

ALONE ^{OF} ALL HERSEX

THE MYTH & THE CULT OF THE
VIRGIN MARY



Marina Warner

ALONE OF ALL HER SEX

Marina Warner is a novelist, historian and critic. Among her acclaimed works on myth, symbolism and fairy tale are *Joan of Arc, Monuments and Maidens* (winner of the Fawcett Prize), *From the Beast to the Blonde, No Go the Bogeyman, Phantasmagoria*, and most recently, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*. In 1994 she gave the Reith Lectures and in 2000, the Oxford Clarendon Lectures, published as *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*. Her fiction includes *Indigo, The Lost Father* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize and winner of a Commonwealth Writers' Prize) and *The Leto Bundle*.

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MARINA WARNER

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Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	vii
<i>Author's Note</i>	xi
<i>Preface to the New Edition</i>	xiii
<i>Prologue</i>	xxxii

PART ONE VIRGIN

1. Mary in the Gospels	3
2. Mary in the Apocrypha	26
3. Virgin Birth	35
4. Second Eve	51
5. Virgins and Martyrs	70

PART TWO QUEEN

6. The Assumption	83
7. Maria Regina	106

PART THREE BRIDE

8. The Song of Songs	123
9. Troubadours	136
10. Madonna	151
11. Dante, Beatrice, and the Virgin Mary	162

PART FOUR MOTHER

12. Let it Be	179
13. The Milk of Paradise	195

14. Mater Dolorosa	209
15. The Penitent Whore	228
16. The Immaculate Conception	241
17. The Moon and the Stars	261

PART FIVE INTERCESSOR

18. Growth in Every Thing	279
19. Icons and Relics	291
20. Visions, the Rosary, and War	306
21. The Hour of our Death	322
Epilogue	339
<i>Appendix A: St. Luke's Magnificat</i>	346
<i>Appendix B: A Muddle of Marys</i>	348
<i>Chronology</i>	351
<i>Notes</i>	363
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	403
<i>Index</i>	411

List of Plates

1. Luke's account of the Visitation and King David's arrival in Jerusalem. M.724, Canterbury or St. Albans (?), twelfth century. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.*
2. The life of Samuel, Luke's narrative of the birth of John the Baptist, and the birth of the Virgin. M. 619. 1160–1180, St. Swithin's Priory, Winchester. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.*
3. The Virgin and Child. Second century, Catacomb of S. Priscilla, Rome. *Scala, Florence.*
4. The flight into Egypt, from the apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. From Martin Schongauer's *Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. c. 1470–5. *Bridgeman Art Library/Private Collection.*
5. St. Anne and St. Joachim supervise the Virgin's first steps. Mid-fourteenth century orphrey, English. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*
6. *Vierge Ouvrante*. c. 1300, Middle Rhine. *Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917.*
7. The Virgin Mary, St. Anne, and St. Elisabeth. Eighth-century niche, S. Maria Antiqua, Rome. *Alinari/Topfoto.*
8. Eve and the Serpent. Michelangelo, *The Fall of Man*. 1508–12, Sistine Chapel ceiling (fresco, post restoration, detail of 167699). *Bridgeman Art Library.*
9. The Dormition of the Virgin. Tenth-century ivory from Constantinople, placed by the German Emperor Otto III on the cover of his Gospel Book (Clm 4453, VD). *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.*
10. *The Madonna of the Belt with Saints Gregory, Margaret, Thomas, Augustine, Tobiolo, and Angelo*. Lippi, Filippo (c. 1406–69) & Fra Diamante (c. 1430–90). *Museo della Pittura Murale, Prato, Italy/Alinari /The Bridgeman Art Library.*
11. St. John's vision of a "woman clothed with the sun," pursued by the Beast with seven heads. c. 1250, St Albans (?). *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.*
12. Madonna della Clemenza (Madonna of Clemency). 6th–7th century, Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere. *Scala, Florence.*
13. Tree of Jesse, about 1535. Genga, Girolamo (c. 1476–1551), attr. *Scala, Florence/The National Gallery, London.*

14. Mary and the Apostles. Botticelli, *Descent of the Holy Ghost*. Fifteenth century. *Bridgeman Art Library/ Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, England*.
15. Queen Blanche of Castile with her son St. Louis IX of France; Author Dictating to a Scribe. Moralized Bible, c. 1230, France. M.240, F.8. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
16. The Virgin as Christ's bride. Agnolo Gaddi, *Coronation of the Virgin*. c. 1370, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.203. *National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*
17. The Mystical Marriage of Christ and his mother (detail). Gable of a fourteenth-century (?) Florentine diptych. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*.
18. Mary as Queen of Heaven. Velásquez, *Coronation of the Virgin*. *Bridgeman Art Library/Marnel Collection/Prado, Madrid*.
- 19, 20, 21, 22. Miracles of the Virgin. c. 1456, Flemish. MS Douce 374 Roll 119A (1). *Department of Special Collections & Western Manuscripts Bodleian Library*.
23. *Madonna of Humility*, Domenico di Bartolo. 1433. *National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Andrew Mellon Collection*.
24. Tree of Jesse, Nardon Pénicaud (?). c. 1470–1542, Limoges. *Bridgeman Art Library/Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston*.
25. Joseph is chosen as the Virgin's husband and guardian. Master of the Duke of Bedford, Book of Hours. Ms. Illu. Fifteenth century. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
26. *The Nativity*, Robert Campin (d. 1444). *Bridgeman Art Library/Giraudon/Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France*
27. *The Annunciation and Expulsion from Paradise* (detail), Giovanni di Paolo. c. 1435. *Art Archive/National Gallery of Art Washington/Superstock*.
28. *The Adoration of the Magi*, Sandro Botticelli (d. 1482). *Bridgeman Art Library/National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Andrew Mellon Collection*.
29. The Dormition of the Virgin. Mosaic. 1143, La Martorana, Rome. *Scala, Florence/Fondo Edifici di Culto—Min. dell'Interno*.
30. The Queen of Heaven and the Bride of Christ. 1140, Mosaic. S. Maria in Trastevere, Rome. *Scala, Florence*.
31. *Assumption of the Virgin*, Titian. 1518, *Scala, Florence/S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice*.
32. Saint Anne with Virgin in her womb, flanked by David and Solomon. Book of Hours ('Da Costa Hours'). c. 1515, Bruges, by Simon Bening and others. M.399, f.351v. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
33. *The Immaculate Conception*, Diego Velásquez. Seventeenth century. *Bridgeman Art Library/The National Gallery, London*.
34. *Pietà*, Giovanni Bellini. Sixteenth century. *Bridgeman Art Library/Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice*.

35. *Madonna della Misericordia*, Piero della Francesca. c. 1445–8. *Bridgeman Art Library/Pinacoteca, Sansepolcro*.
36. *Marriage of the Virgin*, Esteban Murillo. 1670. *Bridgeman Art Library, Wallace Collection, London*.
37. *The Intercession of Mary and Jesus*. Florentine, c. 1402. *Scala, Florence/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, purchase 1953*.
38. *Adam and Eve after the Fall*, from *The Labours of Adam and Eve in Initial 'O' and three marginal scenes with the Fall of Man, God discovering the First Sin, and Expulsion from Paradise*. Psalter. Second half thirteenth century, Liège, Flanders. M.183, f.13. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
39. Agnès Sorel, Jean Fouquet, *The Melun Diptych (detail)*. c. 1450. *Bridgeman Art Library/Giraudon/Koninklijk Museum*.
40. *The Mystic Hunt*. Grote, Geert (author), and van Doetinchem, Geertrud (scribe). Sixteenth century, Dutch,. MS McClean 99.f.11v. *Bridgeman Art Library/ Fitzwilliam Museum/McClean Collection, Cambridge*.
41. *The miracle of the Virgin's milk*. Queen Mary Psalter, English, fourteenth century. (Reference number: 175072 [Royal 2 B. VII, Monk restored by the virgin with her milk, f. 231. Digital number: G70032–39]) *The British Library, London*.
42. *The Vision of St. Bernard*, Filippino Lippi. *Scala, Florence*.
43. *Isis nurses Horus*: Reg. No. 1839,0921.76; Image code 00125558001. Courtesy of *The British Museum, London*.
44. *The Madonna and Child*, Coptic artist Isaac, from a manuscript written in 893 in Fayum, Egypt. M. 574 folio 2r. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
45. *Madonna and Child*, (c. 1525–30) Joos van Cleve (c. 1485–1541). *Bridgeman Art Library/Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge*.
46. *Isis and the dead Osiris*. Egyptian; steatite statuette. *The British Museum, London*.
47. *The Virgin and the dead Christ: a Pietà*, The Master of Rimini. c. 1430. *Art Archive/Victoria and Albert Museum, London*.
48. *Jesus is taken down from the Cross*. English ivory, approximately 1150. *Art Archive/Victoria and Albert Museum, London*.
49. *Mary and John at the foot of the Cross*. A pre-Norman Conquest illumination from the English Gospels of Judith of Flanders. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*.
50. *St. Mary Magdelene* c. 1455. Donatello, *La Maddalena*. Fifteenth century, the Baptistry, Florence,. *Bridgeman Art Library/Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence*.
51. *The Two Marys*. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London*.

52. Christ, the Virgin, St. Anne, and St. Emerentia (or Esmeria). Polychrome statue by the Urban Master from Hildesheim, Lower Saxony. *Scala, Florence/Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916.*
53. Mary gives dowries to young brides. Anonymous bas relief, mid-fifteenth century, Rome. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*
54. The Black Madonna of Montserrat. Byzantine, twelfth century. *Alamy/The Print Collector/Monsterrat (Barcelona) Monasterio.*
55. *St. Luke Painting the Virgin*, Rogier van der Weyden. c. 1440. *Bridgeman Art Library/Alte Pinakothek, Munich.*
56. Guide to Saying the Rosary. Woodcut, c. 1490, Savoy, France (?). *National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*
57. The Virgin of Humility. *Madonna in a Rose Arbour*, Stefan Lochner (d. 1451). *Scala, Florence.*
58. *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila*, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1645–52. *Bridgeman Art Library/Alinari/Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.*
59. Altarpiece of the Rosary at St Thégonnec Church (église Rétable du Rosaire). 1697. Photograph: Anne Laurent.
- 60, 61. The monk Theophilus and the Virgin. Bas Relief, tympanum of the abbey church at Souillac, France, twelfth century. *Art Archive/Gianni Dagli Orti/John Parker.*
62. Mary rescues Theophilus the devil. North portal, Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris. c. 1230 Photograph: Jean Roubier.
63. Madonna and Child, follower of Giotto. Italian, early fourteenth century. *Oxford University, Ashmolean Museum.*

Author's Note

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Although it may seem an act of perversity in a book about a Catholic cult, I have used the King James Authorized Version of the Bible. Its imagery and its cadences are so integral to the English language and its strength and beauty so marked that I could not pass it over. Where a divergence between the Authorized Version and the Catholic interpretation is material to my theme, I have supplied the Catholic Douay translation. For similar aesthetic reasons, I have generally quoted poetry in the original language and supplied a translation; but I have quoted prose passages directly in English, unless they are particularly striking in the original and lose greatly in translation.

Preface to the New Edition

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I

As a child, I searched out lives of great women. Some of my heroines appeared in graphic story form on the back page of the comic I read then, called *Girl*: Eleanor of Aquitaine, Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie mingled with Albert Schweitzer and Davy Crockett; their stirring words were blazoned in balloons, against backdrops of crenellated castles, jungles, battlefields. In the pages of the magazines my mother took, I followed the lives of divas, queens and stars; one of these was the pictorial weekly *Oggi*, modelled on *Life*, but also a harbinger of *Hello!* in its lurid curiosity about its rich, mostly doomed subjects. The women who appeared in its pages were usually embroiled in tragic, flagrant lives as abandoned lovers, infertile wives-victims, one way or another. Car crashes figured prominently; also drink and other intoxicants. Maria Callas, Queen Soraya, Françoise Sagan, Marilyn Monroe – these were my role models (you could say I was raised by negative example).

The exceptional status of women achievers, and the rack and ruin to which prominence seemed always to lead, puzzled me from an early age. I worried there might be fundamental differences in ability. I also became anxious about the discrepancy between women's sinfulness and men's: we were 'occasions of sin' rather than perpetrators; we incited others rather than committed acts ourselves. Could it be that the female sex was intrinsically passive and docile, so nicer? (This was the implied message, and in the Fifties and Sixties, far fewer young women were convicted of crimes than their male counterparts.) Could this be a strength, or somehow disabling? I began reading and watching for clues.

Resonances struck between historical individuals and larger than life mythological heroines gradually assumed significance beyond simple similarities. I hadn't yet come across Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, a book that was to prove crucial to me later, but I was beginning to sense the workings of ideology in stories, running from the sacred to the profane, from tales of the virgin martyrs, celebrated on their feast days and in the litany of the saints, to the cautionary lives of the rich and addicted.¹ The anthropology of Malinowski and Margaret Mead was another crucial inspiration, for their vision of alternative social arrangements (and sexual freedom) provided passionate support for culture over nature, for social conditioning over biological destiny. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, which had also first appeared long before I read it, was decisive as well, though Beauvoir's vivid way with physical evocation was less encouraging than Malinowski and Mead's utopian picture of possible liberty. Beauvoir's grim plain-speaking put bodies – gynaecology and geriatrics – firmly at the centre of female secondary status.

In 1970 Germaine Greer brought out *The Female Eunuch*, which owes a huge debt to its French foremother, but parted from her in the defiant rallying call Greer issued to her sisters, in the incandescent eloquence she used to refuse the status quo, and her passionate and marvellous fury that women allowed the propaganda against female potential to continue. The book was a manifesto, and it rose on a spring tide of popular enthusiasm for feminism; appearing after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and the same year as Kate Millett's blazing *Sexual Politics*, it marked the height of post-war hopefulness that things could change.

My editor during those excited days of hope, Christopher Falkus at Weidenfeld & Nicolson, read something I had contributed to a book of essays by women on what they thought had shaped them as women.² The Virgin Mary was the single most dominant and crucial element in my female life so far, and I'd written a short piece about the sexual politics of my convent school upbringing. Christopher liked it and wanted me to expand it into a full-length study. I protested, I begged, I told him I had struggled hard against the grip of Mary, and to condemn me to spend at least two or three years once more entangled with her as intimately and intensely as a book would require, was too terrible to contemplate. He urged me to think about it.

I was in Vietnam a few months later as a journalist, because I had only just got married, and I didn't want to be parted from my husband, William

Shawcross, who had been assigned to cover the war for the *Sunday Times*. In our room upstairs at the Hotel Royale, Saigon, I began looking at the New Testament, and was startled to find so few passages about the Mother of God. It seems naïve of me – and indeed ignorant – to have expected her presence there to be more fully realised, but I had been immersed in her cult throughout my life so far. At school we celebrated her feast days with masses, processions, and holiday treats; on ordinary weekdays, we were trained to feel with her sorrows, her joys, her glories as we recited the Rosary; and a myriad images of her – in miniatures in our missals, in paintings and statues inside the school and outside in the grounds, created a sense that Mary and Christian doctrine were synonymous. She pervaded the story of salvation as I had been told it.

As I was – still rather half-heartedly – embarking on writing a book about Mary, I began looking in Vietnam for traces of her cult. The cathedral in Saigon is dedicated to her, in her single, powerful aspect as the Immaculate Conception, and this effect of late nineteenth-century French Catholicism, revealing the popularity of Bernadette's vision through the French empire, confirmed my growing feeling that the subject held matters of interest beyond sex, that the figure of the Virgin Mary could be unfolded with regard to ethics in a wider political relevance. During the early period of contact between Christian missionaries, Buddhists and Taoists, a male Bodhisattva, Guannon, gradually changed into Guannin (Kuan-yin) the beloved goddess who protects women and children especially. In Asia, in converted countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, the two figures, like communicating vessels, exchanged and mingled their essences: Mary acquired the features of Guanyin, while Guanyin attracted to her many miracle stories told about Mary and the saints in the middle ages, themselves stories close to fairy tales – about Mary sheltering persecuted brides from the false accusations of evil mothers-in-law, or living in disguise as a monk and finding she's charged with fathering a child.

The Black Virgin Mountain near Saigon, once a shrine to a local nature divinity, had become a Marian shrine, as often happens to ancient holy places, and I decided to go there. The lower slopes are also home to the headquarters of the Cao Dai, the vegetarian, pacifist, anti-communist cult founded in 1926, which figures malignly in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. I was curious to see their vast enclave at Tay Ninh, where they worship an eclectic group of heroes, prophets and saints – Jesus and

Mohammed, Julius Caesar, Sun Yat-Sen, Joan of Arc and Victor Hugo (the last two again exhibiting French colonial influence).

The press corps in Saigon used to hang around the verandah of the Hotel Continentale, waiting for a lead about the state of the war, and one day in June 1972 they (we) were at a loose end, and I suggested we hire a group taxi to take us to the Mountain. En route, we stopped at the Cao Dai city, thronged with white-robed followers, and visited the temple, where in the nave the cult's pantheon is depicted in larger than life-size brilliantly enamelled statues, amid a riot of gilded, floral, polychrome decoration. The wild syncretism of this modern faith provokes easy surprise, even laughter (Victor Hugo on a pedestal in his dark suit), but in many ways its evolution, through adaptability and absorption, offers something to learn about changing established religions as well, about their ideological shifts and bids for relevance.

We then continued down Route One, but began to notice signs of fighting: planes overhead and some smoke drifting on the horizon. Gradually it became more difficult to advance: army blocks, stopped traffic, soldiers standing around in patrols on the road, stationary. We were still waved on, however, until we reached a larger huddle of buses and cars, surrounded by a detachment of the South Vietnamese army, squatting on their helmets, and a small crowd of local people, with photographers and journalists leaning against carts and trucks and lorries. Almost as we stopped beside them, a strike from the air exploded in the village visible ahead, in front of the twin towers of the Catholic church, and out of the smoke came running some of the villagers, down the road towards us. The first person I saw was the mother – or grandmother – of a baby in her arms, and the skin of the baby was hanging loose off his limp naked body. The woman was howling and as I stood there looking, waves of different feelings came over me all at once: horror at my helplessness (I had nothing with me even to cover a baby in that state, let alone do something medically useful), shame at my position as a foreign visitor, a voyeur out to find and see these terrible events, and then, as I took in the trail of smoke over the placid water buffalo lying half-submerged in the paddies by the side of the road and the farmland and the houses around us, so quiet, so apparently peaceful, I was engulfed in a kind of longing to disappear into them, to sink into the shallow water.

There were many more children and women, older people – men and women – scrambling out of Trang Bang, and a terrible confusion of

wounded and terrorized and dying. Among them was a thin naked little girl screaming, as she ran down the road; she had also been burned by the napalm bombing, and her image travelled all over the world and came to embody the horror of the Vietnam war.

Much later her name – Kim Phuc – became known and she herself acted for a long time as a goodwill ambassador to help build peace.

The experience has returned in many things I have tried to write, and gave me a motive and a perspective. Although the connection between the bombing of civilians in Vietnam and the cult of the Virgin Mary is very stretched, the two are for me emotionally and ethically interwoven, as the accident of that day, June 8 1972, made evident.

II

When *Alone of All Her Sex* came out, four years later, in 1976, it provoked controversy: I was denounced in Ireland, for example, not surprisingly, and several reviewers here and in the US condemned the book for its attack on Catholicism. Garry Wills, a leading and brilliant Catholic polemicist, who had inspired me with his study of the crisis in the faith (*Bare Ruined Choirs*, 1972) criticised my book for its contradictoriness. I show a great love of Mary, he wrote, of the art, liturgy, and cult she inspires, while rejecting the meaning of the symbols and the doctrines associated with them. Michele Roberts dramatised the fracture that writers who were once a Catholic experience in her a novel, *The Wild Girl* (1984), which was sparked by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi gnostic gospels, and rejects the orthodox portraits of Jesus, Mary, and Mary Magdalene.³ The novel is full of passion, defending an incarnational vision against joyless austerity and female subordination. Roberts' usurping of the evangelists' position stands at the start of a strong recent trend.

Colm Tóibín, in *The Testament of Mary*, captures this state of doubled consciousness, and with a tragedian's insight into inner conflict has entered into her voice, expressing the anguished struggle between love and doubt, faith and rage, trust and terror; it's a luminous act of negative capability, and reads to me like Tóibín's own confessions – he has written before from the position of a cradle Catholic (in *The South*, 1990).⁴ In this fiction, which began as a play, he dramatises ambiguity about what is true and what is right, what is believed and what is rejected. His book follows closely on

Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel*, in which she quarries her background in Judaism and comes to a similar bleak sense of breakdown between mother and son. Mary, a disbeliever in her own status as Mother of God, speaks as the conscience of those who have known the security of faith.⁵ My own split feelings are bound up with what these writers are saying, but it has become a little less difficult to enjoy Marian worship, though I'm still not altogether freed from very turbulent responses. Invited to hear a friend, a decade ago, singing in evensong at Jesus College, Cambridge, I was transported by a motet the choir clanged and mewed to the rafters, a wild ecstatic *a cappella* sequence of rising repetitions of the single phrase, 'Totus tuus, Mater mundi' (Wholly yours, mother of the world). Afterwards, I found that the piece was by the Polish composer Henryk Gorecki to words that Pope John Paul II had adopted for his personal motto, by which he expressed his intense love of Mary. The piece was composed in 1987 to celebrate the Pope's third visit to his native country to the national shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa.

The association spoiled the pleasure the music had given me, then, for John Paul II had declared again and again his opposition to the changing role of women, rejected the ordination of women, and urged closer emulation of Mary. The priesthood, he argued, was a masculine role which would harm women's 'proper originality'.

A motherless boy from a communist state, Pope John Paul II experienced personal and political losses that inspired his fervent attachment to the ideal mother, the embodiment of the motherland, and he did more than any Pope in modern times to revive her cult. He made pilgrimages to Marian shrines of recent date, and was known to take a keen, sympathetic interest in Medjugorje, in former Yugoslavia, for example, where a series of visions were fiercely contested by the local clergy. The Fatima visions of 1917, the year of the Bolshevik revolution, developed into the focus of a vehement anti-communist crusade, and this pontiff carried with him, into the central authority of the Church, the beleaguered mentality of a community who looked for support from Mary's modern apparitions and their prophecies. His most ardent devotions were paid to Our Lady of Fatima, for she had prophesied the attempt on his life in 1981, it was widely believed, and saved him during the attack. He dedicated the bullet that was extracted from his body to her statue at Fatima, where it is embedded among the jewels in her crown. In 1997, his devotion was sealed when he proclaimed Mary as Co-Redemptrix with Christ.⁶

Benedict XVI, his successor, is of a less passionate temperament, and before he became Pope, acted as a rigorous scrutineer at the Holy Office over which he presided. But he has also made the pilgrimage to Fatima and reinterpreted the Virgin's mysterious 'Third Secret' as a warning of the grief overwhelming the Church over the child abuse scandals.⁷

At Medjugorje, where the visions began in 1981, and at Ballinaspittle in Ireland, where in 1985 a statue began wobbling before crowds of pilgrims, the Madonna's message has been that however buffeted the faithful are by change, by reform, by the pressures and problems of modernity, she is there on their side to help. The anthropologist William Christian, Jr. has explored the interpenetration of belief and power, visions and state authority, in research focussing on Spain, but applicable more widely.⁸ Such outbursts of fervour are sincere, he argues, and genuinely popular, even when they serve the interests of a certain party; the young seers, very often adolescent girls, are not lying, but they succeed in commanding attention because the message they bring serves outside interests – the Cold War at Fatima, and anti-Tito-style universalist Sovietism at Medjugorje (now in Bosnia-Herzegovina but near the border with Croatia).⁹

In Ireland, the phenomena at Ballinaspittle sparked several other visions; they were taking place in a time of ferment when traditional social norms were being turned upside down (referenda were held on divorce and abortion, while charges of sexual abuse tore into the church's self-image, exposing guardians as predators, the sinners as victims.) Local bishops, confronted with visionaries and their followers, often chose scepticism, if not downright condemnation; were the clergy not given to doubt, the shrines would spring up in greater numbers than they do – any month brings news of bleeding icons, more moving statues, and Madonnas appearing in pareidolia on walls, in tomatoes, in a slice of bread. John Paul II was unusually open to such portents, and in his endorsement of Fatima and other cult sites of the virgin Mary, he unexpectedly approved a populist current in contemporary religion, which joins its energies to the flood of interest in all manifestations of faith, ritual, iconic images, and individual beliefs.¹⁰

When I learned that the music I had found so blissful crystallised around Mary's most powerful and passionate pilgrim, Karol Josef Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II, I felt cheated by its loveliness, rather like a bridegroom in a story who finds he has been married off to the wrong sister (Jacob and Leah, and later, Italo Svevo in *The Confessions of Zeno*). But last year, when I heard

the same piece again played on Radio Three, I found I could split it from its origins in papal ideology and propaganda uses of Mary. I could surrender to its beauty. This new serenity may be connected to Pope John Paul II having died in the interim. Perhaps. But I also think that I mind less about the dictates and precepts of the Catholic Church because its grip on ethics feels so much less confident these days and its pronouncements on women and the ‘proper originality’ of their teleology have lost purchase. With huge changes taking place on the religious map (not only Islam but the spread of Christian evangelism), the meanings and uses of the Virgin Mary have also changed. In the last century, apparitions tended to be conservative in their yearnings, especially when approved by clergy, as at Fatima, with Mary castigating the community for their lapses and little faith.¹¹ There was always another, countervailing current, however, when she rebuked the clergy and extended her protection to victims. With the widespread sexual misconduct of priests and nuns, and the remoteness of the present pope’s personality, the Church’s power to chastise and control has collapsed in many communities; this has contributed strongly to an efflorescence of popular forms of belief, expressed in the staging of events and the making of images, of a sacred character but with no denominational allegiance or ethical prescription.¹²

III

Letters began coming from readers in 1976 and they still do, surprisingly frequently. A French publisher warned me that the only people who would read the book would be offended by it, but he was wrong. The Virgin Mary means so much to so many that the book draws breath from their beliefs or dissent, from their recognition of fellow feeling and similar experience – lapsed Catholic women are very numerous and even those who return to the church still experience misgivings and frustrations, and write to tell me they know and recognise what I am trying to say. Some of the correspondents were extraordinary individuals: poets sent me translations of Rilke’s *Marianleben* and their own works – in one case an epic rhapsodising the feast of the Assumption in the style of David Jones’s *Anathemata*. I struck up friendships by post with Dom Sylvester Houedard, the Benedictine monk, mystic, and pioneering concrete poet of the Sixties,

who from his cell in Prinknash Abbey, Gloucestershire, sent me rare and marvellous lore about the faith: the ring with which St Catherine is espoused to the Christ Child, he wrote, is none other than the foreskin of the baby, a ring of flesh. The spikes on the Catherine wheel, he told me in another letter, carry the memory of the oyster shells which the mob picked up on the quay of Alexandria to stone the philosopher Hypatia to death – the pagan Hypatia having metamorphosed into the learned Doctor of the Church Catherine, according to the law of absorb and conquer.

Joseph Needham, the great Cambridge Sinologist, was invited by Oxford to give the University Sermon the year after my book came out, and he sent me the text, in which he explored the possibility of a sacred feminine principle.¹³ He spoke about being a Christian, but ‘a twentieth century one’, and said that he recognised that the Tao offered guiding principles compatible with Christianity, especially the presence of ‘a cosmic libido’, which can take a feminine form. He urged that this energy be infused into the paragon of femaleness, the Virgin Mary. (Nearly forty years on, Needham’s ideas have become widespread among New Age believers – more on this below.)

There were many hostile letters as well; some relished my future eternal punishment, some were praying for me to be spared it. Invitations came, and these continue. I’ve written about more recent apparitions – about the shrine at Knock, and about the bleeding statue at Civitavecchia in the 1990s.¹⁴

The historiography has been growing, and fine-grained studies have since appeared and supplied microcosmic analyses of Marian phenomena, such as the visions in 1876 to three little girls at Marpingen, Germany, ‘the German Lourdes’, which David Blackbourn explores in a magisterial book to illuminate the interactions of political movements with Catholic cult.¹⁵ Ruth Harris’s *Lourdes*, mentioned above, reconfigures all previous approaches to the most phenomenal sacred site of modern Christendom, and brilliantly dissolves the positivist/pious dichotomies established in the 19th century and recasts the terms of engagement with such subject matter. Coming from the keyboard of a professed secular non-Catholic scholar, this book on Lourdes overturned the presumption that history of faith can’t be written sympathetically by an outsider. Harris also brought an anthropological approach to bear, open to the way the informants picture their experience, rather than assessing the evidence with detachment; in an analogous way to psychoanalysis, it is the life of the story that matters,

not its objective veracity. The effect of this is to leave Bernadette's experiences a mystery, the miracles unaccountable. But Harris's book illuminates eloquently the complex tensions that brought the massive pilgrimage into being. Both she and Blackbourn show sympathy with the causes of the oppressed that were channelled through supernatural vehicles; Blackbourn points out that leading Romantics who were recording the stories, songs, and memories of the illiterate, also showed concern for the new visionaries: Clemens Brentano, a crucial supporter of the Grimm Brothers, and indeed the inspiration for their fairy tale collecting, took down the experiences of the mystic Catherine Emmerich in the Rhineland and described her as a Cinderella.

The importance of Mary's cult beyond Europe has fired some of the best contemporary writings on her: in 2004, Linda B. Hall published her vivid and convincing study, *Mary, Mother and Warrior* (2004) in which she focusses on her popularity and its vehicles of iconography, ritual, feast days, music, celebration.¹⁶ Local culture, history and memory, ancient and recent, have been interfused into Catholic tradition and transformed it; Our Lady of Guadalupe symbolises a pre-Conquest Mexico for the thousands who flock to the shrine. The vision of Juan Diego grounds the identity of the people in a special miracle of protection, wrought by the Virgin, rather than in humiliation and bloodshed.

In *Mother of God* (2010), an account of the cult of Mary from the early years of the Catholic church to around 1500, the medievalist Miri Rubin sets out features of the Jewish community in which Mary of Nazareth would have been living; in this respect she attempts to unite the study of her myth with a historical approach, looking into the symbol to find the woman of her time. She also comes to her subject from a non-partisan position, after several powerful studies in aspects of anti-Semitism and Christianity, and examines aspects of contemporary interest, such as the Koranic presence of Mary. Yet, these important books aside, there has still been surprisingly little analysis of the female myth that dominated culture through Christendom for two millennia and still radiates energy for millions worldwide.

Looking back at my own book after over thirty years, I am dismayed by my hubris in taking on such a vast subject. Also, if I were to return to it now, I would write about different things. It's the work of a young woman absorbed in questions of sexuality, transgression and obedience, purity and pollution, far less interested in motherhood, or in grieving and solitude,

ageing and loss. I was still in my twenties, much nearer the convent than I am now. My closing assertion, that the cult of Mary would become, like the worship of Hera or Aphrodite or Artemis, a myth which no longer inspires belief, reads today as a hope at best, and a major historical error at worst. Yet it remains the case that nobody expected the return of religion in the twenty-first century to the centre of the social and political arenas.

IV

The startling resurgence of faith is one of the many complicated results of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, but the rise of a politicized Islam began long before and was taking place in conjunction with the hardening evangelism of Christians in the United States; this rivalrous self-labelling revived an impassioned crusading spirit in political decision-making, which was prominently adopted to justify the invasion of Iraq. People like myself, who knew that congregations of all varieties were thinning in numbers, had felt that secularisation was settled as the norm. But this was to come to an end: however secular or sceptical one might be as an individual, the argument about religion is now live. Churches need to speak about state matters because states are increasingly casting themselves as the messengers of higher truths. Militant atheists, Islamist and Christian fundamentalists, New Age adepts, charismatic Catholics – faith has become one of the chief defining elements in identity and ideals. Philosophers have even begun suggesting that non-believers need their own temple of worship.¹⁷ Meanwhile, militant atheists are rising up in protest, in outcry after outcry that the public sphere is being encroached upon by believers.

The solidarity felt between some Christians and the anti-capitalist political movement throws a fresh and curious light on the evolving differences of the cult of the Virgin Mary since the Fifties when I was a Catholic Child of Mary. Mary in modern times has consistently appeared to the poor, unlettered, downtrodden, children, women, the overworked and underpaid, a strand in her story that casts her as an appropriate symbol within the Occupy movement, something that would have been unthinkable in the Fifties and Sixties, when she was carried in the processions of juntas. At La Salette in 1848, for example, the young seers, when asked what the splendid Lady had told them, passed on orders that everyone

should keep one day a week holy in her honour: labouring children were invoking a union rep on high to get them a day off.¹⁸ At Lourdes, as Ruth Harris illuminated, a coalition of women, from a pauper like the visionary herself, Bernadette Soubirous, to the philanthropic *grandes dames* who championed her truthfulness, formed to articulate a policy for the church that would give women a greater role in its ministry, fulfilling Christ's teaching on the Seven Acts of Mercy; Mary's apparitions to Bernadette as the figure of eternal wisdom, the Immaculate Conception, not the Madonna with her child, confirmed this modern metamorphosis of the Virgin's character.¹⁹

One of the most striking features of the modern Mary is the fading from view of the baby. However much the doctrine commands the faithful to worship God through Mary and not Mary herself, almost every contemporary image I have looked at shows Mary on her own, often standing on the moon, an apocalyptic figure of power, resplendent, blessings flowing from her hands. Just as the Madonna of Mercy in medieval cult spreads her cloak to shelter all who turn to her (and even covers up errant nuns' pregnancies), Mary is now invoked as the protectress of the wretched, the guardian of sinners and prodigals.

The appearances of a such a figure are myriad – from the visions in Paris in 1830, which gave rise to the Miraculous Medal, to the current apparitions at the Coptic Church in Zeitoun, Cairo, where a radiant lady hovers over the domes in full view and promises to shield the faithful from the persecution they are suffering. In the French church in Soho, London, the image over the high altar is a tapestry, a modern variation on the medieval *mille fleurs* design, and it shows a young girl in an elaborate white gown, surrounded by a blossoming garden in flower; more a figure of Spring, a *kore* or Persephone-like divinity, this Virgin Mary was designed by the parish priest in 1954. You couldn't tell, from anything in the image, that she is meant to be the Mother of Jesus from the Bible.

Alongside the growing importance of religion in political conflicts and their justification, a countervailing, popular revival of religious practices is under way. Some of its participants adhere to a conventional church, some are believers, but mavericks, yet others are no believers at all. Different groups of very different persuasions are nevertheless accepting a new turn towards what the Catalan philosopher Eugenio Trias has termed a religion of the spirit, grounded in events not tenets.²⁰ Such events are marked by symbols and rituals, which take the form of artifacts and actions or

enactments – pilgrimage, procession, ceremony. Relics, icons, charms and talismans are efflorescing. Within the official Church, the opposition to such popular expressions of piety are loosening: Pope Benedict XVI in this respect follows John Paul II's enthusiasms, and is promoting the use of indulgences again.²¹ The veneration of relics is being strongly encouraged once more – a relic of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was recently taken on tour; the reliquary attracted vast, fervent crowds who testified to reporters that contact with the saint had a transformative effect on them.²² When the Belt of Virgin Mary, a famed help to fertility, was brought last year from Mount Athos to Russia, thousands queued in the icy winter weather to touch the reliquary; the majority were women, young women between twenty and forty. The passion of such testimonials is moving, and it would be ugly to scoff at them; they also offer, as one Russian paper commented, a diagnosis of distress.

One of the relic's way stations on its triumphal tour was the Cathedral Church of Christ the Saviour where, around six months later, Pussy Riot erupted onto the altar by the sacred iconostasis and staged their protest. 'The main concern,' one of them said afterwards, 'was to appeal to the Virgin because she is considered the protector of Russia, and that is why we made a prayer to the Virgin to kick out Putin.' A choppy video shows the young women in their lollipop-bright balaclavas, tights and dresses, capering and kneeling, and then, after two of them have been hauled away, the two who are left cross and prostrate themselves before guards hustle them off. In a magnificent show of spirit, punk irony here claims Mary for its champion against the lies and corruption of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is headed by a patriarch who has called Putin 'a miracle of God'. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova sees the band's actions as yurodstvo – 'holy fooling' – in the Russian spiritual tradition, and brilliantly turns quotes from the New Testament against the women's accusers: 'It makes us sick,' she said in her closing statement to the court, 'to see such beautiful ideas forced to their knees.' It is extraordinary that the state doesn't see that meting out excessive punishments to the band – Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, both of whom have a young child, have been sent to prison camps of notorious harshness – only goes to prove that what they say is right. Such developments are following – not leading – the general sacramental trend of public ceremony and assemblies – mass pilgrimages to museums and art installations and events on the one hand, passionate involvement in weddings, royal and other. Creating wayside shrines at

the spot, the tree, the junction where somebody died in a road accident has changed the experience of driving: on one stretch of road that I take to my university post, there are now three trees garlanded with flowers and fluttering with cards, photographs and other mementoes and messages. White bicycles, also covered in garlands and tributes, are padlocked to railings where a rider was knocked over; they are part of the protest for bicycle lanes and improved road safety, but they are also grim memento moris, with a ritual charge independent of creed.

The anti-capitalist camps, which sprung up in different cities and were cleared by police applying different levels of brutality, also turn tenet into event, taking language into the territory of controlled action. Such camps differ from marches, and draw more on the tradition of communal ritual. Their members have undertaken a pilgrimage in conviction and hope, and are addressing a united plea for sanctuary and redress. Their protests resemble prayer, even conjurations and apotropaic rituals, and they use masks movement, gestures and other elements of performance. In the wake of Pussy Riot, four Occupy protesters commemorated the anniversary of that eviction by chaining themselves to the pulpit of St Paul's. Photo opportunities in an era of instant image-transmission and news-streaming explain some of the ritual theatricality of these happenings, but not the reasons for their occurrence in the first place. In many ways, these protestors (and their methods are widespread through many other reform movements) are adapting old sacramental processes to secular and political purposes, without necessarily proclaiming allegiance to a creed.

These examples range from very different kinds of event, involve very different groups and individuals, but they do share two principal unifying features: first that they are events, communal statements expressed by gesture, movement, action and their meanings (tenets) are not apparent, defined, cohesive, or central; and secondly – and this follows from the absence of settled tenets – they take place regardless of belief in a higher order of reality, however much they seem to reproduce religious processes. For both these reasons, The Virgin Mary is increasingly loved and revered, invoked and depicted well outside the sphere of Catholic officialdom. From being the figurehead of the long crusade against communism and the emblem of kings and Fascist dictators from Europe to Central and South America, she is evolving, it seems to me, into a countercultural peace symbol, closer to the voodoo goddess Erzulie or the candomble figure of

Iemanja than a traditional Madonna. It isn't that her myth has died – far from it; but it has changed with regard to its historic meanings, alliances, and effects.

The sexual, feminist issues, embodied by the Virgin Mary when she was held up as the ideal of womanhood, have become less urgently intertwined with her symbolism. By contrast, the larger ethical questions and their political reverberations, about relations of church and state, belonging and dispossession, justice, equality of means, of women and children's survival, stewardship of nature, have crystallized in the traditional figure of Mary in her aspects as the Mother of Mercy and advocate and protectress of the poor. And it is not only the self-professed faithful who find this Mary an inspiration.

The potter Grayson Perry's British Museum exhibition, *The Tomb Of the Unknown Craftsman* (2012), offers a vivid case of the metamorphosis I am describing.²³ He chose from the museum's extraordinary collections an extraordinary array of objects, in order to explore the ways cultures have tapped the sacred through images, ritual artefacts, reliquaries, vestments, spells and charms. The Virgin Mary is invoked by many of the exhibits, as were many of her counterparts among the magna maters and virgin goddesses of civilisations ancient and modern. Most striking of all, to my eyes, was one sculpture, called 'Our Mother', a cast iron statue of a woman completely covered in things she's carrying – like a pedlar or a refugee, a bag lady.²⁴ Rusted and mineral, with a head and face modelled on an African sculpture, she also reminds the viewer, in her bristling accoutrements, of the fetish statues which are studded with nails into which wishes have been infused by the petitioners, or of cult statues of Mary that are swathed from head to foot in gorgeous costume and ornament and flutter with entreaties pinned to them. She is Eve, in her African aspect as the world ancestress, but also a contemporary deity, a figure of Our Lady of the Disappeared, the Dispossessed, the Displaced. Grayson Perry's 'Mother' conveys that she is a pilgrim. Pilgrimage, wanderings, and migrations were themes of the show and lie at the heart of its quest to bring the anonymous – the ordinary – into view as the makers of the world. It's a long time ago that I lost my faith in Mary, a long time since she was the fulcrum of the scheme of salvation I then believed in, alongside Jesus the chief redeemer. But I find that the symbolism of mercy and love which her figure has traditionally expressed has migrated and now shapes secular imagery and

events; Catholic worship and moral teaching no longer monopolize it or control its significance.

Marina Warner
Kentish Town, 2012

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ALONE OF ALL HER SEX

*She . . . had no peer
Either in our first mother or in all women
Who were to come. But alone of all her sex
She pleased the Lord.¹*

—CAELIUS SEDULIUS

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Prologue

We do not know, and never shall know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past; but, as far as the present is concerned, it is certain that social behaviour is not produced spontaneously by each individual, under the influence of emotions of the moment. Men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act. Customs are given as external norms before giving rise to internal sentiments, and these non-sentient norms determine the sentiments of individuals as well as the circumstances in which they may, or must, be displayed.²

—CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

Invocations to the Virgin Mary marked out the days of my childhood in bells; her feasts gave a rhythm to the year; an eternal ideal of mortal beauty was fixed by the lineaments of her face, which gazed from every wall and niche.

On February 2, the feast of the Purification, we wore starched white veils of tulle that stood out around us like a nimbus. With the medals of the Sodality of Our Lady on blue ribbons round our necks, we processed with lit candles up to the communion rails to be blessed. In another convent school, on the same day, each young girl laid a lily at the feet of the Virgin's statue: "Mary, I give you the lily of my heart, be thou its guardian for ever."³

The blue ribbons—blue is the colour of the Virgin, "the sapphire," as Dante wrote, who turns all of heaven blue—signified that the wearer was a child of Mary, and had dedicated herself to the Virgin and promised to emulate her in thought, word, and deed: her chastity, her humility, her gentleness. She was the culmination of womanhood. As my agnostic father maintained, it was a good religion for a girl.

Under the chapel there was a crypt, with a grotto of the Virgin made from chunks of cork oak from the Holy Land and hung all about with rosaries. On special occasions—the death of a pope, for instance—we were allowed to file into this darkened and scented place to kneel before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes and recite our Hail Marys. The worship bit deep into our imaginations: I was no exception when, secretly and with intense excitement, I made myself my own grotto. Finding a rhododendron bush so old that its dusty dark green foliage framed a hollow chamber, I used to crawl in during breaks and after study hours and kneel to pray. “Holiness,” as we called it, was natural, a part of living as simple as drawing breath. “She’s so *holy*,” we’d say in admiration of a classmate who spent particularly long on her knees before the thirteenth Station of the Cross: “Mary takes her beloved son to her bosom.” Only moments before we had been stifling our giggles at that risqué word “bosom.”

So our holiness was a shallow affair, although most of us considered with complacent resignation the vocation to the cloister, which might suddenly come upon us. Other Christians are often shocked by Catholic frivolity. Our religion was certainly untroublesome, because it consisted of simple certainties, outlined in the crisp rhetoric of the Catechism we learned by heart. And the Virgin was the chief of these certainties.

In her mercy, her sweetness, her overflowing goodness, she was incapable of withholding her favour if approached with the right courtesies and the correct salutations. The bond of motherhood that attached her to her son and to the whole human race through him presupposed a natural law of inalienable, irreducible, indestructible love. All the antiphons that pealed from the choir beseeching her to save us were, despite their imploring words, so much praise and thanksgiving. She did not really need to be asked.

We were not troubled by questions about the Virgin’s personality, about what her life had been, what she had been like. We sometimes chattered about the colour of her skin—swarthy?—or the shape of her nose—Jewish? But we never probed history deeper, and although we did study the New Testament, we never noticed—it was not indeed called to our attention—how the Virgin is passed over almost in silence.

The world of music, flowers, perfumes, and painting that enfolded her was filled with joy. It was only in the last two years at school, when I had been a devout Mariolater all my conscious life, that I felt the first chill wind sigh in this blissful pleasure dome. Doubts about doctrine caused minor

tremors compared to the absolute misery that shook me when I was confronted, in puberty, by the Church's moral teaching.

For although the Virgin was steadfast, the human heart was faithless; although she never abandoned a votary, her votary could abandon her, and then, like Orpheus turning to grasp the vanishing shade of Eurydice, the intimate bond that once existed was severed. The price the Virgin demanded was purity, and the way the educators of Catholic children have interpreted this for nearly two thousand years is sexual chastity. Impurity, we were taught, follows from many sins, but all are secondary to the principal impulse of the devil in the soul—lust.

It is wry now to remember, at this distance, the terror this inspired: the children who spent the night cruciform on the dormitory floor after a “dirty thought,” the tears of shame and embarrassment in the confessional after teenage gropings at lights-out parties. But even while the terror gripped me, I was already doubtful. Although I could not have articulated it then as I can now, I sensed that the problem of human evil was more complex than concupiscence—at least in its narrow sexual definition.

The Virgin, sublime model of chastity, nevertheless remained for me the most holy being I could ever contemplate, and so potent was her spell that for some years I could not enter a church without pain at all the safety and beauty of the salvation I had forsaken. I remember visiting Notre Dame in Paris and standing in the nave, tears starting in my eyes, furious at that old love's enduring power to move me. But though my heart rebelled, I held fast to my new intimation that in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated.

In this book I have tried, by exploring aspects of the Virgin's cult in Europe, to describe this paradox more fully. I started with a simple question: what was it I had worshipped? It is therefore the outcome of a private journey. But there are millions of Catholics who share the same experience. For almost all the 659 million of them in the world, the religious landscape encloses at its very heart the powerful and most beloved figure of the Virgin. Wayside shrines in Italy, with a poor plaster of parais statue, a ring of cracked fairy lights, and a withered bunch of flowers; the Angelus bell in France; even the dedications of village churches in England—once Roman, now Anglican—are fragments of the same myth that inspired Botticelli to paint the Virgin's portrait, that raised the spire and towers of Chartres, and that moved Dante to give voice in Paradise.

I have not pursued the historical Mary, the woman of Nazareth, because theology and belief have only rarely focussed on her. The reader will find nothing about life in Galilee in the first decades of our era. I have concentrated on the different aspects the Virgin assumes at different times and have attempted to uncover the convergence of circumstances that might have made such a symbol satisfying. The Virgin Mary has been formed and animated by different people for different reasons, and is a truly popular creation. That does not mean the “people” as opposed to the ruling classes or to the intelligentsia, for she has been the beloved patroness of saints as brilliant as Bernard of Clairvaux, or a pope as intellectually refined as Pius XII, or a king as gallant as Henry V of England.⁴ It is an insular assumption that—as one often hears in England—the cult of the Virgin is the refuge of a poverty-stricken peasantry.

The finer points of Mariology have always been and still are a delight to the subtlest and clearest thinkers in the Church. Four dogmas have been defined and must be believed as articles of faith: her divine motherhood and her virginity, both declared by councils of the early Church and therefore accepted by most of the reformed Christian groups; the immaculate conception, sparing her all stain of original sin, which was proclaimed in 1854; and her assumption, body and soul, into heaven, which Pope Pius XII defined in 1950. The Vatican is still pondering whether the Virgin Mary experienced death at all, and whether the traditional and widespread faith in her perpetual virginity—her unbroken hymen—*post partum* (after birth) as well as *in partu* (during), is necessary. With scholastic nicety, she is entitled to a special worship of her own—*hyperdulia*. God is owed *latria* (adoration) and the saints *dulia* (veneration), but Mary occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and heaven. Pope Paul VI has a learned and profound devotion to the Virgin, as his 1974 apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* bears witness. Since medieval times the aristocracy have opened their purses to build churches in her honour, to commission paintings, statues, masses, and votive crowns for her shrines. There are two colleges at Oxford placed under her patronage, although both—Oriel and New College—are known under their sobriquets.⁵ But she is also, as is more visible to the Mediterranean tourist, the focus of a vigorous and fertile grassroots piety that knows nothing of Duns Scotus’ casuistry or Pius XII’s ratiocinations.

A myth of such dimension is not simply a story, or a collection of stories, but a magic mirror like the Lady of Shalott’s, reflecting a people and the

beliefs they produce, recount, and hold. It presents their history in a certain light and in a way that singles them out. For the Virgin is a protagonist in the drama of the Incarnation and the Redemption of Christ, and consequently in the personal salvation of each individual who feels himself to belong to Christian history and professes Christian beliefs. (Until the Reformation this applied to almost all Christians, but now it is restricted to Catholics, Orthodox, and High Anglicans.) Just as Aeneas provided Roman citizens with historical roots in the noble past of Troy and descent from the goddess Venus, his mother, and at the same time furnished a standard of conduct that they regarded as exemplary—Virgil's "pius Aeneas"—so the Virgin Mary, an ordinary woman who gave birth to Christ, in whom all found new life, becomes the symbolic mother of the Church, gives each of its members a part in God's plan, and also stands as a model of perfect humanity.

Myth, while providing a historical viewpoint and an ethical code for its adherents, also follows certain characteristic but easily overlooked patterns of thought. For instance, the Christian equivalence between spiritual impurity and bodily decay provides the basic argument behind the doctrine of the Assumption, which declares that the all-pure Virgin was spared the dissolution of the grave. In such patterns, the sacred and the profane, as well as human desires and fears, can to some extent be deciphered.

I have not undertaken a history of the cult of the Virgin as such, but in chronological order I have taken aspects of her composite personality at their zenith and then worked backwards and forwards in time showing the ideas that contributed to their genesis and growth and lingered on in the tiredness of old age. The idea of the Virgin's queenship had a value during the emergence of powerful kings in western Europe that it no longer has; but the image, stripped of its original strength, survives as a stock in trade of contemporary prayer and ritual. So although Pope Pius XII proclaimed Mary queen only in 1954, I have discussed the idea of her majesty at the point I consider it had maximum force: during the early middle ages. The most evident function of the Virgin today is intercession: she is prayed to for redress against private and public wrongs and to bestow graces of all kinds. Mediation has been the most constant theme of her cult, so in the later chapters about the different areas in which her help is particularly sought, the reader will find much early as well as contemporary material. Throughout I have used iconography, because it cannot be stressed enough that most believers until modern times were illiterate, and the walls of the

churches were their Bible. Although this method tends to present history as a smooth continuum, and to perceive the common culture of different nations and epochs rather than their differences, I feel such a perspective is justified in the case of a figure like the Virgin Mary, because she belongs to a vast community of people and represents a gradual accretion of their ideas, the deposit of popular belief interacting with intellectual inquiry, until, like the result of the coral insects' industry, a doctrine breaks to the surface like a new atoll. It is possible to probe this process only so far, however, and after consideration, I have avoided explanations arising from Freudian psychology. I do not think it is adequate to say that men will always yearn for a pure mother who will never let them down, and that that is why the Virgin Mary flourishes; one has to ask why purity and motherliness have been defined the way they have in the case of the Virgin and accept the fact that the ultimate reasons for her hegemony can never be fully understood. Nor does the Jungian archetype explain the myth of the Virgin Mary, for such figures are not innate, but cultural and historical products. I do accept, however, as the Jungians maintain, that such a symbol exercises a sway over our unconscious lives. The Virgin Mary is a manifestation of the principle the Chinese call *yin* and represents the quintessence of many qualities that east and west have traditionally regarded as feminine: yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, mercifulness, tolerance, withdrawal. But whereas the Orient and to some extent Jung realized that both masculine and feminine qualities must be present in the whole individual in balanced measure, it has been the constant tendency of western thought, both when it was dominated by the Church and afterwards, to equate the feminine with the female of the species; and to insist that the female sex was and should be feminine, according to its definition. The Virgin Mary, a polyvalent figure who appears under many guises, is the Church's female paragon, and the ideal of the feminine personified. But, in the Church's attitudes to women, the oscillation between regarding them as equal in God's eyes (endowed with an immortal soul) and yet subject and inferior to the male in the order of creation and society ("And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee"—Genesis 3:16) has never ceased, and provides continual background interference to any discussion of the Virgin, the model of the sex, who accurately reflects this perennial ambivalence. Therefore, as when *yin* is defined its complement *yang* takes shape by implication, so much of the matter that follows affects men as well as women, and defines the masculine as well as the feminine.

Whether we regard the Virgin Mary as the most sublime and beautiful image in man's struggle towards the good and the pure, or the most pitiable production of ignorance and superstition, she represents a central theme in the history of western attitudes to women. She is one of the few female figures to have attained the status of myth—a myth that for nearly two thousand years has coursed through our culture, as spirited and often as imperceptible as an underground stream.

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PART
ONE

Virgin

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ONE

Mary in the Gospels



*He came all so stille
There his mother was
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the grass.
He came all so stille
To his mothers bower
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flower.
He came all so stille
There his mother lay
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.
Mother and maiden
Was never none but she;
Well may such a lady
Goddess mother be.¹*

—ENGLISH CAROL
(FIFTEENTH CENTURY?)

In his urgent missive to the Galatians, St. Paul stresses that Jesus was fully human and yet the son of God. To drive his point about Jesus' humanity home, he tells his readers that Jesus was "made of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). It is the earliest reference to the mother of Christ that has come down to us; and it is a very quiet entrance for the Virgin Mary.

St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians was probably written in A.D. 57; his letters as a whole are the earliest work in the New Testament, which is itself the earliest source for Mary, and the only one with any claim to historical

validity. Apart from this passing and anonymous mention in Galatians, Paul never refers to Jesus' mother again. Nor is the rest of the New Testament more generous. In Mark, which may be the earliest of the Gospels, she appears once in an unflattering light (Mark 3:31) and is mentioned once as the mother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). In the Fourth Gospel, the last to be composed, she makes two appearances: at the wedding feast at Cana with Jesus, and at the foot of the Cross. In the Acts of the Apostles she prays with them in Jerusalem after the Ascension (Acts 1:14). Marian knowledge is concentrated therefore in the two accounts of Christ's infancy, as found in Matthew and in Luke.²

Both infancy narratives are now acknowledged by scholars to be later additions to the Gospels. They were written more than eighty years after the events they describe took place. It is not difficult to imagine what the life of a great man—Napoleon or Mao Tse-tung—would become if an oral tradition alone had conserved the story of his origins for nearly a century and no contemporary written accounts had survived. Like the legend of Roland and Oliver in the pass at Roncevalles, recorded nearly a hundred years after the mysterious events that felled the heroic warrior had occurred, the story of Jesus' birth belongs to the realm of the myth.

The two evangelists who describe Jesus' birth and childhood agree that when he was born heaven was present on earth in sign and prodigy. They also agree that Jesus was of the house of David, his birthplace Bethlehem, his father's name Joseph, and that his mother was called Mary. Otherwise their stories diverge.

In Matthew, Jesus says during the sermon on the mount: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17). In his picturesque opening narrative, Matthew bears out the saviour's claim in a sequence of events that despite centuries of dulling familiarity still conserve a strange, Oriental beauty. But they cannot be regarded as historical, and are empty of what any contemporary writer would consider biographical data, for they are openly modelled on the Old Testament in order to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah, and the fulfilment of the law.³

The Gospel opens with a long genealogy of Jesus. Abruptly and unconditionally, the evangelist states that "Mary was found with child by the Holy Ghost." Then he shifts focus to Joseph, her husband, who doubts her virtue, but does not want to shame her by repudiating her publicly. An angel appears to him and reassures him: "that which is conceived in her is of

the Holy Ghost.” The angel tells Joseph to call the child Jesus, and reveals that he will be the saviour. When Joseph wakes he does not reject Mary as he had considered doing, but “took unto him Mary his wife and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus” (Matthew 1:25).

“The wise men from the east” who have followed the star to Jerusalem appear before Herod and ask to see the King of the Jews. Herod is troubled and consults the priests and scribes, who tell him the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. So the wise men follow the star to Bethlehem, “and, lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.” They worship him and offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh. A dream warns them not to return to see Herod (Matthew 2:1–12).

An angel now appears to Joseph for a second time and tells him: “Arise, and take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him” (Matthew 2:13). When Herod dies, an angel appears for the third time to Joseph and tells him to return with the child and his mother to Israel; this he does, but when he hears that Herod’s son Archelaus reigns in Judaea, he is afraid and turns to Galilee and settles in Nazareth.

No less than five times, Matthew links an incident to a prophecy from the Old Testament. The conception of Jesus “before they [Mary and Joseph] came together,” fulfils a prophecy of Isaiah: “Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son . . .” (Isaiah 7:14). Although the wise men are following the star, they stop in Jerusalem to hear where the Messiah is to be born from the chief priests, whom Matthew uses as the mouthpiece of another biblical prophecy, in order to underline the authenticity of Jesus’ messianic claims: “And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judaea, art not least . . . for out of thee shall come a Governor, to rule my people Israel” (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6). Jesus’ birthplace thus confirmed and emphasized, the wise men once again follow the faithful star.

The detour to Jerusalem reveals Christ’s fulfilment of the Old Law. Again, when Joseph is sent to Egypt by the angel in a dream, Matthew explains that the family’s exile fulfils the words of the Lord’s prophet, Hosea, who wrote: “Out of Egypt have I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). The massacre of the innocents similarly realizes another prophecy, Jeremiah’s, that Rachel would weep for her dead children (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18). Finally, Matthew ends his tale of Christ’s birth and

infancy with Joseph's decision to live in Nazareth, so that "it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets: He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23). The historical Jesus manifestly came from Nazareth in Galilee, but this messianic prophecy Matthew quotes to support Jesus' authority as saviour does not come from the Bible and has not been traced elsewhere.⁴ Matthew, in his enthusiasm to demonstrate Jesus' fulfilment of the law, outruns the book itself. As no messianic prophecy concerned Nazareth, Matthew supplied one.

The major episodes Matthew does not explicitly illuminate from the Old Testament are as deeply coloured with its oracles and its imagery. The adoration of the wise men enhances the mythic might of the newborn child and marks him out as divine, as does the miraculous wandering star, a common device in the Greco-Roman world to designate the birth of a hero. But the visit of the men from the east also fulfils Isaiah's prediction: "the Gentiles shall come to thy light . . ." (Isaiah 60:3) and "they shall bring gold and incense" (Isaiah 60:6). The myrrh appears elsewhere, in the Book of Exodus, when the Jews at Moses' order mix a chrism with which they anoint the Ark of the Covenant—an apt symbol that the child who accepts the wise man's myrrh is the anointed one who will inaugurate the New Covenant. The worship of the wise men was recognized early on as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, for in the writings of the great Greek exegete Origen (d. 254) they have already metamorphosed into kings from Arabia, following the words of Isaiah that complete the prophecy: "And kings shall come to the brightness of thy rising . . ." (Isaiah 60:3) and "from Sheba shall they come" (Isaiah 60:6). Matthew never mentions kings, nor does he say they were three in number. But Christian imagery, in art, music, and poetry, prostrated eastern potentates before the baby in the stable, and as early as Bede gave them the exotic names of Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

The sequence about Egypt—the flight, the massacre of the innocents and Jesus' miraculous deliverance, the safe return of Mary, Joseph, and the child—forms a harmonious parallel to the adventures of the infant Moses, the founder of the Old Law. The symmetry between Moses' escape from Pharaoh's massacre of all the first-born of the Hebrews and Jesus' safety is no accident in a Gospel saturated with biblical memories.⁵ Elsewhere, Matthew emphasizes the diptych of Moses/Jesus, the Old Law and the New, when Jesus, like Moses, is transfigured "on a high mountain" (Matthew 17:1–6). Not only the story of Moses, chief among the heroes

of Israel, but also the story of Israel itself are recapitulated by Matthew in the figure of Jesus, Israel's redeemer, who like his country and his people flees into Egypt and is then safely delivered by God's providence.

The figure of Joseph himself is dyed in Old Testament associations. Like the old Joseph of Genesis, who interpreted dreams in Egypt, Joseph the father of Jesus is a dreamer who no less than three times is visited by an angel in his sleep and granted a prophetic vision. The biblical colouring in Matthew's infancy Gospel is indeed so vivid that if Luke did not corroborate Joseph's existence, he might have remained a type of God's merciful plan, fusing the Old and New Covenants, and never have attained the status of a historical character.⁶

Luke was writing after Matthew. If he knew Matthew's account, he rejected it. For in the first two chapters of Luke, Joseph does not dream, the wise men do not come to adore the child, Herod does not massacre the innocents, and the holy family do not flee to Egypt. Luke does not quote openly from the Bible, but he skilfully interweaves biblical memories and images to create a profound and emotive meditation on the coming of the saviour. Matthew unashamedly linked Jesus of Nazareth to the Old Law; Luke's intention was similar, but his strategy was more adroit. Where Matthew is a primitive, Luke is a consummate old master, building up tone, colour, and texture in layer upon layer of glowing oils. In Luke's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus instructs the two disciples on the road from Emmaus: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures, the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). When Luke blends ingredients from the Bible, in particular from the stories of Abraham, Samuel, and David, to create the sumptuous feast that is his infancy Gospel, he may be taking the lead from Jesus himself, reporting his master's thought in a highly truthful but generally unsuspected way.

Luke's infancy Gospel is the scriptural source for all the great mysteries of the Virgin; the only time she is the heart of the drama in the Bible is in Luke's beautiful verses. Luke tells the stories of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the Purification (or Presentation of Christ in the Temple), and he describes the mysterious scene when Christ is lost and found among the doctors in the temple—the only occasion apart from the wedding feast at Cana when Christ and his mother speak to each other. In Luke's Gospel Mary speaks four times; in Matthew she is silent.

Luke refers in the opening words of his Gospel to "eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word" whose example he is going to follow (Luke 1:2). An

early tradition therefore held that Luke received his story of Christ's birth from Mary herself, and made her true portrait not only in words, but in paint also. Icons of the Virgin by St. Luke can be found in several Mediterranean towns, the object of love from the locals and the butt of sceptics (see Chapter 19). Catholic scholars still support the idea of a first-hand source for Luke's infancy Gospel, because when the original Greek of Luke 1:5–12 is translated into Hebrew it is richly alliterative in a manner typical of Hebrew poetry. The passages may have originated in a group of Christians centring on St. John in Ephesus, where the Virgin traditionally lived with him after the Ascension. "Its contemplative personal mood shows it was conceived in a feminine mind," remarks one scholar, when "Mary was sharing the first years of the church in contemplation of the Incarnation with John, before heresies and persecutions overcame them."⁷

But a closer look at Luke's first two chapters is enough to strip almost all narrative realism from the central incandescent mythological core, for Luke is intent on revealing to the reader the divinity of Christ, and not to write his biography, as a contemporary historian might.⁸

Luke begins his infancy Gospel with the story of the birth of John the Baptist. Zacharias, a priest, is married to Elisabeth and they are childless. While he is performing his duties in the temple, an angel appears to him and tells him a son will be born to him, whom he is to call John. Zacharias is astounded, and asks for a sign that the message is true. The angel identifies himself as Gabriel, and strikes Zacharias dumb. When he returns home after his duties in the temple are over, his wife Elisabeth conceives.

Luke then turns to the story of Jesus' conception. In the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, the same angel Gabriel "was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1:26–7). From then on, the story follows the Baptist's in a beautifully wrought double helix. Gabriel appears to Mary in Nazareth and greets her with the famous words of praise: "Hail, thou that are highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women." Mary is "troubled" and does not understand the angel's salutation. (Zacharias, too, was "troubled.") Gabriel reassures her: "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God." (Gabriel comforted Zacharias: "Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard.") Gabriel prophesies the birth of Jesus, and tells Mary of his great destiny, as he told Zacharias of his son John's high mission. Mary's son is to be called Jesus. Mary answers—her most precious speech in

Mariology, for it implies her innocence and virginity: “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34).

Zacharias had also demurred: “Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.” Gabriel continues, telling Mary: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” He then reveals to her, as a sign of God’s power, that her “cousin Elisabeth . . . who was called barren,” has also conceived a son. (This sign parallels the dumbness of Zacharias.) Mary, hearing this, acquiesces in her destiny with the famous words, her fiat: “Behold the handmaid of the lord, be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38).

The angel Gabriel leaves Mary, and she “with haste” makes her way through the hill country to the house of Zacharias and her cousin Elisabeth. The double helix converges, and the two stories become intertwined. Mary greets her cousin, and when Elisabeth hears Mary’s salutation, the baby in her womb leaps, and she is inspired by the Holy Spirit to praise Mary “in a loud voice”: “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Luke 1:42).

She calls Mary “mother of my Lord,” and prophesies the fulfilment of the Lord’s promises to Mary. Mary answers her cousin’s rejoicing with equal energy and joy, in the words of the great hymn the *Magnificat*, by far her longest speech in the Bible. In some manuscripts, however, it is Elisabeth who recites the *Magnificat*, not Mary.⁹ In the hymn, she does not mention the child she has conceived but gives thanks to God for his kindness and his might. Mary stays with Elisabeth for three months, and then returns home.

John the Baptist is born, and eight days later he is circumcised. Zacharias regains his power of speech, and, prophesying, he gives thanks to God in the majestic poetry of the second Lucan canticle, the *Benedictus*. The melodies that had reached a diapason at the Visitation when the two women greeted each other now separate again and answer each other softly, at a distance.

In his second chapter, Luke tells the story of the Nativity of Jesus. Each man was to be taxed in his own city, by decree of the Emperor Augustus. So Joseph leaves Nazareth for Bethlehem, the city of David and his town of origin, with Mary, who was “great with child.” She gives birth and lays her son in a manger “because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke

2:7). That night the shepherds are told by angels of the Messiah's birth, and visit him. They tell everyone what they have heard, but Mary "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

The responding harmonies start up again. Jesus, after eight days, is circumcised, as the Baptist was. Mary goes up to Jerusalem to be purified and to dedicate the first male child to God, according to Mosaic law. After she and Joseph have offered, as the poor are required, two turtle doves to the temple, Simeon, an old man like Zacharias, is inspired to recite the third lovely canticle of Luke's Gospel, the *Nunc dimittis*. In mid-flow, Mary and Joseph marvel at his exalted prophecies, just as Zacharias' neighbours, before the *Benedictus*, were struck with fear. Simeon then turns to Mary with the sombre words, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35)—a prophecy that has puzzled Christians and that eventually led to the western cult of the Virgin's sorrows, represented by a sword transfixing her breast (see Chapter 14).

After Simeon's canticle, the prophetess Anna joins the holy family and gives thanks to the Lord for granting her this sight of the redeemer. Then Mary and Joseph and the child return to Nazareth, where "the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). Of John the Baptist, Luke had written, "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel" (Luke 1:80).

As a coda to his account of Jesus' birth, Luke appends the extraordinary incident in the temple at Jerusalem, when Jesus was twelve years old. Mary and Joseph have gone as usual to Jerusalem for the Passover; but they find on their return journey that he is not with them or their friends and relatives in the company as they thought. So they go back to search for him in the city, and "after three days" they find him with the doctors in the temple, asking and answering questions. "And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers." Mary and Joseph are "amazed" to see him thus, and Mary speaks to him: "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." Jesus answers: "How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

Then Luke writes: "And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them." This is the first of the two conversations between mother and son reported in the Gospels. Jesus returns with them to Nazareth and "was subject to them." Again, says the evangelist, "his mother kept all these

sayings in her heart.” The Lucan infancy Gospel then comes to its end: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”

In his next, third, chapter, which originally opened his Gospel, Jesus comes to John and is baptized in the Jordan. Luke follows this with a genealogy of Christ, also traced through Joseph, but quite different from Matthew’s. Thus the stories that began with the birth of the two firstborn sons and came together at the meeting of the two mothers converge once again with the encounter of the two grown men about thirty years later.

A solid architecture governs the internal structure of Luke’s narrative. Carefully constructed as to form, it is also highly sophisticated as to content, and a veritable labyrinth of Old Testament reminiscence. The two annunciations—to Zacharias and to Mary—echo the appearance of Gabriel to Daniel (Daniel 9:21) who prophesies the coming of the Messiah and the destruction of the temple, an event that when Luke was writing had taken place very recently. Gabriel hails Daniel, “thou art greatly beloved” (Daniel 9:23), just as he greeted Mary, “thou that art highly favoured” (in Greek, *kekaritomene*). Daniel later sees an angel, who is not named but who reminds him of Gabriel in his earlier vision. The angel’s words, “Fear not, Daniel” (Daniel 10:2), Gabriel echoes to both Zacharias, and Mary at the Annunciation. Daniel is then struck dumb, as Zacharias was.¹⁰

During another apparition of an angel, Gideon is greeted in the same words as Gabriel used to Mary: “The Lord is with thee” (Judges 6:12). Gideon then asks for a sign, as does Zacharias.¹¹ The angel Gabriel’s opening salutation to Mary disturbs and puzzles her, because, say Catholic exegetes, it departs from conventional words of greeting to echo the rapture of the prophet Zephaniah (Sophonias in the Vulgate) when he invokes fair Sion, the true remnant of Israel, and asks her to sing of her coming triumph (Zephaniah 3:14–17). Mary, say the apologists, was well versed in the Bible, and, recognizing the messianic ring in the angel’s words, was alarmed by its weighty significance. The association of Mary with the true remnant of Israel is later deepened by Luke in her triumphant hymn the *Magnificat*.

During the Annunciation to Mary, Luke works a second vein of association, that of Mary with the Ark of the Covenant. The verb he uses to describe the action of “the power of the Highest” on Mary is very particular—“overshadow”—a verb that explicitly picks up the mysterious image that closes the Book of Exodus, when the *shekinah*, the cloud that is

the spirit of God, covers the Ark of the Covenant “and the glory of God filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). Just as God was present at the Ark of the Old Covenant, so he covers the Ark of the New with his overshadowing power.¹² Again, at the Visitation, Luke recalls the Ark. David goes up to a city of Juda and is anointed king (2 Samuel 2:1); Mary goes up to a city of Juda, and is proclaimed by Elisabeth the mother of her Lord, the new heavenly king. Her exclamation, “And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” echoes David’s cry as he conducts the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem: “How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?” (2 Samuel 6:9). Mary stays three months with Elisabeth, just as the Ark “continued in the house of Obededom the Gittite for three months” before it was brought to “the city of David” (2 Samuel 6:11) (plate 1).¹³ Luke’s paramount concern with the typology rather than the story gives commentators anguish, for on a psychological and narrative plane, Mary should have stayed with Elisabeth to help with the birth, yet Luke leaves this completely ambiguous.¹⁴

The double annunciations to Zacharias and to Mary, and the miraculous births of John and Jesus stir myriad memories of other tales of prodigious and unexpected fertility in the Bible. The conception of John the Baptist by Elisabeth in her old age recalls in particular the story of Isaac, born to Abraham and Sarah after she had long been thought barren. Luke also blends in fragments of Samson’s birth to Manoah, also announced by an angel (Judges 13:3–4), of the twins’ birth to Rebecca (Genesis 25), and, above all, of Samuel’s birth to Hannah.¹⁵

Hannah provides a particular model for both Elisabeth and Mary, and echoes of her story, that of the most faithful and loyal mother in the Bible, reverberate through the Visitation and the *Magnificat*, the Presentation and the finding of Jesus in the temple (plate 2). Samuel, prodigy child and wise adult, is Christ’s prototype as mythic hero, and his mother Hannah is Mary’s forbear, a relationship so close that by the second century Mary’s mother was believed to be called Anna, another form of the name of Hannah, according to the legendary *Book of James* (see Chapter 2).¹⁶

Hannah calls herself handmaid no less than five times in the first chapter of the first book of Samuel. It is her leit-motif, borrowed by Mary when she answers Gabriel’s greeting. This could be coincidence if Luke did not display such consistent art and if he did not sow other references to Hannah’s story throughout his infancy Gospel. Hannah gives thanks to God in an exultant hymn of rich psalmodic imagery that is the *Magnificat*’s