# Introduction

"Who does it seem to you that I am?" asks a golden-faced Lady (*domina*), adorned with jewels. Stupefied by her resplendence and admiring her beauty, an abbot standing before her replies, "It seems to me that you are the blessed and glorious Virgin, Our Lady." But this Lady answers, "No, son, no." She invites the abbot to "look again, from behind." On closer inspection, the abbot discovers a horrifying sight: the Lady's back festers with worms, snakes, and toads. "Now," the Lady says, "you fully perceive (*perpendere*) that I am not a glorious virgin. I am not the Virgin Mary, but the Mother Church."[1]

Like this brief encounter between an abbot and a luminous Lady, this book invites closer attention to revelations of Lady Church. The book's detailed case studies of feminine imagery for the Church from the fourth century through the seventeenth, with special focus on the long English Reformation, illuminate Lady Church from many angles and generate a fuller understanding of her contested theological personhood and her diverse literary forms. Like snapshots, these case studies vary in scale. Some focus on a single text or portion thereof, while others zoom out to compare the use of feminine imagery by competing writers or to take in

[1] "Vidi," inquid "dominam quandam, vultu speciosam auro ac gemmis ornatam. Dixitque mihi, stupendi ac pulcritudinem eius miranti, 'Quid tibi videtur? Quenam sum ego?' Cui respondi, 'Videtur mihi quod sis beata & gloriosa Virgo, Domina Nostra.' At illa respondit, 'Non, fili, non. Respicias modo a tergo.' Cumque tergum eius respicerem, vidi illam putridam, fetentem, serpentibus bufonibus & vermibus scaturientem. 'Nunc,' inquid, 'poteris perpendere me gloriosam virginem non esse. Non sum Virgo Maria, set sum Mater Ecclesia …'" CUL MS Ii.3.8, f. 137r. Transcription and punctuation mine, abbreviations expanded.



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wider discursive fields. Taken together, these case studies show that depicting the Church as mother, bride, virgin, widow, queen, and even whore was not merely a convention to retain. Feminine imagery for the Church was a discourse to reimagine, refine, and infuse with new conceptual significance and dramatic life. The analyses and discoveries in each case study also reveal what a focus on Lady Church can contribute to broader understandings of biblical interpretation, historical ecclesiology, and medieval and early modern literature with religious themes.

This book generates its wider view of Lady Church by incorporating literary works into the history of theology and by examining texts from across the medieval and early modern periodization divide. However, the analysis in each case study is highly focused on the sources at hand. Each instantiation of Lady Church is particular to its textual and institutional circumstances and is apprehensible only through layers of historical mediation. Exemplifying these particularities and layers of mediation, the revelation of the Church to the abbot, recounted above, survives as an anecdote in one of several Latin anti-Wycliffite sermons bound in a manuscript codex.[2] The abbot, who is unnamed but localized to Clairvaux, reportedly narrated this vision to a certain Peter, archbishop of Sens, who wanted to discuss the abbot's frequent ecstasies.[3] In the vision itself, Mother Church identifies completely with the institutional church's afflictions and limits her lifespan to the church's institutional history. She explains that her golden and bedecked front-facing parts signify her original condition (*primo statu*), when she was decorously adorned with apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins. Her putrefying hind parts signify how in these latter days she has become rotten, corrupt, and full of shame, her silver turned to dross by "modern ecclesiastical men."[4] For the late medieval audience of the sermon in which this vision survives, these *moderni* would be Mother Church's Wycliffite tormentors.[5]

[2] For a brief description of the manuscript, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 518. The anti-Wycliffite sermons are found on ff. 41–169. The sermon in which the abbot's vision survives, on the theme "Videte, vigilate, et orate" (Mk 13.33), begins at f. 134v.

[3] My best guess at historical referents for these men are Peter of Corbeil (d. 1222) for the archbishop and Conrad of Urach (d. 1227) for the abbot.

[4] "... [P]rimo statu meo, quasi in anteriori parte mea, in apostolis, martiribus, confessoribus, virginibus fui pulcherima & decenter ornata, set a parte posteriori, id est postremo tempore, vt in modernis viris ecclesisticis, iam sum facta putrida, corupta, & ignominia plena. Argentum meum versum est in scoriam." CUL MS Ii.3.8, f. 137r.

[5] In a similar polemical use of *moderni*, Roger Dymmok's anti-Lollard tome also refers to Wyclif's heirs as *moderni heretici* (modern heretics). Roger Dymmok, *Liber contra XII*

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Though representative of the feminine Church's adaptive particularization to new texts and contexts, the abbot's vision and its anti-Wycliffite deployment provide only a partial glimpse of Lady Church as the transcendent theological person and lively literary figure that this book's more detailed case studies reveal her to be. In the abbot's vision, the Lady assumes a maternal relationship to the abbot, her son. (One can imagine the abbot's jolting horror to learn that the *domina* whose beauty he admired with desirous intent turns out to be his mother!) The abbot's Mater Ecclesia is a figure coterminous with the church as a longsuffering institution, degenerated from her apostolic origins and victimized by hereticated enemies. But other sources discussed in this book present Lady Church as a transcendent theological person, more ancient than all creation and passionate with desire for Christ and for all humankind. These two perspectives on Lady Church encompass a spectrum of additional and often competing views. This book's more comprehensive and multifaceted portrait of Lady Church, including ambiguities and internal tensions, integrates many genres of theological and literary writing across a diachronic scope from before and after the Reformation.

As we shall see, the feminine imagery for the Church that is so pervasive in this period is typically overlooked in intellectual histories and histories of ecclesiology more concerned to extract ideas from the images that once made those ideas appealing and persuasive. Studies of medieval and early modern literature, for their part, examine some of the most famous poetic representations of the Church as a feminine figure, but without addressing the full theological and historical import of this imagery or its widespread presence in other genres. Lastly, scholarship that is restricted to periods either before or after the English Reformation misses both the conspicuous resilience of feminine imagery for the Church and its remarkable versatility in response to evolving institutional

*errores et hereses Lollardorum*, ed. H. S. Cronin (London: Wyclif Society, 1922), Prologue, 13.3. On the different treatment of "moderns" versus patristic writers in late medieval works, see Christina von Nolcken, "Notes on Lollard Citation of John Wyclif's Writings," *Journal of Theological Studies NS* 39 (1988): 411–37, at 418. A quite similar revelation of the Church was tailored to the Great Papal Schism (1378–1417): Honoré Bovet's *Somnium super materia schismatis* (1394). See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Dramatic Troubles of *Ecclesia*: Gendered Performances of the Divided Church," in *Cultural Performances in Medieval France: Essays in Honor of Nancy Freeman Regalado*, ed. Eglal Doss-Quinby, Roberta L. Krueger, and E. E. Jane Bruns (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 181–94, at 191.

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pressures. This book therefore provides the fullest and most polyphonic account of Lady Church's long, complex, and surprising history.

The pages that follow alternate between "the feminine Church" and "Lady Church" when discussing the central subject of this study: the Church as a theological person and literary figure, who is accessible within but not identical to ecclesiastical phenomena that pass as "church" in earthly life, marked here with a lowercase "c."[6] Other contenders for a shorthand moniker included "Mother Church" and "Bride of Christ." Many sources discussed later refer to the Church as Mother and use maternal imagery extensively, but the phrase "Mother Church" is associated most commonly with defenses of the institutional church's prerogatives.[7] The phrase "Bride of Christ" often refers not only to the Church but to consecrated virgins and the individual soul.[8] The title "Lady" commends itself as an alternative, first because it is the term of address used for the Church in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which contains the earliest revelation of the doctrine of Church antiquity – the notion that the Church is a "pre-created" being.[9] In this late first- or early

[6] In practice, it is not always easy to determine when capitalization is warranted, especially in later chapters that affirm the ontological continuity of so-called "particular" Churches on earth with the "universal Catholic Church." Making these calls, I felt rather like an editor of *Piers Plowman*, reluctant to overdetermine whether a common noun or allegorical persona is intended. My choices were conscientious, if not always satisfying. Notably, my practice of capitalizing "Church" when referring to the Church as a transcendent and pre-created theological entity differs from other scholarly usage, in which "Church" with a capital C (or *église* with a capital *É*) denotes an institutional force hostile and repressive toward mystical discourse, the female body, or pre-Christian views of the natural world. See, for example, Jacques Le Goff, *La Bourse et la vie: Économie et religion au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Hachette, 1986), 85–86; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

[7] For a reconsideration of "Mother Church" imagery in historical and constructive Roman Catholic ecclesiology, see Cristina Lledo Gomez, *The Church as Woman and Mother: Historical and Theological Foundations* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018). For a Protestant counterpart, see Theresa F. Latini, "The Church as Mother: The Theme of Union in Christ in Calvin's and Luther's Ecclesiology," in *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 183–201 especially at 197–201.

[8] Claude Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ: An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940); Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Rabia Gregory, *Marrying Jesus in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe: Popular Culture and Religious Reform* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[9] David P. O'Brien, "The Cumaean Sibyl as the Revelation-bearer in the *Shepherd of Hermas*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 473–96, at 492.

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second-century Greek text, the Church is called Κυρία Ἐκκλησία (*Kyria Ekklesia,* Lady Church), making her the feminine counterpart of Christ the Lord (*Kyrios*, *Dominus*).[10] Further, the term "Lady" connotes the romance tropes that later writers use to arouse ecclesiastical loyalty, to embolden reformist desires, and to prompt maturation in the Church's earthly lovers. Thus, for purposes of the present study, the title "Lady" or *Domina* most aptly evokes the Church's role as the leading lady in the episodic romance of salvation history.

## HISTORICAL THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

David Aers observes that the history of theology is "impoverished by restricting itself to works of formal theology" without incorporating literary materials.[11] His is not a straightforward, just-add-literature proposition. Aers cautions that, when incorporating literary works into the history of theology, it does not suffice to examine expository theological texts simply as "background" for literary analysis, nor to interpret literature as a "response" to theological issues. Instead, the study of historical theology can be enriched by discovering how certain literary writing does theological work, especially work that could not be done in other modes. Accordingly, this book assesses how imaginative, literary texts make distinctive contributions to the development of Lady Church as a theological person. In addition, the book explores how some comparatively drier genres – biblical exegesis, expository treatises, polemical prose – dramatize Lady Church in literary ways.

This integrated approach is particularly valuable for the history of ecclesiology. As a theological entity, Lady Church is more difficult to assess than the Virgin Mary, Christ, or the other Trinitarian persons. In the early Christian period, ecclesiastical councils and formal creeds established orthodox terminology for discussing the coeternal, consubstantial Trinitarian persons, while officially hereticating other points of view. Many Mariological doctrines were concomitants of the high christology that these creeds professed. Dedicated treatises explicitly clarified and systematically defended conciliar proclamations. But in the Church's

[10] For the conclusion that one can date *Hermas* "no more precisely than to some point in the period 70–140," see Andrew Gregory, "Disturbing Trajectories: 1 Clement, the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the Development of Early Roman Christianity," in *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, ed. Peter Oakes (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 142–66, at 153.

[11] David Aers, *Versions of Election: From Langland and Aquinas to Calvin and Milton* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), xiv.

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case, no such treatises were forthcoming. Early ecclesiological teachings are scattered across biblical commentaries, homilies, and defenses of institutional authority.[12] The Nicene Creed, as revised in 381 CE, defined the Church as "one," "holy," "catholic," and "apostolic," but this terminology left enormous scope for disputing what exactly constituted the Church's unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity. In Reformation England, "Is the pope Catholic?" was not a rhetorical question.[13] Answers to basic ecclesiological questions are often implicit or unresolved in Christian texts, especially through the twelfth century, such as when, precisely, the Church's life began, in what forms she is embodied, and how she relates to the church as an institution. Writers use feminine imagery for the Church to explore these ambiguities, to defend contested ecclesiological principles, and to attempt resolution of competing views.

Overlooking this imagery and relying exclusively on formal ecclesiological treatises gives a distorted impression of ecclesiological thought. For example, one recent survey of historical ecclesiology generalizes that "Virtually all ecclesiology . . . was an apologetic defense of church authority or a defense of ecclesiastical power in both the spiritual and temporal orders." This summary of ecclesiological thought is based on the first formal ecclesiological treatises – primarily fourteenth- and fifteenth-century defenses of papal power – and the precedent these treatises set for defending the Roman Catholic Church for the long haul against Protestantism, socialism, and secularization.[14] However, a wider range of genres, especially exegetical and literary works, from a wider range of confessional perspectives, can modify this impression of ecclesiological thought. Biblical exegetes, homilists, late medieval critics of ecclesiastical institutions, post-Reformation Catholics, and Protestants recalibrating their institutional loyalties, not to mention poets and dramatists, espouse a more diverse range of ecclesiological principles and express more varied passions for the Church's earthly forms.

Currently, the most thorough analyses of feminine imagery for the Church focus on Latin Song of Songs commentary, which dominantly

[12] On the exceptionality of ecclesiology as a theological discipline, see Frederick J. Parrella, *The Idea of the Church: Historical and Theological Perspectives* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2023), especially at 73–77.

[13] Peter Marshall, "Is the Pope Catholic?" in *Catholics and the Protestant Nation: Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England*, ed. Ethan Shagan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22–48.

[14] Parrella, *Idea of the Church*, 212. The immediate context for Parrella's survey of ecclesiological thought is the deficiency of Roman Catholic ecclesiologies in the face of the sexual abuse crisis.

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interpreted the Song's Bride as the Church.[15] While this field of scholarship is meticulous and fruitful, it most closely tracks the history of ecclesiology as institutionally defensive. In its earliest stages, comments on the Song took the form of "citations and allusions," as opposed to verse-by-verse exegesis. These citations and allusions aimed to defend the institutional church's boundaries, as exemplified by Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258).[16] Over the long history of Song of Songs exegesis, interpretations of the Bride in the Song were used to assert the institutional church's prerogatives and to "decry forms of Christianity which the authors found unacceptable."[17] There were many institutional prerogatives at stake in interpretations of the Bride as the Church: the exclusive authority of certain leaders to administer sacraments efficaciously and to transmit doctrine faithfully, the autonomy of ecclesiastical institutions with respect to secular rulers, and the relative importance of the active or contemplative life in maintaining the Church's purity and fecundity.[18] In all of these instances, ecclesiological interpretations of the Bride assert the privileges and prerogatives of one subset of Christians over others.

While heavily indebted to these analyses of feminine imagery for the Church in interpretations of the Song, this book widens the field of historical ecclesiology by building on a basic distinction between the tradition of Cyprian and the alternative represented by the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Joseph C. Plumpe's 1943 study of early Christian maternal imagery for the Church shows that, on the one hand, several early Christian writers conflate "Mother Church" with clerical and institutional prerogatives. Infamously, Cyprian insists that one "cannot have God as one's Father" without also having "the Church for one's Mother."[19] For Cyprian, having the Church for one's Mother meant

[15] Following convention, I refer to the primary speakers in the Song of Songs as "the Bride" and "the Bridegroom," although the lovers' marital status in the various poems and poetic fragments that the Song anthologizes is far from clear.

[16] Karl Shuve, *The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), vii, 3.

[17] E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 13.

[18] Shuve, *Song of Songs*; Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, 86–122; Suzanne LaVere, *Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100–1250* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[19] On Cyprian's use of maternal imagery for the Church, see Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1943), 81–108. On dating the composition and revision of Cyprian's *De unitate*, in which this remark appears, see Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 27.

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maintaining allegiance to a church superintended by a duly authorized bishop who had an apostolic pedigree and was sole guarantor of ecclesiastical unity and baptismal efficacy. Purist sects who based their legitimacy on such other factors as refusal to capitulate to Roman imperial demands were not "churches" at all.[20]

On the other hand, Plumpe shows that in Egypt and Asia Minor, Μήτηρ Ἐκκλησία (Mother Church) is "purely Scriptural, allegorical," and "a mystical projection of theory and meditation."[21] The most striking revelation of this alternative Lady Church comes from *Hermas*, when Lady Church appears in the form of an old woman (γυνὴ πρεσβῦτις). She wears a radiant robe, sits on a large and snow-white chair, and holds a book in her hands.[22] Like the abbot of Clairvaux centuries later, Hermas misrecognizes the dazzling woman before him. Unlike the abbot, Hermas mistakes her not for the Virgin Mary but for the Sibyl. When Hermas learns this old woman's identity, he discovers that "the Church" is not a new institution but the most ancient, precreated companion of God.[23] Thus, just as early artistic depictions of Christ as a hoary old man reveal Christ's true identity as the Ancient of Days, with his snow-white garment, woolen hair, and fiery throne (Dan 7.9), so Lady Church's aged appearance reveals her true identity as a preexistent being.[24] This unique created status renders the Church "an object of faith" rather than a self-evident empirical reality.[25] The "pre-worldly" view of the Church in *Hermas* and similar sources may have delayed the Church's institutionalization in some contexts.[26]

[20] Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 23–30.

[21] Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 125. As a practical matter, Cyprian did not have access to the feminizations of the Church found in Origen's exegesis of the Song of Songs. Thus, their respective traditions of feminizing the Church took divergent courses. Shuve, *Song of Songs*, 4.

[22] *Vis* 2.2.2, *Hirt des Hermas*, ed. Leutzsch, 150.

[23] *Vis* 2.4.1, *Hirt des Hermas*, ed. Leutzsch, 58.

[24] The convention of representing Christ as an old man is especially common before 1350 and in representations of the Transfiguration. Peter Stallybrass, "Who Is God? Depicting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, 1400–1550." March 22, 2021. Recording available at https://youtu.be/LZsMLDMd58M (last accessed August 11, 2023). On "christophanic exegesis" of Daniel 7, see Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 208–46, which includes full-color plates.

[25] Lage Pernveden, *The Concept of the Church in the* Shepherd of Hermas (Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 19–20, 33–34, 37.

[26] Patrice G. de Mestral, "The Heavenly Church in the Second Century: Delaying Factors in the Process of Institutionalization of the Church in the Second Century" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1966).

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While some revelations of Lady Church discussed in this book uphold clerical prerogatives and assert institutional boundaries, as is the case with Cyprian's Mother, others, like *Hermas*'s Lady, explore the Church's preexistent and transcendent nature. This development of the ecclesiological principles present in *Hermas* appears in commentaries on a wider range of biblical feminine images – beyond the Song's Bride – which present the Church as a theological person who preexists her incarnate form, much like Christ himself. *Hermas* also may have influenced William Langland's representation of Lady Holy Church in *Piers Plowman*.[27] This potential influence, though perhaps indirect, is one sign that literary genres carry forward ecclesiological work that differs from defenses of the institutional church.

When examining the ecclesiological work done in literary modes, this study of Lady Church also builds on a few examinations of feminine imagery for the Church in art and literature. The most thorough artistic analyses of the feminine Church focus on a widespread, anti-Judaic iconographic tradition. This iconography typically portrays the feminine Synagoga wearing a dislodged crown and a blindfold and bearing a broken spear, while her counterpart, Ecclesia (the Church), wears a crown and carries a chalice and a cross-topped staff. Synagoga's blindfold denotes the trope of Jewish blindness, whereby Jewish readers allegedly failed to discern the persons of Christ and the Church beneath the literary surface of their Scriptures. The most famous sculptural renderings of Ecclesia and Synagoga are found in the thirteenth-century façade of Strasbourg Cathedral.[28]

[27] Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Volume 1: C Prologue – Passus 4; B Prologue – Passus 4; A Prologue – Passus 4* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 150. See also Chapter 6.

[28] On the Strasbourg sculptures, see Nina Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection at the South Façade of Strasbourg Cathedral," in *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. Mitchell Merback (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 179–202, plates at 484–93. For further examples of this artistic tradition in England, especially from a time span corresponding to the expulsion of Jews from England and France, see Lewis Edwards, "Some English Examples of the Mediaevel Representation of Church and Synagogue," *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 18 (1953–1955): 63–75. See also Margaret Schlauch, "The Allegory of Church and Synagogue," *Speculum* 14 (1939): 448–64. Ecclesia and Synagoga are also characters in a twelfth-century Latin verse play from Bavaria: Kyle A. Thomas and Carol Symes, *The Play About the Antichrist (*Ludus de Antichristo*): A Dramaturgical Analysis, Historical Commentary, and Latin Edition with a New English Verse Translation* (Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications, 2023).

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Some artistic analyses stress that Ecclesia and Synagoga figures are neither always antithetically related nor clearly correlated with anti-Jewish violence. Nina Rowe argues that in the Strasbourg portrayal, Synagoga's "beauty marks her as an essential component" in "the ecclesiological scheme" that the sculptures manifest.[29] Like some artistic renderings, many sources discussed in this book also posit nuanced and complex relationships between the Church and her pre-Christian past. This book shows that they do so in distinctly literary ways. A variety of writers increasingly used precise narrative details from the stories of women in the Hebrew Bible, along with poetic lines from other pre-Christian biblical texts, to supply narrative arcs and a larger speaking part for Lady Church in the drama of salvation. It is well known that Christian allegorical exegesis imbibes the trope of Jewish blindness and the doctrine of Christian supersessionism by reading pre-Christian biblical characters and images as figures or types of Christian theological mysteries. This book adds a new dimension to our understanding of the supersessionist Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Bible for Christian theological purposes. This appropriation was a matter not only of allegorical force but of literary ingenuity, which incorporates pre-Christian history into Lady Church's long narrative life.

Feminine imagery for the Church is also discussed in scholarship that focuses explicitly on theologically conceptual work done in literary modes. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski's study of poetic, visionary, and prophetic works during the Great Papal Schism (1378–1417) describes the "*imaginaire*" of the period by looking beyond "official" ecclesiastical discourse to the alternative genres that "spoke most forcefully and most imaginatively about the Schism."[30] In these genres, the feminine Church is imagined though "different metaphorical terms," such as "being adulterous" herself or being a victim of sexual assault. These divergent

[29] Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection," 181. For further analysis of medieval iconography of Ecclesia and Synagoga as non-antithetically related, see Elizabeth Monroe, "'Fair and Friendly, Sweet and Beautiful': Hopes for Jewish Conversion in Synagoga's Song of Songs Imagery," in *Beyond the Yellow Badge*, ed. Merback, 33–61, plates at 433–42. The 2015 sculpture "Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time," created by Joshua Koffman and sited at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, envisions an alternative relationship between the two figures, with both women crowned, seated side by side, and reading each other's texts with open eyes.

[30] Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378–1417* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 13. The *imaginaire* "refers to the ideas, conceptions, and even prejudices that informed the creation of texts and images."

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metaphors capture "the double perspective of the church as the guilty party or victim."[31] Metaphors also carry substantial ecclesiological weight in the conflicts discussed in this book and facilitate double perspectives on Lady Church's theological personhood. Lady Church's adulterous promiscuity is a recurring metaphor in this book's imaginative representations of her as a labile theological person.

Barbara Newman's study of medieval allegorical "goddesses" uses the category "imaginative theology" to denote "the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature, especially vision, dialogue, and personification." According to Newman, these techniques and the variety of genres that used them provided "refuge" from "hostile scrutiny" and thus allowed for greater daring and theological experimentation.[32] In an introductory discussion of the appearance of Lady Holy Church to the visionary protagonist of *Piers Plowman*, Newman describes Langland as "uninterested in … monastic and often triumphalist exegesis," instead "mak[ing] his Holy Church not a queen but a teacher of economic and political justice." *Piers* vividly depicts a Church who "disappears into heaven, yet still seeks embodiment on earth."[33] Literary works thus develop alternatives to dominant discourses and distill paradoxes that are integral to a full understanding of Lady Church as a theological entity with whom individuals can build direct, though fleeting, relationships.

This book's study of feminine imagery for the Church differs from previous scholarship by integrating expository and literary works. Its analysis of the former focuses on their overlooked feminine imagery and literary techniques. Analysis of literary works identifies their distinctive contributions to ecclesiological thought. The result is a rounded account of Lady Church in the "imaginary" of the long English Reformation. Feminine imagery is not merely a rhetorical ornament, but the means by which religious writers make their ideas clearer, more sophisticated, more persuasive, and more appealing. Literary works contribute distinctively to the understanding of Lady Church as a preexistent and incarnate theological person, whose nature is both concealed and revealed through paradoxical metaphors and through the material forms she humbly assumes to relate to her children and lovers.

[31] Ibid., 5.
[32] Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 292–93.
[33] Ibid., 14–19.

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## CHRONOLOGICAL SCOPE

In its chronological scope, this book also provides a more fulsome view of Lady Church, revealing her exceptional resilience as well as her significant transformations in new institutional circumstances. At its largest diachronic scale from early Christianity to early modernity, one primary contribution of this book is to draw Lady Church from the Virgin Mary's shadow. Just as the abbot of Clairvaux initially misidentifies the Lady before him as Mary, scholars today commonly regard the Virgin Mary as the feminine figure most central to Christian theology, soteriology, and devotion.[34] This book restores Mary to her subordinate place relative to Lady Church in several ontological frameworks in premodern Christian culture. While the gospels contain only a handful of references to Mary, and always as a human figure, the Church enjoyed high ontological status at an earlier stage of Christian thought, being feminized as Christ's beloved bride in the epistles – the NT's earliest texts.[35] Unlike Mary, who in the second and third centuries "drew little attention from the formative thinkers engaged in imagining and writing a Christian universe,"[36] the feminine Church was in that same period integral to Christian reimaginings of cosmogony and salvation history.[37] In the mid third century, Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs made the Church heiress of some of Judaism's most dominant feminine images – feminized Israel and the Shekinah. By contrast, "Mariological exposition" of the Song had to wait for nearly a millennium.[38]

[34] See the companion volumes by Jaroslav Pelikan: *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

[35] Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 52–56. These images include the Church described as Christ's beloved bride (Eph 5.25–27), the chaste and betrothed bride of Christ (2 Cor 11.1), "the elect lady" (2 John 1.1), and the woman clothed with the sun (Rev 12.1). On NT references to Mary, see Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries*, 7–21.

[36] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 16.

[37] Pernveden, *Concept of the Church*. See also John Muddiman, "The Church in Ephesians, 2 *Clement*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*," in *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107–21.

[38] Before full-fledged Mariological commentaries on the Song, select verses had been incorporated into Marian liturgies. Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, 11, 15. There are a few references to Mary in Origen's commentary on the Song, but not as an allegorical referent

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Lady Church is not only Christianity's earliest prominent feminine figure but also its most resilient. Lady Church continues to appear in contexts otherwise notable for eschewing feminine figures like Mary. It has been claimed that Wycliffites, in largely rejecting the cult of saints, "erased any specifically female figures from the pantheon of the divine and quasi-divine."[39] However, Lady Church continued to hold theological and devotional significance for John Wyclif (d. 1384), for generations of his followers, and for his Protestant self-proclaimed heirs. In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, Marian devotion sharply divided Roman Catholic from Reformed Christians, yet the Church as *domina* and mother retained her appeal for Christians of all types.[40] As Plumpe, a Roman Catholic scholar, remarked with some chagrin, "Not even Luther and Calvin ceased to speak of the *Mutter Kirche*, the *Église Mère*, after they had turned their backs upon her house forever."[41] Thus, a range of religious actors who objected to Marian devotion and the cult of saints did not wholly reject feminine imagery for the divine; rather, they concentrated such imagery on the person of the Church.

Granted, in many contexts Mary seems to outshine Lady Church.[42] Various studies of Mary have explored her early medieval ascent to the heart of European devotional culture beside Christ crucified, where she is addressed in prayer as "Co-sufferer with Christ" and "Co-author of the Redemption."[43] Others have emphasized the late medieval proliferation of Marian "devotional possibilities"[44] and Mary's depiction in late medieval art as the Trinity's "honorary female member."[45] However, this

for the Bride and always "subordinated to the task" of establishing a high christology. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 14–15.

[39] Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420–1530* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 21.

[40] For Protestant critiques and Counter-Reformation exuberance concerning Mary, see Rubin, *Mother of God*, 367–78, 402–12.

[41] Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, viii. See further Latini, "Church as Mother." For an English translation of Luther's love song to the Church as "worthy maiden," see Wolfgang S. Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970), 126.

[42] On the interchangeability of Mary and Ecclesia (the Church) in some contexts, see Mary Beth Long, *Marian Maternity in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 30–34.

[43] Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1, 204.

[44] Rubin, *Mother of God*, 332.

[45] Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 245–90, quotation at 247.

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book redresses an imbalance in contemporary scholarship by showing that, during the same period, higher ontological claims and enhancements to her devotional appeal were made for Lady Church as well.[46]

At a smaller scale, this book's chronological scope focuses on the long English Reformation, across the traditional periodization divide between medieval and early modern. Admittedly, this book is yet another instance of "medievalists working forward" in the "one-way traffic" across the great periodization divide,[47] though hopefully it is more than "a whisper in the ear of early modernists."[48] Crossing this periodization divide is not simply a matter of making scholarly projects longer and quite possibly shallower. Aers proposes that cross-period scholarship can "consider the transformation of one image or allegory across time and in differing contexts," yet still treat "complex texts with the kind of specificity they demand and surely deserve."[49] Accordingly, this book considers the transformation of Lady Church across a breadth of genres and across time, without sacrificing the demands of philological and literary analysis. To accomplish this, it takes the form of detailed case studies rather than a comprehensive overview or an attempt to track direct influences.

Though focused on philological, historical, and interpretive issues relevant to specific sources, these case studies collectively modify dominant narratives about religious change. Stubborn paradigms for depicting religious change in this period overemphasize the doctrine of predestination, overstate the opposition between the "visible" and "invisible" churches in some pre-Reformation and later Protestant ecclesiologies, and overly rely on the discrete categories of "Church" and "Scripture" as antagonistic forces. Sometimes, this antagonism is mapped onto Latinity and vernacularity. Purportedly, predestinarian and bibliocentric Christians eroded confidence in the institutional Church, measured the

[46] To take but a few examples of recent scholarship on Mary in medieval culture, see Emma Maggie Solberg, *Virgin Whore* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Long, *Marian Maternity*; and Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation: Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020).

[47] David Matthews, "The Medieval Invasion of Early-Modern England," *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008): 223–44, at 238.

[48] Quotation from the title of the stand-alone essay in David Aers, ed., *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 177–202. This essay is foundational for cross-period-scholarship.

[49] Aers, *Versions of Election*, xi.

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Church against pristine NT models, and at last justified their departure from the Roman Catholic Whore of Babylon. In the process, they jettisoned feminine figures such as the Virgin Mary and the female saints, along with Latinity and allegorical exegesis, while Roman Catholics clung to the same.

This book argues instead that the most consequential and imaginatively inspiring ecclesiological principle for many reformist Christians, both medieval and early modern, was not predestination *per se*, but the doctrine of Church antiquity or preexistence – that is, the teaching that the Church was the Trinity's first creation and has existed since the beginning of the world. For some writers, this teaching was a top-tier index of doctrinal rectitude. It also inspired dramatizations of the Church's life as a romance with Christ her consort from the beginning of time. Further, while several medieval and Reformed Christians are accused of positing an "invisible" Church, this book demonstrates that they affirm the Church's increasing visibility over the course of salvation history and the enduring value of her material forms. What is more, reformists did not abandon allegorical methods, but relished allegorical readings that dramatized and ontologically realized Lady Church, vigorously defending Lady Church as the proper referent for all biblical feminine images in the OT. Vernacular biblical translations, for their part, were valued even in the medieval period as forms of pastoral mediation, while some of the sharpest critiques of the Church's institutional forms were leveled in Latin. Far from rejecting prominent feminine figures, reformists centered their affection on Lady Church. Instead of bypassing the Church in order to pursue unmediated relationships with God and Christ, they promoted Lady Church herself as a direct object of identification and desire. Some post-Reformation Roman Catholics, for their part, radically transformed the feminine Church into a figure who demanded bodily loyalty and was incapable of intimately knowing the hearts of her devotees.

Thus, in both its long arc from the fourth century to the seventeenth, and in its more thorough examination of texts from the long English Reformation, this book widens the view of Lady Church's status and versatility and introduces a new angle from which to view a period of intense religious change. By focusing on the long and complex history of feminine imagery for the Church, this book recovers a feminine theological figure whose historical prominence has been overlooked, whose ontological status has been underestimated, and whose unique revelations merit close textual and literary analysis.

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## LADY CHURCH'S HUMANITY

While incorporating literary texts and techniques into the history of theology across a period-defying chronological scope, this book's fuller picture of Lady Church has a significant limitation. The representations of Lady Church examined here are produced mainly by clerical men. Like other idealized representations of feminine figures, Lady Church reveals little to nothing about actual women, but much "about the competition for power between men and other men."[50]

Beyond matters of institutional power, however, feminine imagery for the Church also reveals an overlooked dimension of masculine devotion. While other scholars have discussed the promotion of Mary as a substitute wife during crackdowns on clerical marriage in the high Middle Ages,[51] or the persistence of gender-reversing devotional traditions in which men describe their souls as brides of Christ,[52] this book examines an alternative tradition of direct spiritual intimacy with Lady Church. In some cases, this devotional tradition cultivates a masculine piety of "ennobling love," arousing Lady Church's devotees to perform virile deeds, to pursue and rescue the true Church, and to flee the snares of a false church.[53] This spirituality often takes the form of "sexual object choice," a dimension of knightly masculinity described by Ruth Mazo Karras and adapted by clerics in the works discussed in this book.[54] Clerical men represent themselves not only as Lady Church's champions but also as the parts of her body most intimately conjoined to Christ through contemplation or most involved in the generation and nurture of Christ's offspring. The relationships of identification and desire that male authors construct with Lady Church

[50] Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4.

[51] Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 81–126.

[52] Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); Gregory, *Marrying Jesus*; Carolyn Diskant Muir, "Bride or Bridegroom? Masculine Identity in Mystic Marriages," in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 58–78.

[53] C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[54] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 50.

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contribute to a growing body of literature on premodern cultures of clerical masculinity.[55]

Despite revealing new dimensions of gendered religiosity, feminine imagery for the Church is typically associated with clerical patriarchy to the exclusion of women's speech and governance in ecclesiastical institutions. Like other "male appropriations of the feminine voice" that Elizabeth D. Harvey has found so common in early modern England, idealized representations of the Church as pure virgin, faithful wife, and trustworthy mother in fact "confined women to a marginal and metaphoric status."[56] For example, Dyan Elliott traces how "bride of Christ" imagery, which initially signified a corporate union between Christ and the whole Church, eventually was used to hyper-privilege consecrated virginity as an ideal for women. Thus, the "bride of Christ" image came to function discursively as "a metaphor that is imposed upon the lives of . . . women" by authoritative mediators.[57] Some contemporary feminist critics argue that male ecclesiastical officers symbolically appropriated for themselves the maternal functions of childbearing and nurture through sacramental and homiletic ministries, while restricting biological women from these formal leadership roles.[58] Thus, feminine imagery for the Church upholds clerical patriarchy while excluding women from homiletic speech and ecclesiastical governance.

These representations enforce what Barbara Newman calls "a rift between symbolic exaltation and pragmatic subjection." As Newman observes, the visions of Ecclesia described by Hildegard of Bingen

[55] Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *The Manly Priest: Clerical Celibacy, Masculinity, and Reform in England and Normandy, 1066–1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, ed., *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis, eds., *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005); Jo Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–12.

[56] Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1, 142.

[57] Elliott, *Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 7.

[58] Feminist critiques of feminized imagery for the Church include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "We are Church – A Kingdom of Priests," an Address to Women's Ordination Worldwide, July 22, 2005, Ottawa, Canada; Christine E. Gudorf, "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth," *Horizons* 14 (1987): 296–309; and Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 34.

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(1098–1179) affirm the existence of "an ideal, timeless, and preexistent Church in the heavens," but, despite this lofty ontology, Hildegard insistently restricts ordained ministry in Ecclesia's body to men alone.[59] Other women visionaries equate "Mother Church" with an institution to whose ordained leaders and teaching authority they must defer. When Julian of Norwich (*c.* 1343–after 1416) edges toward revelatory insights with potentially daring theological implications, such as the desire for universal salvation or confidence in the essential sinlessness of human beings, she quickly asserts, "now I yeele me to my moder Holy Church as a simple child owyth" ("now I defer to my Mother Holy Church, as a simple child ought to do").[60] Margery Kempe (*c.* 1373–after 1438), ever seeking the guidance and approval of male authority figures, recounts how in order to seek "socowr undyr the wengys of hyr gostly modyr, Holy Cherch" ("succor under the wings of her spiritual Mother, Holy Church"), she "went and obeyd hyr to hyr gostly fadyr" ("went and submitted herself to her spiritual father"), conflating the Church's maternal capacities with the prerogatives of clerical patriarchs.[61]

Thus, to summarize the crux: Lady Church is an overlooked feminine theological person perceived as integral to creation and redemption in a long span of Christian history. But, Lady Church is also yet another product of clerical patriarchy.

This sort of impasse was aptly described by Elizabeth A. Clark in 1998, at a critical disciplinary moment for feminist historians. As historians began to embrace the "linguistic turn" by adopting the methods of literary and critical theory, feminist historians could no longer claim to be recovering "real women" and "real female voices" from historical evidence, since, at least in the case of early Christian texts, these voices have been thoroughly "appropriated . . . by male authors." This is true of female historical figures, but especially true of allegorical ones like Lady Church. However, reducing all historical evidence to a representational surface can go so far as to "annihilate the female subject." Clark's recommendations for moving through the impasse are to acknowledge that all literary historical evidence is a form of representation, to explore the fruitful question of how texts construct women and gender, to identify

[59] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 196–249, quotations at 197–98.

[60] Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 263/41.

[61] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1993), 18.

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the social forces (rather than purely linguistic forces) that shape these constructions, and to discern in these sources "opposition voices" that challenge the paradigms that became historically dominant.[62]

Following Clark's recommendations, this book acknowledges that Lady Church is a literary representation and explores how the texts in which she appears construct women and gender. This book also identifies the social, institutional forces that shape how Lady Church is represented. Most of these institutional forces concern the evolving balance of ecclesiastical and secular power and the changing institutional landscape of Reformation Christendom.

In addition, this book discerns, in many sources that represent her, an oppositional challenge to two dominant paradigms: male universality and the tight control of female sexuality. Representations of Lady Church discussed in this book belong to what Holly A. Crocker, speaking of other feminine figures in late medieval and early modern English literature, calls "an important tradition of putting women at the center of human experience." Despite the theoretical privileges of men in patriarchal societies, they still, as Crocker puts it, "experience subjectivity" in typically feminized ways: "as vulnerable, as subject to others, as shaped by sources outside the self."[63] As in Crocker's own work, this book's inclusion of literature and its cross-period scope reveal an alternative model of virtue grounded in the common, feminized experience of human existence. Crocker focuses on canonical male authors such as Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, discovering in their literary texts models of women's "ethical excellence" and "material virtues" that differ from more prescriptive genres like conduct books and from programs of institutional enclosure designed to safeguard women's sexual purity.[64] By contrast with such prescriptive materials and programs of control, the heroines that Crocker examines exhibit a capacity for ethical excellence that is comparable to Lady Church in this book's sources. Lady Church manages her vulnerability using her intelligence and her capacity for endurance, and she instantiates virtue in embodied forms as she journeys far and wide and incorporates phases of sexual adventure and failed first marriages into the story of her life. While Lady Church is not a real woman, neither

[62] Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 1–31, quotations at 3, 15, and 31.
[63] Holly A. Crocker, *The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 26.
[64] Ibid., 153, 232.

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is she a silent victim or submissive virgin ensconced in a tower or consigned to a nunnery.

The abbot's vision with which this book opened is therefore markedly different from many textual revelations of Lady Church examined here. Some of the feminine imagery for the Church presented in this book's later chapters participates in marginalizing work similar to the abbot's revelation – that is, defending a maternal and ideally virginal institution while hereticating her enemies. Yet, quite unlike the Mother Church who decries her enemies to the unnamed abbot of Clairvaux, many appearances of Lady Church discussed in this book eclipse the Virgin Mary in ontological prominence, inclusively transgress the divisions of earthly institutions, and celebrate Lady Church's long romantic history over her apostolic purity.

This book's snapshots of Lady Church through time bring fuller recognition to the pervasive presence and historical resilience of feminine imagery for the Church, especially in the long English Reformation. Across this period, religious writers of all persuasions embraced Lady Church as an ontologically prominent, devotionally accessible, materially incarnate, and vividly dramatized feminine being. Moreover, the analytical method for assessing Lady Church's ontological status and literary dramatization is transferrable to instantiations of Lady Church in primary sources from other times, places, genres, and media beyond the scope adopted here.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1 argues that a high view of the preexistent Church as Christ's nearly coeternal consort began to develop at an early stage of Nicene-orthodox Christianity. This argument is based on close assessment of patristic exegesis on the first passage of the NT (Matt 1.1–17), a genealogy of Jesus's ancestors that mentions four women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. The chapter proposes that the more leisurely homilies of John Chrysostom and the more exhaustive commentary of Ps.-Chrysostom develop ecclesiological readings of particular women as alternatives to Jerome's hasty condemnation of these women as sexually deviant sinners. Further, Carolingian commentators adapt this patristic inheritance by minimizing Jerome's condemnatory remarks, elaborating each foremother's ecclesiological significance, and, in the case of Paschasius Radbertus (786–*c.* 860), advancing a metaphysical theory of how the Church as *genus* is both concealed and partially glimpsable

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beneath the *species* of women with scandalous pasts. Lastly, Chapter 1 shows that the twelfth-century *Glossa ordinaria* abridges much of the dramatization and metaphysical speculation that enlivened the Church in prior exegesis, though the *Glossa* does automate the exegetical habit of reading all biblical women as types of the Church.

Chapter 2 charts a different path of transmission and Lady Church's increased ontological prominence in a twelfth-century Latin commentary on Matthew's gospel. Unlike the *Glossa*, a commentary now called Durham Matthew retains the "continuous commentary" form of exegesis rather than the *Glossa*'s more constrained text-and-gloss format. The Latin commentary preserved in the unique manuscript of Durham Matthew constitutes a high point in narrative representation and ontological status for the Church. Using its ample space to digress, it interprets not only the four directly mentioned foremothers as types of the Church but also Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah, along with Leah's sister Rachel, though none of these women is listed in the Matthean genealogy itself. These ecclesiological readings present the Church in terms most comparable to Christ. The Church is not identified simply as sinful flesh that is converted into Christ's pure, faithful, and fertile partner but as a heavenly form who, like Christ himself, descends to earth and assumes flesh while remaining uncorrupted. The commentary also links these ecclesiological readings more directly with specific details in the biblical narratives concerning these women, turning commentary on the Matthean genealogy into a reading of the entire story of salvation as a romance between Christ and the Church. Most, but not all, of the Latin commentary's dramatization and ontological theories of the Church survive in a fourteenth-century translation of this commentary into Middle English, known as Northern Matthew. This chapter also presents philological evidence concerning the relationship of its manuscript sources to each other and to Wycliffite translation practice.

John Wyclif holds pride of place in the next chapters. Wyclif features so prominently both because his ecclesiology is commonly misunderstood – indeed, catastrophized – and because he powerfully articulates high ecclesiological principles through feminine imagery. Wyclif's Latin tracts systematize many of the ideas embedded in exegetical genres, which are internally inconsistent, ambiguous, and unsystematic in their presentation of doctrines such as Church antiquity. Chapter 3 argues that Wyclif's conceptual and imaginative investments in the tradition of feminizing the Church elevate her ontological status to that of a theological "person" who enjoys privileged and intimate relations with Father, Son,

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and Holy Spirit and is capable of direct relationships with devotees. The chapter closely examines passages from Wyclif's *De Ecclesia*, particularly its chapters on Church antiquity, which are seldom cited in discussions of Wycliffite ecclesiology. This analysis challenges several truisms about Wyclif's ecclesiology, arguing that the most consequential and imaginatively inspiring patristic doctrine for Wyclif was not predestination but Church antiquity or preexistence. Wyclif cleverly reinterprets the Apostolic and Nicene professions of faith in "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" as affirmations of Mother Church's existence long before Christ's earthly life. Further, Wyclif does not understand the Church to be "invisible," for she remains manifest in material dimensions of ecclesiastical life.

Chapter 4 poses a more focused challenge to prevailing conceptions of the relationship between Scripture and Church in Wyclif's work. In Wyclif's *De Ecclesia*, he names both Scripture and Church as co-maternal figures. In practice, the role of Mother Scripture is to furnish Wyclif with illustrations and other literary materials that dramatize Wyclif's predetermined ecclesiological truths. Analysis of the exegetical portions of *De Ecclesia* demonstrates that Wyclif uses dilatory comments on brief biblical phrases to construct for the Church a long narrative arc and to improvise her first-person speech. This chapter also examines Wyclif's rebuttal of an unnamed opponent, through which Wyclif refines criteria for differentiating legitimate ecclesiological readings of feminine biblical imagery from spurious ones. Wyclif refutes low ecclesiological readings of Eve's emergence from Adam's side and contends more broadly that all biblical feminine imagery be presumed to hold substantive ecclesiological implications.

Chapter 5 shifts from identifying the major conceptual developments of Lady Church to the more distinctly partisan uses of feminine imagery. Though forced to rely on one-sided textual records of what were originally dialectical exchanges, the chapter reconstructs several late medieval disputes and shows that they are surprisingly reducible to conflicts over gendered imagery for the Church. The most fully representative sources are Wyclif's *Trialogus* (*c.* 1383) and Roger Dymmok's long refutation of Wycliffite or Lollard propositions after 1395.[65] Representing different

[65] In this book, I typically use "Wycliffite" for phenomena more closely connected to John Wyclif's ideas and writings and "Lollard" for the related subcultures of reformist Christians active after Wyclif's death in 1384. I capitalize "Lollard" despite current trends, trusting readers not to essentialize either "Lollards" or "Wycliffites."

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perspectives on ecclesiastical wealth, Wyclif analogizes Lady Church to a damsel in distress, who has been seduced by the fraternal orders and assaulted by endowments from secular lords, and who needs secular reformist knights to use violence on her behalf; Dymmok, for his part, presents the current abundance of ecclesiastical wealth as the very uterus, breastmilk, and nursery through which Mother Church has conceived, nurtured, and reared her educated clergy. Dymmok also depicts Lollards as matricidal infant vipers whom the king must suppress. In Wyclif's discursive shift from *De Ecclesia* to more partisan genres, the conceptual status of Lady Church also declines, and the secular interventionist power promoted by both Wyclif and Dymmok curtails representations of Lady Church's autonomy and liberty.

Chapter 6 identifies the distinctive literary contributions to the development of Lady Church found in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*. While Wyclif more commonly serves as a foil in discussions of Langland's ecclesiology, this chapter argues that Langland's Lady Church is a robust theological person who broadly reflects the ecclesiological principles that Wyclif promotes – that is, the Church's preexistence and her assumption of incarnate forms. As an overtly literary work, *Piers* makes Lady Church more devotionally accessible and dramatically enlivened through personification allegory, romance tropes, and alliterative verse. Chapter 6 argues that *Piers* presents Christian maturation as a transformed relationship with Lady Church, from dependence on her maternal form to pursuit of her as romance heroine. By comparing Scripture's sermon on the wedding banquet parable in *Piers* with Northern Matthew's comments on the same, Chapter 6 also reinterprets this critical moment in *Piers* as a moment of regression in the face of a stringent soteriology of Last Judgment. Lastly, this chapter demonstrates that Langland's depiction of Lady Church as a promiscuous yet demanding mistress is integral to the poem's vision of ecclesiastical reform, which seeks a church that is neither impenetrable nor overly porous.

Chapter 7 examines the decline of Lady Church's ontological status yet affirms her continuing devotional appeal in the increasingly persecutorial circumstances endured by Wyclif's complex heirs, the Lollards, in the early fifteenth century. Examination of the feminine Church in the anonymous vernacular *Lanterne of Li3t* reveals the overlooked importance of gendered imagery to the *Lanterne*. The feminine Church is the *Lanterne*'s most consistent means of cultivating the inwardly distinct sense of ecclesial belonging that bonded Lollard

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Christians but did not preclude their participation in mainstream ecclesiastical practice.[66] Using feminine imagery, the *Lanterne* sharply distinguishes three "churches" and urges readers to identify most intensely with the first Church, who is a virgin, bride, and travailing mother. The *Lanterne* uses feminine imagery to nurture in its Lollard audience the sense that they belong to a very different mother, even as they partake of the liturgical, sacramental, and charitable activities of mainstream parochial life.

Chapter 8 examines the neo-Latin university drama written by John Foxe during his exile to the Continent in the reign of the Catholic queen, Mary I . The chapter argues that Foxe uses his dramatic work to forge a diverse community of Continental and English Protestants into the impassioned body of the Church through the quasi-liturgical and quasi-sacramental experience of reading, performing, or attending his neo-Latin play. Mater Ecclesia (Mother Church) is a central character in the play, which depicts her long history of persecution. The Latin text of this play is rarely analyzed and frequently dismissed as an exercise in polemic and indoctrination. The chapter acknowledges some of the play's slights to the conceptualization and dramatic representation of Mater Ecclesia, such as the foreshortening of her antiquity and her portrayal as a perplexed woman in need of lectures from the Apostle Paul. However, Chapter 8 also identifies the distinctive developments in the ontological realization and devotional accessibility of the feminine Church made possible through the medium of neo-Latin university drama. Foxe constructs for Ecclesia a genealogy of endurance through the long scope of salvation history, and he presents her as mother and schoolmistress of the entire human race. Most important, Foxe frames the audience's applause as the bodily gesture through which the audience participates in the Church's desirous body, clapping to greet the apocalyptic return of Christ her spouse and to celebrate an end to tyrannical violence.

Chapter 9 pivots from close examinations of fewer sources to analysis of broader discursive fields. It shows that Roman Catholic writers did not pay merely deferential lip-service to "Mother Church" or cling white-knuckled to medieval conventions of feminine imagery. Rather, writers

[66] This distinctive Lollard sensibility is discussed most thoroughly in Fiona Somerset, *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings after Wyclif* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

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attempting to embolden Roman Catholics against conformity to the established Church of England depicted Roman Catholicism as a rightful queen, Christ's exclusively faithful spouse, and the only soteriologically efficacious mother, who demands bodily allegiance from her devotees. English Protestants did not then surrender feminine imagery for the Church, but refined it in striking ways. Refuting both the soteriological exclusivity of Roman Catholicism and the obsession with ecclesiastical purity by Protestant separatists, defenders of the Church of England depicted their Church as a woman whose lap and bosom were open to many loyal lovers, despite their divergent opinions on ceremonies, the episcopacy, and predestination. They developed a holistic ontology of Church that distinguishes the manifest dimensions of her body from the private parts that can be viewed by her spouse alone, and a metaphysics of Church that ascribes maternity to the universal Catholic Church and designates all particular Churches on earth as daughters of their mother and sisters to one another.

Chapter 10 examines feminizations of the Church in John Donne's Satyre 3 ("On Religion") and Holy Sonnet XVIII ("Show me deare Christ, thy Spouse"). The chapter interprets both poems as efforts to negotiate and forge an impassioned relationship with Lady Church, who is both present and absent in the established Church of England. The chapter contrasts these poems with defenses of the Church of England in Donne's discursive milieu, which conventionally rely on the ecclesial binarism of contrasting Protestantism with the Whore of Babylon, or which celebrate the Church of England as a *via media* between extremes. Chapter 10 also considers Donne's poems as culminations of a long history of interpreting promiscuous women as revelatory signs of Christ's consort. Against claims that Donne's "Show me deare Christ" rejects any affinity between the Churches of divided Christendom and Christ's singular spouse, or that the Church's promiscuity is coded as Roman Catholic, the chapter argues that the poem reappropriates a slur leveled at the Church of England and affirms her instead as an adequate sacrament of Christ's apocalyptic bride. In both poems, the speakers promote what I describe as non-idolatrous devotion to the established national Church of England, who provides safety to the body but poses risks to the soul.

Using both underexplored and well-known literary revelations of Lady Church, this book provides a robust account of Lady Church's significance and transfigurations over time. Lady Church enjoyed high ontological status in early Christian history and went on to feminize the

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Protestant pantheon single-handedly. The Conclusion of this book considers this evidence in light of a brief aside in Tina Beattie's feminist analysis of patristic gender symbolism: "[P]erhaps the Church rather than Mary needs to be seen as the Goddess figure of the Christian religion."[67]

[67] Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 264.

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