

PROFESSIONAL SELF-PORTRAIT

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*“I am the mother of fair love and of fear and of knowledge and of holy hope....  
They that explain me shall have life everlasting.”*  
—*Ecclesiasticus 24:24, 31*

WHY DO I STUDY the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary? Because Mary is more than just the Virgin whom Christians believe gave birth to the Son of God. She is the key that unlocks the medieval era itself. As I argue in the proposal for the Companion to the Christian Tradition that I have been invited to edit for Brill, to understand the place of Mary in medieval Christian devotion, it is not enough to study her as an art historian or a musicologist or a literary scholar or an historian or a theologian. To understand Mary as medieval Christians imagined her, one has to understand *everything*. She is there in the art and the architecture and the music. She is there in the literature and the liturgy and the liberal arts. She is there in the most elevated expressions of human imagination and in the humblest prayers for help. She is there in the politics and in the ideals of marriage, in battle cries and in pleas for mercy for the oppressed. Medieval Christianity is inconceivable without her, and yet, since the Reformation, Christians have struggled to explain why she should have been there at all. “All the steam in the world,” Bostonian Henry Adams (d. 1918) once opined, “could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres.”<sup>1</sup> He might better have said, “build Christendom.”

In my first book, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*, published in 2002, my primary goal was to find a way to make a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, 1918), chap. 25.

hitherto obscure tradition of scriptural commentary readable as a form of devotion. For my second book, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought*, published this past month, I wanted to take this exercise further and find a way to help modern academic and lay readers imagine seeing the world as a medieval Christian might, from within, while at the same time making clear what it took for medieval Christians to construct that worldview.

My sources for this second project were similar to those that I used for my first book: liturgical chants and prayers, commentaries on scripture, stories told about the miracles of the Virgin, sculpted and painted images, all situated in the biographies of their authors and the larger transformations of the society and tradition in which they were produced. My question was likewise similar: what did it mean for medieval Christians to pray to the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God and to Jesus Christ as her Son? But my goal was somewhat more ambitious: not just to show modern readers how medieval Christians talked about Mary and her Son, but to give modern readers some sense of what it was like to see the world through this devotional and theological frame.



GENRE WAS a formidable hurdle. I might write a novel. But, as I try to show students in my junior research colloquium on “Writing Historical Fiction,” novels carry with them their own expectations of reality, more attuned to the nineteenth-century’s categories of the socially-real than, for example, to the transcendent aspirations of liturgical chant. I might write a self-help book, along the lines of Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, presenting the chants with appropriate instructions. But, as my students and I learned in my graduate colloquium on “Spiritual Exercises: History and Practice,” even with explicit instructions on what to say and how to move, the interior experience of such practices is typically accessible only by analogy. We can know what it was like to pray as a medieval Christian only by analogy with experiences we ourselves have had.

Here was my first big insight. To imagine what it must have been like to pray as a medieval Christian, I needed to find some experience sufficiently analogous to the training that medieval Christians, particularly monks and nuns, underwent in order to be

able to say their prayers. I might, as many people suggested to me, go on a monastic retreat, but to my mind that approach would only exacerbate the problem. I would be pretending to be a nun for a time, not committing myself to the life. I needed something that would take commitment so as to transform me.

I found it in fencing, using money from one of the prizes that I won for my first book to buy my first mask and foil.<sup>2</sup> I have been a competitive fencer now for some fourteen years, and last year I had the honor to compete in Stralsund, Germany, as a member of the USA Veteran Fencing Team at the World Veteran Championships. I placed 23rd in the world in Veteran Women's Foil 50-59. This was no small achievement for someone who took up the sport when she was thirty-eight.

I have developed other practices as well.

The year after I started fencing I had the good fortune to spend a full academic year funded by a Mellon New Directions Fellowship sitting in on courses at the University of Chicago in Psychology. Four years after that, I started my blog *Fencing Bear at Prayer*, the same summer I began work on the research for my second book with support from the Guggenheim Foundation and the ACLS. My original goal in the blog was to express some of the things I had learned since taking up fencing as a competitive sport in 2003, while at the same time giving myself a place to share some of the things that I was learning from my research about prayer (thus the rhyme in the title). Not yet convinced that I was sufficiently committed to the problem of training myself—or my soul—, in 2012 I began taking classes at the Old Town School of Folk Music in fiddle. Together, my fencing, my fiddling, my blogging, and my studies in psychology came together to provide the tools that I needed for writing the book, with results surprising even to me.

I have detailed the lessons that I learned from my year in psychology in the reports that I wrote for the Mellon Foundation (included in dossier). Perhaps the most startling lesson, even for me, was how what I learned from my colleagues in psychology reinforced the importance of my own training as an historian for addressing questions I had hitherto considered out of my range. As I explain in my Final Report for the Mellon,

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<sup>2</sup> “Can I Buy That?,” June 18, 2008, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2008/06/can-i-buy-that.html>>.

methodologically I found myself by 2007 frustratingly betwixt and between, “no longer wholly comfortable in history, my home field, where questions of behavior, cognition and emotion are still more typically cast as problems of context rather than variations on a universal human repertoire,” but neither comfortable in psychology, which as a discipline (to my mind as an historian) “has a long way to go towards integrating its presentist experimental insights with the vast range of expressions of which history shows human beings to be capable.” I had tried on the mask of psychology only to realize that it was my mask as an historian that would better enable me to access the experience I sought to understand.

Meanwhile, my practice as a fencer was taking me places in my soul I would have preferred never to visit, much less acknowledge existed. Envy, pride, anger, greed, gluttony, lust, and sloth: these were the demons that the desert fathers went out into the desert to meet.<sup>3</sup> These were likewise the demons I met as I attempted to fence—and to write.<sup>4</sup> Sloth hit particularly hard after the first year I spent on leave working on my book. We call it writer’s block, but it is actually a species of procrastination brought on by perfectionism and overwork. Or so I learned after a year and a half of being incapable of writing so much as a book review, when I discovered Robert Boice’s work on why professors in the academy find themselves blocked: I had, in that first year (2008-2009), written myself into a depression, which only retraining myself as a writer could overcome.<sup>5</sup> The blog helped me through this depression, as I found myself able to write there even as my academic writing stalled, but it was working in brief, regular sessions on the translation of John of Garland’s *Epithalamium beatae virginis Mariae* (now under contract with Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations) that enabled me at long last to return to writing my book.




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<sup>3</sup> “Into the Desert,” July 18, 2008, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2008/07/into-desert.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> “The Seven Deadlies: Definitions and Remedies,” June 21, 2012, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2012/06/seven-deadlies-definitions-and-remedies.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> See “Tips for Dealing with Writer’s Block: For Teachers and Students” <<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rfulton/Tips.htm>>.

PUTTING ON A FENCING MASK changes you. Not that it imbues you with particular powers; like prayer, fencing as a skill takes years to develop. The change is more in the way in which the mask encourages you to perceive yourself—you have put on a certain character—as well as the (literal) frame it gives to the world.

Any mask has this potential, as my students and I learned in the “Spiritual Exercises” course, when I used a improvisational mask exercise to demonstrate the way personification allegories like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* work on the soul (see Mellon New Directions Final Report). Psychologist Jordan Peterson talks about the way in which our perception of the world is made possible by the frames that we use, the stories that we tell. Masks encourage us to tell stories about ourselves and so enable us to act in the world.

Some of the masks that we put on are physical. Others we wear only in our imaginations. Some we call our identity. Others we wear unconsciously, becoming conscious of them only when they are threatened as fake.

In my first book, I talked about the need for historians to empathize with the experiences, particularly the emotions, of those whose stories we want to understand. I am no longer convinced that it is empathy we need—or, rather, that it is empathy alone. We need, as R.G. Collingwood suggested, to find some way to “rethink the thoughts” of the historical actors whose experiences and expressions we want to understand. As J.R.R. Tolkien might put it, we need an Elf-friend, a go-between belonging to both worlds to guide us into the Secondary Reality of Art—and of faith.

*Mary and the Art of Prayer* is an attempt to provide such a go-between into the thought-world of medieval Christian devotion. Much like Tolkien’s own legendarium, it presumes the need for a frame (in medieval terms, an *accessus*), its goal being to provide readers with the experience of finding themselves “in the same tale still,” with the consciousness of being in the story and, therefore, with the option to leave—or to stay. In Augustinian terms, it is an exercise in exegesis designed with the understanding that readers will come to it with radically different interpretive frames of their own, some of which make what medieval Christians claim to have seen through their interpretive frame quite literally impossible to see, above all, the role of the Virgin in scripture and prayer.

My guess is that even many Christian readers will find this interpretative mask difficult to put on, much less accept as historically or theologically real. My hope is, at the very least, that they will be willing for the moment to pretend that it could be. *Hic sunt dracones!*, as it says in the psalms.<sup>6</sup>



THE BOOK ITSELF is structured as a set of nested frames, intended to guide the reader from the outside in.

Chapter 1 gives a history of the prayer practice by which medieval Christians trained themselves both to see the Virgin and her Son and to read—literally. The Books of Hours in which this practice becomes the most visible—again, literally—were the books that late medieval Christians used to learn to read, thus their title in English, “primers.” This chapter also introduces readers to the temporal structure by which medieval Christians prayed: the eponymous “hours” of the Divine Office according to which they read the psalms.

Chapter 2 opens with an invitation to the reader to imagine saying the opening versicles of the Marian Office as they might have been performed in the later Middle Ages at St. Mary’s Abbey in York. It then explores the way in which medieval Christians described the experience of saying the invitatory antiphon for the Marian Office, better known as the Ave Maria, both as an exercise in saluting the Virgin and for the emphasis that it gave to Mary’s name, even as they insisted that nothing they could say could ever fully lay open the mystery contained in the angel’s greeting.

Chapter 3 is the most experimental of the chapters, taking as its goal a close reading of the antiphons and psalms of the daily Office that medieval Christians sang in praise of Mary and her Son. It is here that the framing becomes most complicated, the structure of the Office providing the frame for a history of the devotion to the Virgin

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<sup>6</sup> Or, at least, implies, depending on which translation you use. See Psalm 148:7 LXX and Vulgate. In the RSV, the dragons are sea monsters. For a fuller discussion of my encounter with the dragons, see the Response to Readers for Columbia University Press included in this dossier, with one update: I was received into the Roman Catholic Church this past March and took my first communion at Easter.

from the ancient temple to the introduction of the Marian feasts from the East. If medieval Christians wrote little about the way in which they understood the experience of saying the Office (other than its invitatory antiphon), in other ways they wrote about it all the time, both in the antiphons that they used to frame their recitation of the psalms and in the commentaries and sermons that they wrote to help ground that recitation. This chapter suggests a reading based on the interpretive frame provided by the antiphons and grounded in a new retelling of the history of the cult of the Virgin as suggested by Margaret Barker's work on the origins of Christianity in the traditions of the Jerusalem temple and the transmission of that tradition from the Orthodox East to the Latin West via the Marian use of the psalms.

Chapter 4 takes the interpretive framing suggested in chapter 3 as a guide for reading three of the most elaborate thirteenth-century efforts to explain the significance of the angel's greeting and of Mary's multitudinous name: Richard of Saint-Laurent's *De laudibus beatae Mariae virginis libri XII*, Conrad of Saxony's *Speculum beatae Mariae*, and pseudo-Albert the Great's *Mariale, sive CCXXX Quaestiones super Evangelium Super missus est*. Rarely read even by scholars today, these texts have been often invoked as representing simultaneously the apex and nadir of medieval Marian devotion, dependent as they are on a reading of scripture today most find absurd. As with my reading of the Song of Songs commentaries in my first book, the goal in this chapter is to make these commentaries readable, while at the same time offering them as proof of the reading of the antiphons and psalms suggested in chapter 3.

With chapter 5, the reader enters at long last into the Holy of Holies, the place where the Virgin shows her Son to the world. The hope is that by this point, the reader will have sufficient practice imagining Mary through the names that her medieval devotees found for her in scripture—ark, tabernacle, temple, house, throne, city, mountain, river, tree, mirror, virgin, bride, Wisdom, queen—to be able to appreciate what it meant for medieval Christians to pray to her, serve her, and honor her as the temple through which God made himself visible to the world.



WHAT IS PRAYER? This is the question with which I began the project of my second book. I expected it to be challenging, but in retrospect—to put it mildly—I underestimated the challenge. Be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes. While scholarship on Mary, particularly the medieval devotion to Mary, has greatly expanded in the years since I began my research on her thirty years ago, in many ways we are no closer to appreciating the impact that this devotion had on the development of European civilization than we were when I began.<sup>7</sup> It is simply too vast a topic, like fish trying to describe the ocean or birds, the air. As one thirteenth-century English poet put it, in my translation:

As many scribes as there are leaves,  
Rocks, pebbles, groves, or dripping seas  
Could not the Virgin worthily  
Describe in all eternity.

If scribes were numbered with the stars  
That twinkle in the face of Mars  
Or drops of rain that on earth fall,  
The matter's weight would crush them all.<sup>8</sup>

What effect did imagining the Virgin as the Mother of the Maker who entered into his own creation through the temple of her womb have on the way in which medieval European Christians understood themselves as makers and artists and their churches and towns as places in which God became flesh? If in my first book I attempted to describe commentary on scripture as a practice of devotion, in my second I have attempted to show how reading scripture through the liturgy trained medieval Christians to see Mary as the one who made God visible to the world. For my third book, *The Lady and the City: How the Virgin Mary Gave Birth to the Christian West*, I would like to explore the way in which this vision of Mary gave shape at once to the soul and to the city, that is, how it

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of this historiography, see my Response to Readers for Columbia University Press included in this dossier.

<sup>8</sup> Walter of Wimborne, *Marie Carmina*, stanzas 5-6, trans. *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, 72.

both trained medieval Christians in virtue and inspired them as craftspeople to give shape to their world.

I already have a few starting points which I have begun to pursue.

I have mentioned the way in which working on my translation of John of Garland's *Epithalamium* helped me get back to work on my second book (see sample in dossier; I have a finished draft of the whole nearly 6,000-line poem, which I now need to annotate and revise). Unlike Richard, Conrad, and pseudo-Albert, who were writing as confessors and preachers, John wrote as a grammarian, and his Latin is extremely challenging, appropriately so, given that his theme in the *Epithalamium* is praising Mary as the Mother of the Word. John was a teacher at Paris at a time when Aristotelian logic was beginning to gain the curricular upper hand, and he was concerned that the arts of grammar and rhetoric (what we might now call the humanities) were being neglected in favor of natural philosophy (what we would now call science) and the professions (then as now, medicine and law). His goal in the *Epithalamium* was to provide a kind of textbook for schooling students in the arts of language through a epic allegory on the life of the Virgin, beginning with her conception and ending with her assumption into heaven, where she would be wed to God, her Father and Son. Along the way, in celebration of her role as Mother of Wisdom, John would introduce students not just to the language arts, but also to history, philosophy, theology, cosmology, civil and canon law, zoology, anatomy, botany, geography, climatology, lapidology, aesthetics, and cookery—a veritable encyclopedia of the Wisdom to which Mary gave birth. The *Epithalamium* concludes, like a proper wedding, with a joust between the personified Virtues and Vices, after which Death is banished and the choirs of heaven rejoice.

For medieval Christians like John, Richard, Conrad, and pseudo-Albert, naming Mary was more than just an exercise in praise. It was a way in which to describe the whole of creation as an artifact of God, a celebration of the creatures as ways to understand the creator. As the Franciscan preacher Servasanctus of Faenza (d. ca. 1300) explained in his *Mariale*, citing Ecclesiasticus 24:25, 31: “*In me* [Wisdom says] *is all grace of the way*, that is, of every creature, which is a way to the Creator, for Mary, the book of life and the mirror and the exemplar either is or contains all these things....*They that explain me shall have life everlasting.*” What did it mean to explain Wisdom? For

Servasactus as for Richard of Saint-Laurent, it meant reading not just the scriptures but the whole of creation as written about her (see forthcoming article in dossier). It also meant seeing in her the reflection of what every soul was intended by its creator to be: a mirror of God's majesty, made in the image and likeness of God.

I have an outline of chapters for the next book I would like to write, but as with my other books, I expect it to take me a little while to work out its methodology. In structure, it will resemble my second book more than my first, taking not a chronological, but more thematic approach, albeit this time moving outward from the center rather than, as with my second, outward in. At the moment I envision the chapters as follows:

- 1. *Story and Scripture: Exegesis and Archetype*. Having brought readers to the center of the story in *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, here I plan to begin with the image of Mary immediately: who she was in scripture, how medieval Christians imagined her story, how the images they associated with her work as archetypes, what it meant to read scripture as filled with her names. I need to explain how this symbolic system worked as a way of creating a frame for seeing the world.
- 2. *Disciplining the Self: Virtue and Vice*. The next step is to understand the way in which framing one's self-perception through Mary enabled medieval Christians to train themselves in virtue so as to combat vice. It is not just John of Garland who made this connection. A penitentiary at the cathedral of Rouen, Richard of Saint-Laurent was also the author of a treatise on the virtues, while Servasactus served as a confessor at the Franciscan convent of Santa Croce in Florence, for which he composed a book of exempla for preaching on the articles of the faith, the sacraments, and the virtues and vices. In this chapter, I plan to explore the way in which treatises like Richard's and Servasactus's used Mary as a model for training the virtuous soul.
- 3. *Crafting the World: Arts and Sciences*. In *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, I hint at the way in which Mary was associated with the disciplines of the three language arts (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), and I show how she was described as filled

with the knowledge of all the arts and sciences. This is a theme that a number of scholars have recently begun to explore, including Georgiana Donavin, who has written on the way in which Mary appears in English literature as mistress of the Word, and William Courtenay, who has written about Mary's role as patron of the university of Paris. Mary was also taken as patroness for numerous confraternities and guilds, as well as being the constant subject of late medieval devotional art, not to mention architecture. In this chapter, I would like to explore how medieval scholars and craftspeople thought about their work as makers with words and with things, taking Mary as their exemplar in her role as the one who brought the creator into the world.

- 4. *City of God: Town and Country*. Of all the names for Mary that her medieval devotees found for her in scripture, perhaps the most important was one that I had least expected: city of God (Psalm 86:3). This is the name that Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda gave her four-volume meditation on the life of Mary (see Epilogue in *Mary and the Art of Prayer*); it is also the name that Mary's Orthodox devotees used in describing her as the patroness of their city. Christianity in its origins was centered on the holy city of Jerusalem expected to descend like a bride from heaven when the Lady should return (Revelation 12, 21–22). What I would like to show is how having this image of the Lady-City at the center of their imagined world affected the way in which medieval Christians thought about and designed the cities in which they lived as well as the churches in which they prayed.
- 5. *Defending the City: Friends and Enemies*. "I shall be a wall for them," Mary as bride says in one of the earliest Marian commentaries on the Song of Songs.<sup>9</sup> For medieval Christians Mary was not just the humble maiden of Nazareth; she was also imagined as a fierce protectress of cities like Constantinople, Siena, and Chartres. Richard of Saint-Laurent gives an extended description of her based on his own city of Rouen, and notes that she loves all people, Christians, Saracen,

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<sup>9</sup> See *From Judgment to Passion*, 280-85, on Honorius Augustodunensis's *Sigillum beatae Mariae*.

and Jews, “albeit in different ways.” This chapter will explore the ways in which imagining Mary affected medieval Christians’ understanding of the inhabitants of their cities as well as those who placed their cities under attack.

For all of these chapters, I have some sense of the sources that I might use, but I need to spend time reading more about the larger themes. This Autumn I taught a new course for graduates on “Cities and Towns in the Middle Ages” in order to give myself the chance to read in that literature. I am planning courses for next academic year on “Virtues and Vices” and “Medieval Christian Mythology” to help with chapters 1 and 2. I will likewise be working over the next few years on revising my translation of John of Garland’s *Epithalamium*, as well as editing the volume on medieval Marian devotion for Brill’s series of Companions in the Christian Tradition (proposal in dossier). I have also this past spring begun serving as Area Editor in Christianity—Medieval Times for DeGruyter’s *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, which is giving me the opportunity to learn more about the work of many new colleagues in my field.<sup>10</sup> As with the sixteen articles and chapters for edited volumes that I wrote and the twenty or so new courses that I taught while researching my second book (see dossier and homepage), my hope is that my work on these various projects will help me develop the methodology that I need while at the same time introducing me to the materials I might use. If my experience with my second book is any indication, I am in for yet another challenging quest.



IT HAS BEEN quite the journey. To judge from the peer reviews of my work, the questions that I have asked over the course of my on-going quest for Mary make my academic colleagues at large anxious. The methodologies that I use cross too many interpretive boundaries. And the rhetorical style that I have developed for my scholarly writing

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<sup>10</sup> This is an international project now in its tenth year dedicated to producing an interdisciplinary guide to the reception of the Bible. I started work as an area editor this past spring. On this project, see <<https://www.degruyter.com/dg/page/ebr/encyclopedia-of-the-bible-and-its-reception>>.

worries even sympathetic readers, who would prefer that I not address them quite so directly when I ask questions about devotion and prayer.

“Which of the senses tells us most about God?”<sup>11</sup> “I don’t know about you, but I have always had difficulty understanding the role of saints in prayer.”<sup>12</sup> “Would you like to learn to pray like a medieval Christian?”<sup>13</sup> “Let’s pretend.”<sup>14</sup>

Historians worry that I give too much play to the imagination. Theologians insist that I do not do theology and that, if I do, it does not engage with proper theological questions, only myths. Psychologists don’t know what to do with my emphasis on the soul. And everyone worries that I address my readers in the second person: *you*.

Who am I, when I write as a scholar? This question has engaged not a few people’s attention this past year, as I have also become known for my authorial voice as Fencing Bear. I addressed it more fully in one of my blog posts,<sup>15</sup> but I thought it might be helpful to address it briefly here.

First and foremost, when I write as a scholar, I am not writing with the intention to convert anyone to faith in Jesus Christ or his mother the Virgin Mary. To be sure, whatever I write, I write as a Christian, but I believe that there is a profound, even sacred difference between the classroom and the pulpit. On my blog, I may be preaching to the choir—to judge from their comments on my Facebook page, the majority of my readers seems to be Christian, albeit not all—, but in the classroom and in my scholarly work I

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<sup>11</sup> “‘Taste and see that the Lord is sweet’ (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West,” *The Journal of Religion* 86.2 (April 2006): 169. One reader for the press was delighted that I seemed to have been “studying medieval cookery in [my] kitchen as well as [my] library.” (I had; I handed out samples at one presentation of my work.) The other reader lamented my “speculation,” particularly my efforts to draw our modern experience of taste into our appreciation of the medieval metaphors.

<sup>12</sup> “Anselm and Praying with the Saints,” in *Experiments in Empathy: The Middle Ages*, ed. Karl Morrison and Rudolph M. Bell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 95. My original opening read: “I don’t know about you, but saints bore me.” The editors begged me to tone it down.

<sup>13</sup> Jacket copy for *Mary and the Art of Prayer*.

<sup>14</sup> “My Psalter, My Self; or, How to Get a Grip on the Office According to Jan Mombaer: An Exercise in Training the Attention for Prayer,” *Spiritus* 12 (2012): 80. So effective was my pretense in this exercise, the editor for *Spiritus* assumed I had made it up, rather than simply drawing on Mombaer’s instructions. In the editor’s words: “If this is what it is to have a prayer life, who could ever manage it? It is just so wildly ornate and endlessly layered. It makes the life of prayer feel like wandering endlessly through a maze.”

<sup>15</sup> “Bear’s Two Bodies,” March 5, 2017, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2017/03/bears-two-bodies.html>>.

am speaking to fellow intellectuals who may or may not share my faith, a distinction I take very seriously.

All of us in the academy, whether we identify as religious or not, share a commitment to reasoned, evidenced discourse and critical thinking. Without this commitment, the academy would become, as many fear it already has, a kind of substitute church, dedicated to indoctrinating students in a particular vision of how society should function, making absolute moral claims about the answers to the perennial human questions that we ask, and insisting that everyone adhere to the answers agreed by the group or be declared a heretic (lit. “divisive”). The problem, of course, is that more often than not the answers to our questions are themselves embedded in the questions, however neutrally we have attempted to articulate them. The moral claims on which our academic answers are premised are almost invariably already baked in.

For example, the insistence that every human being, regardless of class, race, or sex, be treated with equal dignity as a human being. This is a claim that no one in American academia would think to challenge nor, I would agree, should we other than to affirm it, but the source of that claim is highly contested. Does it come from the state? From natural law? From society? Or—as I would contend—from a particular religious tradition? It is one thing to attempt to demonstrate the validity of this claim on the basis of arguments from political, legal, social, or religious theory. It is another to insist that only one or another of these arguments can be valid.

As I see it, this is the challenge I face writing as a Christian to a scholarly audience: how to frame what I see through the lens of faith in a way that makes what I see at the very least *thinkable*, even as I appreciate that many will not be persuaded that what I see is *true*. This is no easy task, thus the years that it has taken to develop the methodology that I have since publishing my first book in 2002.

But I did not begin my study of the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary over thirty years ago confident that this vision was true—although I hoped it was! I began it because I wanted to understand how culture—and faith—works. I wanted to understand the way in which stories shape the way in which we, as human beings, perceive the world. And I wanted to understand how we use stories to shape ourselves and the things that we make, including cities and virtuous souls. While, as a scholar, I appreciate that

such stories may seem more make-believe than real, as a Christian I hope at the very least to tell them in a way which makes them accessible to the imagination, if not as answers, then as masks that one might try on in order to see the world through another frame. But let the reader beware! The world that you see through this frame may be more enchanting than you expect, even if it does belong more to the secondary world of imagination or “faërie” than to the primary world of provable “facts.”

Having tried on the mask, you might not want to take it off.

