



Who Saw Her First? The Tangled Sight-Lines of Medieval Romance and Marian Piety

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Abstract

The cult of the Virgin Mary, which has origins in early medieval devotional practice, fostered a profusion of richly evocative imagery, much of which was taken up in later centuries by Romance texts that transfer elements of Mary's idealised womanhood onto the new ideal of the idealised feminine vision of courtly love. Both visions posit a transcendent other who offers comfort, inspiration and hope to her devotee.

Keywords: Marian devotion, medieval romance, courtly love

Résumé

Le culte de la Vierge Marie, que l'on retrouve en Europe dans les pratiques de dévotion dès le début de l'ère médiévale, a nourri une riche imagerie évocative, que l'on retrouve dans les siècles qui suivirent dans les textes de la Romance. Ceux-ci ont transféré les éléments de la féminité idéalisée de Marie vers la nouvelle vision féminine idéalisée de l'amour courtois. Les deux visions se rejoignent en supposant un transcendent autre qui offre confort, inspiration, and espoir aux dévots de Marie.

Mot-clés: dévotion Mariale, romance médiéval, amour courtois



He cast his eye upon Emelya,
And therewithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"
As though he stongen were unto the herte.

(*The Canterbury Tales*, fragment 1[A] ll.1077-79)¹

He cast his eye upon Emily,
And there and then he blanched and cried "A!"
As though he had been pierced to the heart.

This is how Palamon, one of the hero-rivals of Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, catches his first glimpse of Emily, the sister-in-law of Duke Theseus, from a high window of the tower in which he and his cousin Arcite have been imprisoned for their part in a Theban civil war. The grim surrounds of the cousins' confinement fall away in a moment of recognition that elicits only an inarticulate cry or sob from the stricken knight. Recognition, but of *what*, exactly? Chaucer plays this moment for comic misunderstanding. Arcite interprets Palamon's 'A!' as an expression of his cousin's distress at their hopeless confinement. Palamon is quick to correct him:

The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the garden romen to and fro
Is cause of al my cryng and my wo.
I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, ,
But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse.

(*The Canterbury Tales*, fragment 1[A] ll.1098-1102)

The beauty of that lady who I see
Roaming yonder in the garden to and fro
Is the cause of all my crying and my woe.
I know not if she be woman or goddess
but it is surely Venus, as I guess.

This is love at first sight, so sudden and absolute that Palamon mistakes it for a literal epiphany: his first response is to kneel and pray to Venus, the goddess he imagines has appeared to him. When Arcite takes his own peep out the window, he is similarly stricken, and the two wrangle bitterly over who saw Emily first. Arcite will argue that *he* did, since Palamon mistook her for a goddess, while he saw a woman of flesh and blood.

Who is right? This parallax between Palamon's religiose prostration and Arcite's more down-to-earth sensibilities allows Chaucer gently to mock the medieval romance tradition, which by his fourteenth-century moment had profoundly influenced European

¹ Middle English text from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson *et al.*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All translations or modernisations of Old or Middle English texts are my own.

literature for more than two centuries. It is a tradition of many parts, drawing on chivalric culture's growing consciousness of its own oddly contrary sensibilities: warrior stoicism against erotic emotionalism, the social confinement of etiquette and politesse against the lover's impatience with all boundaries, and an idealisation of the feminine that draws on the culture of devotion to the Virgin Mary which took powerful hold of the Christian imagination at roughly the same time.

Both romance sensibilities and Marian pietism sprang from deep roots we can now unravel only partly. Their shared archetypes of exalted female figures—mother and beloved, supernally imposing and infinitely desirable, numinously erotic—suggest a common psychological dimension that resists merely historical analysis. Outwardly diffuse and even antithetical at points, the medieval traditions of high reverence for the courtly lady and for Mary as the queen of heaven speak a mutually intelligible language, overlapping and intersecting across complex histories that appear to reach much farther back than the Middle Ages.

Earlier English texts do embody Marian sensibilities, but they tend to speak feelingly about high theological abstractions. Surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry contains a number of pieces that allow us a glimpse of early medieval Marian devotion. A typical example is this passage from an address to Mary in the ninth Advent lyric in the sequence that opens the Exeter Book:

Wlat þa swa wis-fæst witga geond þeod-land
oþ þæt he gestarode þær gestapelad wæs
æpelic ingong. Eal wæs gebunden
deoran since. duru ormæte,
wundur-clommum bewripen. Wende swiðe
þæt ænig elda æfre ne meahte
swa fæstlice fore-scyttelsas
on ecnesse o inhebban,
oþþe ðæs ceaster-hlides clustor onlucan,
ær him godes engel þurh glædne geþonc
þa wisan onwrah ond þæt word acwæð:
"Ic þe mæg secgan" —þæt soð gewearð—
"þæt ðas gyldnan gatu giet sume siþe
god sylf wile Gæstes mægne
gefælsian, Fæder ælmihtig,
ond þurh þa fæstan locu foldan neosan,
ond hio þonne æfter him ece stondeð
simle singales swa beclýsed
þæt nænig oþer, nymðe nergend god,
hy æfre ma eft onluceð."

Nu þæt is gefylled þæt se froda þa
mid eagam þær on wlatade.
þu eart þæt weall-dor, þurh þe waldend Frea
æne on þas eorðan ut siðade
ond efne swa þec gemette, meahtum gehrodene,
clæne ond gecorene, Crist ælmihtig.
Swa ðe æfter him engla þeoden
eft unmaele ælces þinges
liofu-cægan bileac, lifes brytta.

(*The Advent Lyrics*, IX.306-334)²

The wise prophet then peered across his land
till he gazed upon a nobly founded gate.
Precious treasures bound that massive door,
all festooned with many wondrous chains.
He quickly realised that no human being
for all eternity, could ever raise
such fixed and massive bolts, or ever release
that city-portal's gates, before God's angel,
with glad intent, showed to him the way
pronouncing this speech: "I can say to you—"
which came to be in truth—"that God himself
will cleanse these gates in some time yet to come,
through the power of the Spirit, the Father almighty
and past those fast-shut bars shall seek the earth.
And after him, eternally, they'll stand,
always and forever closed so fast
that no one else, except for the Saviour God,
shall ever thereafter unlock them." Now what he saw,
that wise man, with his eyes, has come to pass.
You are that gate, through whom the regal Prince
singularly emerged upon this earth,
all-powerful Christ, and just so came to meet you,
unsullied and select, with virtues adorned.
Behind him, life's dispenser, angels' prince,
once more secured you with your own limbs' key,
in every aspect still immaculate.

This passage, composed perhaps during the ninth or tenth centuries, combines elements of contemplative regard, praise-hymn, and petition. It remains formally in touch with

² Old English text from *Old English Poems of Christ and His Saints*, ed. and trans. Mary Clayton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013).

orthodox angelology, Christology, and soteriology, while expressing wonder at the depth of God's grace revealed through his humble handmaiden. Its central image is the fanciful elaboration of a vision (mistakenly attributed by the poet to Isaiah) that occurs in Ezekiel 44:1-2, where the Spirit of Yahweh transports Ezekiel to 'the outer east gate of the sanctuary' of Solomon's temple and announces its closure. None shall pass through before God himself does so at some future time. The biblical passage simply names the temple's eastern gate, which this passage magnifies into a cyclopean portal, a 'massive door, / festooned with many wondrous chains,' noble, bolted and barred until God's return.³ The poet identifies this cosmic gate with Mary herself, the chains and bars her virginity, her womb the gate through which God, in the person of Christ, will return to the world, thereby opening a passage for all humankind to be restored to its prelapsarian bliss. Like a good householder, he secures those gates behind him, a confirmation of Mary's perpetual virginity. A triumphant bit of theology is given both a concrete and a highly aestheticized voice.

The seventh Advent Lyric plays out a dialogue between the pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph, in which she eases his agonised doubts about her virtue. In the process she gives first-hand witness to the miracle of the immaculate conception. The scene emphasises the human dimension of Joseph's experience, but his words express a poignant squawk at the affront delivered to earthly reason by the formal doctrine. The episode is basically catechism dressed up as domestic melodrama. Some centuries later, different sensibilities have begun to colour the literature of Marian devotion and reflection. Consider this brief but deeply affecting lyric from the early thirteenth century, which renders a *pietà* of Mary grieving for her dead son against a mysterious vegetative setting:

Now goth sonne under wod:	Now the sun goes under the wood:
Me reweth, Marye, thy faire rode.	I pity, Mary, thy beautiful face.
Now goth sonne under tre:	Now the sun goes under the tree:
Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee. ⁴	I pity, Mary, thy son and thee.

³ Ezekiel 10:18-19 earlier describes the departure of God's glory or *shekinah* from the desecrated temple of Solomon:

The glory of Yahweh then came out over the temple threshold and paused over the winged creatures. These raised their wings and rose from the ground as I watched, and the wheels were beside them. They paused at the entrance to the east gate of the Temple of Yahweh, with the glory of the God of Israel over them, above" (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, gen. ed. Henry Wansbrough, New York: Doubleday, 1985. All biblical quotations will be taken from this translation).

Ezekiel's vision of this celestial chariot is the foundational text of the *merkabah* (Hebrew: chariot) tradition of *kabbala*, a later Jewish mystical tradition that incorporates many female elements into its vision of the divine.

⁴ 'Pity for Mary,' from *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. R.T. Davies (London: Faber, 1963).

A more intimately personal note has entered into this speaker's relationship with Mary. She is wholly human here rather than the humble handmaid who is at the same time God's interdimensional cosmic portal into our world. Her grief is lit by a sun that descends *under wod*: literally, under the wood. The image is of a deep red sun falling behind a thick stand of trees, an inherently atmospheric scene lent extra depth by the assonance of *sonne* (sun) and the fourth line's *sonne* (son). Mary's *faire rode* (fair face) *reweth* the speaker (literally, it rues me, i.e., demands his rue: his pity or compassion). But *rode* is also the Middle English form of early modern English *rood*. Both words mean cross or crucifix, to which the *tre* that ends the third line lends its archetypal heft. Mary's son 'goes under the tree,' most likely in the sense of being deposed from the cross after his death, a setting sun/son. The poem clearly references the crucifixion, yet its compressed polysemy and evocative tableau of mother, son, and tree suggest any number of the dying-god vegetation myths that, from an orthodox Christian vantage, anticipate Christ's torment on *his tree*.

Tammuz and Inanna are here, as are Isis and Osiris, Venus and Adonis, or, in another register, Persephone and Demeter. Mary's grief figures all those grieving mothers and bereft lovers of myth. The mother-and-child motif has an ancient provenance: Egyptian images of Isis suckling the infant Horus anticipate medieval and renaissance art depicting the Madonna and child. The word *madonna* is simply Italian for 'my lady' and could be used with equal propriety to express reverence for Mary, respect towards a feudal duke's duchess (the courtier's 'm'lady'), or a passionate courtly devotion to a beloved.

Beyond these associations, the fair face of Mary in this lyric lends her something of the grace of the courtly lady as well, a small hint that has suggested to me the substance of this discussion: that in the centuries between *The Advent Lyrics* and 'Pity for Mary,' a mysterious psycho-spiritual upheaval rearranged the mental furniture of the Western imagination. It made itself felt in a number of different dimensions, most notably in the language of Marian devotion and courtly romance. The exalted courtly lady and the Queen of Heaven are perhaps avatars of Robert Graves' White Goddess, who in them reclaims a new eminence after centuries of suppression under the auspices of both Imperial Rome and the fathers and bishops of Christianity's early centuries, who inherited ancient Rome's strongly patriarchal tendencies.

We can read the seismic trace of this rearrangement by considering its effects in both Marian and courtly traditions, particularly in the language taken up in parallel by hymns and by the poetry of medieval romance. And not just in parallel: from the earliest romance texts we can sense the reciprocal incursions of each tradition on the other's domain. In the late twelfth century, Chrétien de Troyes, a courtier of both Marie de France and Eleanor of Aquitaine, gathered a number of popular traditions into a sequence of verse narratives set in the Arthurian world. This 'new' realm of chivalric romance,

ostensibly Christian, preserves many elements it absorbed from sources far older than the faith that structures its characters' beliefs and actions.

Folklore, legend, and myth, transmitted orally from unknown reaches of past time, left half-glimpsed deposits of alien sensibilities that gleam from behind the muscular piety of Chrétien's characters. Consider the mixed semiotics of a passage from his *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (The Knight of the Cart). Lancelot, on a quest to rescue the kidnapped Queen Guinevere, is travelling in the company of a maiden he'd previously rescued from her captor along the way—we can for now simply note how such secondary services to womankind, in addition to his unwavering devotion to Guinevere, are a keynote of Lancelot's calling. Here the pair come upon a comb of gilded ivory left lying on a flat stone by a brook. He is struck by its beauty, and even more by the beauty of the golden hair caught in its teeth. The maiden asks Lancelot for the comb, but she suggests that he keep the hair, which, she offhandedly informs him, is Guinevere's. The effect of that intelligence is electric:

He was willing for her to have the comb, but first he removed the hair, being careful not to break a single strand. Never will the eye of man see anything receive such reverence, for he began to adore the hair, touching it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead and his cheeks. He expressed his joy in every way imaginable and felt himself most happy and rewarded. He placed the hair on his breast near his heart, between his shirt and his skin. He would not have traded it for a cart loaded with emeralds or carbuncles; nor did he fear that ulcers or any other disease could afflict him; he had no use for magic potions mixed with pearls, nor for drugs against pleurisy, nor for theriaca,⁵ nor even for prayers to Saint Martin and Saint James. He placed so much faith in these strands of hair that he felt no need for any other aid.⁶

Lancelot's reverence toward stray strands of his beloved's hair mimics the reverence a Christian might offer a saint's relics. For him, Guinevere's hair is beyond compare or price, an absolute good that will not suffer any this-for-that chafferings of exchange. This minuscule fraction of Guinevere's physical presence weighs in her lover's mind with the force of a wholly realised archetype. He handles it with a tender solicitude, as though it actually were Guinevere herself. In this moment, it is Guinevere, as the bread of the eucharist is the body of Christ when it is elevated at the consecration. Like the eucharist, Lancelot accords it a sovereign power over disease, over all medicines or even the intercessory powers of the saints. Chrétien's psychology is careful here: the hair's numinous presence shines for Lancelot alone. Is it merely a fancy of his imagination?

⁵ a medicinal paste made from various drugs mixed with honey

⁶ From Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (late twelfth century), translated by William W. Kibler, in *Arthurian Romances* (Penguin, 1991), p. 225.

When he later rescues Guinevere and the two arrange a tryst before their return to Camelot, he approaches her in a state of quasi-religious awe:

He came next to that [bed] of the queen; Lancelot bowed low and adored her,
for in no holy relic did he place such faith.⁷

Guinevere has here become an artefact of the numinous, a piece of heaven footing earth. Her elevation complements how 'Pity for Mary' draws Mary's grief into sharp focus as that of an all-too-human mother, amidst the swirl of high powers at play in her son's crucifixion. These depictions of elevated queen and humanised Queen cross at their shared visions of woman-as-archetype. The Lady and the lady assume each other's guises, in a game of diction and image that plays out across the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond.

A century or so after Chrétien, Dante was to construct an elaborate edifice of romantic theology,⁸ which he proposes in response to the glimpses of heaven that came to him in the person of a young Florentine lady, Beatrice Portinari. Their brief acquaintance (she married elsewhere and died relatively young) left Dante literally stunned. He later recorded his experiences a short treatise, *Vita Nuova*, in which he reflects on the emotional and spiritual upheavals prompted by the advent of Beatrice into his consciousness, in a mixture of prose exposition and verse celebration. The *canzone* that opens its nineteenth chapter, *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, ('Ladies who possess an understanding of love'), contains this sonnet-stanza in praise of Beatrice:

My lady is desired in highest heaven;
a lady who aspires to graciousness
should seek her company, for when she walks,
Love drives a killing frost into vile hearts
that freezes and destroys their every thought;
and dare a thought remain to look at her
it has to change to good or else must die;
and if she finds one worthy to behold her,
he feels her power, for her least salutation
bestows salvation on this favoured one
and humbles him till he forgets all wrongs.
This too has God Almighty graced her with:

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 264.

⁸ The term was coined in the early twentieth century by the English poet and novelist Charles Williams in his account of how Dante's vision of romantic love influenced Western thought and imagination. Williams wrote his treatise in 1924, but it did not appear in print until *Outlines of Romantic Theology* (ed. Alice Mary Hadfield) was published in 1990 by Wm. B. Eerdmans.

whoever speaks with her shall speak with him.⁹

Dante calls on an imagined audience of *donne* (ladies, singular *donna*, from the feminine form of the Latin *dominus*, lord) as judges empanelled to pronounce on his declarations of courtly sensibilities, inspired by his own *donna*, Beatrice. His argument synthesises all the elements that compose the full romance paradigm, of which Dante is the foremost expositor. In his vision, love wields a quasi-divine power, channelled through the idealised form and character of the beloved, whose mere presence lifts her lover's spirit heavenward. Every modern love-cliché about being in heaven, every pop-song from *Cheek to Cheek*¹⁰ to *Singing in the Rain* to *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic*, or simply our fundamental notions of falling in love betrays the far-off but still palpable influence of Dante's imagination. But such a power, like God's own omnipotence, overawes its devotee, demanding a perfection in his character to match that of his beloved. No mortal thing can behold the unmediated divine and live, and yet, paradoxically, such a vision can afford its recipient a fleeting taste of heaven's beatitude in the mortal body of this life.

The experience of being in love, even more so of *falling* in love, has always eluded proper characterisation or definition. The modern experience, however jostled in the hectic domains of social media and dating apps, still draws significantly on the celebration of love in the courtly literatures of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The sudden revelation to the lover of the beloved as an incomparable paragon, as someone might experience it today, owes much of its force to Dante's recall of his raptures over his discovery of Beatrice's perfections, whether we know it or not.

Dante's ideal of romantic love wields an exalted yet terrifying power, as this next passage, from the third chapter of *Vita Nuova*, dramatises. After a first encounter with Beatrice at nine years of age, their paths cross once more nine years later. She acknowledges Dante with a smile, which sends him back to his chamber to contemplate this unexpected miracle:

In my reverie a sweet sleep seized me, and a marvellous vision appeared to me. I seemed to see a cloud the colour of fire in my room and in that cloud a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet apparently marvellously filled with joy. He said many things, of which I understood only a few; among them was, 'I am your master.' It seemed to me that in his arms there lay a figure asleep and naked except for a crimson cloth loosely wrapping it. Looking at it very intently, I realised that it was the lady of the blessed greeting [i.e. Beatrice], the lady who earlier in the day had favoured me with her salutation. In one of his hands he held a fiery object, and he seemed to say these words: 'Behold your heart.' And after a short while, he seemed to awaken the sleeping one,

⁹ From the nineteenth chapter of *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 36.

¹⁰ With its opening line of "Heaven, I'm in heaven . . ."

and through the power of his art made her eat this burning object in his hand.¹¹

Dante's dream vision draws on allegory to consummate its fusion of romance and religious sensibilities. The man both 'lordly' and 'frightening,' yet also 'filled with joy,' identifies himself only as Dante's 'master.' His presence presides over both the exaltation and the abjection the lover may experience. Not quite Eros/Cupid, this figure acts as both mystagogue and torturer, the psychopomp of Dante's initiation into a cult of love. The grotesquery of the passage's shrouded female figure being fed Dante's own burning heart captures the totality of the courtly lover's devotion to his beloved, which trumps every other demand on his attention and loyalties. Beatrice will of course go on to centre the entire narrative of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.¹² She stands in a chain of feminine command, dispatched by the Virgin herself to rescue Dante from the risk of damnation in which he stands in the prelude to *Inferno*. By the end of the *Purgatorio*, she takes over from the chaperone she'd arranged to conduct the poet through the circles of hell and purgatory, the Roman poet Virgil. Her every appearance is an epiphany, and she ultimately conducts Dante up through the crystal spheres of the planets, across the empyrean, to the fences of heaven itself, where he can behold the multifoliate rose that seats the souls of the blessed in heaven's bliss.

The thirteenth century *Romance of the Rose*¹³ reaches an earthier climax, in the centre of an allegorical rose-garden that serves as a horticultural emblem of the *inner* topography of the character and emotions of the protagonist, replete with allegorical figures who represent the challenges and rebuffs he faces in his courtship of his beloved in the waking world. His long-deferred plucking of the rose at the centre of that allegorical garden is a frankly sexual gesture, haloed by the quasi-religious character of his quest or pilgrimage. Dante's explicitly religious pilgrimage proceeds under the *aegis* of an historical, earthly beloved. He and the dreamer of *The Romance of the Rose* quest seek very different ends, yet each traverses symbolic landscapes that embody highly structured schemes of values that centre on an informing female presence.

I possess neither the learning nor the leisure to delve into the labyrinthine back-channels of goddess-worship in the ancient Near East and Europe, let alone in the rest of the world. For the purposes of this discussion, I need only acknowledge its presence and try to register a few of its higher harmonics that resonate in later stages of subsequent cultures and their literatures. In very different ways, English-language poets (to speak of something I know a little about) have hummed in sympathy, knowingly or subliminally.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

¹³ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry W. Robbins, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: Meridian, 1962).

Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*¹⁴ and Ted Hughes' *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*¹⁵ explore the impact of the goddess-archetype and her many avatars on the poetic imagination of different times and tempers.¹⁶ The quip attributed to Freud, that 'everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me,' though apocryphal, suggests how the poetic imagination can draw on psychic resources laid down long ages before its own time. Many suspect that such a dynamic drove the literatures of Marian devotion and courtly love along parallel paths that have crossed and recrossed many times, during the Middle Ages and beyond. Their reciprocal resonance has been mooted by generations of scholarship, and behind it lies a long and mostly obscure history of female agency once attributed to the divine, subsequently suppressed yet irrepressible. Judaism's worship of its solitary (and occasionally tetchy) bachelor deity Yahweh, who will have no other gods before him, represents a relatively rare phenomenon in the history of world religions. Although the three faiths 'of the book,' Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and their strident monotheism account for a sizeable proportion of the world's religious identities today, they remain outnumbered historically by countless polytheistic faiths that went before them. This they represent as a kind of progress, from 'primitive' superstition that located deity in networks of anthropomorphic family relationship to the enlightened acknowledgement of a singular godhead that transcends simplistic analogy to human family dynamics.

Yet this before-and-after sequestering of a benighted pagan past from its Christian successor overlooks its fitful persistence. The odd Christian saint's life from late classical and early medieval sources can conceal a surprise or two. Though deeply formulaic and dedicated to promoting orthodox church teaching, the genre sometimes seems to hear a subtly eccentric music, whose narrative elements can suggest curious genealogies. The legend of St Eustace (a saint of uncertain provenance, set aside in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* as 'of unknown date and quite probably of no historical existence'¹⁷) is a mostly by-the-numbers tale of miraculous conversion and martyrdom, but its central miracle sits a little oddly alongside its more conventional elements. Eustace appears to have been a popular figure in medieval England. The scrupulously orthodox Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham includes him in his *Lives of the Saints*, where he tells how, under the reign of the emperor Trajan, a military commander named Placidus (the future St Eustace), while indulging his favourite pastime of hunting, encountered an extraordinarily large and beautiful hart. He follows it into the wilderness, till it turns to face him upon a high rock, which is where things get a little strange:

¹⁴ *The White Goddess: A Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948, rpt. [ed. Grevel Lindop] Carcanet Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Faber & Faber, 1993.

¹⁶ Graves' and Hughes' tumultuous relationships with accomplished fellow-poets (Laura Riding and Sylvia Plath respectively), while matters of historical record, from certain distances and perspectives seem confused echoes of the goddess-worship they pursue in their researches.

¹⁷ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), p. 154.

Witodlice betwux þæs heortes hornum glitnode gelicnys þære halgan cristes rode breohstre þonne sunnan leoma and seo anlyicnysse ures drihtnes hælendes cristes, and he mennisce spræce asende on þone heort and clypode to placidam þus cwæþende, Eala placida . hwi ehtest þu *min* efne for þinum intingum ic com nu þæt ic þurh þis nyten þe me ætywde.¹⁸

Clearly between the hart's horns there shone a likeness of the holy cross of Christ, brighter than the light of the sun, and the likeness of our lord saviour Christ, and he conferred human speech on the hart, and called out to Placidus, speaking thus: "Oh, Placidus, why do *you* pursue *me*, when for your very sake have I now come, that I might show myself to you through this beast?"

Here the edifying saint's life briefly takes on the character of folklore and popular legend, with its talking animal and its hunter who unexpectedly finds his place changed with that of his prey. Miracle or faerie magic? The Christological framing of this anecdote more or less answers that question for us from a purely ideological perspective, but is that the whole story? The hunt motif is a staple feature of myth and folklore. Archetypal hunters such as Nimrod, Actaeon, and Orion (to name only a few) figure both a primordially necessary human activity and the psychic dimensions of aspiration, quest, and pride. The crossing of this mythical fixture with the much younger discourses of hagiography and Christology frames the overlap between Marian and courtly discourses the rest of this paper considers.

Medieval romance on its own embodies a hectic crossroads of myth, folklore, and Christian sensibilities. The narratives that constitute the Welsh *Mabinogion*, for example, comprise a compendium of archaic legend peppered with Christian expostulation and a later courtly ethos. The hero of its very first narrative, Pwyll, the prince of Dyfed, embarks on a series of otherworld adventures that begins with a hunt which takes an unexpected turn.¹⁹ The queens and enchantresses who weave in and out of Arthurian legend, wielding uncanny powers, reflect distant recollections of a number of female deities found in different Celtic traditions. The anonymous fourteenth-century comic masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pits a peerless Christian knight, who carries an image of the blessed Virgin emblazoned on the inside of his shield to remind him of the reverence he owes her, against a Green-Man analogue who embodies deeply archaic nature and fertility sensibilities. Their story's genial denouement suggests something of the ease with which religious and courtly tradition could exchange imagery and sensibilities.

¹⁸ *III NON. NOVEMBR. PASSIO SANCTI EUSTACHII MARTYRIS SOCIORUMQUE EIUS. Ælfric's Lives of the Saints* vol. 2 (EETS o.s. 94 and 114), XXX, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Oxford UP, 1890 and 1900, rpt. in one volume 1966), p. 192.

¹⁹ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

Against this broad background of romance syncretism and Christian reverence for Christ's lady-mother, the tighter emotional focus of courtly love-lyric and Marian devotional poetry achieves its own cross-threaded balance. Here is a typical English example from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century:

Ase I me rod this ender day,
By grene wode to seche play,
Mid herte I thoghte all on a may,
Swetest of alle thinge.
Lithe, and ich ou telle may
All of that swete thing.

As I rode out the other day,
to take my pleasure by a green wood,
my heart dwelt all upon a maiden,
the sweetest creature of all.
Pay attention, and I can tell you
all about that sweet creature.

This maiden is swete and fre of blod,
Bright and fair, of milde mod;
Alle he may don us god,
Thurh hire besechinge.
Of hire he tok flesh and blod,
Jesus, Hevene Kinge.

This maiden is sweet, of noble blood,
radiant, fair, of gracious heart;
she can do good to everyone,
through her intercession.
He took flesh and blood of her,
Jesus, heaven's king

With all my lif I love that may:
He is my solas night and day,
My joye and eke my beste play,
And eke my love-longinge.
All the betere me is that day
that ich of hire singe.²⁰

With all my life I love that maiden:
She is my solace night and day,
my joy, my finest pleasure too,
and my love-longing as well.
The day is all the better for me
whenever I sing of her.

This poem's opening is pure medieval love-lyric, with its stylised pastoral setting and its speaker's compulsion to celebrate his *may* (maiden or young woman, one of the more common words that can name a courtly love-interest). That she should be 'swete and fre of blod' will surprise no one familiar with courtly convention. But the second stanza closes with the startling revelation that this singer's rapture celebrates no object of physical or sexual desire, rather the woman from whom Jesus took 'flesh and blood.' Where a lover stung by desire into song would commonly play petitioner for his lady's exclusive favour, this speaker identifies *his* lady's 'besechinge,' i.e. Mary's power to intercede for us sinners before God's judgement seat, as a blessing available to all. The third stanza resumes the note of exuberant love: both Mary and the lover's maiden figure as *solas* (solace) in their respective traditions, a source of both delight and profound comfort for their devotees: the sequence of 'joye,' 'play,' and 'love-longinge' resonates with an expansive sense of possibility and unlooked-for hope, equally apt to both the lover and the Marian devotee.

²⁰ from 'The Five Joys of Mary,' in *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. R.T. Davies (London: Faber, 1963).

A similar sensibility informs the poem known as *Pearl*, the first piece in the same manuscript as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, most likely composed by the same poet. Excerpts cannot hope to capture in full the strange atmosphere of this powerful dream vision, but these brief samples will suffice to suggest its visionary confluence of celestial and earthly airs, centred on its primary speaker, the pearl of the poem's title who appears to the narrator in a luminous setting that comprises equal parts of faerie and heaven:

<p>Mor mervayl con my dome adaunt: I saw biyonde that mery mere. crystal clyff ful relusaunt; Mony ryal ray con fro hit rere; At the fote thereof there sat a faunt, A mayden of mensk, ful debonere; Blysnande white was her bleaunt. I knew her wel: I had sene her ere. As glysnande gold that man con schere, So schon that schene anunder schore. On lenghe i loked to her there: The lenger, I knew her more and more.</p>	<p>A further marvel daunted my discernment: I saw beyond that happy pool a crystal cliff entirely resplendent; from it many royal rays shot up; there at its foot was seated a young child, a dignified young girl, full debonaire; her over-cloak was radiantly white. I knew her well: I'd seen her before this. Like glistening gold that men cut into threads, so on the far shore that brilliant creature shone. Long I gazed upon her there: the longer, I recognised her all the more.</p>
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(III.157-168)

<p>All blysnande white was her beau mys, Open at sides, and bounden bene With the meriest margarys at my devise. that ever I saw yet with myn ene, With lappes large, I wot and wene, Dubbed with double perle and dight, Her kyrtel of self sute schene. With precious perles all umbe pyght. A pyght coroune yet wer that gyrl. Of margarys and non other stone, High pynacled of clere white perle, With flurtd flowres perfet upon; To hed had ho non other werle.</p>	<p>Her beautiful stole was a refulgent white open at the sides, and clasped about by the gladdest pearls that I could ever wish, that ever I'd seen before with my own eyes, long-hanging sleeves, as I believed I saw, bespangled and arrayed with double pearls. Her kirtle shone in matching hues, embroidered all about with precious pearls. A crown, with pearls adorned, that child wore too, with pearls and with no other precious stone, its lofty crest made all of clear white pearl, upon it flowers perfectly arranged. No other circlet did she wear on her head.</p>
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(IV.197-209)²¹

The speaker has fallen asleep, exhausted by a long, futile search for his pearl, whose unaccountable loss has left him desolate. Though this pearl is never fully identified, it clearly references a longed-for female presence. Readers identify her variously, most often as the speaker's young daughter, taken by a tragically premature death, sometimes

²¹ from *The Works of the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (London: Penguin Classics, 2014).

as a lost beloved, like Beatrice (whose epiphanies in Dante's writings resemble those of this pearl's). From her first appearance, the pearl-maiden is shrouded in lovely but impenetrable ambiguity. She appears to the dreamer in a resplendent array of white silks and pearls. Pearls *everywhere*: embroidered on her clothing, encrusting her belt, set thickly on her crown. To a medieval imagination, her attire would speak a language of utmost purity, in which spotless white cloth and the pure white of doves, pearls, and lilies figure most often. She is set apart: she stands opposite the dreamer across a river, before a city whose crystal walls, we later learn, are those of the Book of Revelation's New Jerusalem. Yet she is not wholly other: though she appears very young, the speaker insists from his first glimpse that he *knows* her, though it takes time before he realises that this is *his* pearl, the pearl he'd been seeking so desperately before he fell asleep. To any reader familiar with medieval iconography, the maiden's attire clearly reflects the way Mary is represented as the ultimate archetype of human purity: immaculate, without spot or stain such as ordinary mortals accumulate across the experience of lifetimes on the hither shore.

But the pearl-maiden stands on the far shore, sundered from the dreamer, which implies that she is the dreamer's daughter or other beloved who has died. The poem's deep emotional currents of love, loss, recognition and restored hope lend the dreamer and the maiden's metaphysical, philosophical, and theological exchanges (which constitute the bulk of the poem) the character of romance speculation in a quasi-Dantean mode. That it centres on a female character who one critic has described as 'a lesser Mary'²² hints at another dimension of the affinity between Marian and romance traditions: the commanding, sometimes imperious presence of their central female *personae*. The idealised feminine embodies a locus of power that stands both within and over the patterns of masculine authority that structure medieval society. The *Pearl*-maiden is clearly a child, which hints allegorically at the perpetual burgeoning freshness of the soul, but in her role as docent and mystagogue, she also inverts medieval conventions of authority: the child instructs the parent, the daughter her father.²³

Across the later Middle Ages, the courtly lover's devotion to his beloved and the faithful Christian's to Mary trade places in a dance of registers. Examples are not hard to find, as the following handful attest:

²² Karen Saupe, 'Middle English Marian Lyrics: Introduction,' <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/saupe-middle-english-marian-lyrics-introduction>.

²³ In this she resembles the more mature figure of Lady Philosophy in Boethius' fifth-century *Consolation of Philosophy*, who visits the imprisoned author to refresh his understanding of (and submission to) her teachings.

Guido Guinizelli (1230-1276)²⁴

Io voglio del ver la mia donna laudare

I truly wish to give my lady praise
And liken her to lily and to rose:
Brighter than morning star she comes and glows
And makes me think of all that heavenly blaze.
Green banks I compare with her, I compare the skies,
Flowers of every color, yellow and green,
Azure and gold, the richest jewels to be seen;
Through her even Love feels his value rise.

She passes in the streets, noble, adorned;
She humbles the pride of any with her greeting,
And skeptics to believers quickly are turned;
No wicked man with her would risk a meeting;
And still I say: her powers are even keener.
No man thinks evil once that he has seen her.

Gace Brulé (1170-1212)

from *De bien amer grant joie atent*

('Great joy from loving well I am awaiting')

5. Lady, none of the others is your peer.
Pretty and good, rightful receiver of lauds . . .

6. Lady, from you I'd never conceal
Any desire or any thought.
I love with a love that's real,
More than any other creature wrought.
I want to be your servant leal,
And for this end I feel so fraught
That, without some mercy, I'm all undone;
Far away or near, I can't go on.

²⁴ All these examples are taken from *Medieval Song*, trans. and ed. by James J. Wilhelm (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972).

Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377)

Blanch com lys, plus que rosee vermeille

White as a lily, redder than a rose,
More splendid than a ruby oriental,
Your beauty I regard; no equal shows
White as a lily, redder than a rose.
I am so ravished, my heart know no repose
Until I serve you, a lover fine and gentle,
White as a lily, redder than a rose,
More splendid than a ruby oriental.

Walther von der Vogelweide (ca. 1170-ca.1230)

from *sô bluomen ûz dem grase dringet*

2. A noble lady, beautiful and pure,
In fancy clothes wrapped well about,
Walks among the people for delectation,
High-spirited and courteous, not demure,
Glancing on all the faces thereabout,
Shining like the sun against constellations:
Let May bring us all or his many wonders,
For which of them is something that can plunder,
Compared to the royal splendor of this lady?
Yes, we should let all of May's blossoms stand
And stare on every hand at this worthy maid.

In Italian, Old French or Provençal, or Old High German, poets such as these share not only their common matter of erotic desire, but also a common *tone* of awed wonder that cannot be wholly distinguished from the notes of religious reverence. Guinizelli's lady turns 'skeptics to believers.' Brulé begs his for 'mercy,' a common romance trope for the courtly lady's notice or affection. Von der Vogelweide's 'noble lady' shines like a Marian vision and presents like a variation of the *Pearl* maiden. De Machaut offers us his beloved, with her hues of lily and rose, in the same floral palette taken up time and again in praise of Mary, as in this stanza from a thirteenth-century Marian hymn in English:

Levedy flowre of alle thing,
Rosa sine spina,
Thu bere Jesu, Hevene King,

Lady, flower of all things,
rose without a thorn,
you bore Jesus, Heaven's King

Gratia divina.

by divine grace.²⁵

The beloved's advent verges on epiphany time and again: one soul's vision of another's absolute irreplaceability. Like the literal epiphanies of Jesus' baptism or his transfiguration in the gospels, of Moses' encounter with the burning bush, or even the humbler apparition of the angel of the Lord to Balaam's ass,²⁶ such revelations of a luminous reality of unfathomable depth challenge the waking mind's grasp of reality. In romance narrative this can even play comically: at one point in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Charette*,²⁷ Guinevere tests Lancelot's devotion by sending word that, to please her, he must disgrace himself in a tournament by fighting badly:

The queen summoned a clever, pretty girl to her and whispered: 'Damsel, you must take a message, quickly and without wasting words. Hurry down from these stands and go at once to that knight bearing the red shield; tell him in secret that I bid him "do his worst".'

Lancelot, of course, accedes instantly and without demur to his beloved's starkly antithetical bidding:

The moment he heard her, Lancelot said that he would gladly do so, as one who wishes only to please his queen.²⁸

Guinevere's whim makes no sense, according to any rational scheme of chivalric values, which would require Lancelot always to cultivate and defend his reputation as the world's greatest knight. His instant compliance represents a kind of abjection, willingly undergone by the devotee as a token of his subservience to the object of his devotion. Some five centuries later, Cervantes will caricature this quasi-religious, obsessive quality of generic romance behaviour in his *Don Quixote*, whose protagonist has lent his name to the English adjective 'quixotic,' which denotes behaviour that is hopelessly, uselessly, naïvely, or obsessively idealistic. Quixote dismisses every reality-check that lays him flat on his back (or reveals his beloved—and wholly imaginary—Dulcinea del Toboso to be the far less exalted Aldonza de Lorenzo) as spells cast by his wicked sorcerer-adversary.²⁹ The power both of deity and of an idealised feminine to unseat the normal courses of reason is absolute.

²⁵ From "A Hymn to Mary," in *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. R.T. Davies (London: Faber, 1963). The rose and lily figure as well in medieval hagiography as emblems of the saint's devotion and purity.

²⁶ Numbers 22:21-35.

²⁷ It is possible to feel in Lancelot's enforced ride in a humble farmer's wagon, which gives the story its title, a distant mockery of the *merkabah* vision of God's chariot in Ezekiel 10:18-19 (quoted above).

²⁸ *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, in *Arthurian Romances* (Penguin, 1991), pp. 276-277.

²⁹ The tumultuous denialisms of recent factions in U.S. politics (Trump, QAnon, *et al.*) sound a dimly diminished echo of Quixote's. Whether in politics or in romance gone rancid, idealism can turn toxic at its furthest extremes.

Which perhaps should not surprise us, since a higher feminine principle has commonly opposed or matched a higher masculine principle in the religious traditions of most human cultures. In this regard the masculine bias of the so-called 'religions of the book' — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — makes *them* the outliers, at least in literary terms. But the goddess gets around, in a dazzling variety of guises. Boethius' Dame Philosophy, Dante's Beatrice, the *Pearl* maiden, Guinevere, or any of the beloveds addressed in troubadour lyric or other medieval poetry all wield, in their different ways, an unanswerable authority. The voices in which they speak share a common timbre, which descends, by circuitous paths across great distances of time and cultural evolution, from prior goddess cults partly concealed in the histories of most societies.

The second-century *Golden Ass* of Lucius Apuleius tells how its protagonist (also named Lucius) meddles in magic and accidentally transforms himself into a donkey. After much comic misadventure, he recovers his proper human form through the intervention of the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose climactic epiphany comprises a long discourse that reviews the metamorphic play of her many identities across different times, places, and peoples:

Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me, The primeval Phrygians call me Pessinuntica, Mother of the gods; the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Artemis; for the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite; for the archers of Crete I am Dictynna; for the trilingual Sicilians, Stygian Proserpine, and for the Eleusinians their ancient Mother of the Corn.³⁰

Though still a figure of imposing power, whose roll-call of identities extends a good bit beyond the list I've quoted here, Isis turns a kindly maternal face to Lucius, as if correcting an erring but loved child. Her plural selves, which constitute a kind of genealogy of near-Eastern female deity, record the many manifestations of the goddess under many different identities. These I cannot even begin to enumerate here, but I need only note their common association with the powers of life itself, with its generation and its nurturing, but also with its many dark endings and the deep mystery of what might lie beyond the theatre of space and time whose stage it treads. These are deep waters, plumbed by Robert Graves in his study of the goddess and her guises in *The White Goddess*. He argues that Western culture has crippled itself in its default ignorance and suppression of the goddess as a psychic presence. Suppress her we may, but she's an insistent, irrepressible thing, never wholly bundled out of view. The Bible itself, the composite canon of Jewish and Christian tradition, contains hints of her presence.

³⁰ *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1950), p. 271.

Nowhere so strongly as in the overtly female figure of Wisdom who speaks in the Book of Proverbs:

The LORD created me at the outset of His way,
the very first of His works of old.
In remote eons I was shaped,
at the start of the first things of earth.
When there were no deeps I was spawned,
when there were no wellsprings, water-sources.
Before the mountains were anchored down,
before the hills I was spawned.
He had not yet made the earth and open land,
and the world's first clods of soil.
When He founded the heavens, I was there,
when He traced a circle on the face of the deep,
when He propped up the skies above,
when He powered the springs of the deep,
when He set the sea its limit
that the water not flout his command,
when He strengthened the earth's foundations.
And I was by him, and intimate,
I was His delight day after day,
playing before Him at all times,
playing in the world, His earth,
and my delight was with humankind.³¹

I have cited this passage in the introduction to my recently published book on Old English wisdom poetry, and my comments there will serve equally well here:

This extraordinary self-portrait is itself an archetypal wisdom text: it embodies distinctive features that can be found in just about any wisdom tradition you could identify. First (and perhaps foremost), it is *personal*. Wisdom is not about abstract philosophising or forensic debate. She is both a person and a personal possession, as intimately known as your best friend or your favourite song. In these lines from Proverbs, Wisdom plays the parts of God's chief engineer, personal assistant and playmate in the act of primordial creation itself. In Genesis 1:3, this is narrated as a solo verbal act: "God said: let there be light. And there was light." Well, not *quite*. Turns out he had help. And that help comes not in the shape of angels focused wholly on adoring God and performing his will, but of a *personified* Wisdom who is a friend and consort, a

³¹ Trans. Robert Alter, in *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

lover almost, who appears to exist coevally with God's own inconceivable eternity. She is a dancer: wisdom is supple, wisdom *moves*. She *plays* in God's presence, and she delights as well to visit the habitations of God's human creations, once they've made their entrance from the wings. Ancient Judaism's patriarchal leanings and its later embodiments in the prescriptive fixities of the law make this characterisation surprising, to say the least. Yet at the same time the rabbis delighted in the play of the dialogic imagination, in which voice answers voice answers voice in a seemingly endless speculative dance. Beyond the gender issue, moreover, the passage from Proverbs demands that we see double, in order to discern a venerable principle of cosmic making that is also a playful, fleet-footed sprite - as if a supernova could also twinkle among the bluebells at the bottom of your garden like a firefly or a fairy.³²

Is this playful sprite yet *another* guise of the goddess? Such a suggestion might scandalise Jewish or Christian orthodoxies, which have banished her to the outermost margins of Western consciousness. Here she dances her way into one of the foundational texts of the Jewish and Christian canons. A long way from the *magna mater* of antique tradition, and consorting with a patriarchal tradition unyieldingly hostile to her archetype, yet, once more, there she stands, unmistakably herself.

As a brief coda I would note here how the medieval romance tradition, down a different line of transmission, has bequeathed the figure of the idealised feminine to later literature as the serially imperilled heroine of sentimental fiction, from Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe to Austen's Elizabeth Bennett to Dickens' Little Nell and Little Dorrit, all the way down to even such highly ironized modern characters as Bridget Jones. With their many sisters along those extraordinarily winding and tangled paths, they share a common genealogy that can be traced back through medieval romance to early Christian hagiography, Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions, and on into the backward abyss of time where their fore-mothers dwell amid shadows we can no longer wholly illuminate.

Their influence reaches as far as our own sceptical, disillusioned modernity. Here I can cite that multifaceted conjurer of modern ironies, Marcel Proust. The narrator of his *In Search of Lost Time* establishes one parallax after another between conventional ideals and the diminished realities into which they inevitably descend in the world of experience. Whether in the visions of architectural and scenic romance his narrator expects from his first visit to Balbec by the sea, or in his friend St Loup's ecstatic, courtly declarations of his mistress's virtues, reality inevitably disappoints or crudely belies the idealist's expectations:

³² *Reading Old English Wisdom: The Fetters in the Frost* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), p. 3.

It was not so much that I found [St Loup's mistress] of little consequence, but that I found the power of the human imagination, the illusion that fostered the pains of love, so momentous. Robert noticed that I seemed moved. I looked away towards the pear and cherry trees in the garden opposite to make him think that it was their beauty I was moved by. And it did move me in somewhat the same way, by bringing close to me those things we not only see with our eyes but also feel in our hearts. By likening the trees I had seen in the garden to strange gods, had I not made the same mistake as Mary Magdalene when, in another garden, on a day whose anniversary was fast approaching, she saw a human form, 'supposing him to be the gardener'? Guardians of the memories of the golden age, keepers of the promise that reality is not what we suppose, that the splendour of poetry, the magical light of innocence may shine in it and may be the reward which we strive to deserve, were they not, these great white creatures so magnificently stooped over the shade that invites us to rest, to fish, to read, were they not more like angels?³³

Disillusion bites deep. We might think there's nothing more to see here, yet, Proust insists, disillusion can conceal a deeper enchantment. His narrator notes the obvious disconnect between the ideal and the real, but in his allusion to Mary Magdalene's mistake he reverses it: her imperfect vision takes the higher for the lower, the risen Jesus for the gardener. Yet she is not disillusioned, or at least not for long: the very answer to her bereavement, its impossible reversal, stands living and breathing before her. Proust's back-to-front *exemplum* leaves his reverie unsettled: *do* our ideals conduct to heaven? *are* they angels? In the end, he appears unable or unwilling to decide. Romance casts its enchantments as far as the very brink of modernist disillusion. We may see them as illusion yet yield to them all the same. Are we simply to dismiss the illusion or to admire its transformative power? Proust allows both, giving a wry nod to both Dante's exalted vision of Beatrice *and* Quixote's elevation of Aldonza as his imagined Dulcinea. Finally, even a modern American poet like Wallace Stevens, whose writing is often characterised by rigorous abstraction coupled with a kind of epistemological exuberance, systematically rioting in the particulars of the here and now, registers the draw of Dante's Beatrice: indirectly, perhaps, but palpably. His 'Study of Images II' echoes Dante's *terza rima* in its unrhymed three-line stanzas, a form Stevens favoured for some of his most adventurous work:

The frequency of images of the moon
Is more or less. The pearly women that drop
From heaven and float in air, like animals

³³ *The Guermantes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne, vol. 3 of *In Search of Lost Time* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 157.

Of ether, exceed the excelling witches, whence
They came. But, brown, the ice-bear sleeping in ice-month
In his cave, remains dismissed without a dream.

As if the center of images had its
Congenial mannequins, alert to please,
Beings of other beings manifold—

The shadowless moon wholly composed of shade,
Women with other lives in their live hair,
Rose-women as half-fishes of salt shine,

As if, as if, as if the disparate halves
Of things were waiting in a betrothal known
To none, awaiting espousal to the sound

Of right joining, a music of ideas, the burning
And breeding and bearing birth of harmony,
The final relation, the marriage of the rest.³⁴

This may at first appear an obscure way to close a discussion of medieval romance and Marian piety, but look closer. The archetypal feminine descends as 'pearly women.' Should we see them as versions of the Middle English *Pearl* here, or perhaps as 'women with pearls,' like a squadron of society matrons? They float like ectoplasmic apparitions, 'animals / Of ether,' as if descended from a higher realm yet somehow associated with lower living forms of will, desire, and appetite. Congenial mannequins occupy the 'center of images': human forms, perhaps the anthropomorphisms of most religions, accommodate the ursine consciousness of the brown bear, submerged in its cave and dreamless sleep, to the daunting dimensions of larger being. 'Beings of other beings manifold' suggests a larger consciousness made somehow legible to a lesser. This practically epitomises my discussion's whole thrust: the idealised visions of the feminine in romance and in Marian devotion enfold each other, in an ether that transcends the bestial brown bear dismissed to its sleep.

Above this tableau rises a moon paradoxically 'shadowless' yet 'wholly composed of shade,' in apposition to women whose hair is 'live' with a life not their own. Gorgons? Mermaids ('half-fishes of salt')? Perhaps they inhabit the indistinct twilight to which Western consciousness has banished the figures of the goddess, leaving only fragments of

³⁴ From *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

partially glimpsed myth and folk-tale behind. The moon of course presides over the realm of Diana/Artemis, one of the primary avatars of Graves' White Goddess. The triple repetition of 'as if' practically echoes the goddess's triple aspect with a subjunctive hesitancy: to modern reason, none of this manifests as objective fact - it's all 'moonshine' in one sense. Those *as if*'s hold the 'disparate halves' of things apart, another evocation of the divided human consciousness that has resulted from the goddess's exile, yet that hesitancy is also an expectancy: the halves are waiting for some utterly unknown (perhaps unknowable?) consummation that constitutes a 'right joining' and a 'music of ideas,' a celebration of wholeness and harmony, something akin to the hermetic 'chymical wedding,' the impossible (from where we currently sit) resolution of the conflicts and contradictions, the tragedies, truncations and tribulations of the world we know beneath the skies of our time.

Thus I conclude, on a highly speculative note, a discussion of some reasonably well recognised cultural phenomena: the medieval courtly idealisation of the feminine and the elevation, during the same period, of the Virgin Mary to a new eminence of Christian devotion. As I have suggested throughout this discussion, I suspect they sit on the shoulder of a mountain far larger than any of us has recognised, its roots unfathomably deep and its summit beyond all reckoning above us in the sun.

About the Author

Robert DiNapoli has taught medieval English literatures in North America, England and Australia. He has published essays in *PN Review*, *Arena Quarterly*, *Eureka Street*, *Medieval Studies*, and *Neophilologus*, and books on *Beowulf* (*A Far Light*, Cambridge Scholars Press 2016) and Old English wisdom poetry (*Reading Old English Wisdom*, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2021). His two books of poetry, *Engelboc* (2019) and *The Gnostic Hotel* (2021) have been published by Littlefox Press in Kyneton, Victoria.