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December 1, 2019

People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.
—Terry Pratchett, Witches Abroad

AS A HISTORIAN, I am fascinated by stories, particularly the way people use stories to give shape to their lives, whether to define themselves as individuals (medieval Christians would say "souls") or in community (for example, "the Church"). As recent debates both within academia and in the public sphere illustrate, stories are primary sites of contestation over questions of identity: do "we" as a nation exist if "we" cannot agree on a story about who "we" are? All stories come with entailments, constraining certain perspectives while enabling others. Christians understand themselves as participants in a story stretching from the creation of heaven and earth to the end of time, with the further entailment that the Creator of heaven and earth himself entered into that story in time. As J.R.R. Tolkien famously put it, in the Gospels myth becomes history: "Legend and History have met and fused."[1] Appropriately, for Christians, as Augustine of Hippo explained to his friend Deogratias, conversion is above all an exercise of finding yourself within a new story—in the case of the Gospels, the greatest love story ever told.[2]

How, as a scholar, is it possible to understand this process of entering into an imagined world, particularly one so apparently foreign to modern ways of thinking as that of medieval Christianity?[3] My teacher Caroline Walker Bynum suggested looking to the images—metaphors, tropes, and examples—with which medieval Christians expressed themselves in doctrine and practice, taking images in context with other images as a guide to the "unspoken assumptions,

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[1] Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" (1947), in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Del Rey), 89.
[2] Augustine, "On the catechising of the uninstructed," trans. S.D.F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series 3 (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).
[3] To be clear, I do not think medieval ways of thinking are completely foreign to our present perspective in Western civilization, thus my "apparently." Modernity, of course, by definition begs to differ.

especially the unspoken inconsistencies and conflicts, at the heart of people's experience of the world."[4] In my own work, I have focused more on the processes of constructing narrative through meditation on images, particularly the images found in the liturgy, but my goal has been much the same: to discover the way in which medieval Christians constructed their experience of God and of his relationship to the world through art, liturgy, study of the scriptures, and prayer. My work sits at the intersection, if you will, between history, psychology, textual analysis, liturgy, exegesis, and performance, my goal being to establish empathy with medieval Christians' experience of devotion and prayer. Accordingly, I have attempted in my scholarship to stay as close as possible to the language with which medieval Christians described that experience, while at the same time framing my descriptions in a way that enables the modern academic reader to participate imaginatively in this worldview.

To judge from reviews of *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, I have succeeded beyond my wildest imaginings—not because I have persuaded every reader, but because I have unsettled some and delighted others, as often as not by doing (or not doing) the very thing others wish I had not (or had). If for Stephan Waldhoff, I have not defined prayer in the terms he would use (he seems to prefer a more philological approach), for Fr. James Schall, I have tapped directly into the Thomistic definition of devotion: "'Truth is the conformity of mind and reality.' Our minds are made to know *what* is; they do not create it." While Barbara Newman is unconvinced by my suggestion that we take seriously the Temple imagery embedded in the Orthodox and Latin Christian descriptions of the Virgin Mary as evidence for the origins of the Virgin's cult, Willemien Otten declares that "it should perhaps be no real surprise that the way in which Mary became revered reveals close connections with the Old Testament temple cult." Conversely, Otten wishes I had spent more time on the context for the medieval cult, while Newman notes my careful contextualization of the practice of the Hours and praises the attention that I give to works others have dismissed as irrelevant. Shery A. Kujawa-Holbrook sets my work in the context of four other recent studies of the devotion to Mary, concluding favorably: "This book represents the best of traditional scholarship, with an innovative structure that captures the imagination." Both Schall and Newman predicted that my book would have a massive impact on contemporary understandings of the Virgin. Newman says it has the potential to be a "game-changer" in the reassessment of the Mariology of Vatican II, while Schall says it "requires an

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[4] Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christendom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 7.

almost total rethinking of how we look on Mary today in the light of how medieval Christians understood her." Rebekah Lamb cast its effect even wider: "Given both its size and unique methodology, *Mary and the Art of Prayer* will challenge its readers to reconsider how they interpret the categories of 'medieval,' 'imagination,' and 'devotion.'"

How do we explain medieval Christians' desire to gaze upon the Mother of God, tell stories about her, and lift their voices to her daily in song? The question is either easy (projection, reification, sublimation of the need for a mother or lover; social structures supporting particular hierarchical visions of society, including ones that give place to queens; previous categories of description for the divine and/or role of women) or impossible to answer. Which came first, devotion to Wisdom or service to the lady-mother-bride? Rather than default to modern theorizations of the feminine and its relationship to religion, I have preferred a more experimental approach. Erving Goffman talks in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) about the way in which people perform their roles in public as if putting on different kinds of mask. As Goffman would put it, we wear the mask of our persona—the role that we aspire to fill—every time we interact with others. But actors know that physical masks can have similar effects: putting on a mask for the sake of a play can bring out characters others than those that the actors consciously create. Keith Johnstone describes this experience as entering into a trance state and notes how masks have been used across cultures as tools for the encounter with the divine.[5] Masks are more than just costumes; they are tools for channeling the energy of characters we want somehow to become.

Medieval Christians spoke in terms of "putting on the face of Christ," whether in imagination or through physical exercises of imitation, particularly of the agonies of the Passion. As I showed in my first book, *From Judgment to Passion*, Mary herself was imagined as sharing intimately in this imitation, begging to die with her Son even as he suffered on the Cross. What if, I wanted to know, I invited my own readers into this experience by way of an analogous exercise? "Imagine yourself. Put yourself in the scene." More to the point: "Imagine yourself gazing with love on the Virgin Mother and her Son." Would my readers see what medieval Christians said they saw? Here is where things get complicated, as Schall points out in his review of my book. "Devotion," as I put it in the Invitatory to *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, "requires an object. Like the imagination, devotion takes its shape and purpose from its object." In Schall's

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[5] Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 143-205 ("Masks and Trance").

words: "You cannot be devoted to thin air or to yourself… This affirmation is realism. It is good Thomism… This position is why everything, not just acknowledgements [to a book], requires thanksgiving as its first response. For us, reality begins in receptivity of a good we did not make." Taking Mary and her Son as real, not just as objects of devotion, but as causes of the feelings and emotions of those dedicated to them requires a leap not just of psychology, but of epistemology. What causes faith? Rather than require my readers to answer a question that has riven Christianity since the Reformation, I suggested instead an exercise: "Say the Hours of the Virgin as if you took their object as real. Notice how this exercise changes your understanding of devotion."

Confirmation of this method has come from unexpected places, not least of which the dozens of invitations I have had since my book came out to speak both within the academy and to the public about medieval Christians' experience of Mary.[6] Catholics tell me that they have never heard Mary described in the way the medieval sources do (as mentioned everywhere in scripture as the place in which God became visible to the world); they are as surprised as my fellow scholars to learn that the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary does not conform to the modern emphases on the feminine in the way they have been taught to expect. Many tell me that my book has inspired them to take up the practice of saying Mary's Hours, sometimes even in Latin. Much as Tolkien hoped his story-telling would inspire others to respond in "paint and music and drama" to his invitation to sub-create within his story-world, so my readers have declared themselves inspired to make art, music, and poetry in praise of Our Lady.[7] Students in my course on "Mary and Mariology" (Spring 2012, Autumn 2015) have presented me with Christmas pageants, paintings, pages from a Book of Hours, an embroidered stomacher, motets, poems, prayer books, miracle stories and more. I can well imagine their work gaining some of them an apprenticeship in a medieval guild.

Perhaps the most reassuring response, however, has come from a writer for the University of Chicago alumni magazine, who contacted me with a question about some art made not for traditional religious purposes, but rather by fans of a particular television actor who is an alumnus of our College. Why, she wanted to know, did his fans spend so much time making such

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[6] Many of these interviews and lectures have been recorded and posted online. See <https://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/p/bear-on-air.html> for links to some 70 videos, podcasts, and radio interviews about my work posted over the past two years. Additional appearances are listed in my c.v..

[7] Tolkien, *Letters*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), no. 131.

intricate representations of him in his character as an angel? The fan art she showed me was astonishing in its variety: crocheted figurines and bed-sized blankets, drawings, paintings, gum-wrapper art prints, costumes, and souvenir buttons, all homemade, much of it intensely time-consuming to produce. The actor is a handsome man, so it is perhaps unsurprising that his fans love drawing him. "They're clearly responding to his beauty," I told her. "When you're in the presence of beauty, the desire to draw it is almost overwhelming. It's an act of seeing, of giving back." But why did the artwork need to be so involved? "As an artist," I told her, "you are gazing on the thing that gives you the most joy. Of course [the fans are] going to do something that takes an immense amount of attention. That's the only way you can actually be in the presence of the beloved."[8] My students in my "Medieval Christian Mythology" (Winter 2019) responded in kind when I showed them the fan art and compared it with the images and prayers medieval Christians made in honor of the saints including Mary. "It's fanfic," I told them. "You know what devotional art is. You make it all the time." They nodded—and proceeded to tell me about their own artwork and stories.

Mary and the Art of Prayer is about what it says in the title: the art of prayer, prayer as an exercise of the imagination and of love. Medieval theologians liked to quote John of Damascus: "Prayer (oratio) is defined as 'a lifting up (ascensus) of the mind and soul to God.'" Modern debates about whether it is appropriate to pray to Mary tend to focus on the question of intercession, whether a mere creature (Mary or another of the saints) could respond to prayers, whether praying to Mary interposes an unnecessary (and unscriptural) mediator between humanity and God. Medieval Christians worried rather about how best to serve her. According to the miracle stories collected beginning in the twelfth century by her monastic devotees, Mary was particularly pleased with such devotional services as saying her Hours and reciting the angel's greeting. My problem in describing these practices was explaining how they answered to the Damascene's definition of prayer: how did serving Mary help lift the mind and soul to God?

One of the principal barriers that I had was explaining the treatises that her medieval devotees wrote to support this service, particularly the long lists of names with which they greeted her. To anybody other than a lover such lists are interminably boring, likewise to scholars seeking answers to the mystery of devotion in places other than love. Helen Phillips

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[8] Carrie Golus, "Squishy Hugs: Why is Misha Collins, AB '97, the object of so much affection?," *The Core: The College Magazine* (Winter 2017), < http://thecore.uchicago.edu/Winter2017/features/squishy-hugs.shtml>.

described them as exercises of clerical obscurantism, hypocritically elevating a woman theologically and devotionally when otherwise medieval society accorded "women and female qualities…little power or respect."[9] Others, including Catholics writing since Vatican II, have found the lists embarrassing and excessive, a sign (as Hilda Graef put it) of the decadence to which late medieval Marian devotion was regrettably prone.[10] The sixteenth-century reformers rejected these lists of titles along with their scriptural referents, insisting that elevating Mary by describing her as anything other than a humble housewife was to denigrate her Son's role as Savior.

Mary's medieval devotees would have found these reservations nonsensical. Praising Mary was, they insisted, an exercise in praising God. To name her as the Mother of the one who created heaven and earth required praising the whole of creation, thus their extensive catalogues of her titles and repeated recitations of her name. My students who are familiar with fanfic get it instantly. They know what it is like to long to gaze on the face of the beloved. They know what it is like to want to know every detail of their beloved's life. They know what it is like to hunt through the story canon cataloguing every mention of their beloved's name. They know what it is like to write themselves into the story of their beloved, imitating his or her costumes and mannerisms, becoming their beloved by putting on the mask. They know what it is like because they have done it themselves, even as they worry that others might find their devotions silly or cringe-making. No wonder modern readers find the medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary so embarrassing. Love is always embarrassing to those looking on from outside.

What effect did the devotion to Mary as the Mother of the Creator of heaven and earth have on the development of medieval European Christianity? My contention is that we cannot know unless we take stories as generative, not simply as reflections of the cultures that tell them. This is why I have worked to develop the method that I have: to frame the texts rhetorically ("Imagine yourself") in such a way that readers can appreciate them as if they were fans in love with Our Lord and his Mother. Seen from the outside (as is common practice in our scholarship), devotion makes no sense however exhaustively we catalogue its images, precisely because the images are the thing we cannot explain except with reference to other uses of the same images.

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[9] Phillips, "'Almighty and al mercible queene': Marian Titles and Marian Lyrics," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Ruddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 86-87.

[10] Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963, 1965).

Why did the poet Frauenlob use the images that he did to describe the Virgin Mary? Because (as Barbara Newman shows in her exquisite study of his *Marienleich*) these were the images that were available in the repertoire, as evidenced by Richard of Saint-Laurent's encyclopedic catalogue.[11] Why did Richard of Saint-Laurent catalogue the images that he did? Because, as I have shown in *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, these were the images he found in the Virgin's liturgies cited from the scriptures. Why did the seventh, eighth, and ninth-century authors of the Marian liturgy use the images that they did from scripture? Because these were the citations that they found in the oldest liturgies going back to Constantinople and Jerusalem. Why did the liturgists in Constantinople and Jerusalem use the citations from scripture that they did? Because these were the texts that they believed spoke about the Virgin Mary. Why?

You see the problem. As historians, the only thing we can do is trace usage; we depend upon the authors of the tradition to explain their choices of images and texts, but the authors of the liturgy give us no such explanations. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. In the Christian tradition, worship has more or less invariably preceded doctrine. What, then, do we do as historians when we find a continuous tradition of imagery—for example, of Mary described as the Temple of the LORD—going back to antiquity, long predating the medieval usage of this imagery? Do we explain Birgitta of Sweden's description of Mary as the Temple of Solomon with reference to fourteenth-century architectural styles? Or do we allow that the use of these images to describe the Virgin Mary stimulated the authors, artists, and architects of medieval Europe to produce the works that they did in her honor?

I have indicated in the footnotes to *Mary and the Art of Prayer* the places in which the historiography on the devotion of the Virgin has argued against continuity from one period to the next. These are the moments I have labeled "dragons" in the scholarship (see General Index, s.v. dragons), the places of contestation, if you will, when causation is called into question. They are the chasms across which our usual periodizations—Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, early Christianity, post-conciliar Christianity, medieval Christianity, Reformation and Catholic Christianity, modernity—forbid us to cross. *Hic sunt dracones*, as the maps say. Here are the places our explanations dare not go. Did Christians invent the devotion to the Virgin Mary, or did devotion to the Lady and her Son invent Christianity? Medieval Christians had no

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[11] Newman, *Frauenlob's Song of Songs: A Medieval German Poet and His Masterpiece* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 186, 188, 214.

such qualms. From their perspective, Mary was visible in scripture because, just like Christ, she had always been there, or rather, she had been there since Wisdom danced before the throne of the Creator, rejoicing before him and delighting in his works (Proverbs 8:22-31). She was, after all, the Mother of Wisdom, the Word who entered into time and became flesh in her womb.

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HAVING CLARIFIED the terms in which medieval Christians talked about the Virgin Mary, I am now interested to explore how their devotion shaped not just their artistic creations (poems, liturgies, miracle stories, commentaries, paintings, architecture, sculptures, plays), but also their understanding of themselves as souls made in the image and likeness of God. What happened when medieval Christians put on the mask of "servant of Our Lady"? How did their desire to serve her affect their sense of self, particularly their understanding of virtue and vice? As with my study of devotion and prayer, so now with my study of virtue and vice, the first step is to develop a method for accessing the experience on which our sources are based. I note in my Research Statement ("Professional Self-Portrait") how training as a fencer enabled me to access some of the metaphors ("demons") with which medieval Christians described their encounter with sin. Over the past two years, I have been conducting further experiments in psychomachia—a.k.a. allegory—to test the descriptions I have found in the medieval sources of what it means to train the soul. I am still in the early phase of making sense of these experiments, some of which I have begun writing about on my blog. I would like to take a moment here to reflect on some of the things I have learned, particularly as they have helped give shape to my future research.

My project has changed considerably in the past two years, although the broad outlines remain the same as described in my "Professional Self Portrait": to study devotion as a method for training the soul in virtue, much as I have previously studied exegesis and liturgy as vehicles for devotion and prayer. I now understand how much that training involves not just a shaping, but more importantly a sacrifice of self. "Putting on Christ" is not for the faint of heart—Thomas Aquinas would say that I have discovered the virtue of fortitude.[12] I now also appreciate how much the medieval sense of virtue as a reflection of the glory of God differs from the more

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[12] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 123-140.

punitive, calculating sense of virtue that has been standard since Christian ethics succumbed to nominalism.[13] Above all, however, I understand why Benedict of Nursia (d. 547) believed that the best training in virtue involved submission to an abbot, as well as why this training was cast allegorically as a combat with vice. Some of these insights came directly from reading within the medieval tradition of treatises on the virtues and vices for the graduate course I taught in Autumn 2018 ("Virtues and Vices in Medieval Christian Thought"), but by far the most illuminating lessons have come from arguably the last place one would expect to find training in virtue: my continuing encounters on social media with internet trolls.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised. After all, the desert fathers went into the desert to fight demons—a.k.a. the vices famously personified by Prudentius (d. ca. A.D. 413) in his *Psychomachia*. Where better to train in virtue than fighting against analogous avatars of mischief and chaos? Cartoonish, stripped of social status, disembodied, social media avatars function in much the same way Keith Johnstone describes the more mischievous of his Masks. Certainly, many encounters on social media play out as if the various avatars have taken over the human beings purportedly "wearing" them. People say things on social media they would never say in person or (when they use animal or inanimate avatars) in character as a human being. Much has been written on the dopamine hits that accrue as one accumulates "likes" or "tweets" and how addictive such attention rewards can become. Less commented (at least in my experience on social media) is the way in which the avatars people choose affect their behavior online.

Anecdotally, I have observed and participated in thousands of interactions over the past several years on a variety of platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram). At first, I was using these interactions as a way to test my own ability to answer criticism, much as I had trained myself to stay calm as a fencer. As a teacher, I was also interested in what questions people had about the topics I raised, whether in the history of Western civilization or about faith. In the past few months, however, I have been involved in what I have described on my blog as an extended experiment in training in virtue—a school, as it were, for internet thoughts (pun intended)—in the guise of a group chat on the messaging app Telegram. Accustomed as I am to looking for patterns in modern life that play on Christian structures and symbolism, I was still somewhat surprised to realize this past summer how, thanks to its obsession with status established through

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[13] For introduction, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, 3rd edition (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

combat, the Telegram chat had taken on the character of a monastery complete with abbot (chat owner), obedientiaries (admins), choir monks (members), and novices (newbies). Perhaps even more surprising was how this obsession with status had been transformed by our abbot into a lesson in the virtues of obedience and humility—exactly as Benedict designed it to be.

The chat began mid-May and had grown to over 3,000 members by the end of November. As with a Benedictine monastery, membership in the chat is voluntary, but under the direction of the chat owner with support from the admins whom he appointed. Likewise, as with a monastery under the rule of St. Benedict, there are rules of conduct, including days set aside during which certain members are required to keep silence, while other days are kept as feast days with additional posting allowed and shared viewing of a livestream. Infractions of the rules are punished with temporary excommunication, resolvable through penance, including almsgiving. Older members tend to claim higher status in the chat thanks to the time they have spent there, regardless of age or social status outside the chat, but this ranking can be overruled at any time (as Benedict would put it) "by the merit of their life, or by the appointment of the Abbot."[14]

Given the apparent capriciousness of some of the abbot's commands, it is not unusual for fights to break out in the chat over precedence, as members of the chat attempt to trump each other either with insults or information, depending on their preference for rhetoric or dialectic. The one tactic that never works, however, is to claim status on the basis of whatever status we enjoy in real life, much as monks abandoned their previous social standing once they entered the monastery. To gain status, one must be willing to be humiliated and ridiculed—and to welcome the humiliation, as, for example, when one new chat member quoted back something I had written and commented: "Lol you write like a woman… BREVITY IS THE SOUL OF WIT, MY DEAR!... Really trying to meet that fucking word limit, huh?" To which I replied, much as Eowyn to the Witch King: "I am no man!"

There are further analogues—the sense of being under siege from the world, the use of military metaphors to describe our spiritual battles—but it is the willingness to play by the rules and accept the decisions of the abbot that has been most striking. The closest analogue I can think of would be an athlete's relationship with a coach or a soldier's relationship with his sergeant, both metaphors that medieval monks would recognize from Benedict's own description

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[14] *The Rule of Our Most Holy Father St. Benedict*, ed. and trans. by one of the Benedictine Fathers of St. Michael's (London: R. Washbourne, 1875), cap. 63.

of the abbot. The difference in the chat is that there are nothing but avatars—no bodies, only souls—and the tests that the game puts them through. Over and over again, I have witnessed the way in which arrogating status fails, sometimes miserably, sometimes at the cost of excommunication for a day or a week. You can almost see the avatars puffing themselves up in the hope of becoming important to the chat, only to discover that the abbot has ruled that the least of the members shall be elevated, while the mighty are cast down. It seems at times cruel, much as the discipline of the monastery can look cruel until one remembers that it is voluntary (the Cistercians insisted upon it) and for the good of the monks' souls. The question is, how?

Much as medieval monks understood themselves as in training to become soldiers of Christ by taking up the "strong, bright armour of obedience," particularly humility, so I and the other members of the chat have been challenged to confront our own longing for status, not to mention our pride. It has been interesting to watch the members of the chat jockey for status and how they respond when they are chastised or ridiculed, as well as how they react when they are praised. The interactions have an intensity that is rare in my experience in daily life, more like the jostling and posturing to which the characters in medieval histories are said to have been prone. Blunt and fast-paced as they are, such interactions easily become verbally and (with the use of images) visually quite emotional, sometimes even abusive, more so than most modern speakers tend to allow themselves to become in person.

Pride is a frequent visitor to these encounters, humility much less so. What interests me is the dynamic, the way in which it is possible to test people's responses solely on the basis of what they type, without the additional information that would come from seeing their faces or bodies or hearing their voices. Although sometimes chat members post photos or voice messages, most interactions are solely in text. The only thing the chat members have other than the mask of their avatar is their ability to craft persuasive or compelling speech. Reading the chat is like reading the script of a play that is being written in real time, every character an allegory of the author behind the screen. Such allegories are a kind of mask—personifications we as readers use to explore the interior of our souls. Will Christian get caught in the Slough of Despond? Will Faithful succumb to the temptations of Vanity Fair? Will Hopeful and Christian survive their passage over the River of Death? Will virtue win out over vice?[15] In the chat, these allegories are

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[15] According to John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678): Yes, insofar as the reader is able to identify with Christian.

highlighted, made raw, in ways that they could never be simply by reading a story about "Christian" and his friends.

Consumed as they are with the longing for attention, the interactions in the chat have made me thoughtful above all about humility and why it is the virtue most closely associated with the Virgin Mary. It appears first in Richard of Saint-Laurent's catalogue of Mary's virtues, the font from which all her other virtues flow.[16] Brian Reynolds has pointed in a recent essay to the theological significance of the Virgin's humility, particularly in the Latin West. As Reynolds shows, Mary's humility was seen from this perspective as "*the* key to the Incarnation," her humble assent to the angel's message opening the door to humanity's salvation. That the West (and not the East) should take humility as Mary's primary virtue is perhaps unsurprising given the emphasis that Benedict placed on humility in his Rule. The Benedictine monk Bede (d. 735), for example, held Mary up as a model of humility for his monastic brothers: "Dearest brothers, following her voice and the thoughts of her mind, insofar as we can, let us remember to be servants of Christ, in all our actions and all our thoughts.… Together with the Blessed Virgin Mary let us pray assiduously so that for us too, it may come about according to his word."[17] Likewise, the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) invoked the imitation of Mary's humility as not just desirable, but necessary to salvation: "One can be saved without virginity, but without humility salvation is utterly impossible."[18]

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[16] Richard, *De laudibus beatae Mariae virginis libri XII*, lib. 4, cap. 1, ed. Augustus and Aemilius Borgnet, in *B. Alberti Magni Ratisbonensis Episcopi, Ordinis Praedicatorum, Opera Omnia* 36 (Paris: L. Vivès, 1898), 166-74. Appropriately for his role as penitentiary for the cathedral of Rouen, Richard was also the author of an as yet unedited treatise on the virtues and their relationship to confession and prayer. For table of contents, see Jean Chatillon, "L'héritage littéraire de Richard de Saint-Laurent," *Revue du moyen age latin* 2.1 (1946): 149-66, at 151. That Richard expected his instructions on the service of Mary to have active as well as contemplative effects is suggested by a curious claim he makes in *De laudibus beatae Mariae virginis libri XII* about the capaciousness of Mary's love. In Richard's words, Mary's love for God was "generous and wide: because she both loved and loves everything which is of God, Saracens, Jews, and Christians, albeit in different ways" (lib. 4, cap. 17, n. 7, ed. Borgnet, 222). In *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, I hypothesized that Richard was referring to actual Jews who lived near the cathedral of Rouen in his day, but why say that Mary loved "Saracens" as well? Perhaps he meant a certain family resident in Rouen with the surname "Salehadin"? Noting my puzzlement, William Chester Jordan has offered a more compelling answer: Richard was referring to the Muslim converts whom King Louis IX had settled throughout France, including in Rouen, where Richard served as a canon at the cathedral. The converts were, after all, the "apple" of Louis's eye. Would not the Virgin love them, too? See Jordan, *The Apple of His Eye: Converts from Islam in the Reign of Louis IX* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 132 (on my reading of Richard), 86-87 (on the metaphor "apple of his eye").
[17] Bede, *In festo Annuntiationis beatae Mariae* 10, cited by Reynolds, "The Patristic and Medieval Roots of Mary's Humility," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 320-37, at 328.
[18] Bernard, *First Sermon on the Glories of the Virgin Mother*, trans. by a priest of Mount Mellary (Devon: Augustine Publishing Company, 1984), 7-8, cited by Reynolds, 333.

In the Telegram chat, as you may have guessed, I am known as "Queen Mother" or "Mom." The newbies tend to assume that I am just another older woman (my avatar is my own image, I do not hide behind masks on social media, only on my blog), whereas the long-time members know that they can expect homework from me. They see me interacting with those who taunt and ridicule me; sometimes the long-time members try to warn the newbies that challenging me in that way can lead to a permanent ban from the abbot. (I have no such powers as Mom.) But what they do not see is me trying to stand on my status as Professor Rachel Fulton Brown, only my willingness to engage in the banter, sharing stickers and memes in between making reading recommendations in history and arguing about the importance of Christ. It has been a lesson for me, too, for my professional status to mean nothing in such engagements, only my knowledge and my willingness to take the hits. Have I learned what the medieval monastic authors meant when they pointed to the Virgin Mary as an example of the humility they should imitate in submitting themselves to the discipline of the Rule? At the very least, I have thought long and hard on what it meant for Mary to keep "all these words, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Modern readers typically find such instructions distasteful, if not downright misogynistic, ignoring the fact that monks like Bede and Bernard were calling for *men* to imitate the Virgin Mother of God in her humility. Even harder to appreciate, I would argue, is the way in which taking Mary as a model might make it easier (more comprehensible, more attractive, more doable) for monks to live according to Benedict's "little rule for beginners." How can we understand, never mind train in, a system of virtue in which we no longer believe? I have friends who live according to the Benedictine Rule; I could ask them. But as with the Hours of the Virgin, it takes practice to appreciate the experience from within, even if only by analogy (as, of course, all our knowledge of historical practices must be, much like our knowledge of God).[19]

Medieval authors like John of Garland were fond of personification allegories as devices for exploring the play of the virtues in their contest with vice. John set his psychomachia as the climax of his versified allegory of the life of Mary as Wisdom, the container of the uncontainable

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[19] My touchstone here is Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979), 23: "The fact is, that all language about everything is analogical; we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things…. In particular, when we speak about something of which we have no direct experience, we must think by analogy of refrain from thought…. To complain that man measures God by his own experience is a waste of time; man measures everything by his own experience; he has no other yardstick."

God. In John's *Epithalamium*, the Vices and Virtues join battle in Mary's soul as the company of heaven is celebrating the nuptial feast, their jousting at once an entertainment for the court and an explanation for the Virgin's heavenly ascent. She has been assumed bodily into heaven as the temple of the Incarnate Son and the bedchamber of the Bridegroom, but her mind is also a spiritual heaven where the Virtues compete for a prize. One by one the Vices fall in battle to their respective Virtues: Faith draws her sword, and Fraud flees. Torpor and Sloth are overcome by Industry and Vigilance. Happiness fights by playing her harp, while Sobriety purges the field of Gluttony's filth and Generosity drives Avarice away. Charity casts out Envy; Patience fells Anger. Pride retreats to her tower, where she is besieged by Humility. Genius and Skill hasten to build a siege-machine under the direction of Prudence. Modesty destroys Luxury, and Death laments the loss of her reign.

My students in "Virtues and Vices" and I wrestled with how to make sense of such images. Were they meant seriously as descriptions of the contests within the soul? Or were they meant simply to entertain John's students with battle scenes as they learned Latin grammar and poetry? Would it not make more sense to teach virtue soberly, rather than interspersing it with cockfights (book 3) and fishy battles (book 8)? What place do descriptions of castles and catapults have in training students in the liberal arts? Does it not demean the Virgin to imagine the Virtues battling it out in her soul like so many roistering knights? Herein, I have realized in my contests in the Telegram chat, lies the dilemma of Christian virtue: is it meant to be dignified and sober or mischievous and joyful? Modern popular culture typically casts Christians as joyless prudes, but poetry like John's, not to mention the margins of every medieval prayer book, would seem to suggest otherwise: that virtue was meant to be something playful, a delight, not a burden, even as the Virtues rejoiced in their victories over Vice. The Virtues, after all, were the ones playing musical instruments and singing nuptial songs, while the Vices ground their teeth in frustration and rage.

But perhaps we should not be surprised to find mischief-making at the heart of Christian virtue. Did not the Lord Jesus Christ pick grain on the Sabbath and throw the money changers from the Temple, only to welcome tax collectors and prostitutes to eat and talk with him? Christianity plays havoc with the expectations of the world, elevating the poor and humiliating the rich. To be virtuous in Christians terms is to be willing to be made fun of for believing something so ridiculous as God's emptying himself to become man. It is to be willing to be made

a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23), not to mention a fool to those who stand on their dignity and their status in the world.

This was the lesson that John of Garland's contemporary Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) set out to teach his fellow Christians, including the pope. Francis came to Rome to submit his Rule to Pope Innocent III for approval, but when Innocent beheld Francis's "ill-fitting robe, ugly face, long beard, disheveled hair, and overhanging black eyebrows," he could not believe that Francis had anything to teach him. "Brother," the pope told the vagabond, "go find some pigs—to which you should be compared rather than to men—and roll in the mud with them. And take the Rule you have made to them—and give them the benefit of your preaching!" Francis, obedient to the letter, bowed his head and went out to find some pigs. "And having found some swine, he rolled in the mud with them until he had soiled his whole body with it from the soles of his feet to the top of his head," at which he went back to the Pope and said: "Lord, I have done what you ordered. Now please listen to my petition."[20] Chastened by Francis's willing embrace of his foolishness, the Pope granted Francis and his brothers permission to live according to Francis's new Rule.

I have written elsewhere about the importance of humor for disrupting the worldly pieties of our day.[21] My challenge now is to find a way to write about the medieval understanding of virtue that enables my academic readers to share that joy. Thanks to the reading and teaching I have been doing the past two years, I appreciate better now both the scope of the medieval sources and the difficulty of translating them than I did when I wrote my "Professional Self-Portrait," but it is my experience in the chat that has given me what I now recognize as a way in: *look for the comedy in what the world sees as shame*. I am scheduled to give talks later this academic year at both the 55th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo and the 16th International Congress of Medieval Canon Law in Saint Louis, which will enable me to test some of these themes: Mary's beauty inside and out as a sign of her virtue, and her role as advocate in the contest between Justice and Mercy. To the treatises on virtues and vices I read with the students, I would now add allegories like John of Garland's *Epithalamium* and Robert Grosseteste's *Chasteau d'amour* ("Castle of Love") as well as the hundreds of miracle stories in

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[20] Raphael Brown, *Fifty Animal Stories of Saint Francis as told by his companions* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1958), 52-53.
[21] Fulton Brown, *Milo Chronicles* (New York: Dangerous Books, 2019).

which the Virgin chastises her devotees for not serving her as they ought. I explored some of this literature in an essay I was invited to write for the Oxford handbook *High Medieval: Literary Cultures in England* on "Delight." I realize now that this essay was, in effect, the starting point for my study of virtue, including the delight that authors took in praising the Virgin for her beauty. My task now is to understand why her devotees chose the genres that they did for training their souls in joy.