the modyr of God.' The blyssed chyld answeryd and seyd: 'I wold I wer worthy to be the handmayden of hir that schuld conseive the sone of God.' The creatur seyd: 'I pray yow, Lady, yyf that grace falle yow, forsake not my servyse.' The blysful chyld passyd awey for a certeyn tyme, the creatur being stylle in contemplacyon, and sythen cam ageyn and seyd: 'Dowtyr, now am I bekome the modyr of God.' And than the creatur fel down on hir kneys wyth gret reverns and gret wepyng and seyd: 'I am not worthy, Lady, to do yow servyse.' 'Yys, dowtyr,' sche seyde, 'folwe thow me, thi servyse lykyth me wel.' (6: 541–65)[114]

Three generations of the holy family appear in the short span of this passage, where time flexes to include all of Mary's childhood as well as two short conversations between visionary and Virgin. Though Margery reports asking Anne to be her maiden and servant, we do not hear Anne agree before Margery whisks off the newborn Mary, a startling reversal where the Mother of God is mothered by Margery. Such a maternal position is not to be underestimated:

Ho (New York: Palgrave, 2000); and Hope Phyllis Weissman, 'Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: *Hysterica Compassio* in the Late Middle Ages', in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700–1600*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1982), 201–17. On Margery's *imitatio Christi*, see, for example, Sarah Beckwith, 'A Very Medieval Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 195–215.

[114] All quotations are by chapter and line number from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt.

'the domestic and housewifely services which Margery Kempe repeatedly performs for the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child in her visionary life are not naïve or childish attempts at mysticism, as they have so often been interpreted, but rather deliberate and self-conscious emulation of the Marian model'.[115] Margery dresses her adoptive daughter like herself, in white, and also projects herself onto Gabriel by making his Annunciation announcement for him seemingly before he gets a chance. Though Margery speaks first in this passage ('Lady, ye schal be the modyr of God'), her message is not her own: she announces to Mary the essence of the Gabriel's words in the Luke episode. She has become Mary's mother and, now, her angel; there is no room for other voices but Mary's and her own.

In a way, Margery does not pass up the opportunity to replace both the angel *and* the book Mary is always depicted reading at his visit: she substitutes her own body and voice for the Bible, rewriting the foreshadowing prophecy of Isaiah, cutting right through the verse's implication to its direct interpretation with Mary as the virgin that shall conceive and bear a son (Isaiah 7:14). Her statement takes on more than the power of prophecy, as she inserts herself as the Old Testament in its transformation of the *Logos* into the Word made flesh of the New Testament – her utterance takes on the power of the Word of God. By speaking as scripture itself in its typological role in the Incarnation, Margery positions herself to become 'the voys of God', where her voice and Christ's are rhetorically conflated. Barbara Zimbalist has probed the radical ways in which Margery speaks for and as the visionary Christ, and how 'Margery presents her words as the manifestation of the Word, and her *Book* purports to legitimize her aspirations to holy speech through textual representation of that Word.'[116] This argument is key for understanding the significance of this scene and the absent presence of Mary's book. While Margery's *Book* can be seen generally to supplement and indeed equal scripture in its representation of Christ's speech, at the Annunciation we see Margery physically taking the place of scripture: Mary does not hold a book in her hands, but stands alone with Margery; she does not read Isaiah, but hears the prophecy from the mouth of her visionary interlocutor from the future. Margery utters the word that will become the Word, the body of Christ, in Mary's womb.

It is predictable, then, that the scriptural account of the actual Annunciation is also silently bypassed in Margery's vision. The Incarnation moment happens outside the frame of the narrative, when Mary 'passyd awey for a certeyn tyme' while Margery continues 'stylle in contemplacyon'. Off-stage, as it were, Gabriel and the Holy Spirit do their work, work that receives no record

[115] Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 50.
[116] Barbara Zimbalist, 'Christ, Creature, and Reader: Verbal Devotion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41(1) (2015): 3.

in Margery's *Book*. Excluding Luke's account, Isaiah's prophecy and Gabriel's role in the Annunciation leaves the entire scene to women's voices (really only one – Margery and Margery's voice relaying Mary's). No non-female textual or divine mediation – even that of God – presents itself in this reckoning of the Incarnation of Christ.[117] It is only mothers and their wombs that we witness.

The calculated removal of all resonances of male-authored scripture from the scene is counter-balanced by some additions that firmly place it in a textual tradition of women's visionary accounts. Not only does Margery superimpose her own voice on that of Luke, the scriptural author of the Annunciation, she also ventriloquizes the visionary accounts of the Annunciation documented by Birgitta and Elizabeth, generating for herself a matrilineal succession of visionary models. Margery's complex relationship with these figures and their texts is well documented in the *Book* and mapped by modern researchers.[118]

[117] Because Gabriel, as an angel, is sexless.

[118] For discussions of Birgitta and Elizabeth and their connections to Margery, see Windeatt, 'Introduction', 9–18; Janette Dillon, 'Holy Women and their Confessors or Confessors and their Holy Women? Margery Kempe and Continental Tradition', in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalyn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 115–40; and Madeleine Jeay and Kathleen Garay, '"To Promote God's Praise and Her Neighbour's Salvation": Strategies of Authorship and Readership Among Mystic Women in the Later Middle Ages', in Anke Gillier, Alicia Montoya and Suzan van Dijk, eds, *Women Writing Back/Writing Women Back: Transnational Perspectives from the Late Middle Ages to the Dawn of the Modern Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 38–47, on Margery and Elizabeth and Birgitta. McAvoy discusses the influence of Elizabeth and Birgitta on Margery in *Authority and the Female Body*, 44–7, as does Donavin, *Scribit Mater*, 268–71. On Birgitta and Margery in particular, see especially M. Hoppenwasser, 'The Human Burden of the Prophet: St Birgitta's Revelations and *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Medieval Perspectives* VIII (1993): 153–62; Hopenwasser and Signe Wegener, '*Vox Matris*';' Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 45–7; Julia Bolton Holloway, 'Bride, Margery, Julian, and Alice: Bridget of Sweden's Textual Community in Medieval England', in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. S.J. McEntire (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 203–22; S. Schein, 'Bridget of Sweden, Margery Kempe and Women's Jerusalem Pilgrimages in the Middle Ages', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 14 (1999): 44–58; G. Cleve, 'Margery Kempe: A Scandinavian Influence in Medieval England?', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V*, ed. M. Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 163–78; and Einat Klafter, 'The Feminine Mystic: Margery Kempe's Pilgrimage to Rome as an *imitatio Birgitta*', in *Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds*, ed. Victoria Blud, Diane Heath and Einat Klafter (London: School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2018), 123–36. There is ongoing debate about how Margery would have encountered Birgitta's visions, whether by one of the extant Middle English translations, one that does not survive, or any of the numerous Latin manuscripts; here I pick up on possible connections with the Claudius version, but further work is needed. Roger Ellis confirms that Elizabeth of Hungary's 'tretys' that Margery was exposed to was probably the *Revelations* text, as edited by McNamer; 'Margery Kempe's Scribe and

One of her priest-scribes 'red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bodys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys therupon, Seynt Brydys [Birgitta's] boke, [Walter] Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other' (58.4818–21), and we later read that, like Margery, 'Elizabeth of Hungary cryed wyth lowde voys, as is wretyn in hir tretys' (62:5173–4). Holy women mentioned in the *Book* such as Birgitta, Elizabeth and Marie d'Oignies each function simultaneously to legitimate Margery's status as a female visionary that was married and a mother, as well as to provide precedents for Margery's exuberant expressions of holiness, particularly her raving and weeping. She imitates them but also seeks to surpass them in sanctity; as Jessica Rosenfeld articulates this dynamic, her 'competitive relationship to other female saints thus allows her to borrow their authority while also asserting her own difference'.[119] For instance, when Christ says to Margery, 'My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse' (20:1517–33) we should understand that 'Margery's desire to supersede Birgitta in the love shown to her by Christ is entirely typical and constitutes another strategy used by her to achieve authority in the *Book*,' McAvoy explains.[120] The *Book* performs this tension both through explicitly mentioning the holy women and by implicitly parallelling their texts through rhetorical or thematic similarities.

The influence of Elizabeth and Birgitta's visionary texts on Margery's Annunciation passage, a scene so crucial for the development of the identity of all three visionaries, stands out as a significant, and under-studied, example of her relationship to other holy women. Mary's non-scriptural response to Margery, 'I wold I wer worthy to be the handmayden of hir that schuld conseive the sone of God,' closely echoes her words in Elizabeth's *Revelations* and Birgitta's *Liber Celestis* – two of the most influential books for Margery. Similarly, Margery's wish to serve Mary puts her in the footsteps of the visionaries themselves. For each woman, Mary's wish to be a part of the prophecy provides a model of the visionary's own desire to interact with the holy family – and Mary's subsequent identification as the Mother of God likewise parallels the visionary's promotion to be Mary's handmaiden. In other words, Mary shows them what participatory piety sounds and looks like. In Elizabeth's *Revelations*, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Mary explains her response to

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the Miraculous Books', in *Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 161–75, esp. 164–8. Barratt explores in great depth 'echoes of Elizabeth's treatise in Kempe's book' (not including the Annunciation passage) and argues that it was 'Kempe herself rather than her amanuensis who was influenced by this little-known though fascinating text' in her article 'Margery Kempe and the King's Daughter of Hungary', 190.

[119] Jessica Rosenfeld, 'Envy and Exemplarity in The Book of Margery Kempe', *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26 (2014): 107.

[120] McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 46.

reading Isaiah, how she desires to preserve her own maidenhood so that she may serve the maiden who bears the Son of God:

> And in þe ferste opnyng of þe bok cam to myn eyin þys word of Ysaye þe prophete: *Loo, a maydyn schal conceyve and bere a chyld &c.* Qwanne I thowte þat maydynheed schulde mich plese God, for he wolde ys Sone be bore of a maydyn, I purposede þanne in my herte and in my thowt my maydynheed for to kepe in reuerence of here, þat 3yf yt befeel me for to se here, þat I mayte in maydynheed seruyn here al þe tyme of my lyf. (V, 72)

I argue above that this sentiment, in fact almost the exact words, are echoed in Birgitta's revelation of Mary recollecting her response to the prophecy: 'I desired euir in mi herte þat I might leue and se þe time of his birth, if I might happeli be a worthi handmaiden to seruis of his modir' (I.10:18). The words of Margery's Mary closely echo both texts: 'I wold I wer worthy to be the handmayden of hir that schuld conseive the sone of God.' A fascinating contrast is how Elizabeth's text emphasizes *maidenhead*, virginity, which fits the possibility of the visionary being Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples, chaste nun. Margery omits any reference to virginity, only emphasizing the act of serving as handmaiden, fitting with her status as mother. Margery's response, 'I pray yow, Lady, yyf that grace falle yow, forsake not my servyse,' likewise parallels Elizabeth's request to serve Mary. Earlier in Elizabeth's visions, Mary offers the role of handmaiden to Elizabeth several times, saying '3yf thou wyth be myn handmaydyn, I schal be þy lady' (I, 56) and again, 'Yf þou wyth be my dowtyr, my discyple, and myn handmaydyn, I schal be þy moder, þy lady, and þy maystresse' (I, 58). Mary similarly affirms Margery's privileged position of personal service, replying, 'folwe thow me, thi servyse lykyth me wel'.[121] Citing the other parallels of this motif of handmaiden in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Elizabeth's *Revelations*, Alexandra Barratt has also argued that 'the idea of the Virgin as a teacher or "maystresse," and of the visionary as her disciple, clearly derives from Elizabeth'.[122] The Annunciation scene, I suggest, establishes these parallels between visionary and virgin Mary, and in both cases the relationship undergirds the visionary's identity as authentic visionary and claim to spiritual authority through Mary's role in the Incarnation.

Of course, all of these iterations of the role of handmaiden, *ancilla*, recall Mary's concluding words in Luke's Annunciation, *Ecce ancilla domini*, 'Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.' Thus Margery folds the Virgin's gesture back on her self, so that she can be in the position of making the same request to serve

[121] The motif of Margery as handmaiden to Mary recurs many times after this initial 'hiring'. See lines 1606–08, 2802, 3037–8, 6386–7, 6560–1, 6841–2, as Windeatt notes (*Book*, 77). See also McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 51.

[122] Barratt, 'Margery Kempe and the King's Daughter of Hungary', 196.

the Mother of God – in essence, echoing Mary, Elizabeth and Birgitta concurrently. The Mary who appears to Margery is not simply Luke's young maiden but also the Mary that appears to Birgitta, and the Mary that appears to Elizabeth. *Imitatio Mariae* here becomes channelled through a ventriloquization of a shared female visionary *imitatio Mariae*, wherein prophetic authority becomes a power rooted in motherhood, whether physical or spiritual.

From generation to generation, Margery's insinuation of herself into the female lineage behind Christ echoes her insinuation into a line of female visionary foremothers, medieval holy women whom she saw as sharing her spiritual vocation. Likewise, Margery's presumptuous borrowing of the child Mary from Anne aptly parallels the series of textual and verbal borrowings which subtly connect almost every line of this passage to the Annunciation revelations of those female visionary foremothers. A kind of matrilineal succession of handmaidens, originating in the Virgin, manifests itself in Margery. Such close textual parallels create an authoritative continuum between the two recognized visionaries' experiences and Margery's visions, and through this continuum Margery's text is able to share in the authority granted to the texts of Elizabeth and Birgitta.

Yet does Margery *herself* share? She does not seem to share with Anne her rearing of the Virgin; nor does she share with Gabriel his announcement. Birgitta, Elizabeth and Luke's text may play supporting roles in Margery's Annunciation episode, as scripture and other texts frequently do throughout the *Book*. Their reverberations might be heard by the attentive reader. But Margery's voice, ventriloquizing their words without citation, dominates. Her rhetorical competition with these women can be framed as part of a structural logic of envy, as construed by Rosenfeld, where Margery is 'performing exemplary singularity, constructing a notion of exemplarity that preserves the singularity and integrity of both imitator and imitated'.[123] To push Rosenfeld's argument further, another important facet of the ethos of competition seen in the Annunciation passage and throughout the *Book* is the competitive edge to Margery's *imitatio Mariae*. Mary, as exemplar of exemplars, has a singular position within the text. I argue that Margery sets up the same motif of competition with Mary, only to cede her dominance at the last moment, in order to maintain the Virgin as a higher authority upon which she can build her own claims to spiritual authority. In other words, Margery competes with Mary, but she knows Mary must win; Mary stands as the authority that must be authoritative for Margery's power structure to hold up. We see this play out neatly in the Annunciation passage. Margery takes over as Mary's mother; she boldly prophesies to the Mother of God her future as Mother of God ('Lady, ye

[123] Rosenfeld, 'Envy and Exemplarity', 111.

schal be the modyr of God').[124] Then, in a satisfying power shift, Mary returns *as* the Mother of God to claim her position of power over Margery through a pointed echoing of her words: 'Dowtyr, *now* am *I* bekome the modyr of God' (my italics). Mary makes clear that *now* Margery is the daughter and no longer the mother – and that while Margery's words have come true, *now* Mary is the only one with the authority to be proclaiming the Incarnation. Margery's *imitatio Mariae* holds the competitive forces of envy in tension with the vital need for an unassailable model of holy motherhood.

This tension captured in the Annunciation scene, among the web of tensions woven throughout the text, holds together the complex narrative of the *Book*. Reading between the lines of the Annunciation scene reveals the other narratives lying hidden beneath, and emphasizes the meaningful lack of Mary's own book at an Incarnation moment that is completely elided. Without any book to compete with Mary's attention, we are left with Margery's *Book*, singular and exemplary; her textual offspring, like Mary's Christ, stands alone above all others. Donavin points towards this conclusion when she herself concludes that 'in all, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is conceived through Kempe's *imitatio Mariae*, and as the Word of Christ, offers the fruit of the Virgin Birth'.[125] Perhaps we should think of the *Book*, Margery's immortal child, as much a conception conceived in that slight moment of the visionary being 'stylle in contemplacyon' as Mary's conception of the Son of God. Perhaps we should think of Gabriel's arrival to Mary as passed over in silence because it intersects with Margery's (pro)creative envisioning of the text – being read at that exact moment by the reader. Mary's time, Margery's vision-time, her writing time and the reader's time collide and collapse together.

Conclusion

Mary emerges as prophet, visionary, contemplative, imaginative reader, interpreter and pregnant mother. For these holy women the scene of the Annunciation opened up a rich variety of aspects of Mary, most completely distinct from those aspects developed at the Passion and having little to do with her roles as queen of heaven and intercessor. This kind of *imitatio Mariae* encouraged an approach to the divine not through the body of Christ itself but through the body that bore Christ, a woman's flesh. Bynum extensively explores the gendered implications of the Incarnation for medieval Christians,

[124] On Margery as operating within a tradition of medieval women prophets, such as Christina of Markyate and of course Birgitta of Sweden, see Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 27–37.

[125] Donavin, *Scribit Mater*, 286.

ultimately emphasizing the dominance of *imitatio Christi* over any *imitatio Mariae* performed by holy women.[126] Women, she argues, were by and large not overly concerned with their female bodies that they shared with Mary; 'in fact, religious women paid surprisingly little attention to their supposed incapacity'.[127] While true, this claim overlooks how in fact, religious women did pay quite a lot of attention to the powerful *capacity* of the female body as exemplified by the Virgin, as these Annunciation episodes insist. In other words, because of Mary at the Incarnation, they came to see the female body as not only fecund, but as multivalently generative, as transformative, even as intellectual and literary. Physical motherhood was no longer exclusively an embarrassment or irreversible step away from virginity.

Such a self-conception nuances Bynum's later statement that 'women reached God not by reversing what they were but by sinking more fully into it', a female identity and approach to the divine which she qualifies as most characterized by 'suffering (both self-inflicted and involuntary) and food (both eucharist and fasting)'.[128] When Gabriel arrives to announce the coming of Christ, there is no suffering, no food, neither wails nor weeping nor silence. Mary's mouth is neither full nor empty nor parched, but uttering the words that vocalize the transformation of Old Testament into New, of *Logos* into flesh, of the signification behind the sign of the eucharist itself. The Virgin becomes the foremost paradigm for channelling the divine, whether through visions, prophecy, or interpretation. To Elizabeth, Mary narrates her book-based prayer practice as it intersected with her emergent visionary vocation, with the Annunciation scene broken down and spread throughout the *Revelations* in order to become a kind of structural foundation for the text. With Birgitta, the Annunciation likewise appears in multiple places in her text, with significant shifts in Mary's narration that parallel Birgitta's growing confidence as a prophet committed to reform and challenging male systems of power. Through her mystical pregnancy Birgitta shares in Mary's physical conception of Christ in order to gain her powers of intellectual conception, of interpreting the truth of what men say and superceding their scholastic authority via her maternal body. Julian maximizes Mary's interpretive power by positioning her as a hermeneutic key necessary for understanding the full meaning of her own visions. While the Virgin utters her responses to Gabriel at the Annunciation, the emphasis is not on her physical motherhood, but on her metaphorical

[126] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 155: 'But there is still little reason to feel that these distinctive themes of women's religiosity were primarily an effort by women to counter the notion that they were lustful and weak. The immediate religious motive was, as it was for men, desire to imitate Jesus.'

[127] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 154.

[128] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 172, also quoted above at the beginning of the chapter.

conception of the relation between all of creation and the divine. She models how to behold, for Julian the only way for humans to effectively approach God. Margery utilizes the Annunciation scene as the first opportunity to become intimately involved in the holy family, to mimic Mary's maternal position in it, to exercise her new-found prophetic voice and ultimately to establish Mary as the imitable female authority of the *Book*.

This chapter should put to rest any assumption that Mary, 'alone of all her sex', was too unique for medieval women to emulate. After the opening of the *Liber* Christ himself insists on her imitability for Birgitta: 'take ensampill at mi moder, þe whilke, fro þe biginninge of hir life to þi ende, wald noþinge bot þat I wilde' (I.1l.24–5). In Elizabeth's *Revelations*, the Virgin herself commands an *imitatio Mariae* with the literal ventriloquization of her words: 'be ensawmple of me, say, "*To þe handmaydin of Owr Lord be yt do to me aftyr þy word*"' (VI, 82). The handmaiden emerges as a common mimetic mode for these four visionary women. While Julian more subtly draws attention to the motif by citing Mary's response to Gabriel, 'Lo me here, Gods handmaiden,' as the only direct discourse of the vision, Elizabeth, Birgitta and Margery all explicitly invoke the motif of Mary desiring to be the handmaiden to the virgin mentioned by Isaiah 7:14. At that moment when Mary steps up to become that virgin, the handmaiden of the Lord, it opens up an endlessly replicable 'understudy' handmaiden role for these holy women to step into. This shared position brings the holy women together in a female literary tradition motivated by Mary, as it simultaneously creates a new kind of virtual textual community. Though she is alone at Gabriel's announcement, when Mary shares her 'private female discourse'[129] with the visionary she offers divinely sanctioned female companionship and mentorship. When the Virgin's voice is heard through the texts of other visionary women – as when Margery reads of Mary's revelations to Birgitta and Elizabeth – this female companionship widens into female community. Margery reminds us that the positive reinforcement of such a community can be complicated by feelings of competition and envy. Nonetheless, before the male body of Christ becomes visible, it is Mary's body that brings together these holy women across time and space at her side in her solitary room. It is her channelling of the Word that legitimates their written words, rendering superfluous male authorities – at least in the sacred visionary sphere. As Mary explains to Elizabeth, 'Þer ys no broþer in þys world þat of þy spouse kan betere enforme þe þan I' (I, 56).

[129] Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child*, 187.