

The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation

Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion
in Medieval England

Introduction

Laura Saetveit Miles

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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 Laugetrud, 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 pergitur 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 dauidicis 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. Gijssels, 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 sacramentum 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 Englonde, 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

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 rapture – 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?

