

A POPULAR CODE FOR THE ANNUNCIATION
IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LYRICS

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with a popular type of the Annunciation lyric in medieval English poetry. A brief survey of the role of the angelic announcement to Mary in medieval art and culture is given. The argument then pursues several distinctive traits of this kind of lyric in a number of poems from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. The distinguishing features include a tripartite structure, a common set of words, phrases, ideas and images, emphasis on singing, a spring setting, tryst between lovers, and the use of popular genres, particularly ballads and carols. By analogy with music, it is argued that a certain popular code for the Annunciation existed, against which interesting artistic transformations of the theme were introduced. For example, the Annunciation was evoked in a highly compressed and allusive manner by means of but a few elements of the code. The principal elements of the alleged code derived from popular art and imagination. Their application to theological issues frequently led to the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the profane, and between the Christian and the pagan. The paper proposes a distinction between Lent and alleluia subtypes of the Annunciation lyric. It also demonstrates how the *pastourelle*, *aubade*, and *chanson d'aventure* conventions of secular love poetry were adapted to represent the Annunciation. Finally, it suggests a connection between the lyric "At a spryng wel" and a specific statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, like the much-reverenced statue of Our Lady at Walsingham.

The feast of the Annunciation, dating from the fifth century in the Eastern Church and from the seventh century in Western Europe, was one of the most important medieval festivals. It commemorated the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus Christ (see Clayton 1990: 26-27, 29). The festival was celebrated on 25 March, that is, on the threshold of spring, when nature was being brought back to life again. Within the liturgical year, the date usually fell in the season of Lent or, occasionally, coincided with Easter Week.

The medievals knew the story of Gabriel's proclamation to Mary chiefly from Luke's Gospel:

[M]issus est angelus Gabriel a Deo in civitatem Galilaeae, cui nomen Nazareth, ad virginem desponsatam viro, cui nomen erat Ioseph, de domo David, et nomen virginis Maria. Et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit: Ave gratia plena: Dominus tecum: benedicta tu in mulieribus. Quae cum audisset, turbata est in sermone eius, et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio. Et ait angelus ei: Ne timeas Maria, invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum: ecce concipies in utero, et paries filium, et vocabis nomen eius IESUM. ... Dixit autem Maria ad angelum: Quomodo fiet istud, quoniam virum non cognosco? Et respondens angelus dixit ei: Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi. Ideoque et quod nascetur ex te sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei. ... Dixit autem Maria: Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum (Luke 1: 26-38, Vulgate version).

[The angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that are highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. ... Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. ... And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be unto me according to thy word (King James version)].

This story was elaborated upon in a number of apocryphal sources and very soon became a central theme in the arts and writing of the Middle Ages. Particularly, the visual artists, starting from the earliest days of Christianity, represented the story in cathedral sculpture, on altarpieces, bronze doors and jewellery, and in manuscript illumination and stained-glass painting. Possibly the most famous of the medieval visual representations of the Annunciation is the one painted in fresco by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, in 1305-6. The Annunciation theme inspired numerous sermons, theological treatises and liturgical poems alike. The greatest medieval theologians, such as Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Peter Abelard, wrote about it. Gabriel's salutation of Mary was also a constant element of medieval devotion. Specifically, it was interwoven into one of the most frequently repeated prayers of the Catholic Church, the *Ave Maria*, of which only the first half was used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: *Ave Maria gratia plena / Dominis tecum / Benedicta tu in mulieribus / Et benedictus fructus / Ventris tui*. Medieval composers set this prayer and other liturgical texts on the Annunciation theme to

music, both polyphonically and as sequences (see Robertson 1995). Not all of the latter were part of the official liturgy, which however did not make them less popular. This was certainly the case of the sequence *Angelus ad virginem*, which was never completely taken over by liturgical officialdom, but which enjoyed continuing popularity throughout the Middle Ages. Chaucer mentions it in *The Miller's Tale*, where it is sung by Nicholas the clerk.

The *Ave Maria* prayer was, in turn, incorporated into a popular devotion in honour of the Incarnation, the *Angelus Domini*, where it was interlaced with Gabriel's words to Mary. Pope Urban II instituted this devotion at the end of the eleventh century. Both lay and consecrated believers were to utter it three times a day, when the bells rang, so it must have been extremely widespread. In addition, various colourful, paraliturgical embellishments of the ceremony for Annunciation included tropes and dramas. The latter developed from fairly simple and unadorned scenes, performed in a church setting at matins or mass, to elaborate dramatisations, staged in a more public space. The English mystery play cycles of Wakefield, York, Chester, and N Town include full representations of the Annunciation.

In a number of ways England seems to have had the lead in cultivating the Annunciation. Many cathedrals and monasteries were dedicated or rededicated to Mary as early as the Anglo-Saxon period (Clayton 1990: 1, 125-29), that is, two centuries before the majority of such dedications on the Continent. English liturgical music for the feast of the Annunciation was richer than in other European countries. In particular, alleluia versions of both the *Ave Maria* and the sequence *Missus est angelus Gabriel* were composed (for the occasions when the feast fell in Easter), and they were even set polyphonically (Robertson 1995: 282-83). Moreover, the earliest paraliturgical additions to the feast, the tropes for various parts of the mass, originated in England, at Winchester.

The most famous English shrine, after that of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, was the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, in Norfolk. Langland mentions it repeatedly as a pilgrimage destination, both in the prologue and throughout the dream visions of *Piers Plowman*. The chapel, built in 1130, was intended to imitate the Holy House at Nazareth, in which Mary dwelt when the angel appeared to her. Erasmus describes the shrine for the Virgin of the Annunciation at Walsingham as visited and endowed by countless pilgrims. Nearby wells, still existing, were credited with healing properties, while in nearby Norwich the lay Confraternity of the Annunciation became the most distinguished guild in the town in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, was one of its members. It is interesting that the N-Town play probably originated in the county of Norfolk as well (Meredith 1987: 6, 9-12).

The prominence of the cult of the Virgin Mary in medieval England and Europe was by no means synonymous with idolatry for her role was perceived

as subservient to that of Jesus Christ. The latter, according to Christian belief, fulfilled the will of God the Father and was both God and Man. Thomas Aquinas describes the special honour paid to Mary as *hyperdulia*, that is, a veneration that exceeds that paid to other saints. This kind of veneration is, however, infinitely below the adoration due to God alone, termed *latria*. Attributing the latter to any creature was regarded as blasphemous (cf. Farmer 1978: 267).

Within this briefly sketched cultural context, it is not surprising that the angelic proclamation to Mary became a frequent theme also in medieval English lyrics. In many of them it appears in the midst of presentation of the other so-called joys of Mary. The number of joys in England is typically five, as in the explication of Gawain's pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. They include the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Mary's Assumption. In this paper only those lyrics in which the Annunciation is the only or by far the principal theme are considered. Some of them, like "I syng of a maiden," have attained such a high level of artistic accomplishment that they still inspire creative responses nowadays ("I syng of a mayden" has, for instance, been set to music by Benjamin Britten).

I distinguish a certain type of the medieval Annunciation lyric and describe its underlying, artistic code. The code developed from fairly faithful translations of the *Angelus ad virginem* sequence to highly compressed and allusive treatments of the same story. As in medieval music certain melodies served as a kind of code phrases for the Virgin of the Annunciation (see Robertson 1995), so in the lyric, which had its own immanent music, a set of devices emerged, I propose, as a poetic cipher for the same theological content. Critics and scholars recognise the need to view medieval verse in the aesthetic terms akin to those of music, such as the love of correspondence and proportion (see esp. Sarah A. Weber 1969). Of course, not all the elements of the alleged code for the Annunciation were musical in nature, since quasi-musical devices form only a part of poetic expression, but a musical analogy is illuminating.

The poem "In that time, als was ful wel", found in a fourteenth-century manuscript that contains an English verse Psalter (MS. Bodley 425, fols. 2325), is a close translation of the Annunciation account as given in Luke's Gospel. The translator has added only a few formulaic phrases. Written in four-stressed lines rhyming into couplets, the poem does not have any strophic or other compositional divisions. Nevertheless, it devotes equal numbers of lines to each part of the Annunciation story. Accordingly, out of the total number of forty-eight lines, the first sixteen lines relate the angel's salutation and the virgin's wonder; another sixteen lines continue the angel's message and quote the virgin's question; the final sixteen lines provide the angel's reply and the virgin's agreement. This division of the material into three parts of exactly the same length underscores the tripartite structure of the Annunciation story. Within each part, the

angel's words occupy most of the space, while the virgin's responses are succinctly described or quoted at the end, as if punctuating the threefold development. Thus, even in this relatively unadorned translation one of the elements of the alleged code for the Annunciation, a tripartite composition, is present.

"Gabriel, from hevne king" (quoted after Duncan 1995: 108-109; extant in the MS. London, British Library, Arundel 248, dated c. 1280-1300) is a free translation, accompanied with musical notes in the manuscript, of the *Angelus ad Virginem* sequence into Middle English. The resulting poem is composed of five, intricately measured and rhymed, twelve-line stanzas. The number of stanzas may be meaningful as five was considered a Marian number because of the five joys of the Virgin Mary and the five letters in the name *Maria*. The first three stanzas are devoted to the Annunciation. The fourth stanza relates Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus Christ, adding the motif of the Incarnation to that of the poem's central theme of the Annunciation and resembling thereby the *Angelus Domini* devotion. The fifth stanza contains a final, petitionary prayer.

The story of Gabriel's announcement is told in the first three stanzas, which underscores a tripartite composition of the story:

Gabriel, from hevne king
 Sent to the maide swete,
 Broughte hire blisful tiding
 And faire he gan hire grete:
 'Hail be thou, ful of grace aright,
 For Goddes sone, this hevne light,
 For mannes love
 Wil man bicomme,
 And take
 Flesh of thee, maiden bright,
 Mankin fre for to make
 Of sinne and devles might.'

Mildeliche him gan answe
 The milde maiden thanne:
 'Whiche wise sholde Ich bere
 Child withouten manne?'
 Th'angel saide: 'Ne dred thee nought,
 Thurgh th'Holi Gost shal ben y-wrought,
 This ilke thing
 Wherof tiding
 Ich bringe;

Al mankin worth y-bought
 Thurgh thy swete childinge,
 And out of pine y-brought.'

Whan the maiden understod
 And th'angles wordes herde,
 Mildeliche with milde mod
 To th'angel she answerde:
 'Our lordis thew-maiden i-wis
 Ich am, that her-aboven is.
 Anentes me
 Fulforthed be
 Thy sawe;
 That Ich, sithe His wil is,
 Maiden, withouten lawe,
 Of moder have the blis.

The prosodic arrangement of the strophes is truly astounding, but it is not our primary concern here. The first stanza introduces and quotes the angel's salutation of the maiden and his "blisful tiding." The second stanza contains Mary's question and Gabriel's reassuring reply. The third stanza provides the maiden's final response. The key words of the dialogue appear in the two longest, octosyllabic lines of each strophe, which form a couplet rhyming on the most characteristic rhyme of the strophe, further recurring in its closing wheel. Thus, Gabriel's "Hail" (5-6), his "Ne dred thee nought" (17-18), and Mary's concession, "Our lordes thew-maiden" (29-30), punctuate the main moments of the Annunciation story – the Latin *Ave*, *gratia plena*, *Ne timeas Maria*, and *Ecce ancilla Domini*. The Middle English lyric thereby enhances the triple construction of that story, which recounts the angel's three utterances, intertwined with the maiden's three reactions.

The alliterations on the nasal consonant *m* – like "Mildeliche ... milde maiden" (13-14), or "the maiden ... / Mildeliche with milde mod" (25-27) – are quite characteristic. They not only increase the song's sonorous quality but also demonstrate that, perhaps, like number five, the letter *m* was perceived as symbolically connected with the Virgin Mary. In spite of its phonetic ornamentation, however, "Gabriel, from hevене king" has a fairly mournful mood for it emphasises mankind's state of sin and the need of redemption. Thus, the angel's initial address of the maiden, as given in Luke's Gospel, is supplied with an explanation of the purpose of Christ's descent to the world: "Mankin fre for to make / Of sinne and devles might" (11-12). This redemptive goal is restated at the end of the second stanza (22-24) and reiterated, with greater force, in the

closing lines of the fourth stanza, which evoke Christ as the one who “bought us out of pine / And let Him for us slon” (47-48). Furthermore, in the final stanza the collective speaker turns directly to Mary, beseeching her to intercede with God for sinful people: “That He foryive us sinne and wrake, / And clene of evry gilt us make” (53-54). This pronounced emphasis on sin is very much in line with the sombre season of Lent. The lyric may, therefore, be interpreted as developing a Lent version of the Annunciation theme, intended for use at the liturgical time when sinners were customarily shriven of their sins.

In “Gabriel, from hevne king” some highly typical Middle English vocabulary, repeatedly employed to depict the Virgin of the Annunciation, appears. In particular, she is called both “maiden” and “moder,” chosen by God to become the mother of His Son. The phrase “Maiden-moder makeles” (49) pinpoints the Christian paradox of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus Christ. The exact meaning of the polysemous epithet “makeles” became the subject of a modern critical dispute that unfolded around “I syng of a maiden” (cf. e.g. Moran 1973; Halliburton 1968). Another thirteenth-century lyric of the Annunciation, “Now this foules singeth” (quoted after Duncan 1995: 109-111; extant in only one manuscript, MS. Cambridge, Trinity College, 323, dated c. 1250), uses the same crucial expressions and concepts. They include the phrase “maide and moder” (36) and the epithets “makeles” (6) and “ful of grace” (19). However, this poem gives a still more free account of the Annunciation.

Now this foules singeth
 And maketh her blis,
And that gres up thringeth
 and leveth the ris;
Of on Ich wille singen
 That is makeles,
The king of alle kinges
 To moder He hire ches.

She is withouten sinne
 And withouten hore,
Y-come of kinges kinne
 And of Jesses more;
The loverd of mankinne
 Of hire was y-boren
To bringe us out of sinne,
 Elles we were forloren.

Gabriel hire grette
 And saide hire, 'Ave,
 Marie ful of grace,
 Our loverd be with thee,
 The fruyt of thine wombe
 y-blessed mot it be.
 Thou shalt go with childe,
 For sotheIch seye it thee.'

And thare gretinge,
 That angel had y-brought,
 She gan to bithenchen
 And meinde hire thought;
 She saide to the angel:
 'How may tiden this?
 Of mannes y-mone
 Not I nought, y-wis.'

Maid she was with childe
 And maiden her-biforen,
 And maiden er sithen
 Hire child was y-boren;
 Maide and moder nas
 Never non but she,
 Wel mighte she berigge
 Of Goddes sone be.

Y-blessed be that child
 And the moder ek,
 And the swete breste
 That hire sone sek;
 Y-hered be the time
 That swich child was y-boren,
 That lesed al of pine
 That er was forloren.

The array of lines and rhymes is less impressive in this piece, composed of quatrains of alternating rhymes. The quatrains are linked into six octaves, though the rhymes seldom fully agree. But the poem introduces a number of interesting devices and transformations in the treatment of the Annunciation. It confines the story of Gabriel's announcement to the two middle octaves and

considerably reduces it. Thus, the third stanza connects the angel's first and second utterance into one speech, which for the most part follows the *Ave Maria* prayer. The fourth stanza likewise ties up Mary's initial confusion with her subsequent question into a single reaction. The third, final part of the encounter is truncated after Mary's puzzled question (32). The omission is evidently a conscious device on the poet's part. It worked because the story was so widely disseminated. Instead of giving a full account of the Annunciation, the poet has surrounded it with a double rhetorical frame. The inner frame, formed of the second and the penultimate stanza, provides an elaborate portrayal of Mary, the heroine of the poem. Thus, the second verse emphasises her innocence and purity, her noble, royal lineage, and her supreme role in the work of salvation as mother to the lord of mankind. The last but one verse, in turn, dwells upon Mary's never-ending maidenhood and the paradox that she is both maiden and mother.

The outer frame, comprised of the opening and the concluding stanza, testifies to the poet's artistic freedom and ingenuity. First of all, the initial stanza provides a natural, spring setting for the Annunciation. This is particularly striking as no such setting appears in any of the traditional, either canonical or apocryphal, accounts of the Annunciation. On the one hand, the spring setting may have provided a hint at the date of the feast of the Annunciation. On the other hand, the *reverdie* was such a widespread convention in medieval poetry that the poet's conscious adaptation of it cannot be excluded. Consider, for instance, the opening of one of the most famous Middle English lyrics of erotic love (quoted after Hirsh 2005: 101):

Bytuene Mersh ant Aueril,
 When spray biginneth to springe,
 The lutel foul hath hire wyl
 On hyre lud to synge.
 Ich libbe in loue-longinge
 For semlokest of alle thyngge.
 He may me blisse bringe,
 Ich am in hire baundoun.

I believe that the author of "Now this foules singeth" deliberately embedded his Annunciation lyric in the context of love poetry in order to extol his heroine even more.

In fact, he seems to have followed a still more specific convention of the secular love lyrics. In his text, the birds sing, the grass pushes up, the branch sprouts leaves, and in these obviously outdoor circumstances a man of authority addresses a young, unsophisticated woman. This closely resembles the pattern

of a principal genre of medieval love poetry, the *pastourelle*, describing an outdoor, unexpected encounter of a knight with a shepherdess (cf. Dronke 1978: 167-68). The pattern is illustrated by the lyric “As I me rode this endre dai” (MS. London, Lincoln’s Inn, Hale 135; referred to after Duncan 1995: 24). Its refrain sets the speaker’s lovesickness in the context of spring: “Nou springeth the spray” (1). While riding in the open country, the man first overhears a love complaint of and soon comes upon a maiden “in an herber swot, / Under a bogh” (14-15). She complains to him about having been betrayed by her lover, and he appears to be more than willing to comfort her.

The pattern was soon adopted by devotional poetry, as evidenced by a religious love lyric beginning with exactly the same line as the summarised *pastourelle* (MS. London, British Library, Harley 2253; quoted after Duncan 1995: 139-140). The second “As I me rode this endre day” poem combines the *pastourelle* convention with the motif of the five joys of the Virgin Mary, the first of them being traditionally the Annunciation (cf. stanza 5), and represents what may be termed the sacred *pastourelle*.

As I me rod the ender day
 By grene wode to seche play,
 Mid herte I thoughte al on a may,
 Swetest of alle thinge;
 Lithe, and Ich you telle may
 Al of that swete thinge.

This maide is swete and fre of blod,
 Bright and fair, of milde mod,
 Alle she mai don us god
 Thurgh hire bisechinge;
 Of hire He tok flesh and blod,
 Jesus, hevene kynge.

With al. my lif I love that may,
 She is my solas night and day,
 My joie and eke my beste play,
 And eke my love-longynge;
 Al the bet me is that day
 That Ich of hire synge.

Of alle thinge I love hire mest,
 My dayes blis, my nightes rest,
 She counseilleth and helpeth best

Bothen olde and yinge;
Now I may yif that me lest
The five joies mynge.

The firste joie of that woman
When Gabriel from hevene cam
And seide God sholde bicomen man
And of hire be bore,
And bringen up of helle pyn
Mankyn that was forlore.

The poem continues to relate the remaining joys of the Virgin Mary in the finely orchestrated six-line stanzas. There is yet another Marian lyric, focusing specifically upon the Annunciation, that adapts a closely related convention of love poetry, that of the *chanson d'aventure*, to a religious purpose. The poem (extant in MS. Bodley 29734, fols. 47b-48a; quoted after Saupe 1999: 7) is a carol celebrating the noble birth of Christ, emphasised in the refrain. In the verses, the first-person speaker pretends that, while enjoying himself on a horse ride, he has overheard a maiden:

Under a tre
In sportyng me
Alone by a wod syd
I hard a mayd
That swetly sayd,
“I am with chyld this tyd

“Gracyusly
Conceyvdy have I
The Son of God so swete;
Hys gracyous wyll
I put me tyll
As moder hym to kepe.

The poem imitates the secular songs in which a betrayed maiden laments her pregnancy. It has survived in a fifteenth-century manuscript of seventy-six religious and secular songs, which may be a minstrel's collection. It is clear that both the Annunciation carol and “Now this foules singeth” have taken over the motifs of love longing, love adventure, natural surroundings, and admiration for a maiden from secular love songs. The borrowings bring out further subtypes of the Annunciation lyric: the sacred *pastourelle* and the sacred *chanson d'aventure*.

One more kind of borrowing is noteworthy: the shared emphasis on singing. Thus, the motif of singing the praises of the beloved lady joins “Now this foules singeth” with the religious “As I me rod this ender day.” The latter’s “Ich of hire synge” (18) parallels the former’s “Of on Ich wille singen” (5). Likewise, the refrain of the Annunciation carol summons the collective audience to join the speaker in song: “Nowel, nowel, nowel, / Syng we with myrth”, This emphasis on song implies, especially as used by the poet of “Now this foules singeth”, a conscious choice of theme and its self-consciously artistic treatment. The poet harmonises his own song with the joyful singing of birds in the opening lines of his lyric. In fact, both the opening and closing octaves are vivid expressions of praise and adoration. The final stanza may be described as a lyric outburst of worship. This feature definitely makes “Now this foules singeth” an alleluia version of the Annunciation lyric. It may be noted, furthermore, that although the inherent triple division of the Annunciation story has been curtailed in this poem, its composition as a whole follows the tripartite pattern, observing the rules of symmetry and proportion. Namely, the Annunciation story is framed with introductory and concluding parts, and each of the three parts consists of exactly two octaves.

Yet another, and nowadays by far the most famous, Annunciation lyric is “I syng of a mayden” (quoted after Duncan 1995: 111; extant in only one manuscript, the British Library, London, Sloane MS. 2593, fol. 10v.). It survives in a fifteenth-century manuscript entirely devoted to secular and religious songs, which may be another minstrel’s collection. The poem manifests many of the familiar features of writing about the Annunciation, while further transforming them.

I syng of a mayden
 That is makeles,
 King of alle kinges
 To here sone she ches.

He cam also styлле
 Ther his moder was,
 As dew in Aprylle
 That falleth on the gras.

He cam also styлле
 To his moderes bowr,
 As dew in Aprille
 That falleth on the flour.

He cam also stille
 Ther his moder lay,
 As dew in Aprille
 That falleth on the spray.

Moder and mayden
 Was never non but she –
 Wel may swych a lady
 Godes moder be!

All the main elements of the alleged poetic code for the Annunciation – a set of key words, the tripartite pattern of composition, the spring setting, and the love encounter – are present in this lyric, where they undergo further modifications. Thus, the key words “makeles”, “mayden”, and “moder” appear in metrically prominent positions and connect the lyric with the other Annunciation poems. Moreover, entire phrases and lines are identical in “Now this foules singeth” (cf. the second stanza and lines 37-40) and “I syng of a mayden” (cf. the first and last stanza), suggesting direct quotation, in spite of the two-century time gap between the dates of the manuscripts. Brown observes in astonishment: “I know of no other instance in which an English lyric of the thirteenth century has been quoted verbally in a song of the beginning of the fifteenth century” (Brown 1932: 192).

The shared lexis makes conspicuous the shift from “The king of alle kinges / to moder *He hire ches*” in “Now this foules singeth” to “King of alle kinges / *to her sone she ches*” in “I syng of a mayden” (italics mine). The reversal reveals the later poet’s stronger than usual desire to exalt Mary. Furthermore, Mary’s humanity and her being an ordinary woman and mother are more apparent in the earlier poem, as in the image of her “swete breste / that hire sone sek” (43-44). The later text, on the other hand, presents Mary as “Godes moder” (20). Medieval theologians never questioned Mary’s being the mother of Jesus, but they debated, particularly in the fifth century, whether she was mother of God (Saupe 1999: 5). It was especially with the Council of Ephesus (431) that the full implication of Mary’s role in the Redemption was formulated, whereby the title *Theotokos* (Lat. *Deipara*, mother of God), of Alexandrian origin, became recognised as orthodox (Farmer 1978: 268). The difference between the depictions of Mary in the two poems may be attributed to their more immediate cultural contexts. The thirteenth-century lyric was composed at a time when emphasis on the human, emotional aspects of faith was strong in medieval spirituality, and “Mary provided both a focus and a model for such affective devotion” (Saupe 1999: 3). The fifteenth-century piece, on the other hand, was a product of the later Middle Ages, when the affective approach had waned, being re-

placed with more intellectual representations.

Furthermore, the familiar compositional pattern is employed in “I syng of a mayden”. The Annunciation is framed within the singer’s opening and concluding praises of the Virgin, which are here compressed to a quatrain at the start and another one at the close of the poem. But, like in “Now this foules singeth”, the rule of symmetry is observed: the introductory and closing parts are of the same length. Both poems, therefore, have a tripartite composition, consisting of an initial statement of the theme, a central rendering of the Annunciation, and a final praise of Mary. In addition, the middle section of “I syng of a mayden” has a further tripartite division, relating the three stages of the angel’s encounter with Mary, as in Luke’s Gospel and in “Gabriel, from hevne king”. Finally, the poet has combined this doubly threefold construction with the Marian number five, for the lyric consists of five quatrains.

Like the number five, the doubly tripartite composition may have been a kind of numerical and quasi-musical signal of the Annunciation. Significantly, in the *Angelus Domini* devotion, too, three *Ave Maria* prayers are interlaced with three texts of the Annunciation and Incarnation. The ingeniousness of the “I syng of the mayden” poet consisted in retaining the tripartite pattern only, which is further brought to the fore by parallelisms and incremental repetitions, and in filling that pattern with but remotely related, symbolic content. The use of the well-recognisable signals allowed the poet considerable artistic freedom in the treatment of the traditional theme, without fear that the allusion to the Annunciation might be missed altogether.

The spring setting is yet another link between “I syng of a mayden” and the earlier poetic tradition. Two symptoms of rebirth in the realm of nature, the new grass and leaves, appear in both “I syng of a mayden” and “Now this foules singeth”. However, the later poet deploys the motif of spring quite distinctly. Instead of using it as a setting, a separate descriptive piece, he incorporates it into the story of the Annunciation. Thus, the images of spring – the “dew in Aprylle”, “grass”, “flour” and “spray” – are used as terms of comparison, and hence of equivalence, for the protagonists of the story. What is more, the order of their appearance, along a vertical axis, and their mutual interaction within the tripartite poetic composition are intended to have a combined semantic effect, giving the impression of growth at once in nature and in Mary’s womb.

The evoking of growth may be connected with the traditional idea that Mary and her son came from “Jesses more”, the stock or root of Jesse, mentioned in “Now this foules singeth” (12). The idea comes from the biblical prophecy: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11: 1). Medieval commentators, such as Jacobus de Voragine, following the church fathers Irenaeus and Jerome, developed the theme of Mary as the New Eve. They saw in Gabriel’s visit to Mary a reversal

of the fall: Eva, visited by a serpent and cast out by the Archangel Michael, was redeemed (reversed) through Gabriel's *Ave*, which filled Mary with the grace Eva lost. Mary's obedience cancelled the disobedience of Eve. Conveyed through the image of a tree, this reversal of fate meant that the tree of Jesse, long blighted after the fall, will again bear fruit (Saupe 1999: 13). In this context, the depiction of natural growth in the poem symbolises the conception and birth of Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, who came from the royal house of David, son of Jesse. The poem has translated the traditional theology and genealogy into the image of natural growth.

In "I syng of a mayden", like in "Now this foules singeth", the Annunciation is depicted as a meeting of two lovers, but with an interesting shift from the pastourelle to the aubade in the later poem. The aubade, the dawn-song, was yet another principal convention of the medieval love lyric (cf. Dronke 1978: 167-85). It presented the meeting of the lovers not as an accidental encounter, taking place in broad daylight and close to nature, but as a prearranged, clandestine rendez-vous, taking place at night, often in the lady's chamber, against the loathsome necessity to part at dawn. Such a meeting depended upon the lady's earlier concession. A number of these characteristics of the aubade are implied in "I syng of a mayden", The maiden herself has chosen her beloved and agreed to be with him. They meet secretly, which is suggested by the word "stille", evoking the silence of the night and secrecy. They meet in her "bour". which has both the general sense of "dwelling" and the more specific sense of "lady's bedchamber", The lady's lying position is also highly suggestive, although the verb "lay" may be understood, alternatively, as a synonym of "to be", especially as, according to iconographic tradition, the Virgin received the angel's message kneeling, seated or standing (Woolf 1971: 377). I think, however, that the poem departs from various traditions so often that its deliberate change of the Virgin's conventional position is quite likely. Finally, the presence of dew points to the time between dusk and dawn, as in the aubade.

Interpreting "I syng of a mayden" in terms of tryst between lovers may be a disturbing idea as the poem refers to Christ's conception at the moment of the Annunciation. The pronoun "he" in the thrice-repeated phrase "He cam" obviously refers to Christ who, however, could hardly have been a fully formed person at that moment. Moreover, in the traditional accounts of the scene it was the angel Gabriel who visited Mary. The poem's use of the pronoun "he" seems purposefully ambiguous. However, the ambiguity does not point to the poet's unbounded individualism. An explanation may be found in the apocrypha, where Christ is often presented as an angel. In particular, in the Epistle of the Apostles (dated between the first and the second century) it is written that pre-existing Christ descended upon the earth and entered, in the shape of the Archangel Gabriel, Mary's womb. Here Jesus Himself tells the Annunciation story.

He reminds the apostles that He became to angels like an angel, appearing to the Virgin in the form of Gabriel. “I, the Word”, he says, “entered her and became flesh, and I myself was my own messenger, and did so in the form of an angel, and later I returned to my Father” (Starowieyski 2003: 151; translation mine). In this account, the Incarnation was possible through Mary’s faithful reception of the Word. We do not know how, but this tradition must somehow have reached the poet.

The mystery of the virginal conception at the moment of the Annunciation perplexed early Christian writers, who tried to explain it in various ways. In a number of patristic texts, like for example the Armenian Gospel of Childhood, the Word of God is said to have entered Mary through her ear (Starowieyski 2003: 437). Not surprisingly, this graphic representation of the biblical link between faith and hearing (cf. Romans 10: 17) was frequently used in the iconography of the Annunciation. The iconographic tradition symbolises the conception with the dove, which represents the Holy Spirit, speaking into Mary’s ear.

Medieval Christians knew the story not only from Luke’s Gospel (written c. A.D. 85) but also from the apocryphal *Protoevangelium*, attributed to Jesus’ brother James (c. A.D. 150). In the latter, Gabriel meets Mary at a well where she has gone to draw a pitcher of water, and then follows her to her room. Accordingly, in “I syng of a mayden” the second stage of the meeting takes place in the lady’s bower. The detail is not confined to this lyric only, but appears more widely in Middle English Marian poetry. For example, one of the poems written by the fifteenth-century poet John Audelay begins as follows: “The angel to the Vergyn said, / Entreng into her boure” (quoted after Saupe 1999: 6). The apocryphal and highly symbolic motif of fresh water is, in turn, rendered in “I syng of a mayden” through the central image of the dew.

The English poets must also have been acquainted with the tradition stemming from the *Liber de nativitate Marie*, composed in the monastic circles in France in the ninth or tenth century. It was an immensely popular work, surviving in as many as 130 manuscripts and included in homiletic textbooks and legendaries (esp. those of Vincent de Beauvais and Jacobus de Voragine). In the twelfth century it was translated into French verse by Wace (as *Conception de Notre Dame*) and by Herman de Valenciennes (as *Li Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mare*). Of all the variant versions of the Annunciation only the one in the *Liber* calls Jesus the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Starowieyski 2003: 340). Ultimately, that book must have influenced the English poets who use the first of these titles. The *Liber* also puts extraordinary emphasis on Mary’s purity, which corresponds with the importance of the epithet *makeles* in the English poems.

Evidently, the author of “I syng of a mayden” relied upon an established code of writing about the Annunciation in the medieval English lyric, which in turn drew upon a host of other traditions. His remarkable poetic achievement

results from employing and creatively transforming all the key elements of that code: a common set of words, phrases and images, emphasis on song, the tripartite pattern of composition, a spring setting, and a meeting between lovers. Moreover, a number of the poem's intriguing features can be traced back to the apocryphal traditions of representing the angel's encounter with Mary. On the other hand, the poet's transformations, which consist in compressing, reordering and reversing elements of the traditional imagery and diction, have led to a considerable degree of indeterminacy, giving a sense of mystery and ultimately taking the meaning of the lyric well beyond the interpretative context of Christian theology.

Depicting the conception of the Messiah in terms of the natural process of the growth of vegetation, as a result of the moistening of the land with April dew, endows the Christian event with a mythic dimension. The descent of dew from the sky upon the grass, flower and spray signifies the fruitful union of the elements of water and earth. The union resembles marriage of heaven and earth, the coming together of the divine and the mortal, the approach of the male to the female, or the entwining of the masculine with the feminine principle. Similar mythic patterns underlie Chaucer's description of spring in the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, which depict the renewal of life in terms of the union of the personified four elements. Spiritual revival coincides there with rebirth in nature as the male elements (the April showers, the spring breeze Zephyr, and the young rider sun) touch the bosom of Mother Earth.

In "I syng of a mayden" the activation of myth, as embodying popular ideas about natural phenomena, means that the Virgin Mary, who is quite meaningfully introduced as "*a mayden*" (italics mine), mingles with figures of medieval folklore, such as woodland or water sprites and fairies. The ballad-like form of the lyric also points to the influence of popular folklore upon the portrayal of Mary in this song, without excluding other cultural contexts, notably the theological and the feudal, courtly one. Furthermore, the figure of the maiden mother of God also mingles with parallel female figures of other religions, especially those associated with fertility, like the ancient Greek goddess Artemis and her Roman counterpart Diana, and like all the black madonnas that had pre-existed them from time immemorial. I think that the widely recognised pre-eminence of this poem, "possibly the greatest of all Middle English lyrics" (Hirsh 2005: 47), partly consists in the way it transcends its strictly Christian context and presents the Annunciation and its heroes in continuity with other figures of human religious beliefs.

In the poem "At a spryng wel", from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the reworking of the traditional motifs is so advanced that the poem is hardly recognisable as an Annunciation lyric. Yet, it is generally perceived as such (cf. e. g. Saupe 1999). Indeed, almost all the elements of the popular code

for the Annunciation discussed in this paper are traceable in this brief verse (extant in Magdalen Coll. Oxford MS. 60, fol. 214a; quoted after Saupe 1999: 17), although they are greatly reduced:

At a spryng wel under a thorn
 Ther was bote of bale a lytel here afor;
 Ther bysyde stant a mayde
 Fulle of love ybounde.
 Ho so wol seche trwe love
 Yn hyr hyt schal be founde.

To begin with, the lyric, composed as it is of three rhymed couplets, which form self-contained wholes not only metrically but also in terms of the unity of grammar, thought and imagery, has a clear tripartite structure. It focuses on the figure of a maiden, who is presented against a briefly evoked natural background, “under a thorn”, and as being in the bond of love, “fulle of love ybounde”. One detail, that of the maiden standing at a fountain, as in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium* and the sixth-century *Pseudo-Matthew* derived from it, has been sufficient to evoke the whole scene of the Annunciation. Neither Gabriel nor Jesus Christ is present or explicitly referred to. The focus is entirely on the maiden, who functions as an emblem of true love.

Modern critics and scholars have stressed the poem’s kinship to medieval romance (Gray 1972: 92-93, Dronke 1978: 69; Fowler 1984: 55). However, both the maiden’s solitude and the poem’s emphasis on the “bote of bale”, the remedy of misery, firmly associate her experience of love not only with the joy of the cure but also with pain. The “bote of bale” is reminiscent of the redemption of sin, a recurrent motif in the Annunciation lyrics, especially those written in the mood of Lent. The motif also appears in medieval commentaries on the significance of the Annunciation. On the whole, an awareness of pain, even if it is pain overcome, permeates the lyric, which is devoid of any vivid expressions of joy and of any explicit emphasis on singing. Although it is a melodious piece, the music inherent in its long lines is languorous rather than merry. All these features make the poem a Lent rather than an alleluia version of the Annunciation.

More specifically, the image of the maiden standing at a fountain under a hawthorn tree evokes the scene of crucifixion. The tree is the tree of the cross, at the foot of which Mary stood, bearing the agony of her Son. The “spryng wel” is the wound in Christ’s side, which was interpreted as a fountain of grace and an abundance of mercy by medieval writers (cf. e. g. the *Pearl*-poet). The reading of the poem as one in which the Passion and the Annunciation overlap is confirmed by its manuscript context. The manuscript in which this poem is

found is a collection of *exempla*. In particular, the poem appears in a Latin *exemplum* about confession, where its images are explained. For instance, the “spryng wel” is identified with the wound in Christ’s side.

The word “thorn” as used in the poem, besides signifying a natural tree and connoting the cross of Jesus Christ, symbolises sin as well. It implies, on the one hand, that Mary was pure and innocent, the unparalleled rose without a thorn (an image deriving from Ecclesiastes 2: 18). On the other hand, it reminds us that she participated in the redemptive suffering of her Son, who wore a crown of thorns, symbolising the sin of humanity. The conflation of the Annunciation and the Crucifixion within one poetic image may have been prompted, to some extent, by the liturgy, whereby the two events were sometimes celebrated on the same day. John Donne wrote a poem about one such occasion in his own lifetime, “Upon the Annunciation and Passion Falling upon One Day, 1608”.

The medieval poem not only connects such distinct events as the Annunciation and the Passion but also joins the past and the present. The first couplet, using the past tense, paints a scene from the past, a scene that encompasses the historical lives of Mary and Jesus of Nazareth. But the adverbial phrase, “a lytel here afor”, suggests that Christian history is still current, having implications for the medieval poet and his addressee. The second couplet, switching to the present tense, fully confirms this interpretation. The maiden is still full of love, which binds her to her Son, but which she also extends to every sinner. The third couplet, switching to the future tense, opens the way to true love to anyone who may decide to take it: the way leading through Mary to Jesus Christ.

Moreover, the imagery used in the poem is so indeterminate, so universally symbolic, that it has the effect of bridging the past and the present on a still larger scale, that of the Christian and pagan eras. Like in “I syng of a mayden”, the heroine is “*a mayde*” (italics mine). It has been suggested that she is “at once the Virgin ... and any girl made beautiful by loving” (Dronke 1978: 70). One more interpretation strongly suggests itself. Like in “I syng of a mayden”, the even less identified heroine merges with the fairies and goddesses of various native and foreign pagan beliefs, especially as she is standing at a fountain. In Celtic stories, in particular, fountains were guarded by mysterious maidens, who appeared to be human but who were also firmly rooted in the realm of magic (cf. e. g. *Yvain* by Chrétien de Troyes and its Middle English version, *Yvain and Gawain*).

Similarly, the image of hawthorn (“thorn”) is rich in symbolic associations that go beyond the Christian context. In florology hawthorn means “Good Hope” because it shows that winter is over and spring is at hand. The Athenian girls used to crown themselves with hawthorn flowers at weddings, and the marriage torch was made of hawthorn. The Romans considered it a charm against sorcery, and placed leaves of it on the cradles of newly born infants (cf.

Brewer 1988: 589). These meanings are activated in the poem's context of depicting true love against a spring setting.

Ultimately, the poem's firm connection with the present makes one think of the possibility of its quite definite reference to a specific figure of a maiden, possessing a gift of healing and standing at some hallowed spot in the poet's and his audience's native countryside. The most obvious choice of such a place of Marian cult in England would be Walsingham, which was a destination of countless pilgrims and penitents. It is noteworthy that at Walsingham a statue of Our Lady and Child came to be more revered than the chapel itself, while the nearby wells were credited with healing properties. The shrine became an object of lollard attacks, in which references to the "witch of Walsingham" appear. A famous Walsingham ballad existed and has come down to us in one unique copy in the Pepysian library. A ballad of the same pattern, "As you came from the holy land / Of fair Walsingham", was written by Thomas Deloney and is echoed by Ophelia. At the Reformation the shrine was destroyed, but the revival of the devotion in the twentieth century by both Catholics and Anglo-Catholics testifies to its permanence, lasting through the changing epochs and eras.

For Walsingham and its vicinity were perceived as holy lands not only because of their connection with the sites of Christian events, but presumably also because the shrine was built at a place of some former pagan rites. Let us recall that the practice of rededicating pagan shrines to Christian belief had been introduced in England already by the first apostles of the English, Pope Gregory the Great and his missionary Augustine of Canterbury. In Gregory's letter to Mellitus, Augustine was told not to destroy pagan temples, but only the idols in them. Innocent rites could be taken over and used for the celebration of Christian feasts. One such rite, developed around the figure of a maiden standing at a fountain, under a hawthorn tree, may have been remembered in our poem, which combines the veneration of the Virgin of the Annunciation with some older cult of a water sprite.

Naturally, not all the medieval English lyrics about the angelic proclamation to Mary display the code of artistic representation discussed in this paper. Some of the poems belong to a much more learned and literate type of poetry, written in a more elaborate and courtly style. For example, the poem "*Ave*: Hayle mayden of maydyns, thorgth worde consayvyng" (referred to after Saupe 1999: 12) from the early fifteenth century is an acrostic on the *Ave Maria* prayer. The poem makes extensive use of the rhetorical device of *anaphora* and of Latin-derived diction, and contains potent theological ideas and images. Equally sophisticated in its choice of words and images is the Marian poem by John Lydgate, "Hayle, glorious lady and hevenly quene".

Against the background of such poems, the popular type of the Annunciation lyric becomes even more distinct. We have called it popular because the princi-

pal elements of its artistic language are of popular origin. In particular, the tripartite structure reflects the importance of the number three in folklore. The implications of erotic love in the context of spring and the emphasis on song are likewise of folk provenance. Finally, it may be observed that the Annunciation poems of this popular kind frequently employ the popular genres of carols and ballads. Apart from the balladic “I syng of a mayden”, there is an Annunciation carol “Nowel el el el ...” in the same Sloane manuscript, and another one, “Nowel, nowel, nowel, / Syng we with myrth”, discussed earlier in this paper. Yet another, sixteenth-century carol (referred to Hirsh 2005: 161-62) provides a straightforward example of this type of lyric. The angel’s dialogue with the Virgin is related in simple and concrete words and in the typical carol stanza of three lines on a single rhyme (another instance of the number three structurally employed). The story is framed within the minstrel’s introductory and concluding utterances, which invite the audience to take part in the joyful performance. The triplet strophes are interlaced with the refrain: “What, hard ye not? The Kyng of Jerewsalem / Is now born in Bethelem”.

On the other hand, the sense of mystery and of the marvelous with which the popular Marian lyrics were imbued reaches its peak in “Maiden in the mor lay”, perhaps the least obvious example of the Annunciation poem (referred to after Hirsh 2005: 73-76). The identity of its heroine has been much debated. Some readers have seen in her the Blessed Virgin Mary, whereas some other – a figure originating in folklore, like a fairy (cf. e. g. Wenzel 1974). It is not possible to deal with this issue at length within the scope of this paper. Let us merely point out that the poem shares with the popular Annunciation lyrics not only a tripartite pattern of composition but also the symbolic images of the bower, the water spring, and the flowers, of which especially the rose and the lily were associated with Mary. However, the question whether and to what extent the moor maiden is related to the Virgin of the Annunciation would require a more complex argument. The present discussion has demonstrated, at least, that the choice between a Christian and a pagan, folkloric reading need not be an either-or issue. The popular lyrics of the Annunciation certainly drew upon and profited from both traditions.

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