

H.M. CHADWICK MEMORIAL LECTURES 17

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A room of their own?
Women readers in the Middle Ages



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE, AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H.M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon and kindred studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

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First published 2006 by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, 9 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP, England

ISBN 0-9554568-1-9
 978-0-9554568-1-7

ISSN 0962-0702

Printed by the Reprographics Centre, University of Cambridge

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By a 'room of one's own' Virginia Woolf meant a woman's opportunity to find space, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, in which to cut herself off from daily chores to devote herself to writing. In the historical absence of such space she saw the reason why fewer women authors had been active, certainly before the eighteenth century. My concern is with a much earlier period which she regarded as quite unpromising and with women finding privacy in which to read, although I shall conclude by looking at two examples in which medieval women appear as writers as well as readers, surmounting the obstacles which Woolf thought they could not overcome.

We may start with 'room' in the literal sense of a private space into which women could withdraw for solitary reading. Such a women's chamber is well attested in the Middle Ages (German even knew of two words for this secluded space for women: *kemenate* and *heimlich*). This served a patriarchal purpose: they could be kept safely under supervision in a building swarming with young males, here it could be hoped that what in feudal eyes was their most valuable asset, their chastity, could be kept intact. But this privacy also granted an opportunity for personal reading by women. For example, the Anglo-Norman author Gaimar reports that Constance Fitzgilbert of

* I have kept this lecture in the form in which it was originally given and have therefore added no footnotes. Source references and bibliographical information will be found in a book, *Women readers in the Middle Ages*, to appear shortly.

Lincolnshire ‘often retired into her room and read’ a history of king Henry I by David. In Austria Ulrich von Lichtenstein sends a letter to his lady by a messenger, and she too withdraws in order to read it privately in her chamber. The position is the same with an English-language example from Chaucer, whose Criseyde, on receiving her first love-letter from Troilus, again goes into her room to read it *ful pryvely*. This last example is captured pictorially in an illumination of a manuscript of a French *Roman de Troilus*. The picture is divided into two sections: a larger one on the right shows a crowded social gathering of both sexes, separated by a wall from a smaller room on the left in which Criseyde stands reading to herself by a window. Together, these examples from three languages and different parts of Europe demonstrate that women could find a place for reading, whether a letter or a whole work.

I lack the opportunity here to go into what was meant by ‘reading’ in the Middle Ages and how it differed from modern practice. In the twelfth century both John of Salisbury and Hugh of St Victor reflected on the nature of reading, the latter making a threefold distinction for the verb ‘to read’ (*legere*): ‘I read aloud to someone else’, ‘I am read to (and therefore read indirectly, through someone else)’ and ‘I read to myself’. These possibilities (and others not mentioned by these thinkers) can be illustrated in medieval usage, Latin and vernacular, and must be borne in mind if we are to avoid the anachronistic mistake of some who have discussed women readers in the Middle Ages, but unthinkingly equated medieval with modern reading practice.

To this must be added the medieval distinction between literal reading (decoding letters that exist in tangible written form) and figurative reading (with one’s mind’s eye where, even if letters may be referred to, they are not present in actual writing). What this involves can be shown from two German examples of the *Tristan* story, where the hero is forced to conceal his identity and adopt a pseudonym. With

Heinrich von Freiberg Tristan daringly returns to king Marke's court in disguise and calling himself *Peilnetosi*. Isold of course succeeds in decoding this, but how she does this is described in detail. She reads the name backwards, discovering that it means *Isotenliep*, 'beloved of Isold', and her ability to do this is twice attributed to her reading, hence also to her educated status. In this she has no physical text before her, she reads with her mind's eye, her reading is completely internalised. In his version of the same story Gottfried von Straßburg describes something similar on a different occasion: to avoid being discovered at the Irish court Tristan disguises himself more simply with the pseudonym *Tantris*. Again it is Isold who, musing on this name, is struck by its similarity to 'Tristan', but in a manner possible only for the literate she has already been shown to be, by juggling with the letters and syllables of these names, reading them now one way, now another. In this we are told that she speaks to herself, we follow the thought-processes of her mental reading, rising above any dependence on a written text.

Figurative reading can also be involved in a very different context, namely devotional literature in the late Middle Ages, in which meditation can, for example, take the form of imagining Christ's body at the Passion as a book to be read by the devout beholder, even if uneducated and unable to read in the literal sense. Like the *Tristan* examples, this devotional reading can dispense with an actual written text, but it differs from them in replacing school-based literacy by a grammar and syntax of its own, opening the door to illiterate believers, including religious women of little or no Latinity. However important this devotional reading became in the late Middle Ages, especially with women, we shall be concerned in what follows more with literal reading by women and the acquisition of literacy on which it rests.

Women's acquisition of literacy and of education at large was no foregone conclusion for much of the Middle Ages. Resistance to the

very idea of formal education for them derived support from St Paul's injunction that women should not speak in public or teach, but should instead learn from their husbands in the home. Around 1200 Thomasin, an Italian cleric writing in German, argues that if by any chance a woman had intelligence and education she should on no account display it, since that would concede authority to her. It is more becoming for a lady not to have much knowledge, for it is simplicity that suits her better. Philippe de Novare sees danger in allowing women to read, except in the case of nuns, for he fears the results of unsuitable letters, poems and stories. The morbid suspicion that reading for women could open the door to love-letters or dubious reading-matter such as romances reaches a peak in the objection that teaching women to read will enable them the better to deceive their husbands.

There are however a number of factors working in the opposite direction, encouraging women's education and ability to read. Not all theologians went quite so far as St Paul. Jerome was an early dissenting voice in urging various women with whom he was in close contact to devote themselves to reading, of course of religious texts. This precedent is followed by Abelard when he refers to Jerome in stressing the importance of education for women, and by Vincent of Beauvais in a pedagogic treatise when, as part of the education of young noblewomen, he bases himself on Jerome in recommending young girls to read the Psalter and sacred writings as a defence against vain pleasures. It is with Bernardino of Siena in the fifteenth century that the greatest distance from St Paul opens up. He argues that the age in which he lived no longer resembles that in which the apostle had written. Earlier, men may have been learned in religious matters and therefore, as Paul had laid down, capable of instructing their wives, but nowadays men are ignorant and it is they who are in need of being taught by their wives. Bernardino therefore justifies his disagreement

with Paul by suggesting that times have changed, but his argument presupposes a change also in women's educational status.

Such dissenting voices attract our attention, but even more interesting are the many cases where encouragement for women to read came not from men, but from other women, so that we are dealing with a feminine solidarity in reading. This was already implicit when Jerome and Bernardino quote other women as role-models for women readers. An obvious and unassailable example which did not escape Bernardino was Mary, frequently depicted in literature as well as art engaged in reading, especially in the Annunciation scene. Her reading on this occasion was adduced by Bernardino as an example of pious activity for present-day women which, so he adds, their husbands had every reason to permit. The visual arts depict Mary's role-model function frequently in the late Middle Ages. The Primer of Claude of France (in the Fitzwilliam Museum) depicts the young princess standing behind the infant Mary, likewise involved in learning to read, by the side of her mother Anne. The Buves Hours has an illumination showing the woman owner, encouraged in her devotions by an angel, kneeling by an altar on which lies her open Book of Hours, but on the facing page there is the usual Annunciation scene with Mary likewise before an altar on which lies her own devotional book, a Psalter. The popularity of such pictures from the fourteenth century on coincides with the greater availability of private prayer-books, so that the scene of Mary reading at prayer points to how the owner was to use her Book of Hours.

Not only Mary, but her mother Anne, too, played a part in this. For Mary to be able to read, she must have been taught to read, a task taken over by her mother, as is shown by numerous depictions of this in the same period as the examples just mentioned. By being shown educating her daughter to read, Anne acts as a second role-model for noblewomen to educate theirs. Just as Anne can be shown taking Mary

to the Temple for schooling, so too is Mary represented taking the infant Christ, complete with ABC tablet, to the Temple. The transmission of literacy by women in these scenes therefore extends not merely from Anne to Mary to the infant Christ, but also by a longer female line from Anne to Mary to woman owner of the prayer-book and also, to the extent that this owner followed the example set by Anne, to her own daughter and beyond to untold generations, since it was common practice for these books to be bequeathed by mother to daughter.

Even though it was commonly expected of mothers to see to the education of their children of both sexes, there was a built-in resistance to book-learning for young men throughout much of the Middle Ages, certainly until the later period when young noblemen started to attend universities from which their sisters were debarred. The female transmission of literacy means therefore that, in general, laywomen's literacy and reading practice surpassed that of men for whom such bookish education was felt to be detrimental to the long training necessary for the mounted warrior. This gender-based distinction underlies the contrast between the illiterate German emperor Konrad II and his wife Gisela, who had copies of Notker's translation of the Psalms made for her personal use, or the dedication of his *Historia ecclesiastica* by Hugh of Fleury to Adela of Blois instead of to 'illiterate princes who despise the art of literature'. Peter the Venerable so much admired the intellectual learning of Heloise that he said she surpassed all women and – with a slight qualification to save appearances – almost all men.

If aristocratic women at least were given some sort of education and many of them taught to read, this still tells us nothing of their use of this ability and of their contact with the world of the book. How carefully we must proceed in assessing this can be shown from the

evidence that owning or holding a book is by no means tantamount to actually reading it, as two examples may illustrate.

In the twelfth century a German priest Wernher composed a vernacular life of Mary in verse in which, just after referring to Christ's birth, he claims that any woman who possessed a copy of his book and held it in her hand when in labour would be assured of a painless delivery since this was miraculously the case with Mary. Theoretically, reading could be implied here in two ways (either the woman had read the book before or it was read out to her during labour), but neither sense is actually stated. But equally possible is another sense, with no implication of reading, for in the Middle Ages amulets, in the shape of sacred texts or fragments, could be placed on the stomach or breast of a woman in labour to ease delivery. Mary's miraculous pregnancy was felt to be a guarantee of this, but another precedent was St Margaret. She was invoked on similar occasions because during the course of her martyrdom she had been devoured alive by a dragon, from whose belly she was safely delivered. Copies of her legend were also given to pregnant women. In these cases we cannot be certain that reading took place, since efficacy lay rather with physical contact with the sacred text or its presence in the house.

A second differentiation between owning or holding and reading a book comes from the Lollard heretics of late medieval England. From the evidence produced at their trials it is clear that not all individual heretics who owned a book could read it. They depended instead on someone in their community or on a wandering preacher to read it to them, so that if reading was involved it was not the personal reading of the book-owner.

In these two cases, however, alongside this negative evidence there is some for owners as actual readers. The priest Wernher expects his *Maria* to be read by all true Christians, amongst whom he specifically

includes women, so that he anticipates women readers in addition to those who may use his text to assist childbirth. Similarly, although there were illiterate book-owners amongst the women heretics of Coventry, there was also a number of literate women who did not rely on others to read to them. The ambiguity of such evidence means that it is hazardous, without further evidence, to assume female readership on the basis of female ownership of books.

A comparable range of possibilities in which we move from the uncertain to the certain can be illustrated from art-historical evidence for a woman holding a book in her hand. We begin in Germany, at Naumburg, where the west choir of the cathedral displays around its walls a number of statues of aristocratic founders and benefactors, men and women. Two of the latter concern us, for each holds a book: Gerburg a closed Psalter and Bertha an open one. Even in this latter case there is no certainty that reading takes place, for Bertha holds her book at waist-height without looking down at it, since she gazes straight ahead. If Gerburg carries her closed book as a status-symbol, prestige-object or fashionable accessory becoming a woman of her rank, the open book held by Bertha might suggest more devotional piety, but neither presents us with an act of reading.

A similar uncertainty about reading confronts us at the next point on our art-historical tour in twelfth-century France, in the abbey church of Fontevrault, where the recumbent tombstone effigy of Eleanor of Aquitaine lies alongside her husband, Henry II of England. Like Bertha at Naumburg she holds an open book and at waist-height, but in her horizontal position she looks upwards and cannot be said to be actually reading her Psalter. As with Bertha, this may convey devotional meditation, perhaps after, but not in the course of reading. The presence of a book may suggest contemplation of this kind, combined perhaps with a suggestion of Eleanor's encouragement of literature, but hardly in this setting, as has been proposed, the text of

the love-songs of her grandfather Guilhem IX, count of Poitiers. That would be adding to the mythology which already surrounds her.

With other examples we come more clearly towards the act of reading from an open book. The fifteenth-century Hours of Mary of Burgundy contains an image of her reading in an oratory which shows certain details absent from Naumburg and Fontevrault. Mary's book is open, but she holds it well above waist-height and looks down at it closely. Moreover, she follows the text before her with her left forefinger on the left page while, visible only to close inspection, the right page has been partly lifted in readiness to turning it over as reading progresses. What was not actually present in the earlier examples is here delicately suggested: Mary's rapt attention as she follows her text conveys meditational reading of high quality.

Delicacy also informs an image of Mary Magdalene by Roger van der Weyden on a small panel (now in the National Gallery, London) which formed part of what is considered to have been an altarpiece, now represented only by fragments. Once more the woman holds an open book above waist-height, looks down closely at it and with her right hand has lifted the right page before turning it over. Once more the act of reading has been captured unfolding before us, but in its setting this painting differs from the Hours of Mary of Burgundy. In place of an oratory opening out into a church interior we are shown, visible even in its fragmentary state, a household interior, suggesting the domestication of literacy in the late Middle Ages. If this image once belonged to an altarpiece, what Mary Magdalene is reading was most probably of a religious nature, which suggests that laywomen could be engaged in devotional reading not merely in church, but also at home.

A painting, likewise of the fifteenth century, by Geertgen tot Sint Jans is even more explicit. It depicts what is known as the Holy Kinship

(Anne, Mary, the infant Christ) alongside two other women, with men dismissed very much into the background in a church interior. Anne dominates this group (Mary sits somewhat behind her) and, conforming to her by now traditional role of teaching her daughter to read, she has an open book in her lap as she sits there. In that position it would be difficult for her to read it, and she does not even look down at it, but instead pensively straight ahead. With such details we seem to have returned to Bertha at Naumburg or Eleanor at Fontevrault (open book, eyes directed away from it), but one revealing detail destroys this illusion. On Anne's open book there lies a pair of spectacles suggesting, as was traditional with her, that she was a reader, with her reading either just finished or about to be continued. (Spectacles had been invented well before the time of this artist after the magnifying qualities of the transparent stone *beryllus*, from which modern German 'Brille' is derived, had been recognised.) We are meant to conclude that Anne not merely taught Mary her letters, she also habitually read herself.

We finish this art-historical tour by returning to Germany, to the Hedwig Codex from Silesia. It contains a picture of Hedwig, the patron saint of Silesia, equipped with all her devotional paraphernalia. In her right hand she holds to her breast a small figure of Mary and child, and in her left hand two other aids, a rosary and a prayer-book. Into the pages of this book she has inserted her fingers to keep the place in her reading to which she is about to return. Of this almost snapshot image of a woman reader it has been said that, even though Hedwig and her image have interrupted our reading of the text which it illustrates, it is as if we, as viewers, have just interrupted Hedwig at her reading.

All these examples, from Naumburg to Silesia, suggest religious reading-matter, and although its precise nature may escape us it is likely that the books in the early examples were Psalters, while the

later ones could be either Psalters or Books of Hours. Both were important for literate laywomen, not merely for devotional reading, but also because they were traditionally used as primers for teaching the young to read. We are told of Hildegard von Bingen's education in literacy that it did not go beyond her learning to read the Psalter, but to this is added the significant remark that this was in accordance with conventional practice with the daughters of noblemen. That is no isolated example, for the empress Gisela was interested enough in a translation of the Psalms by Notker to order a copy to be made for herself, while the interest of noblewomen at large is reflected in the large number of expensive high-quality Psalters commissioned by them throughout the Middle Ages, given to them or otherwise associated with them. This does not exclude the omnipresence of less ambitious, more everyday Psalters for use by women in particular, as attested in the thirteenth century by the *Sachsenspiegel*, a vernacular codification of law for north Germany. At one point it registers what may be legally bequeathed by a woman in her will, listing household goods and objects normally associated with women, but including 'Psalms and all books that have to do with divine service, which women are in the habit of reading'.

With regard to women reading the Psalter we may return to Mary, this time not being taught to read by her mother, but reading herself. From early on she can be presented as closely preoccupied with books and reading, so much so that she has been described as a bibliophile. Her reading-matter is of course the scriptures, sometimes specified as the Books of Moses or the prophets, in particular Isaiah because of what was taken to be his foretelling of the virgin birth. Noticeably frequent, however, are the cases where she is shown reading the Psalter, the 'songs of David'. Whether she is reading this biblical book or not, pictorial representations of Mary at the Annunciation from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries show her as reading and even surrounded with books, whilst an earlier tradition commonly depicted

her spinning, not reading. There is no reference to Mary being engaged in either of these activities in the gospels or patristic tradition, but only in the apocrypha, so that some specific influence seems to be at work here. If Mary's mother served as a role-model for medieval mothers introducing their children to literacy, a similar function can be attributed to the frequency with which Mary is shown as a regular reader (not merely at the Annunciation), lending respectability to laywomen occupying themselves with books.

We must go further than that. The decisive period for this iconography may be for art-historians the late Middle Ages with the rise of lay literacy, especially on the part of women, but for literary historians there is an important precedent to be found much earlier, in the ninth-century verse life of Christ by the German author Otfrid von Weissenburg. In what he says of the Annunciation he is quite explicit that the book which Mary holds in her hand and reads is the Psalter (*mit salteru in henti, then sang si unz in enti*), but he combines this with what had become another traditional practice of hers, making cloth from high-quality thread. Neither activity has a biblical precedent, but both are occupations in which high-ranking medieval noblewomen were often engaged. This suggests that the German poet was depicting Mary in terms of contemporary Carolingian noblewomen. This can be confirmed by details which he adds to his scene. In the early Middle Ages Christ was conceived in terms of power and kingship (Otfrid says that he is to occupy the throne of David), but his royal descent is traced back by Otfrid not through Joseph (as in the gospels), but through his mother. In agreement with this, Mary is referred to as a high-ranking lady of noble birth, all of whose forefathers were kings and whom Gabriel visits in her palace, not in the household setting of late medieval Annunciations keeping pace with the domestication of literacy. It looks therefore as if Otfrid was guided at this point by the contemporary practice of literate noblewomen in his description of Mary, whereas the movement of late

medieval iconography was in the opposite direction, with Mary serving as a model for laywomen. In either direction the iconography and literary description of this scene throw light on the reading practice of laywomen at two extremes of the medieval period.

At this point, in order to put women's reading into a wider perspective I wish to widen our focus to include their engagement with literature in a broader sense, embracing also their activity as copyists, dedicatees, patrons of literature and authors. Within this vast field we may concentrate on the innovations which can be attributed to them. For example, as patrons of Anglo-Norman literature in the twelfth century they play a pathbreaking role in encouraging the vernacular alongside Latin. As readers of literature they, rather than their menfolk, are prominent in court literature of this century, but also, as laywomen or religious, in spiritual literature, especially from the thirteenth century on. In pursuing this question of women's innovative role in medieval literature at large we must be careful how we phrase our question. It will not do, for example, to say that Marie de France was the first (known) woman author in French, however important that may be, because such a claim invites the misogynous response that men had long before been active in that capacity, that women typically lagged behind them and cannot be considered as pathbreakers. Instead, the question that has to be asked is: 'What innovation in the field of literature was first brought about by a woman (acting as author, patron or reader)?'.

The material which such a question brings to the fore is immense, covering new literary genres encouraged by women, new departures in secular as well as religious literature and, more generally, women's role in the vanguard of literary developments. This is not the place to inflict details on you, but a handful of examples may illustrate my point.

The first readers of German literature attested by name are both women (they are mentioned in connection with Otfrid and Notker). The first promoters or patrons (with recorded names) of works in English and French are again women (Hilda of Whitby in the case of Caedmon, Mathilda for the Anglo-Norman author Benedeit). The new genre of mystical revelatory literature was introduced into the German vernacular by Mechthild von Magdeburg and shortly before that into Dutch by Beatrice of Nazareth and Hadewijch. If the attempt were made to undercut this by pointing to the *St Trudperter Hoheslied* in the twelfth century, this would not affect my case, for this work was written for nuns, most probably at the double monastery of Admont in Austria. The first histories in French of which we have any knowledge were both commissioned by women: one dealing with Henry I by David (for Adeliza of Louvain) and the other, a history of the English, by Gaimar (for Constance Fitzgilbert).

The great thematic innovation of twelfth-century literature, the *matière de Bretagne*, is closely involved with women from the start, not merely with the *lais* of Marie de France, but also with the first vernacular adaptations of Geoffrey of Monmouth, by Gaimar (at the command of Constance Fitzgilbert) and by Wace (presented by him to Eleanor of Aquitaine). If we rightly attach more importance to the transition from Geoffrey's pseudohistory to the fictional writing that emerged from it in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes, it is to stress that his first romance, *Erec et Enide*, has at least been shown to have close connections, perhaps of patronage, with the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine and that his *Lancelot* was commissioned by Eleanor's daughter by her first marriage, Marie de Champagne. Eleanor's younger daughter, by her marriage to Henry II, also belongs here, since she was married to Henry the Lion and, by the present consensus of opinion, was instrumental in providing the source for the earliest German version of the *Tristan* story, thereby opening the way to massive French influence on German court literature. Taken

together, these three women, Eleanor and her two daughters, can be seen as actively promoting in three countries the beginning of the court romance and the genesis of literary fiction in the vernacular. The role of women in Anglo-Norman literature in this period has been summed up in three points. At this time France was clearly in the cultural lead in Europe, but within that frame it was the Anglo-Norman authors who were the pioneers in French literature, while behind them there lay the patronage and readership of women in the Norman realm.

The full list of examples that could be cited and from which I have selected only a few covers a wide range in several respects. They are all drawn from the three vernaculars with which I am concerned and they cover a long timespan, running in all from the abbess Hilda in the seventh century as far as Syon Abbey into the sixteenth. Together they demonstrate the variety of ways in which women were involved in literature: as readers, patrons, encouragers of literature, dedicatees, addressees and authors. Their spread embraces both secular and religious literature, and the range of genres, indicating women's wide interests, is impressively large. All this cannot be by chance, it reveals that women's innovative role in literature is not to be dismissed as a one-off phenomenon, but is a constant feature of medieval literature, even if more pronounced from the twelfth century.

Persistent through the many examples I have collected is the ubiquity of the vernacular, present in various ways: as vernacular literacy distinct from Latinity, as works translated from Latin into the vernacular or from one vernacular into another, or as works composed in the vernacular in the first place (a possibility that comes more and more to the fore). Theoretically, it might be possible to assess this misogynously, to object that women's vernacularity was yet another illustration of their inferior literacy and cultural standing. To argue thus is to fall victim to the medieval cleric's vested interest in

maintaining that literacy was confined to his Latin cultural world, to fail to register that historical changes over the medieval period undermined what had been a static view of medieval literacy. The women we have been concerned with cannot have known it, but the future in literary and general cultural terms, considered over a long stretch of time, lay with the vernacular, not with the hitherto and still in their day dominant Latin. To this vernacular literacy women gave a marked and lasting impetus which we are only now coming to appreciate. In this context Michael Clanchy has spoken of women's involvement in the dynamics of literacy, but I would qualify that by talking instead of the dynamics of vernacular literacy.

For women to depend on vernacular literacy (even if educationally they had little alternative) and thus to go against the accumulated prestige of Latin, for them to enter upon the male domain of authorship and to claim, as many of them did, authorisation from God when engaged in religious writing demanded a considerable degree of self-confidence and daring, given the opposition and prejudice they faced. How far this daring could go I should like in conclusion to illustrate in the case of two women, one from the twelfth century and the other from the fifteenth, who were both readers and authors, one in Latin and the other in a vernacular.

My earlier example comes from Hildegard von Bingen or, more precisely, from what Guibert of Gembloux, her admirer, redactor and would-be stylistic embellisher, says about her in one of his letters. He legitimises Hildegard's prophetic function, as she had done herself, by biblical precedent, but goes a drastic step further. He addresses her in terms taken from the Annunciation scene and laden with religious import, saying: 'Hail, full of grace after Mary, the Lord is with you, blessed are you amongst women, and blessed the speech of your mouth'. Guibert here compares Hildegard with Mary (safeguarding himself by inserting the words *post Mariam*), but he also replaces the

biblical ‘fruit of your womb’ with the ‘speech of your mouth’. By that substitution he implies a comparable role for both women, the one giving birth to the Son of God (the Logos or word), the other giving expression to the word of God, directly communicated to her.

The later example is provided by Christine de Pizan in the opening scene of her *Livre de la Cité des Dames*. In this scene Christine is seated in her study, reading the *Lamentationes* of Matheolus, a diatribe against marriage and women. Her despair on reading this is interrupted when three allegorical female figures suddenly appear, informing her that God has chosen her to write a book to correct these false views and, like a city, defend women against such attacks. That sounds quite straightforward, but into this account Christine has inserted several biblical reminiscences which cumulatively become clearer until, at the climax, they are changed into an explicit quotation from the Annunciation to Mary.

The appearance of the three figures, miraculously through closed doors and windows, is heralded by a beam of light (equally inexplicable given the time of day) shining into the study. The Bible knows of no such light on this occasion, but it is depicted frequently in the visual arts of the Middle Ages, falling on Mary’s breast or face, but more pointedly, if we recall Guibert’s address to Hildegard, on Christine’s lap. Theological allusions also underline that the apparition of the three figures before Christine is a trinity. They are termed celestial beings and daughters of God; they are one and the same, what one decides the second puts into effect and the third completes. More meaningfully, these figures do not simply tell Christine of their errand, they announce it to her, emphasise that what she is to do has been decreed by God who has chosen her, alone of all women, for this purpose. In her response to this annunciation Christine presents herself as saying that the sweet rain and dew of their words have sunk into her arid mind, refreshing and rejuvenating her thought, an unmistakable

reference to Gideon's fleece, a traditional prefiguration of the Annunciation. The climax of explicitness, where biblical text and medieval fiction come together, is reached when Christine accepts the task laid on her, declaring: 'Behold your handmaiden, ready to do your bidding. I will obey your every command, so be it unto me according to your word'.

This is an astonishingly daring equation by a secular woman author of her conceiving a book with Mary's conception of Christ, and it takes up several points on which I have touched. It starts with Christine surrounded by books and reading in her study; she therefore joins the company of the women whom we saw at the start, able to enjoy privacy for solitary reading. Virginia Woolf's complaint about the absence of such privacy for modern women had to do with their ability to write, not to read, but that is precisely what Christine goes on to do in completing her *Livre de la Cité des Dames*. In moving from reading in her study to writing her own work she has set out the course of my argument, which began with women readers and has ended with them as writers. This combination of reading with writing also has to do with the role of Mary, her adaptability to both purposes. We saw that as a reader, especially in the scene of the Annunciation, she could be put forward as a precedent for women readers in the late Middle Ages, legitimising an activity in which many obstacles were put in their way. In employing her allegory Christine further empowers herself as an author, using religious imagery clustered around Mary to grant herself authority as well as authorship. In both these literate activities, reading as well as writing, women found a role-model in Mary.

We can go a last step further by comparing Christine's self-authorising by recourse to Mary with what we have just seen with Hildegard. Coming not from her, but from Guibert of Gembloux, there is also the daring comparison of Hildegard, a nun vowed to virginity, giving birth to the words of her visions with the Virgin giving birth to Christ, the

Logos. In the blessing of the speech of Hildegard's mouth, in place of Gabriel's blessing of the fruit of Mary's womb, Guibert's biblical allusion was to the angel's salutation, whereas Christine's biblical quotation refers to Mary's response. Both illustrate the Annunciation from complementary points of view.

Behind this parallel between two women writers, authorising their activity, there lies a difference. The comparison of Hildegard with Mary was made not by the German woman herself, but by someone else, her male redactor, whereas it was Christine who made her own comparison. When Hildegard sought authorisation it was by deriving it from God whose words she claimed to be simply transmitting as his mouthpiece, whilst Christine's use of the Annunciation model was an act of self-authorisation. Where Hildegard's words were in the time-honoured sacred language of Latin and meant as religious truth, Christine's were a fiction put forward in the vernacular. If the word 'daring' can be justifiably used of the Annunciation model to legitimise the writing of both these women, it belongs more tellingly to Christine who in the fifteenth century exemplifies the self-confidence that by then some women could acquire in their engagement with literature.

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