

*The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation: Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England*, by Laura Saetveit Miles. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. xii + 301, 17 color illustrations. ISBN: 9781843845348 (hardback), 9781787448780 (pdf).

Countless Annunciations depict the Virgin Mary holding a book when Gabriel materializes, her engrossed reading suddenly interrupted. Laura Saetveit Miles's elegant study pores over this book like the Virgin herself is shown doing and charts the many transformations of this omnipresent though understudied motif in medieval literature and art. Intervening in several established yet dynamic debates in the study of medieval spirituality, this volume recovers a tradition of Mary as a scholar, bookworm, visionary, and contemplative and uncovers the radical potential of Mary's book and its vital importance to medieval devotion and literature.

Intertwining various disciplinary foci (from history of literacy to gender studies), this monograph spans roughly five centuries—from the eleventh century to the Reformation—of transformative engagement with Mary's book in England. Miles contends that, since Mary saw herself reflected in her reading (either the Psalms or Isaiah's prophecies), the Virgin primed readers to see themselves mirrored in her reading and theirs. Mary's reading provided a paradigm of conception and hermeneutics grounded in the female body and thus enabled readers, and female readers particularly, to conceive Christ, the Word of God, spiritually and intellectually like Mary conceived Him physically, spiritually, and intellectually, validating women's reading, writing, visions, meditation, and interpretation.

Following an introduction (re)familiarizing readers with the Annunciation narrative and associated biblical prophecies and tracing the development of the extra-biblical detail of Mary's book, the first chapter lays the thematic groundwork for the subsequent analysis. Unpacking the central polysemy of the verb "to conceive", Miles expounds how, according to medieval theology, the Incarnation undergirds all interpretation, including biblical hermeneutics. Conceiving Christ by her reading before conceiving Him physically, Mary becomes an experienced reader and exegete, modelling and enabling readers' interpretation of Scripture and the advent of Christ in their hearts. This chapter also delineates the study's feminist project of redressing modern theologians' and believers' lack of awareness of the medieval tradition of Mary as a scholar in order to salvage Mary as an emblem of spiritual and bodily agency instead of as a vessel "encoding female subordination to the patriarchy" (36). Miles partially aligns herself with modern reinterpretations of the Virgin by French feminist

theorists; this alignment, however, expresses itself predominantly in her study's enterprise of recuperating Mary rather than in its methodological approach and theoretical affiliation, which are broadly historicist.

Bookish *imitatio Mariae* makes its first appearance in the second chapter. Eleventh- and twelfth-century guides for, and texts about, female anchorites are revealed to invite anchorites to emulate the Virgin's contemplative recitation of the Psalms, transforming the anchoritic cell with its recluse and Mary's room with its inhabitant into mirror images of one another. A Foucauldian heterotopia (a liminal space both porous and enclosing, encompassing several places simultaneously), the cell amplifies the anchorite's performance of the Psalms as a result. Miles then pursues the motif of Mary's reading of Isaiah's prophecies (a twelfth-century shift in the Virgin's reading matter) through twelfth- to fifteenth-century lives of Christ to map how the history of women's literacy and meditation entwine (chapter 3). This chapter triangulates affective piety and the absence, presence, and representation of Mary's book with medieval women's Latin and vernacular literacy to uncover anxieties about or confident encouragement of women's unmediated contact with Scripture. Remaining in the late Middle Ages but turning to a different genre, texts by female visionaries, the fourth chapter considers how Mary's book furnished a validating framework for conceiving visions, (re)writing, and authoritatively translating visions into texts. Like Mary, Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373), Margery Kempe (c. 1373–after 1438), Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples (1260–1322), and Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–after 1416) bear and give shape to the Word of God, drawing on Mary's "maternal power to channel the divine" (137). Expanding the analysis to include visual and material culture, the fifth chapter juxtaposes the fourteenth-century vernacular treatise *Of Three Workings in Man's Soul*, possibly written by Richard Rolle (1300–1349), with the rosary and several atypical Annunciations in books of hours. All dramatically defer Gabriel's interruption of Mary's reading and interpolate the meditator into the scene in imitation of either the Virgin or Gabriel. Likewise homing in on materiality, the sixth chapter charts thematic connections between the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham and a poem recounting its purported supernatural origins, the "Pynson Ballad." This chapter explores how pilgrims and meditators imaginatively occupy the different sites of the Annunciation, Mary's room and womb, with the foundation legend grounding the shrine in Mary's "tripartite model of conception" (249), but emphasizing her interpretative powers rather than her body's. The coda succinctly surveys responses to Mary's book in the (post-)Reformation period, ending on an elegiac note by lamenting the loss of "belief in the Virgin's interpretive,

revelatory power enabled by her reading” in “the Reformation fissuring” (265), a chasm this study undoubtedly will help close.

Demonstrating how holy women sometimes favoured *imitatio Mariae* over *imitatio Christi*, Miles invites scholars further to reconsider the association of women with somatic, Christocentric devotion, asceticism, and affective meditation. While her study shares with Caroline Walker Bynum’s groundbreaking reading and a wealth of other feminist studies a concern with gender-inflected resistance and the body, Miles remains laudably alive to how the “valences [of the Virgin’s gender] resist simplification” (114). Pairing well-known texts with little-studied works and male-authored texts with texts created by or in collaboration with women, *The Virgin Mary’s Book at the Annunciation* also reminds us not to isolate medieval women’s literary culture from male literary culture and contemporary cultural transformations. Furthermore, by tracing the web of connections between literature and literacy, book history and iconography, and material culture and texts, it participates in a larger despiritualization of medieval spirituality and complicates any simple understanding of the effect of the Arundel Constitutions of 1409 on (attitudes towards) women’s reading.

Beautifully written and impeccably produced, this volume will appeal across disciplines and medievalist fields and both to scholars and (advanced) students. The prose zings and sings. Seventeen stunning full-color images vivify medieval devotion. The index and footnotes are thorough without becoming unwieldy. Although the lack of Middle English translations slightly reduces accessibility, readers less versed in medieval religion will appreciate the clear introductions to authors, texts, and contexts.

In the light of recent feminist work (e.g., by Orna Donath) on women regretting becoming mothers, I do wonder whether stressing Mary’s body and maternal bodies might not entail the risk of re-equating particular gender identities with suffering, an equation for which Bynum was criticized in the nineties. Furthermore, while methodologically inevitable, the mediation of women’s voices by male, clerical authors might have warranted further problematizing than a parenthetical comment (76), particularly because Miles’ theorizations are astute. These are only minor quibbles, however.

Readers interested in medieval spirituality, literature, art, and Mariology will find much of worth in this attractive, compelling work. Like sunlight through glass, to borrow a medieval Incarnation metaphor, it fruitfully illuminates our knowledge of medieval devotion, interpretation, and literature.

Godelinde Gertrude Perk  
University of Oxford