



# THE FEMALE MYSTIC

GREAT WOMEN THINKERS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

I.B. TAURIS

Andrea Janelle Dickens

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**Andrea Janelle Dickens** is Assistant Professor of Ancient and Medieval Church History at United Theological Seminary, Trotwood, Ohio. She has written many essays and articles on medieval theology and spirituality, and is also the author of *The I.B.Tauris History of Monasticism: The Western Tradition* (forthcoming).

‘Andrea Janelle Dickens appeals to the mystic in every reader with her inviting and informative treatments of a dozen medieval women. She proclaims them “exemplary rather than extraordinary,” suggesting, contra their times, that gender is no boundary to holiness. For the widely-known (Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard of Bingen) as well as the less studied (Angela of Foligno, Richeldis of Faverches, and Mechtilde of Hackeborn) matters of love, location, authority, pilgrimage, and anti-clericalism are common themes. This readable introduction is the perfect primer for the religious studies or gender studies classroom and has ample scholarly apparatus to encourage further study.’ – **Mary E Hunt**, *Co-director, Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), Silver Spring, Maryland*

‘*The Female Mystic* will serve as an excellent introductory textbook to the life, works and thought of 12 leading women mystics, from eleventh-century Richeldis of Faverches to sixteenth-century Teresa of Avila. The discussion throughout is balanced, informed and clear. The author has both an eye for detail and an admirable capacity to sketch an insightful overview of each figure against the background of her own historical period and within her own social contexts. In these pages the mystical texts emerge as distinctively female, though open-endedly so, and as a vital communication of the rich, multi-faceted world of medieval Europe. *The Female Mystic* will open up new horizons for any reader who wishes to come closer to these extraordinary texts and their authors.’ – **Oliver Davies**, *Professor of Christian Doctrine, King’s College London*

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# The Female Mystic

Great Women Thinkers of  
the Middle Ages



*Andrea Janelle Dickens*

I.B. TAURIS

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# Introduction



In the high middle ages, women began to take a more prominent role in theological writings, both figuring as the subjects for male confessors' writings and sometimes writing their own works. With this increase in the visibility of women's religious lives come questions about the roles that these women played and their adherence to or defiance of societal norms. Women, and their proclivities to holiness and heresy, served as the subject of much literature. Men said that women were weak and therefore more prone to heresy, and thus needed more guidance, could not teach religious matters and needed men to establish the bounds of orthodoxy for them. On the other hand, the prayers of women were recognized to be more efficacious than those of men, so women were sought out in desperate situations. As one friar requested, 'have women and priests pray for me'.<sup>1</sup> It is in this contradictory complex of conflicting imperatives that these women thinkers lived and wrote.

This book considers the lives and writings of a dozen medieval women thinkers within this medieval matrix. It aims to see women's contributions for what they were and orient the reader new to this subject matter to the contours of modern scholarly discussion. Tied up with the opposing representations were the roles into which the social structures of their days perceived women as able to operate. Since the early 1980s, women's mystical writings of the middle ages have come to be studied more and more seriously. Through this research, scholars have come to identify a women's tradition of writing religious and literary texts. It has been defined on the one hand by the sex of the writer (or subject, in the case of

hagiography), and on the other by the lack of scholastic theological training, access to the pulpit or university leadership. From this, a canon of medieval women mystics has emerged. But this renaissance of study of medieval women thinkers has had several pitfalls as well. In particular, many university courses in literature or theology departments now include a course on 'medieval women mystics', suggesting there is something feminine about mysticism. This reinforces the essentialism that ascribes certain types of writing, acting, thinking and behaviours to the sole provinces of either men or women. Such prejudices show that, even today, we are not all that far from having set roles to which we believe we ought to ascribe women's work.

I intend for this book to introduce 12 representative female mystics from the middle ages; in so doing, I will read them as representatives of a wide variety of social, political, religious and literary traditions with which they interacted and which their presence directed. Much has already been written about the women mystics of the middle ages. Such scholarship has often been groundbreaking, introducing new writers, lay spirituality and non-scholastic theology to medieval scholars and students; other scholarship has provided details of a history of women. Some have offered criticism of clericalism and patriarchal 'norms' in church and society, or presented utopian visions of women looking to the New Jerusalem at the end of created time. The 12 women chosen represent many of the major chords of spirituality in the middle ages. The texts by and about these women are available in modern English translations, and this book hopes to find itself useful alongside such translations in the classroom to help introduce the women and explain their milieux.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in studying women from the middle ages is that often the introductions to women's writings and lives present those whom we know about as being different or exceptional, forgetting that any person about whom we know much in the middle ages was exceptional. Another difficulty is that women's writings and lives are often read as somehow presenting a vision of a distinct 'women's spirituality', as if these women's writings have to be separate but equal alongside men's writings. In the course of writing this manuscript, I have come to realize that not only do these women inhabit a number of theological and devotional trends in the middle ages, they also are completely ordinary in the ways in which they operate. They write according to major literary trends open to women: the best examples being the visionary, the devotional, and the courtly love traditions. Much of the writing about women

mystics has focused on their peculiarities, seeing them as extraordinary. I shall focus on these women as exemplary rather than extraordinary.

I do not believe that we need to represent the women as participating in some Platonic form of women's spirituality in order to find worth in these women's writings. Nor do I believe that this selection of women (for there are many more medieval women thinkers than merely these 12) creates a canon of women's mysticism. To show that these women are unique both in their femininity and in their non-gender-specific elements, I shall provide a very brief overview in the next few pages of several ways in which historical, theological and literary scholars approach female mystics. As Bernard McGinn notes, the history of mysticism can be sketched according to a model of gradually accumulating layers of tradition, as can the commentary on it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women and medieval literature**

Medieval women's writings often are classified into the vague description of 'medieval literature', which simply means that they are not seen as technical writings of science, theology, logic or other fields.<sup>3</sup> Within this description of 'literature' there are many genres, ranging from pastoral or spiritual works such as those of Walter Hilton, to dramatic works such as the York mystery plays, poetry and music such as the *Carmina Burana*, to the hymns of Peter Abelard. Even within the 'mystical' we have a wide variety of genres: there is the visionary, in which a person receives special revelations in the form of visual images; prophecy, auditory messages from God or the saints; contemplative devotions; and affective responses to meditations or visions. There is also hagiography, in which a holy person's life is told in the most agreeable terms, either to help her attain canonization as a saint or to offer her life as an example of holy living.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars read medieval women as 'writers' of set genres, ignoring the intellectual content of the writings. For instance, women such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe wrote in the vernacular language of their time and place. Many of the studies of medieval women writers make the assertion that women were instrumental in popularizing the use of vernacular languages for theological or other writings.<sup>5</sup> Studies of Julian have found that her prose has rhythmic qualities to it that expand the scope of English's aesthetic qualities and have focused on how she expanded the use of literary figures of speech in middle English, much like Chaucer did.<sup>6</sup>

Other studies have shown how Julian and Margery's work coincides with popular English preaching of this time.<sup>7</sup> This approach seeks to set the women mystics within 'literature', basing its work upon the language used, and allowing the difference in language between Latin and vernacular language to be the dividing factor. Since women were not educated in Latin grammar as extensively as the schoolmen, vernacular comes to be associated with the women's writings, and genre distinctions are based at least in part upon these linguistic bases rather than solely on clear genre distinctions. There is a subtle distinction to be made here: in readings such as these, women are seen as literary artists, not as thinkers necessarily. Their writings are most often judged as representative of where a literature has developed or is developing at this time. But the women are not evaluated in this as original thinkers, or theological thinkers, or even as consistent thinkers. Nicholas Watson notes that women were associated with the vernacular because of their humility (having a lower social status than men), and its parallelism with Christ choosing the humble family of a carpenter and Virgin.<sup>8</sup> But there were a fair number of men associated with the vernacular languages, particularly since preaching in the vernacular was an especial aspect of the mendicant orders: Franciscan and Dominican men such as Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse, Johannes Tauler, David of Augsburg, Friedrich Sunder and Bertold of Regensburg, all authored devotional treatises and sermons in the vernacular.

### **Medieval women and 'popular' religion in the middle ages**

Another school of thought posits that women's communities are an intellectual buffer zone of sorts between the institutional and popular, keeping the popular dogmatic and helping to revitalize the institutional. As such, the women represent people with more theological astuteness than average, but they are not properly speaking theologians. In such discussions, there is a clearly drawn line between those who were 'institutional' and had been vested with authority by virtue of training or position and the rest of the people in the church. Women – even nuns – represent the popular as opposed to the institutional or the ruling patriarchy. This view reads the intellectual developments of the medieval era as institutional developments, with institutional history and scholastic theology its two main representatives, and social history describes all else.

Investigations of this social history in this way seek to understand the women and medieval religious practices by reading some of the practices of women as representative acts. Perhaps the primary example of this type of scholarship is the work of Caroline Walker Bynum. Her investigations have run the gamut from popular devotions and scholastic theology to women's fasting practices and bodily integrity in medieval devotions.<sup>9</sup> Certainly topics such as sickness, fasting practices, bodily asceticism, penitential acts or travel receive focus: this dovetails with the preoccupations of modern theology regarding the body, location, geography and liminality.<sup>10</sup>

Second, this type of cultural history allows women's thought to be investigated as a separate trajectory in history. It is a unique women's history or women's theology, 'separate but equal' to men's history and theology.<sup>11</sup> This works off an essentialist understanding of what constitutes 'women's writings' and divides women's texts into the categories of non-traditional (and hence women's writings) or 'mere literature' (writing that is not specifically woman-themed). Furthermore, these investigations associate women's writings with the traditions of affective theology, in which the emotional response to a meditation is the focus of the writing. Yet the best-known proponent or teacher of this type of meditation was Walter Hilton; nor is it clear that women's writings necessarily were more affective than men's. Certainly, this was a genre more open to women than, say, scholastic theology, which required specific training that was only open to men with clerical aspirations. But once again the association of women with affective theology has to be examined carefully along with the assumption that men are all rational and women are all emotional.

### **Women's writings, power and authority**

A third approach is to analyse women's theological and literary writings within a matrix of power, authority and knowledge. According to Foucault, knowledge is power, and it has become increasingly popular for scholars to discern axes of power in both the lives of women and the texts by and about them.<sup>12</sup> For cultural historians, this has meant attempting to discern the place that an individual or community inhabited within the larger social sphere of their time, order and geography. The way in which these individuals have interacted within these spheres, particularly the ways in which they have subverted or transgressed the

boundaries established by their own separate spheres, has become a major exploration.

Often this Foucauldian reading emphasizes the unique claims that mystical writings contain: the claim to a divine authority having commissioned the work, which demanded the women speak. In such a setting, obedience becomes power, but God's power trumps human forms of power. The conveyance of power allows mystical commission to trump earthly authority, and thus the weak women have a stronger power (and deeper wisdom or truth from God) than theologians. This reversal is also seen in the Annunciation, when Mary becomes the vessel for the Incarnation in her meekness: 'Women's charismatic, prophetic role was an alternative to, and therefore a critique of and a substitute for, the characteristic male form of religious authority: the authority of office.'<sup>13</sup> A further aspect of power regards who actually declares what is actually valid. For instance, Marguerite Porete's text *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was burned alongside her in Paris, but the work continued to circulate without her name on it.

### **Holy women and their relations to men**

Yet these women are not merely texts – women were people and were subject to interpretations by others. One of the newer aspects of inquiry probes discussions of the relationships between women and their hagiographers. For instance, the work of John Coakley has probed the relationships that holy women had with their confessors and the ways in which the women's and their confessors' perceptions of the women's vocation (prophet, visionary, leader) varied. These perceptions are often passed down through the texts, and thus the authorship of texts matters, and determines to what extent people (men and women) other than the visionary woman herself might have shaped the text's outlook. Every person has an agenda, and, as Coakley points out, sometimes the agendas the men had were substantially different from those of the women.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the women wanted to be quiet about their extraordinary experiences, or only wanted to communicate their visions to those to whom they were addressed; other texts show women used by men in order to put forth a particular agenda. This is perhaps most clear in the case of Christina of St Trond, where her life becomes a sermon example in the hands of her hagiographer, Thomas de Cantimpré.

What this scholarship has shown is that there are differences in terms of the way the women are perceived, as well as their gifts, their roles (intercessor, penitent) and their usefulness as an example. Another topic that garners scholars' attention is the relationship between women and the men who minister to them, whether sacramentally as confessors and providers of the Holy Meal, or as scribes, collaborators or hagiographers. Elizabeth Petroff notes that the women serve a number of services for the men: they offer a compelling image of lived faith to the priests. The men also find themselves attracted to the women's piety; women served as intercessors to God for men. Men come to women when terrible happenings require divine intervention; the women represent a new kind of teaching in action: spontaneous, compassionate and non-hierarchical. The women have new viewpoints and can respond to situations directly and thus appear to be transgressive in ways that a male ecclesiastic cannot.<sup>15</sup>

### Genre and message

If Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that the 'medium is the message' is correct, then we should find in the various genres of writings that there is an infinite variety in the works we see from these women. Certainly genre affects what we expect we will find in a text and how we respond to what is included in the text. An inherent problem arises when we limit the theological by identifying forms of writing that we consider inherently theological as opposed to literary. I wish to push against this notion, much as Catherine Gardner did in her work *Women Philosophers*, in which she argues that the works of the women she has chosen (including Mechtild of Magdeburg, whom I also consider) are inherently philosophical, despite the differences in genre and the different relationship between reader, author and text that this imposes. At heart, genre problematizes but it also matters. Genre, or the identification at least of writings that are *like* other works in terms of narratorial or authorial stance, helps to identify the ways in which we are to read the claims being made in the text. One reads the immediate descriptions of Julian's visions differently from how one reads her interpretations of these visions. One is full of immediate, sensory imagery, while the other is fully of rumination upon the images, working them like *lectio divina* for years until the crystallization of meaning comes forth.

## **Our project**

As this quick introduction to some of the theories guiding the study of medieval women's lives and texts should show, there has been a plethora of recent study of these women since the late 1970s. And the ways in which they have been studied provide us with a wide range of possible angles from which to consider these women, all of which makes the introduction to these women both easier and harder. It is easier in that only two of the women – Richeldis of Faverches and Mechtilde of Hackeborn – are relatively understudied. On the other hand, the plethora of scholarship can daunt the new student who is seeking an overview of the thought-world of each woman. It is this task that I hope this book shall fulfil.

An aspect of these writings that recommends their being read together is that these women all directed their writings or actions outwards. They did not develop their spiritual lives or their spiritual writings merely for the sake of themselves; they meant to direct the lives of the communities to which they belonged.<sup>16</sup> And yet there is perhaps something disingenuous about the title of this book: all of the people chosen to be studied are in fact women; but the fact that they are women is about all that they have in common. Often, books about 'medieval women' attempt to find some essentialist connection between the women, thus marginalizing the women rather than seeking to find them as writers, theologians, prophets or poets in their own rights. I caution my reader at the start: one of the conveniences about choosing a group of women is that often these visionary and mystical texts are introduced in the university classroom in the guise of a course on 'medieval women' in the literary or religious studies classroom. And for such a purpose, this book is geared, having chosen women whose writings show the vast differences in style, topics, means of reception of writing, and interests. But it is not a book that will show everything that the women have in common. Far from it.

As a final note, it is worth remembering the vast period covered by these 12 women. From Richeldis' vision in 1061 to Teresa's reforms until 1581, a period of over half a millennium stretches. The time period covered from the first to last woman in this book is even greater than the expanse of time removing us today from Teresa's Counter-Reformation Spain. When Richeldis has her vision in 1061, England is still a feudal society, and William the Conqueror's 1066 invasion is still half a decade away. Walsingham is, like most English villages of the time, remote and

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## *Introduction*

unconnected. Over the intervening centuries, cities will rise, a new economic class, the bourgeoisie, will be born, and populations will become more mobile. Many new orders will come into existence. Universities will be founded starting in the twelfth century. In the following centuries, the Inquisition will begin, the Reformation will occur, and the Counter-Reformation will follow. By the year Teresa is born, Ferdinand Magellan will be halfway through his circumnavigation of the world, and Spain will be an imperial power, controlling new lands not dreamed of during the lives of most of the other women in this book.



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# 1

## Mary's Handmaid: Richeldis of Faverches



In 1061, only half a decade before the Norman invasion of Britain, a woman named Richeldis of Faverches received a vision from the Virgin Mary instructing her to build a shrine to Mary. Until it was destroyed at the time of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and stripping of the churches, this model of the house of the Annunciation saw hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who came on spiritual quests, and quests for healing, hope and thanksgiving. The shrine became a popular replacement for travel to the Holy Land when the Crusades made travel abroad too dangerous. The legends about Richeldis focus not on her but on the shrine she founded; in this portrayal, they see Richeldis' behaviour as an example for others: a woman of her time following the example of Mary's *fiat* ('let it be so') in response to the Annunciation. The creation of the Walsingham shrine helped foster the development of Marian devotions and Christ-centred devotions, helping others follow the example of Mary as Richeldis had done.

Richeldis is an emblem of the problem of scanty information that modern readers experience with women's lives and texts in the middle ages. Precisely because of this, she offers a good example with which to start this book. The only written testimony about her comes in a ballad written in 1460, nearly 400 years after her life. Also instructive is the existence of the place of Walsingham and references to it in literature of the middle ages. Whereas the other women in this book have left behind texts, Richeldis left behind a physical shrine for pilgrimage and healing as evidence of her theology of Marian devotion, locational significance and

intercessory prayer. The creation of the Walsingham shrine offers an example of a woman's particular abilities to receive divine visions and their importance in establishing and shaping popular devotional practices, and her example also emphasizes women's unique connections to Marian spirituality.

What we do know about the historical Richeldis is that she was named after Saint Richelde, who died in 896 and was canonized 150 years later in 1049.<sup>1</sup> The original Richelde was the wife of Charles the Bald, the great-grandson of Charlemagne. Legends tell how Charles had accused Richelde of adultery, and in her efforts to prove herself innocent she prayed to Mary. After her prayers had been answered and she was no longer found guilty, she publicly pardoned her husband before retiring to the Abbey of Andlau in Alsace. Like her namesake, the later Richeldis of Faverches became associated with the Virgin Mary; but rather than receiving a miracle for herself, the second Richeldis' prayers were answered by the offer of miracles in perpetuity in the place of the Walsingham shrine. In the legends of both women, their intercessor relationship with Mary (identified by her own intercessory relationship) determines their vocation and supports their association with Mary.

### **The Walsingham vision and foundation**

The Pynson ballad, composed about 1460, presents the main account of Richeldis' vision and the shrine's development under Mary's guidance. The ballad addresses itself to those pilgrims travelling to Walsingham and it explains how the miracle of Mary's appearance was followed by a deed of Richeldis in order to secure the grace for all pilgrims.<sup>2</sup> The ballad offers examples of miracles that have occurred to visitors, ending with the promise that Mary will help. The ballad dates Richeldis' vision to 1061. Although a document written 400 years later must be somewhat suspect, Richeldis' vision does bear a number of similarities with the growing spiritualities of the twelfth century, and serves to orient the reader with twelfth-century Incarnational and Marian devotions and pilgrimage in the high middle ages.

Richeldis exemplifies how to imitate Mary, and the gift of the vision for the foundation of the shrine illustrates what the devotee to the Virgin could expect to be offered for his or her devotion. Richeldis shows that the location of Walsingham and the shrine matter in the reception of God's

graces. Furthermore, Richeldis' actions show that Mary can also be a model to women in Richeldis' day and that God still grants graces according to this model of obedience. The ballad describes her as a noblewoman and widow, virtuous, and devoted to the Blessed Virgin. These were all virtues extolled in women in Richeldis' time. Richeldis is described in the ballad as:

A noble wydowe, somtyme lady of this towne,  
Called Rychold, in lyuyng full virtuuous,  
Desyred of Oure Lady a petycyowne  
Hir to honoure with some werke bountuous.<sup>3</sup>

This is a selfless petition in which Richeldis only asks Mary to provide some means for Richeldis to offer homage to Mary.

The poem continues by describing the conditions of the shrine's foundation:

Bylded the yere of Crystes incarnacyon,  
A thousande complete syxty and one,  
The tyme of sent Edward kyng of this region.<sup>4</sup>

By instigating the vision in response to her request to Mary, Richeldis exemplifies how Mary responds to the requests of people who ask her. By showing the initiative to ask, Richeldis also exemplifies the habit and optimism of prayer. Mary appeared to Richeldis and instructed her to construct a copy of the little house in which the Annunciation took place. In the original house of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she was to bear God's son.<sup>5</sup> Mary's act of obedience in her response, 'Let it be', meant that she would accept the role to be the Mother of God. This role granted Mary a particularly efficacious intercessory power with God because of her proximity to Jesus. Being the sinless, blessed mother of Jesus, and having been bodily assumed into heaven at her death, she is considered the second most effective intercessor, second only to her Son.

For the construction of the house in Walsingham, Mary provided Richeldis with a spiritual blueprint for the house; these plans then required Richeldis to keep artisans of various sorts on retainer. The ballad describes this as a 'miracle' that is followed through by the 'deed' of Richeldis' actual establishment of the shrine. The human becomes the

agent through which God's miracles can be accomplished. Mary repeated the vision to Richeldis three times in order for Richeldis to remember the measurements precisely.<sup>6</sup> Mary promised to assist and intercede for all who came there for her aid. In the vision, Richeldis was spiritually transported to the Holy Land in order to see the original house to help her know what she was building:

In spyryte Our Lady to Nazareth hir led  
And shewed hir the place where Gabryel her grette:  
'Lo doughter, consyder' to hir Oure Lady sayde,  
Of thys place take thou suerly the mette,  
Another lyke thys at Walsyngham thou sette  
Unto my laude and synguler honoure;  
All that me seche there shall fynde socoure.<sup>7</sup>

Mary identifies the spiritual effect this house will have on those who visit; the spiritual transportation also suggests the difficulty in getting to the house in Nazareth. At the time, the Holy Land was under Saracen control, which made travel dangerous or impossible for pilgrims. The vision also emphasizes Mary's own association with visions, apparitions, angels and miracles. Mary herself received a visitation by the angel Gabriel and became associated with the host of heaven making visitations to people. Richeldis' reaction is abundant joy; then, immediately, Richeldis calls her artificers to follow Mary's instructions and build the requested house:

This forsayd hous in haste she thought to spede,  
Called to hir artyfycers full wyse,  
This chapell to forge as Our Lady dyd deuyse.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after the vision, Richeldis set to work with skilled woodworkers to build a wooden-framed house to the exact specifications that she had seen in the vision. In short order, they had built the house frame and were ready to erect it. But for Richeldis and the workers to know exactly where to place the house, another miracle needed to occur. Like the story of Gideon's fleece from Scripture, an area of dewless ground the next morning was to mark the spot where the house would stand.<sup>9</sup> But Richeldis found two spots of practically equal size without dew:

All this, a medewe wete with dropes celestyall  
And with syluer dewe sent from hye adowne  
Excepte tho tweyne places chosen aboue all  
Where neyther moyster ne dewe myght be fowne,  
This was the fyrste pronostycacyowne  
Howe this our newe Nazareth here shold stande,  
Bylded lyke the fyrste in the Holy Lande.<sup>10</sup>

Everything went wrong when the workers tried to erect the house on the spot. She sent her artisans home, and spent the night in prayer.<sup>11</sup> The next morning, Richeldis discovered that Mary had come during the night and used the materials of the artisans to erect the house on the other location with the help of some ministering angels. Mary was Walsingham's 'chief artificer'.<sup>12</sup> Mary commanded the teams of ministering angels who constructed the house, suggesting her power to command the hosts of heaven to grant intercessions as well. Following this miraculous construction, the shrine, along with other buildings on the same property and nearby, became a place of pilgrimage. In Mary's miraculous completion of the building, it becomes clear that Mary's concern was not that Richeldis successfully complete the building; rather, Richeldis merely had to show that she would submit to the request of Mary and try to accomplish it obediently. In the shrine that grew up around this original building, other buildings would come to be incorporated in the Walsingham pilgrimage location, such as the Slipper chapel, dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a mile and a half down the road from the Walsingham shrine. It was at this location that pilgrims would remove their shoes for the last portion of the pilgrimage, and receive the sacrament of Penance.

The story of the house's building points to a combination of miraculous plans and emphasizes the power of Richeldis' prayer to bring the project to completion, Mary's willingness to listen to prayers at Walsingham, and Mary's ability to effect miracles. The ballad lists the sorts of miracles one could expect at the shrine. It says that: 'many seke ben here cured by Our Ladyes myghte', as well as the 'dede agayne reuyued'. The ballad's catalogue continues, enumerating Biblical-sounding miracles: the 'Lame made hole and blynde restored to syghte', as well as lepers and 'Defe, wounded and lunatyke that hyder haue sought'. The shrine also helped cure those who were possessed by fiends, wicked spirits or any other form of tribulation. And since the shrine was in East Anglia, sailors also had recourse to the Virgin: 'Maryners vexed with tempest safe

to porte brought.' The list of those who have found help at the shrine concludes with the promise that, 'to all that be seke, bodily or goostly, / Callynge to Oure Lady deuoutly', the Virgin of Walsingham will have a special ear to listen. All the aspects of the legend point to the purpose and theological understanding of a medieval pilgrimage shrine: the earthly and temporal working in concert to bring people to the heavenly. Human prayers meet with divine response and saintly intercession to alleviate the physical and spiritual troubles of the people of God. This intercession occurs because the likeness of the shrine to the house of the Annunciation affects what happens at the shrine: at the shrine, people daily remember the joy of the Annunciation, and by remembering the joy of the Annunciation, remember the joy that brought salvation into the world. It is this joy that undergirds the miracles that take place at the shrine.<sup>13</sup>

The very structure of Richeldis' vision exemplifies the Marian devotion that the shrine embodies. Richeldis first petitions Mary, asking permission to do something to commemorate her. Richeldis receives a spiritual vision of Mary, which includes a spiritual pilgrimage. Then, after the vision is granted, Mary's help is needed in order to construct the house, but this help is required not because of Richeldis' fault or due to the poor work of the builders – rather, Mary's intervention shows that divine grace is needed for humans to fully respond to supernatural visions granted by God. Mary's building intervention is also a physical intervention of a different nature from the earlier spiritual transport to Nazareth; in the second intervention, Mary's grace affects the physical world of Richeldis. Yet even this is not the end of the Marian significance of the shrine. Such a shrine has a two-fold purpose: first, to give evidence of the claim that England is 'Our Lady's dowry'; and, second, to establish a place of pilgrimage and healing. Once again, it manifests Mary's gifts both in a supernatural title and in physical words and deeds among the living.

### **Eleventh- and twelfth-century Marian devotions**

The Marian character of Richeldis' vision is typical of devotional trends from the late Carolingian period in the Latin church. A number of Marian devotions took root first in the monasteries, especially among Carolingian Benedictine reformers and later among the Cluniacs and the Cistercians in the high middle ages. Marian devotion often incorporated intercessory

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