INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS THE MIDDLE of the thirteenth century in Amiens, Richard of Fournival, churchman, polymath, and poet, wrote an unusual, illustrated love letter to his recalcitrant lady. "All men naturally desire knowledge," he begins, quoting Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[1] The didactic premise is more than a pose, for the content is in fact a treatise in the bestiary tradition, which uses animals as *exempla* to exhibit moral teaching, and Richard proclaims his most ardent desire is to penetrate and inhabit the lady's memory. Thus he will resort to a double appeal, or two different "paths," *painture* and *parole*, for "everyone knows that painted letters are returned to voice when they are read," and "a painting can render its subjects so immediate that the viewer believes herself placed before them."[2] The Old French text is accompanied by pictures; pictures and the vernacular word are taken as two aspects of one aesthetic experience because of the physical immediacy proper to each: "on fait present de chu ki est trespassé par ces ii coses, c'est par painture et par parole" (one renders present what has receded into the past through these two things, that is, through image and word).[3] Moreover, this same equivalency of aesthetic experience extends to the great literary invention of the latter twelfth century, the *roman* (romance), "Car quant on ot un romans lire, on entent les aventures, ausi com on les veïst en present" (For when one hears a *roman* read, one perceives the adventures just as if one could see them in the present).[4] Writing (*escripture*) "is both image (*painture*) and the spoken word (*parole*)," which "is only too obvious," in that writing "exists in order to manifest the word (*parole*)," to render it as physical presence.[5]

This is a remarkably concise and highly unusual statement of the nature and use of media in the European High Middle Ages; it also provides, seemingly by the way, a rare medieval statement on the mode of reception of romance narrative. What was "obvious" did not normally need saying to contemporaries; for us it serves to demonstrate how complementary and interchangeable the use and understanding of writing, pictures, and voices could be. Moreover, Richard's self-conscious play on this interchangeability defies reduction into oppositions between an "oral" and a "literate" mentality, between literate and illiterate

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1 *Bestiaires d'amours*, p. 3.

2 "Car quant on voit painte une estoire, … on voit les fais des preudommes ke cha en ariere furent, ausi com s'il fussent present" (*Bestiaires d'amours*, p. 5). The preceding passage is my paraphrase of Richard's text, which appears in note 5, below.

3 *Bestiaires d'amours*, p. 5.

4 *Bestiaires d'amours*, p. 5.

5 "Car il est bien apert k'il [cis escris] a parole, par che ke toute escripture si est faite pour parole monstrer et pour che ke on le lise; et quant on le list, si revient elle a nature de parole" (*Bestiaires d'amours*, pp. 6–7).

education, or even between (sacred) scripture and (profane) love poetry—oppositions that routinely serve to situate texts and images of the Middle Ages in the eyes of modern readers and scholars.[6]

But there is still more to this configuration: the recipient, the lady, who figures both as the object of amorous desire and as human memory, the receptacle of the instructive message. On the one hand, it is only this double identity of his audience that allows Richard's bizarre hybrid of bestiary instruction and lover's seduction to exist. On the other, " 'she' is not an individual woman, but a figure available to and deployed by both female and male audiences."[7] This "woman" is to contemplate the *painture* and attend to its voice, to open "the twin doors" of her eyes and ears such that the author, or his instruction—but really both—will be indelibly lodged in her memory. What Richard has in fact done with his triangle of female memory, image, and word is to reduplicate a model of sacred reading for a purpose ostensibly profane. "Hear, daughter, and see, … and the king shall desire your beauty" (Psalm 44:11–12): thus *sainte escripture* spoke to every Christian, with the voice of the Spirit calling the bride to instructive seduction by the bridegroom. A woman's audio-visual "reading" figures the aspiration of every human soul to the embrace of its saviour, Christ. The prologue of Richard's "Love Bestiary" shows how the media of (secular) loving and (religious) reading, of (sacred) instruction and (profane) seduction, could be one and the same; namely, when the recipient was woman.[8]

This playful discourse on media poetics is only possible because of major transitions that had occurred over the preceding century and a half on all three corners of Richard's triangle, changes in the relationships between knowing in an experiential sense (which I refer to as gnosis), and, each in its turn, gender, visual art, and vernacular literature (Richard's text itself brings three different genres into play). Women and woman were centre stage in the twelfth century as never before, and this in conspicuous conjunction with innovative exploration of new ways of seeing, reading, and knowing. A striking individual example is Hildegard of Bingen, the first female visionary (or mystic) in the Christian tradition, whose audio-visual gnosis resulted in a voluminous Latin *oeuvre* and some of the most unusual visual art of the Middle Ages. More popularly celebrated is the role of Eleanor of Aquitaine: was she indeed the queen of a new cult of "courtly love" and sometime patron or inspiration of new vernacular literature? Eleanor's prominence is as tangible as her actual role is intangible—and in this regard, at least, she is typical as a figure of the female reader in the twelfth century. But women were likewise placed at the imaginative centre of the narrative world of vernacular romance, while the monastic imagination was captivated by a reading enterprise gendered as female, following the *sponsa* through the verbal imagery of the Song of Songs. And in devotional

6 Critique of earlier scholarship on the first two oppositions in Schnell, "Literaturwissenschaft"; Kiening, "Medialität"; Chinca and Young, "Orality and Literacy"; Green, "Terminologische Überlegungen"; and, a decade earlier, Coleman, *Public Reading*.

7 Solterer, "Medieval Senses," 142.

8 For a full reading of the text in this vein, see Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 343–57.

practice a spectacular expansion of the roles of visual art and pictorial narrative can be grasped primarily in psalters and prayer books known to have been commissioned or designed for women.[9] This visual turn in prayer brings up an all-important conjunction that subtends Richard's reflections: that between women's use of images and their use of books and literacy.

The visual turn proceeds in lock step, it would seem, with a turn to writing in the vernacular, and both have found an explanation in modern scholarship through a connection with women's use of prayer books. This conjunction in itself suggests that we are dealing with something other than an advance of literacy or literate instruments. It also points up a curious contradiction. The medieval sources most frequently justify the inclusion of images or writing in the vernacular as a concession to "illiteracy," whether for women or for laypeople in general. The modern argument on the literary turn, on the other hand, has repeatedly emphasized lay noblewomen's higher level of literacy relative to their male counterparts.[10] The contradiction is not irresolvable, but it goes largely unmentioned because modern reflection on the two has taken place in separate disciplines. Our distinction between the histories of "art" and "literature" and their several methodologies long ensured that visual and literary elements of one manuscript, even of the same work, were excised from their contexts and studied separately. For several decades now, text-image studies and new attention to the manuscript context in medieval culture have been at pains to correct this, but the consequences have not yet been intently applied to our question: the question of what happened around women, *painture* and *escripture*—that is, image and script(ure)—and thus around women and reading, in the lettered cultures of twelfth-century western Europe.

The object of study is as elusive as it is pervasive; hence the pages that follow may seem to proceed with some disregard for familiar divisions and boundaries. To study texts together with the images they accompany is a logical correction, but to read texts of monastic instruction together with those of courtly leisure, to read texts of biblical exegesis and those of romance narrative as reciprocally illuminating, and still more, to read texts from the German vernacular tradition as if intellectually imbricated with the literary culture(s) of the courts in what we now call France will seem less immediately justified. It is a given that the early Middle High German romances were adapted from Old French texts, but this relationship has generally been regarded as a kind of subordination and dependency in which the former emulates the latter and seeks to reproduce its cultural achievements from a position of relative isolation and linguistic separation. The texts considered here instead reveal self-assured manipulation of the same strategies of legitimization, the same claims to the mediation of truth—nevertheless differently staged and formulated—and finally even a form of intertextual and intercultural dialogue that would seem to flout the obvious linguistic barrier dividing their several audiences, if not their authors. The questions raised cannot, however, be dealt with in this volume. I see this work as part of a larger move towards translinguistic and transcultural study of the

9 Hamburger, "Illustrated Prayer Book," pp. 149–95.

10 Grundmann, "Frauen," 129–61; Green, *Women Readers*; along with many others in the seventy years between these two.

Middle Ages—such as has been recently advanced among scholars of Mediterranean Studies—in that it suspends cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries long assumed to apply in search of insights that may have eluded us precisely because of the blind spots and disconnections such divisions impose.[11] The results, I hope, will prove in themselves a call to investigate more closely the mechanics on the ground.

As a case in point: the St Albans Psalter (ca. 1130), thought to have been made for the recluse and holy woman Christina of Markyate at St Albans Abbey just north of London, appears to embody Richard's media triangle as a historical event. It contains a first milestone and something of a fountainhead of pictorial narrative in its forty-page prefatory picture cycle portraying Christ's salvation of humanity. It also contains the earliest extant *escripture* of any complete work of literature in French, a vernacular *chanson* of the Life of St Alexis, which somehow interlopes between the picture cycle and the Psalms. Michael Camille made of this codex an object lesson in the way both pictures and vernacular text had been excised, removed from their contexts entirely to become protagonists in their respective histories of art and French literature.[12] The St Albans Psalter will be the subject of chapter 4; here I wish to draw attention only to the double page at the end of the Alexis, where the two histories meet, so to speak (figs. 4.11–4.12).[13] The *chanson* concludes there on the verso, and immediately following the scribe penned in two versions, one Latin, the other Anglo-Norman, of Gregory the Great's apology for pictures as the scripture of the illiterate. On the recto, another full-page picture cycle begins, a three-part cycle telling the story of Christ's appearance at Emmaus. Here then the visual and the literary turn both occur together, with testimony to the "illiterate reading" they serve inscribed (or "painted") in not one but two languages. Should the translation have been included for Christina, the inconsistencies only multiply, as her own vernacular was surely Anglo-Saxon.[14] But that is almost beside the point. The two pages ought to have shown us long ago that it is not our histories that matter here but a history that was being written even for the eyes of its contemporaries, one in which script is both word and image and reading is both viewing and listening (and possibly not the decoding of script at all), a history of new modes of mediating between *homo* and Logos. *Homo*, in this history, was frequently conceived of as a woman and a psalter-reader.

A word is needed here on the local and circumstantial manifestations of the vernacular(s) versus the idea of the vernaculars as languages of a culture apposite to that of the Latinate clergy. The St Albans Psalter manifests both the circumstantial and the conventional: its French texts appear in both continental and insular dialects, no doubt because the insular insertions were composed for the purpose, without an

11 See Akbari and Mallette, *Sea of Languages*, esp. chaps. 1–3.

12 Camille, "Iconoclasm," pp. 371–401.

13 Powell, "Media and Presence," 340–45, and Powell, "Making the Psalter," 307–15.

14 The term "vernacular" loses some of its categorical force here, as Anglo-Norman (or Anglo-French) served in English monasteries as a *lingua franca* of a sort one step below Latin and would most likely have represented to Christina a koiné of the ruling class.

exemplar.[15] At the same time, the scribe appears oddly deficient in Anglo-French or at least its spelling, giving rise to the suspicion that he, too, may have been more comfortable in Anglo-Saxon.[16] Conversely, the pages manifest an equivalence of vernacular *estoire* and pictures as characteristic of lay culture and thereby appeal to a system of conventions (for example, Gregory's letter) that is translinguistic (and transcultural) in that it stems from and is legitimized by the Latin culture of the church.[17] As a rule, it is this latter system of conventions that is operative in the arguments used to present, situate, and legitimize the texts and images considered in these chapters.

The same interest in women's reading just pinpointed, as a figure of mediation between *homo* and Logos, somehow finds a culmination in Richard's bestial love letter, one so self-consciously aware of its origins and possibilities that it can assimilate several literary genres, sacred and secular reading, religious instruction, and literary seduction into a veritable vernacular poetics of image, word, and script; all figured as one parodic "assault" on the memory of his beloved. The story that leads from the one to the other, from Latin psalter to vernacular love literature, is in large part the story of the psalter-reading woman as a *chiffre* of the vernacular audience. Richard's triangle delineates something like the focal point of twelfth-century exploration of the role(s) of media in the reading enterprise. Women's devotional use of prayer books appears to have been both an imaginative and a factual matrix around and through which this took shape. The figure of the woman-as-reader, which signals a way of knowing gendered as female, thus determines the path taken in the chapters that follow; she is the woman in the mirror of my title. If her history has not yet been written, then it is clearly not for lack of important connections to issues and inquiry of concern in our time. In fact, it is not least because competing histories have obscured our view.

Modern Scholarship and Medieval Women Readers

The hypothesis that women's literacy triggered the emergence of vernacular literature, with its corollary that they were its primary readers, originated in German scholarship with the foundational work of Herbert Grundmann on literacy and medieval religious movements.[18] As Helen Solterer correctly observed two decades ago, this "long-standing link … is too fraught to allow for a one-to-one correspondence between textual figure and social role."[19] For Solterer, Grundmann's work "typifies the habit of interpreting the numbers of medieval women linked with bookish culture as proof of their decisive

15 These are two, the prologue to the Alexis and the translation of Gregory's letter; the *Chanson* itself was copied, it seems, from a continental exemplar. See Mölk, "Bemerkungen," 289–303, also the note following.

16 Mölk, "Albani-Psalter," pp. 53–56; paleographer Malcolm Parkes, however, identified the hand as typical of the northern French schools: see Nilgen, "Psalter," p. 162.

17 Powell, "Media and Presence," 343–45; Curschmann, "*Pictura*," pp. 211–19; more generally on such conventions, Curschmann, "Epistemologisches."

18 "Frauen," 129–61; also Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, pp. 452–75.

19 Solterer, *Master*, p. 3.

activity."[20] In view of the groundbreaking position of Grundmann's essay in 1935, this charge is best levelled at all those who happily espoused his conclusions without further probing the question. As recently as 2007, D. H. Green enlarged what remains basically Grundmann's approach into a survey of women and reading that fills an entire monograph.[21] While Green's accumulation and categorization of the evidence is valuable, the methodological problem that Solterer singled out is only compounded by his tendency to speak of the European Middle Ages as a monolithic "society," which in turn reflects a failure to distinguish chronologically or contextually between examples or, most importantly, to untangle their figurative from their potentially factual dimensions.[22] This latter point is the one so fraught with difficulty; it is no less essential to a methodologically defensible treatment of the question.

There is no doubt today of the higher level of reading ability and widespread use of books among (noble-)women of the High Middle Ages so long as the discussion concerns the laity. But this in itself offers no explanation for why it became legitimate and desirable in the mid twelfth century to found a literary culture in the vernaculars. To begin with, the kind of devotional literacy that Grundmann singled out among women in this period was by no means a new development; women's use of psalters and other devotional works is well documented in earlier periods.[23] Beyond this, the basic assumptions behind Grundmann's argument are no longer accepted. For him, new vernacular writing represented the recording of works produced as oral compositions by lay poets; thus, the new texts were there to be read by recipients capable of perusing the pages themselves.[24] Both assumptions have since given way to a model that sees the texts as designed for some form of recitative performance (read aloud by one for many) and their composition as the highly literary work of clerics. The idea that women needed vernacular texts to be able to listen to them is not compelling. As work on the learning of the laity has by now adequately established (and Grundmann was among the first to document this), where such was desired, the knowledge base of the Latin written tradition was routinely made accessible through a combination of oral translation and instruction provided by the learned.[25] Vernacular texts did not arise as access to an otherwise inaccessible body of knowledge.[26]

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20 Solterer, *Master*, p. 3.

21 In *Women Readers*, Green makes much of a need to correct Grundmann's views on literacy in the Middle Ages, but refers only to a different and later essay and with criticism that is often misplaced. Cf. Grundmann, "Litteratus-Illitteratus," 1–65. Grundmann's earlier essay on women and the vernacular literary turn barely receives mention, still less are its conclusions questioned.

22 Unzeitig, Review of Green, 26–28.

23 Haubrichs, *Anfänge*, p. 50; McKitterick, "Frauen und Schriftlichkeit," pp. 111–18; Clanchy, "Images of Ladies," pp. 107–8.

24 In Grundmann's time, the great German romances were thought to be the work of knights or lay court officials.

25 Grundmann, "Litteratus-Illitteratus," 42–43 and 47–48; see also Clanchy, *Memory*, pp. 208–13, 221–22, 252–53; and Bumke, *Höfische Kultur*, pp. 607–10.

26 Constable, "Language of Preaching," pp. 131–52; Sharpe, "Latin in Everyday Life," pp. 315–41.

Neither can the difficulties be resolved by resort to an "intermediate" or "double model" of reception such as Green put forward, envisioning both public performance and individual or private reading as part and parcel of the conception of the new texts.[27] For one thing, such a construct is largely the outgrowth of a teleological view of the period as a "transition" between a primarily oral and a primarily written society or mentality. Green's "intermediate mode" finds very little basis in the sources other than the same problematic literary figuration, the reading woman, which is to be examined more closely here. For another, the manuscript record simply does not support the idea of a significant spread of vernacular literacy before the mid thirteenth century—when the texts of the German *Blütezeit* (literary "blossoming"), as it is known, were already on their way to becoming classics.[28] Green was a prominent Germanist and argued primarily on that ground. The situation in French, however, does not alter this picture.[29]

The literacy hypothesis, the idea that "Growing literacy brought vernacular literature onto the written page,"[30] should itself be abandoned as a fallacy where the crucial period of the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries is concerned. It was not new readers who triggered the composition of written texts but rather the existence of a written literature that only gradually called forth readers alongside a far larger body of listeners.[31] If the idea persists, then it is because Grundmann's question (one that, when he wrote, literary studies had barely posed, far less answered), the "why" of the twelfth century's vernacular literary turn, still lacks a compelling answer today.[32] In the third edition of his seminal study of the uses of literacy in medieval England between 1066 and 1307, Michael Clanchy formulates the question in a way that lays much of the groundwork necessary to a corrective approach: "The hardest question to answer precisely is why a growing number of patrons and writers in the twelfth century ceased to be satisfied with Latin as the medium of writing and experimented with [the vernaculars] instead."[33] Posed this way, the question does not pair writing with reading; it does not assume that vernacular texts make a literate culture of an illiterate one, whether directly or vicariously; it does not even assume that those interested in vernacular written texts are primarily laymen, or that they were previously without access to writing and a written tradition. It circumscribes a different reality than we have previously had in view as the

27 Green, *Medieval Listening*, pp. 169–233 and passim.

28 Bertelsmeier-Kierst, "Aufbruch," 157–74; esp. 160; 170–71; Palmer, "Manuscripts for Reading," pp. 67–102; Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 81–82 and 316–18.

29 Busby, *Manuscrits de Chrétien*, pp. 17–25, esp. pp. 17–18, 24; Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 79–81; Vitz, *Orality and Performance*, pp. 218–20.

30 Parkes, "Literacy of the Laity," p. 556.

31 Clanchy, *Memory*, pp. 79–80, 235–36, 249–50, 252–53 (writing of the situation in England); Coleman, *Public Reading* (on England and France); Curschmann, "Hören–Lesen–Sehen," 218–25 (on Germany).

32 Grundmann, "Frauen," 131: "die Bedeutung der Frage … die die Literaturforschung bisher kaum gestellt, geschweige denn beantwortet hat: wie, wann und wodurch ist aus dem Sprachwerk des Dichters (und des Predigers!), das vorgetragen und gehört, nicht geschrieben und gelesen wurde, Schrifttum geworden?"

33 Clanchy, *Memory*, p. 220. The passage first appeared in the second edition of 1993.

parameters for inquiry and redefines these such that the new question is, appropriately, one that addresses not the uses of texts but the uses of writing.[34]

The argument pursued in this book reveals a much stronger case for the idea that it was not reading but performance itself that "brought vernacular literature onto the written page." What we see in the bilingual (or indeed, multilingual) culture of written texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is an expanded use of the stage, of the vernacular performance space, to accommodate new combinations of writing and performance, written texts and their oral delivery. At one end of the spectrum there were Latin texts to be orally translated and interpreted in the vernacular for a listening audience; at the other, there was the performance of memorized, orally recomposed or orally improvised vernacular poetry and tales. What begins to occur in the course of the twelfth century is the use of this space to perform poetic works with fixed vernacular texts. The opportunity involved was one doubtless felt first and foremost by the authors rather than the audience. New vernacular literature may be thought of as a hybrid or marriage of the art of the preacher and that of the *jongleur*.

Written composition in the vernacular offered the clerical author distinct advantages over oral translation of a Latin text. It gave him greater control over the content of the performance and allowed him to explore greater literary complexity; at the same time, the use of the stage (understood very informally) allowed him to exploit the appeal and entertainment value of the art of jongleurs and oral poets. But for him to be sure of the success we know followed, there must have been an equivalent advantage felt among the audience; that is, among the lay nobility and others who frequented their courts. The idea that these texts, romance narrative in particular, both affirmed and aggrandized the identity and social position of the lay nobility has been thoroughly explored in the past—but the answer must surely reach beyond this idea to one that comprises the hermeneutic value of the texts, the meaning they mediated to new audiences. Modern scholarship has located this added value in the idea of romance as the (re)invention of a poetics of fiction. As I will argue here, not least among the discoveries that lay behind the woman in the mirror of this audio-visual poetics is a new idea of how romance narrative could constitute an experience not of fiction but of divine truth. In this model, then, the layman's performance space and the layman's language were elevated to a position from which they could aspire to their own mediation of the Word.

The question of women's significance for new visual and verbal forms has been not only posited as a relationship of causal agency but also more recently and provocatively explored through the lens of gender ideology in cultural representation. In *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, Roberta Krueger promises "a reconceptualization of the 'woman question' in the *theory* of romance as a genre," and successfully challenges the older assumption that the attention to women

34 See also Bumke, "Bestandsaufnahme," 490–91, also 485, 486. Foundational for my understanding of the culture of communication (written, visual, and oral) in courtly society ca. 1200 is Curschmann, "Hören–Lesen–Sehen."

in the texts, whether as protagonists or audience, reflects their tastes or preferences.[35] She likewise dismantles the simplistic tendency to equate the narrator's cultivation of a female audience with women's patronage of the genre or of new vernacular poetry. But her analysis then becomes embroiled in a trap not dissimilar to that of the literacy hypothesis. Postulating as a "central claim of this study" that "the highly problematic presentation of the women readers within romance fiction reflects the problem of historical women's reception of the genre," Krueger sets out to recover this latter from the texts themselves.[36] Thus literary representation once again is mined for information on women's social reality and even their aesthetic responses; moreover, it is not a medieval understanding of "the *theory* of romance as a genre" that is to be discovered but rather our own that is to be redefined. That the representation of female reception of the texts might have been part of the textual articulation of a theory of the genre—such as I argue here—is a possibility Krueger does not entertain.

In another provocative study of women and medieval courtly literature, R. Howard Bloch recasts the question in the broadest terms, seeking the nature of the relationship between "the question of woman" and "that of reading in the literary history of the West."[37] Bloch analyses "the double bind of Christianity's founding articulation of gender," arguing that it leaves women trapped between "the polarized position[s] of seducer and redeemer," and thus "idealized, subtilized, frozen into passivity that cannot be resolved."[38] The two poles manifest themselves in medieval literature as the cleric's misogyny and the obverse idealization of women in courtly love poetry. Bloch offers a valuable review of the patristic rhetoric on woman, body and representation, arguing convincingly that the Christian "feminization of the aesthetic" extends the notion of the woman as flesh to the entire realm of signs and representations, and thus to art, poetry, and theatrical performance.[39] But his analysis of the way these ideas play out in the crucial twelfth century fails to conceptualize a history interior to the rhetoric and representations themselves, instead once again mapping the medieval discourse into a larger history of gender ideology (and even romantic love) so that its meaning is predetermined by a desire, as Krueger stated her objective, to "contribute to the dismantling of the pervasive myths of gender in our culture."[40] This largely external view of the workings of gender structures precludes inquiry into a manipulation of the same concepts that is internal to the staging of communication between text and audience.

Where applied not to (what we see as) secular literature but instead to religious texts, analysis of gender ideology has put forward fundamental correctives necessary to our understanding of the twelfth-century situation. The work of Caroline Bynum offers in itself the solution to Bloch's "contrary abstracted double," and it is one that she deduces

35 Krueger, *Women Readers*, p. 12.

36 Krueger, *Women Readers*, p. 30.

37 Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 47–48.

38 Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 196, 91.

39 Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 44–46 and passim.

40 Krueger, *Women Readers*, p. 32.

from the medieval texts. Bynum's work has taught us to "consider not just the dichotomy but also the mixing and fusing of the genders implicit in medieval assumptions" and, above all, that men might be just as likely as women were to assume and identify with roles and experiences gendered as female.[41] The position of woman that Bloch finds so paralyzing was one that, in religious discourse at least, men and women adopted and elaborated freely as an image of their own abject state before God. The opportunity hidden in such a debasement was contained in the most basic fact of the Christian faith, the Incarnation: God had required flesh from a woman, Mary, to manifest his love in human form; to identify with woman was to appeal for divine love from the only position truly available, that of human weakness. For Bynum and the medieval writers she studies, Bloch's conundrum becomes an opportunity expressed in remarkably similar terms: "the image of both a sinful and a saved humanity is the image of woman."[42]

Bynum's work has been extended since to areas that very much overlap with my own project. Rachel Fulton sensitively probes emergent Marian commentary on the Song of Songs in the twelfth century as a locus for men's reading through Mary as the biblical bride and human counterpart to Christ's unattainable divinity.[43] Elizabeth Robertson analyses the position of the female audience as constructed in English vernacular texts written for recluses by their spiritual directors in the thirteenth century and shows how the gendering of the audience also legitimizes the use of the vernacular as a medium appropriate to their affinity with the body and the senses, seen as a natural and thus insurmountable incapacity for learning.[44] This idea was deeply intertwined with contemporary understanding of the epistemological place of the vernacular and the image, in and through which the reader-as-woman was seen to experience the metaphors of scripture as literalized, located in the body, and continuous with her own biography. Robertson sees the beginnings of this alternative understanding of reading in the affective meditations of Anselm of Canterbury and as closely connected with a new emphasis on the human body of Christ, likewise the central focus of Fulton's work. Sarah McNamer in effect combines the two approaches to look probingly into the role of gender and women's devotional needs in "the invention of medieval compassion," and argues that it occurs from the beginning as the codification through male writers (Anselm and John of Fécamp) of patterns of devotion and emotional response in themselves understood as female.[45] Of particular interest is the way McNamer then reads devotional texts in Middle English prose from the fourteenth century onward as overtly cultivating a position of female reading identification and emotional response ("Feeling Like a Woman") for audiences of either sex.[46] Compassion, then, was articulated as a woman's pleading

41 Bynum, "Female Body," p. 205; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 282–88.

42 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 265; also pp. 267–68.

43 "Quae est ista," "Mimetic devotion," and *JP*.

44 Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*, see esp. pp. 181–94.

45 McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.

46 "To perform compassion is to feel like a woman. So pervasive is this tacit axiom that it is, I propose, a 'robust' feature of the genre" (*Affective Meditation*, p. 119).

position before God that is projected into vernacular religious texts as a female response prescribed for lay people of either sex.

McNamer's work complements and develops ideas found in a stimulating essay by Nicholas Watson on the vernacular in England in the same period. Likewise focusing on Passion meditations produced for an audience of women and the "unlettered," Watson's "Conceptions of the Word" reveals an incarnational epistemology in vernacular texts, a theory of vernacular literature that sees their textuality as grounded in the idea of *kenosis*, the idea that Christ took human form out of love for humanity and so that he could be more fully understood.[47] From this perspective, affinity with the body could signal proximity to Christ and "contains the potential for a revalorization of … the role of the vernacular writer, the 'uneducated' reader, and the vernacular itself"; resulting even in "a view of the vernacular as equal, or superior, to Latin as an instrument of revelation, and a view of [its] readers as equal, or superior, to the learned in their capacity to receive such revelation."[48] Surprising though these conclusions are, they point directly to those that I will argue towards in my later chapters, and this not for the fourteenth but rather the late twelfth century, not in England but in France and Germany, not even necessarily in what we recognize as "religious" texts but also in courtly romance.

From Bynum by way of Fulton and Watson to McNamer, the studies just discussed have all pointed to the twelfth century as the intellectual incubator of the ideas that define the role of woman and women in a gendered recasting of epistemology.[49] Moreover, they suggest that it was the devotional *practice* of reading in the monastic sphere that placed the woman at the centre of a reading model for "unschooled" users of the vernacular. In this conception, the literary turn would—in a later period—share the same justification as has been identified for the twelfth century's visual turn in prayer. In such models of female knowing, the hierarchies of gender and learning not only posited or enforced exclusions, they also served as concepts through which to justify and articulate alternative inclusions, whether the factual "readers" were women or not.

It is my argument that the advent of vernacular literature in the later twelfth century takes shape as the transfer of a poetics of reading from monastic culture to the lay aristocracy by way of the intermediary position of women as alternative reading subjects. This transfer emerges from a larger field of experimentation in the monastic milieu with new ways of reading and knowing that focus from the beginning on the image, the voice, and the vernacular, performance and a new poetics of bodily media; and treats these as the appropriate means of engaging both the opportunities and the paradox that the woman-as-reader was seen to represent: the need for knowledge where exclusion from learning is an immutable condition. As a category, as essence, woman was body and as such always potentially held the place of a helpless humanity before the omniscience

47 See esp. 91–98.

48 Watson, "Conceptions," 104, 102.

49 Solterer ("Medieval Senses," 142) makes a complementary argument on the *Bestiaire d'Amours* and texts constellated around it, which she reads as effecting a "physical recasting of epistemology" around "the figure of the woman reader."

and omnipotence of divinity. The woman-as-reader serves the intellectual and spiritual landscape of the twelfth century as the posited necessity for an alternative to reading as spiritual asceticism, reading as the separation of chaff from kernel, letter (as flesh!) from spirit, body from truth. In this "she" was the fulcrum of profound change: no less than an ontological reversal of the structure of Christian gnosis.

The final chapters of this book will propose a new understanding of the relationship between empathy, truth, and the emergence of fictional narrative around 1200, focusing on two capital achievements in romance narrative: *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, by Chrétien de Troyes, and *Parzival*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach. One key to this understanding is a transfer of the devotional experience of *compassio* as articulated through Mary to the experience of romance narrative: the audience learns with the protagonist how to assume a compassionating attitude not to Christ but rather to the sufferings of his mother and "widowed bride," Mary; he or she learns to feel as a woman. Mary's experience at the cross represents a bodily knowing of the bodily sufferings of Christ and thus a bodily communion with divine love: feeling as knowing in the most profound sense.[50] Thus, to "feel as a woman" was also to "read" as she did, in and through the body. But the original image of identification with Mary's experience of bodily knowing was not the image of her *compassio*; it was rather that of her *conceptio*, the image of Mary at the Annunciation. Beginning with chapter 2, I will examine the way Mary's experience of the conception of Christ through the Spirit was imagined in twelfth-century male monastic culture as a reading act—that is, as the image of a perfect Christian gnosis communicated and received directly in the body. This act was imitable and Mary's experience was accessible by following the reading bride through the images of the Song of Songs. The same reading path is recast for monastic women, themselves seen as "illiterate" recipients of the Word, through the audio-visual (*audi filia, et vide*) delivery of their monastic instructors in the *Speculum virginum*, to be explored in chapter 3. There we observe how Mary's conception of the Word could be generalized for a female audience and expanded into a programme of "illiterate" and picture-assisted *lectio*. The special privileges of this female receptive position and the nature of its connection to vision and presence are explored over chapters 1, 2, and 4 through the figure of Hildegard of Bingen and the intricate construction (or commemoration?) of a holy woman's reading in the pages of the St Albans Psalter. Two intermediate chapters, chapters 5 and 6, trace the transfer, or really the *translatio*, of this woman's reading, Mary's reading, from the monastic to the courtly sphere, and thus from religious women to lay men and women, in three early Old French texts ranging from vernacular exegesis to one of the early romances of antiquity, the *Roman de Troie.*

This book is thus an investigation in search of a discourse always situated on multiple boundaries, those between the social estates of the clergy and the lay nobility and their largely separate educational and professional paths, between men and women, between the religious and the secular life, and between sacred and profane. The medieval terms of opposition that we associate with the historical uses of literacy and the

50 *JP*, see esp. pp. 195–203; 426–28.

distribution of learning—*litteratus* and *illitteratus*, *clericus* and *laicus*—and those we see as the instruments of social and sexual oppression—*mulier* (woman) and *vir* (man)— fill the function of "theory" within this discussion; they become the rhetorical chess pieces for a field of epistemological reflection that mediates at once between tradition, orthodoxy and innovation, and between the text and its reception, author and audience. It was one of the singular advantages of these terms that they always retained the potential to play on identification with the real capacities and identities of members of their audiences. The terminology has no more obligatory correspondence to real audience or authorial capacities, the actual function and reception of text or image, than do the knight, the bishop, or the queen on a chessboard to the social reality from which they take their names. But this last boundary is no less consciously exploited than the others. This was a discourse, finally and above all about the boundary between reading experience and reality, the life of the body and eternal truth, and it developed, *had to develop*, its own polysemic terms appropriate to a position poised between the same. These did not derive from the methods of textual interpretation so avidly cultivated and discussed in the schools, nor can they be read as directly indebted to the tradition of theological authority on reading and knowing that gave birth to those same. They are instead the somewhat experimental result of reading experiences constructed and expounded upon *in statu nascendi*. As such, they can only be recovered through careful attention to the roles and functions assigned in each case to speaker, audience, and media in relation to the constitution of meaning. Each of the chapters to come must therefore reconstruct these elements within a new and shifted, or "translated" staging of the same and then attempt through close reading of the texts (understood to include visual constructs of pictorial nature) to understand their specific contribution to a history of media and knowing as explored for marginal audiences, guided always by the figure of the woman-as-reader.

The woman-as-reader is thus very much what Richard's text initially stages her to be: all humanity in its natural desire to know (*Toutes gens desirent par nature a savoir*). In the century following the composition of the *Bestiaire d'amours*, illuminators took their turns at rendering Richard's triangle of media poetics in iconic form as an opening miniature to the text. In one version we see the eye and the ear—the receptive counterparts to image and word—disembodied and placed as insignia on each of two doors to the castle of memory.[51] In another, the same sensory doors are "opened" to reveal the castle's inhabitant standing front and centre: a woman (fig. 0.1). Woman as memory and thus the mirror of our reception of *parole* and *painture*: some 200 years, it seems, beyond the initial developments considered here, one artist fixed the visual epigraph that stands no less suitably at this book's beginning.

51 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale fr. 412, fol. 228r. On these images, see Sears, "Sensory Perception," pp. 17–22.

Figure 0.1. Memory in the *Bestiaire d'amour rimé*, ca. 1300, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale MS fr 1951, fol. 1. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.