

## Research Article

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# The Maternal Body as a Space: Examining the Visuality of Marian Pregnancy in Late Medieval Europe

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**Abstract:** This work offers a theoretically informed analysis of the characterization of maternity in religion using a spatial lens. The maternal body as a space is used as an analytical framework to discuss how Mary's pregnancy is located and spatialized in Christianity. Through examining selected medieval Marian iconography, this work discusses what kind of space Mary's body represents in the Christian doctrine. Analysis shows three central themes on the characterization of the maternal body as a space: (1) as a transitional space, (2) as a landmark, and (3) as a liminal space. The images of Marian pregnancy show that the maternal body is beyond its biological purpose in the Bible, but serves as a space that enables various interactions and spiritual events. The examination of Mary's maternal body as a space offers an alternative perspective to discuss Mary's character as a point of interface for Christian doctrines, biblical periods, and the Scriptures. In many ways, understanding Mary's maternal body as a space speaks about the complexities and unveiled aspects of maternity's role in religion. This work hopes to spark further discussions on how the maternal body intersects with spatiality in the context of religion.

**Keywords:** Mary, Marian iconography, maternity, space, body

## 1 Introduction

This work recasts the maternal body as a space that serves as a point of reference in religious terms. Devotion to Mary has brought “intellectual controversy, powerful feelings and, all too frequently, conflict and violence”<sup>1</sup> in the Christian faith. For instance, there is an enduring accusation, beginning in the medieval ages and continuing until the present time, that Marian piety is idolatry, a false worship that robs Christ of His glory. However, this work echoes Tina Beattie's argument that, without Mary and her maternal body, Christianity “is not fully coherent.”<sup>2</sup> Mary's pregnancy is of particular interest because of her legacy as the most significant mother figure in Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Mary's body reveals “a complex system of messages and symbols in the late medieval religious universe.”<sup>4</sup> Being declared as *Theotokos* or, literally, God-bearer in the dogma of the Council of Ephesus (431AD), Mary's body reveals its character as the

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1 Waller, *The Virgin Mary*, 31.

2 Beattie, “Redeeming Mary,” 107.

3 Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*.

4 Gibbs, “Four Coats for Our Lady,” 37.

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dwelling place of divinity.<sup>5</sup> The maternal body of Mary is at the center of debates in the Christian faith, specifically on topics regarding Mary's unique form of automatic redemption as argued by theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Franciscan John Duns Scotus.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Mary's body is a contested terrain which is manifested in how Mary's perpetual virginity has been challenged and defended in religious writings by Helvidius (challenger) and Jerome (defender).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, theologians and church authorities had various contestations on Mary's veneration during late medieval Europe.<sup>8</sup> Mary's body is "searched" to become the site of Christ's conception as revealed in Annunciation. Situated in religion, the maternal body is a terrain for elaborating the role of Mary in Christianity.

The focus of this work is on Mary's pregnancy with the unborn body of Christ. Mary's maternal body with the body of Christ contains vivid physicality and embodiedness among all visual representations of Mary such as the Mother of God, the Virgin, the suffering mother, and Mother of Perpetual Help. Contributing to the rather limited literature on the visibility of Mary's pregnancy,<sup>9</sup> this work builds on the scholarship of Elizabeth L'Estrange, Carole Rawcliffe, and Caroline Walker Bynum<sup>10,11</sup> to examine the visual images of Mary's maternity. Marian images are an important site for examination because the sense of sight serves as "foundation of religious knowledge"<sup>12</sup> where faith comes to believers. Scholarly works in theology recognize the value of artworks since "religious images have a religious significance that cannot be replaced by the word."<sup>13</sup> Visual narratives in Mariology serve as aid to scriptural information about Mary.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the images of Mary's maternal body offer an alternative perspective to discuss Mary's character as a point of interface between Christian doctrines and biblical periods. In many ways, understanding Mary's maternal body speaks about the complexities and unveiled aspects of women's role in religion. The maternal body offers an opportunity to rethink the function of maternity in biblical contexts.

This article shows how the visual representations of Mary serve as a powerful guide to understanding Mary's central role in the story of salvation. As a guide to analyzing selected Marian images, this work draws from the biblical scriptures, religious texts, and academic literature to substantiate the discussions of Mary's body and its role in Christianity. This work argues that Marian representations are indicative of the importance of maternity in religious affairs, suggesting a focus on the maternal body to further understand Christianity and women in the Bible. In doing so, this article juxtaposes Mary's images with various literature, both religious and scholarly, to discuss the relevant interpretations of Mary's body from various perspectives. To see the images of Mary's pregnancy simply as illustrations without considering her place in Christianity is to understand only partially their meanings, and to misconstrue the ways and the extent to which they display the importance of pregnancy to the Christian faith. As this article demonstrates, examinations of the complexity of Mary's pregnant body open up many avenues for further investigation using "practices of seeing"<sup>15</sup> to analyze the intersections of maternity, visual arts, and religious frontiers.

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5 de Haardt, "The Marian Paradox."

6 McHam, "Visualizing the Immaculate Conception."

7 Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*.

8 Tavard, *The Thousand Faces*.

9 Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction."

10 L'Estrange, "Anna Peperit Mariam," and *Holy Motherhood*.

11 Rawcliffe, "Women, Childbirth, and Religion."

12 Polinska, "In Woman's Image," 55.

13 Rahner, "The Theology," 155.

14 de Haardt, "Visual Narratives."

15 Hodne, *The Virginity of the Virgin*, 10.

## 2 Mariology and medieval arts

Late medieval Mariology was characterized by scopophilia or an obsession with gaze,<sup>16</sup> compared to the representation of Romanesque art. Even other forms of art such as medieval poetry and drama instruct their audience to visualize, gaze at, and observe the Virgin Mary and her life. The relevance of visibility in understanding Mary's maternal body develops from the generally limited imagery of maternity in medieval Europe. Whereas in contemporary times maternal conception can be captured by the public eye through technology, images of pregnancy were visible only through religious artworks in the medieval ages as gynecological knowledge developed alongside religion. Since the conception and development of the fetus is associated with the human soul, pregnancy and childbirth were not entirely the dominion of medicine but also of theology. While midwives took part in assisting childbirth, clerics were also present to do "performative rituals" involving verbal charms, prayers, ligatures, amulets, and other physical gestures.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the limited images of maternity had to do with the stigma associated with men's knowledge of women's bodies and genitalia, keeping representations of women's bodies within the confines of religious art.<sup>18</sup> Since only churches can usually afford expensive artworks for display,<sup>19</sup> most preserved paintings of natality are those of Mary's and, occasionally, Elizabeth's. Mary's body is at the center of such discussions since "the woman as maternal feminine has found a place at the heart of the Church's symbolic life."<sup>20</sup> At the same time, from the beginning of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century, diversity in visual culture promoted anthropomorphic images of the deity which brought a renewed critique of iconoclastic sentiment. The idea of deity seen in representational art became popular and was displayed as a tribute of salutation and respectful veneration.<sup>21</sup> This coincided with the shifts in body discourse in European cultures between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>22</sup> In this period, female bodies gained more visibility than previously, most of which took the form of Mary's pregnancy due to the "massive expansion" of Marian devotion and representation in the later Middle Ages.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, scholarly works recognize the value of artworks since "religious images have a religious significance that cannot be replaced by the word."<sup>24</sup> Resonating with Rahner's emphasis on the relevance of visibility, Pope John Paul II appreciated the power of visual arts to send a message where words fall short. In his 1999 letter to artists, Pope John Paul II emphasized the promising "fruitful alliance between the Gospel and art" in which artists make visible the Scripture and "what they manage to express in their [the artists'] painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit."<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the immediacy and scale of reverence of the Marian iconography establishes a dominant paradigm about the relevance of Mary's pregnancy. The images of Mary's pregnancy are important religious artifacts that depict the maternal body. The depictions of religious medieval art represent a very diverse visual culture, with a range of artists and viewers from different backgrounds in terms of class, education, and gender.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the medium of visual arts had been instrumental to religious doctrine in the Middle Ages, especially in that images could speak differently to specific audiences compared to literary, religious culture (i.e., children, or those who could not read).<sup>27</sup> As Habermas argues, religion is to be presented in a way that is accessible to all in order "to arrive at reasons

<sup>16</sup> Waller, *The Virgin Mary*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Jones and Olsan, "Performative Rituals."

<sup>18</sup> Minkowski, "Women Healers of the Middle Ages."

<sup>19</sup> Dutton and Shinnars, *Rethinking Medieval Art*.

<sup>20</sup> Beattie, *God's Mother*, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Graves, "From an Archaeology of Iconoclasm to an Anthropology of the Body."

<sup>22</sup> Kleinschmidt, *Understanding the Middle Ages*; Muir, "Ritual in Early Modern Europe."

<sup>23</sup> Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, "The Theology," 155.

<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*.

<sup>26</sup> Binski, "The English Parish Church."

<sup>27</sup> Gill, "Female Piety and Impiety."

that are more general than the ones in the religious language.”<sup>28</sup> Visual culture during the medieval period is thus important as it captures religious transformations, “both the alterity and the familiarity of historically specific gendered processes and categories.”<sup>29</sup> This accessibility to the divinity and perfection encapsulated in the maternal body is evident through visual arts functioning as “visual apparatus of worship,” where texts fail to do so.<sup>30</sup>

### 3 Marian depictions in visual arts

In what follows, this work presents Marian visual arts in late medieval Europe focusing on Mary’s maternal body as a point of analysis.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that although the examination focuses on painting, this medium is not intended to produce a sufficiently generalizable interpretation of Mary’s maternal body. Representations of Mary’s maternal body in other media may further assist this analysis or provide other interpretations that are more complicated and elusive. Religious images are, after all, bound by our human limitations.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, this work contributes to scholarship on women and religion by turning gaze to the maternal body through visual arts as data.

### 4 Maternal body as a transitional space

The pregnant body serves as the space for salvation’s story, being “the door of salvation” and “the expiator of all the sins” of mankind,<sup>33</sup> which is at the core of Christianity’s doctrine. This relates to Mary’s role as an intercessor between God and man or as the Mediatrix for all of humanity in the Christian doctrine.<sup>34,35</sup> Mary’s maternal body is a crucial transitional space because it made possible Christ’s transition into being a human in flesh to represent sinful humans as their Savior.<sup>36</sup> It is the maternal body that hosts the “central event on which the faith is founded: God’s flesh-taking or incarnation.”<sup>37</sup> In *The Virgin Weaving* (Image 1) the unborn body of Christ is represented as a complete human body, which drives a theological point of divine deviation from the mortal temporal limitations. This serves as a visual commemoration that Christ is already a “perfect human being” and can transcend the stages that mortal beings usually undergo. Mary’s pregnant body shows “the materiality of divine presence.”<sup>38</sup> Even art historians recognize Mary’s role as the Second Eve, which references the transition from one biblical timeline to another.<sup>39</sup> In this way, Mary’s body also represents the departure from the first Eve’s sinful body. Whereas the first Eve is described as “the mother of the human race corrupted by the mind of a viper succumbed to malice,” Mary has been described as “the bearer of the [S]avior of the world, sealed by chastity, threatened his [the serpent’s] head.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 114.

<sup>29</sup> Riches and Salih, *Gender and Holiness*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Aston, “Public Worship and Iconoclasm,” 9.

<sup>31</sup> The images used are considered as public domains (see references). Such images are free to use for non-commercial purposes.

<sup>32</sup> Green, *Imagining God*.

<sup>33</sup> Bonaventure, *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 228.

<sup>34</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*.

<sup>35</sup> Pelikan, “The Christian Tradition.”

<sup>36</sup> Ellington, *From Sacred Body*.

<sup>37</sup> Ware, “My Helper and My Enemy,” 93.

<sup>38</sup> de Haardt, “The Marian Paradox,” 177.

<sup>39</sup> Williamson, “The Virgin Lactans as Second Eve.”

<sup>40</sup> Bouman, “The Immaculate Conception,” 142.



**Image 1:** Master of Erfurt, *The Virgin Weaving*, Upper Rhine, ca. 1400.

Representing Mary's pregnancy with Christ's complete carnal body serves as the visual foreshadowing of the completion of the salvation story in the Scriptures. In one gaze, such an image reveals more than just a biblical event but the entire plot of The Covenant, serving as a visual guide to biblical history. In connection to the scriptures, Mary's first appearance in the New Testament comes in Matthew where she is introduced as "Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). In the genealogy that opens the Gospel of Matthew, Mary's introduction is premised on being the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the son of Abraham – two people with a significant covenant with God. Giving a space to Mary in the genealogy establishes a transitional link between Mary and God's covenant with Israel regarding salvation, a fulfilment of God's promise to David and Abraham. Then, in John 19: 25–28 ("Behold Your Mother"), Mary watches Christ die, manifesting that the complete carnal body, once in her womb, eventually has to face death like that of any person with a carnal body. This provides a perspective on why it makes sense to portray the unborn Christ's body as complete in the artwork. Mary's body is reserved for its role as a transitional space. In the painting *Master of Erfurt*, this transitional role also manifests in the fine clothes covering Mary's body, which is an important visualization in the Bible – "Mary's status, location, and economic circumstances would have precluded her from wearing embroidered silk."<sup>41</sup> In Mary's depiction, her entire body is covered by a mantle, which signifies her sacredness and perpetual virginity to ensure God's paternity of Christ.<sup>42</sup> Being covered reflects Mary as having an intact virginity through the

<sup>41</sup> Gibbs, "Four Coats for Our Lady," 36.

<sup>42</sup> Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 139.



birth of Christ and, arguably, even her postpartum virginal status.<sup>43</sup> The image of Mary's pregnancy with the complete body of Christ serves to guide viewers to her link with God's history of making covenants back in the Old Testament since Mary's story cannot be divorced from the story of the Covenant.

Mary's body is also transitional in the sense of encapsulating the mysteries of incarnation and inspiration of the biblical texts. Just as the Word was made flesh, both human and divine, so are the inspired Scriptures both human and divine. The Marian images with the complete body of Christ illustrate the mysterious space of transition encompassing both the incarnation and inspired Scriptures. As such, what Mary's representation accomplishes is to show the intertwined nature of the maternal body as a reserved space to hold a transitional event, a point made by Pope John Paul in delivering the address "The mystery of Woman in Revealed in Motherhood." The Pope referred to maternity as "potentiality of the female organism. With creative peculiarity it serves for the conception and begetting of the human being, with the help of man." This "potentiality" resonates with Karl Rahner's defense of Marian Dogmas, in which the redeeming potential of Mary's maternal body manifests in Mary being an incarnation herself and experiencing a Virgin Birth. Mary's body was a reserved space because of its potentiality in the process of incarnation and was granted a "sanctifying grace from the first instant of her existence."<sup>44</sup>

## 5 Maternal body as a landmark

Mary's maternal body serves as a landmark of union formation between divinity and humanity in Christian doctrine. Mary's body is the territory that once bound Christ's body in order to show the tie that binds God and men.<sup>45</sup> The image of "Misericordia" (mercy) shows Mary's body as a landmark towering over the smaller bodies as a point of reference, which combines with the central theme of mercy as the crux of men's alliance with God. The "Misericordia" image by Andrea di Bartolo da Jesi (Image 2) presents Mary with her body as a site of mercy at the center and surrounded by two worlds, divine and human. The maternal body is a necessary point of reference to establish the alliance, headquarters, between man and God, whose connection was broken when Adam sinned. Mary's virginity is a symbol of sinlessness, which provides the standards of who is clean and who is not. Also, Mary being Christ's biological mother, became the main site to give birth to the Savior. Mary's body thus holds a "gynecological power" together with her "heavily draped idealized figure" as God's Mother.<sup>46</sup> In the Annunciation in Luke, the angel used the term "hail" or rejoice to address Mary, a word used by prophets to prophesy about the Messiah (see, for example, Joel 2: 23–24; Zechariah 9:9; Zephaniah 3: 14–18). Luke depicts Mary as a representative of people, pointing out Mary's unique role in the history of salvation. Christ could have not been the Savior had He not been born out of a maternal carnal body. Visually, this is shown in how Mary's body contrasts with other characters in the painting in order to emphasize her importance as a point of reference.<sup>47</sup> Mary is the *Mother of Mercy* because of her motherly grace and love that served as a space of alliance formation between Christ and believers. At the same time, the concept of mercy represents abstract feminine gender qualities of charity and virtuous roles.<sup>48</sup> Mary's role has been to have great compassion to pray for believers and protect them from suffering.<sup>49</sup>

Further, in Scriptural terms, Mary's images also meaningfully convey that although Mary's womb resonates with other wombs, it is a unique site in itself. For example, in an indirect Marian mention, Luke 11:27–28 indicates a demarcation of Mary's womb as a unique space or landmark by using the term

<sup>43</sup> Miles, *Image as Insight*.

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord*, 43–4.

<sup>45</sup> Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> Caviness, *Visualizing Women*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Polinska, "In Woman's Image."

<sup>48</sup> Evans, "Allegorical Women and Practical Men."

<sup>49</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*.



**Image 2:** Andrea di Bartolo da Jesi, *Madonna della Misericordia*, ca. 1471.

“blessed” (in “Blessed is the womb that bore you”). Likewise, upon Mary’s visit, her cousin Elizabeth greeted her with words “blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1: 42), separating Mary’s womb as a special landmark for the fulfillment of the Covenant. In the visual representations of Mary’s pregnancy, the womb with Christ’s complete body highlights this “blessedness” as it tells the story of salvation. Another indirect mention of Mary is in Galatians 4:4, which reads “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” The images of Mary with the unborn Christ’s complete body thus serves as a “touchdown” landmark for the continuation of biblically relevant conceptions from Sarah’s conception of Isaac to Rebecca’s birth of Jacob and Esau to Rachel’s delivery of Joseph. Mary’s pregnant body also serves as the final landmark of God’s covenant to bear the Son of God. To be sure, based on the images alone, Marian representations do not immediately connect Mary’s Son to Sarah’s Son. But when biblical history is taken into consideration, Mary’s pregnancy is the cumulative space of Covenant-related births starting from Eve. Such texts mention the “law,” which suggests a form of recognition similar to acknowledging spatial landmarks as official sites. Such observations show Mary’s deeply woven character in the fabric of the inspired text.

In a parochial context, Marian images can visually draw together diverse onlookers of various backgrounds. The images of Mary’s pregnancy serve different purposes for different audiences. In particular, the image of Virgin Mary has served as a “more common theme in visions of men than in visions of women”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 35.

for she became the model woman for men to adore. Yet for women, Mary's image is a place of comfort and assurance in pregnancy.<sup>51</sup> The totality of Mary's devotion to a pious life is the standard set for saints and believers. These images highlight Mary's virgin pregnancy as a character of moral ascendancy since "virginity at that time was a moral rather than a physical category."<sup>52</sup> Celibacy and chastity became the standards for those who would like to serve the church,<sup>53,54</sup> following Mary's example. The images of Mary's pregnancy in medieval religious culture served symbolic purposes as women were encouraged to use relics of Mary, among other saints, to avoid struggling with childbirth.<sup>55,56</sup> In a more historical view, Mary's pregnancy serves as a landscape of comfort amidst trying times. Mary's pregnancy was in direct contrast to the political turmoil, plagues, and economic instability during the Middle Ages. Mary's maternal body represented a fort with nourishment and care. This character of nourishment also manifests in the way that Pope John Paul II read the message on women's bodies as a gift in "The Nuptial Meaning of the Body"<sup>57</sup> He states that "The body which expresses femininity manifests the reciprocity and communion of persons. It expresses it by means of the gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence."

Finally, Mary's body in visual representations is a landmark in the sense of being a battleground, a point of tension, between the expanding artistry of Marian representations in late medieval Europe and its Reformer critiques.<sup>58</sup> At that time, many reformers, both the Protestants and Tridentines, questioned the overwhelming representations of the Virgin Mary's body, which they considered to be overshadowing Christ and making Mary take the attention as "Our Lady of Everywhere."<sup>59</sup> Since the Marian visualizations emerged together with Marian narratives, poetry, music, drama, music, and other forms of arts, critics felt the discomfort of the increasing popularity of Mary. Mary's womb became a symbolic space with strong religious significance, making it a reference point and a subject of devotion.<sup>60</sup> As such, it was a battle for Marian veneration to continue as Mary's representation in late medieval Europe faced assault from reformers who thought that Mary was becoming the center of people's devotion, instead of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

## 6 Maternal body as a liminal space

A liminal space is generally understood as a space "at the boundary of two dominant spaces, which is not fully part of either."<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the liminality of Mary's body manifests in its nature of having both divine and carnal characters but not entirely one or the other. Mary's pregnant body is a fluid compartment that represents the liminality of the sacred-secular divides.<sup>63</sup> The liminality between sacred-secular divide appears in the representations of the unborn Christ with a complete human body inside the womb, which emphasizes the joint divinity and personhood of Christ. The concept of sacredness constitutes a sinless conception by a virgin. Yet, at the same time, the core of Mary's pregnancy is the biological materiality of

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<sup>51</sup> Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?"

<sup>52</sup> Scholz, *Body Narratives*, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Grössinger, *Picturing Women*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 109.

<sup>56</sup> Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction," 87.

<sup>57</sup> John Paul II, "The Redemption of the Body."

<sup>58</sup> Ellington, *Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Rancour-Laferrrière, *Imagining Mary*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 343.

<sup>61</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*.

<sup>62</sup> Dale and Burrell, *The Spaces of Organization*, 238.

<sup>63</sup> The discussions on the notion of secular/secularization are rich in the literature. However, this article uses the term secular to convey the human character such as mortal, sinful, profane, temporal, among others. Moreover, "sacred" refers to anything related to divine and there is no intention to refer to the "sacred" as magic, a dichotomy created by Thomas in his text *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.





**Image 3:** *Visitatie*, Middelrijns Altaar, ca. 1410.

Christ's perfection. This depiction of the divine-person is demonstrated in most depictions of Mary's pregnancy with the unborn Christ together with Elizabeth's human pregnancy in the Visitation. The image of *Visitatie* (Image 3) shows Mary and Elizabeth bearing their own children with contrasting symbolisms – Christ as the divine and John the Baptist as the mortal. Mary's pregnancy serves as a space of divine and human potential. The image of Visitation is a visual exposure that the divine and human realms are not benign and independent realities, but are rather intertwined. By showing a Christ with a human body inside the womb, Mary's body also shows the liminality of time since having a complete child-like body inside the womb is not a realistic illustration of a single point in time. The visual representation of eternity thus mixes with the temporality aspect of being a human being. A complete infant or child explicitly shown in the womb is the most common image of the unborn at least in the Christian tradition.<sup>64</sup> Showing Christ's existence before a carnal body is born resists the usual connection of humans with time. It makes a point

<sup>64</sup> Playoust and Aitken, "The Leaping Child."

that while any physical body is not yet on Earth, Christ nevertheless exists prior to it. Hence, eternity is being represented by the unborn Christ. Moreover, given the high rate of neonatal and infant mortality during the Middle Ages,<sup>65</sup> Christ's complete and healthy human body in Mary's womb also accentuates the sacredness of her pregnancy.

The pregnant body is also an in-between space between the private and the public. The images of natality are patchworks of private and public themes that continue to unfurl through visibility. On the one hand, the pregnant body is very personal as evidenced by only a few documentations of pregnancy during the Middle Ages. But on the other hand, the public images of Mary's pregnancy in chapels, shrines, parish churches or abbeys, and the special masses for pregnant women all lay bare the public character of Mary's pregnancy. This public aspect of Mary's maternal body also manifests when "clergymen who advocated maternal nursing in sermons also commissioned paintings to be placed in the public space of churches. Depictions of the nursing Virgin conveyed the same message carried in sermons, namely, that women should emulate the mother of Christ."<sup>66</sup> The special book of masses in England called *The Sarum Missal*, even offered prayers or masses for pregnancy.<sup>67,68</sup> It is not surprising then that maternity's public role resonates way back to medieval English and Scottish ballads such as "The Cruel Mother," which emphasized the public accountability of the mother to avoid giving birth in secret lest she suffer consequences by herself such as the child's natural death, or even murder the infant in the absence of witnesses.<sup>69</sup> Hence, it is a favorable act to have witnesses at a birth during late medieval Europe. Such examples show that Mary's pregnant body complicates the discursive spatial pair of private–public. Mary's maternal body thus oscillates from the realm of individual experiences and subjectivities to the public, and then back to private experiences.

Mary's body is also a liminal space between being revered and sexualized, a common theme on representing women's bodies in medieval literature and popular culture.<sup>70</sup> Although Mary is a virgin, her body has not escaped sexualized interpretations, which involve symbolic representations of Mary's genitalia as a link to her womb, leading to the birth of Christ and salvation. As Mario Ribas argues, "the breasts and vagina of the Virgin" are the very spaces that God "chose to communicate Godself to the world."<sup>71</sup> Across medieval visual arts, this is evident in the vulva-shaped mandorlas that enclose the representations of the Virgin Mary, as seen in the selected images in the manuscript.<sup>72</sup> Another example is the design of *vesica piscis*, in which the fish sign is interpreted by historian Dan Cruickshank as the Virgin's genitals that is "both the symbolic representation of the generative power of the female and the place through which the saviour of mankind entered the world."<sup>73</sup> As such, Mary's anatomical structure was thus celebrated as "a multivalent symbol of motherhood, femininity, and erotic longing."<sup>74</sup>

The images represent Mary's body as a liminal space because, more than artworks, these visualities show Mary's constantly shifting character in the lives of Christian devotees. Although the images of Mary with Christ's complete body in her womb could have been seen with physical accuracy as barren mothers have had children in the Scriptures (e.g. Sarah, Hannah), such works are able to "ruptur[e] the static vision of motherhood,"<sup>75</sup> revealing Mary's complex relationship to humans. Through visual arts, the scopophilic impulses of medieval Mariology are manifested by the desire to relate to Mary by viewing her representations in many forms such as paintings and frescoes, statues, and other objects of devotion. But at the same

<sup>65</sup> Sayer and Dickinson, "Reconsidering Obstetric Death and Female Fertility."

<sup>66</sup> Miles, *A Complex Delight*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction."

<sup>68</sup> Warren (trans), *The Sarum Missal in English*.

<sup>69</sup> Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* cited in Atkinson, "History, Symbol, and Meaning."

<sup>70</sup> Waller, *The Virgin Mary*.

<sup>71</sup> Ribas, "Liberating Mary, Liberating the Poor," 135.

<sup>72</sup> Caviness, *Visualizing Women*.

<sup>73</sup> Cruickshank, *Britain's Best Buildings*, 57–69.

<sup>74</sup> Easton, "Was It Good for You, Too?" 15–6

<sup>75</sup> Hardy and Wiedmer, *Motherhood and Space*, 2.

time, the same visual representations of Mary also highlight Mary's divinity with a perfect and uncorrupt nature that humanity will never achieve, reminding devotees that Mary is different and distant. Such near-distant liminality also manifests in Mary's last indirect mention in Revelation 11: 19–12: 17, in which St. John provides a mysterious and symbolic description of "The woman clothed with the sun[...] who brought forth the male child[...] who is to rule all of the nations." This mystery covers Mary's enduring roles as both close to saints but maintaining a certain distance. As Julia Kristeva puts it, Mary is "combination of power and sorrow, sovereignty and the unnameable."<sup>76</sup> Finally, public visual representations of Mary are in themselves liminal because they have both spiritual and entertainment value, whereby a demarcation between the sacred and the secular is "impossible to draw."<sup>77</sup>

## 7 Maternal body as a space

What transpires from examining the Marian representations is that Mary's body serves as a space where biblical doctrine takes place. The maternal body acts as an alternative pathway to expand our sense of space to consider not only tangible spaces but also space in the sense of discourse.<sup>78</sup> This kind of spatial imagination provides contemporary readers an alternative way of seeing bodies in general as "the body itself is always already a space of its own."<sup>79</sup> The maternal body touches upon the distinction between space and place – whereas a place represents a more empirical entity, a space is more abstract and conceptual.<sup>80,81</sup> As such, the maternal body, through imagination of space as abstract, establishes the connection not only between the spatial and the social but also the theological. This reinforces the relevance of having spatial metaphors for women's bodies.<sup>82</sup> For instance, Mary's body is a space that departs from the Old Testament female character, Eve. Mary's body, through her virginity, is venerated and idealized while Eve's body has been a symbol of rebellion and sin. As Hardy and Wiedmer urge, "we need a vision of motherhood and of space in which multiple narratives can co-exist."<sup>83</sup> In this regard, artworks have been instructive to understand the spatiality of Mary's pregnancy because "simply by being human, we value spaces through our senses."<sup>84</sup> The artworks make visible the unseen spatial mechanisms of the maternal body as a venue that invites interpretation. This resonates with McLuhan's famous catchphrase "the medium is the message."<sup>85</sup> The medium – visual representations of the maternal body – conveys, as words alone could not, the significance of departures from fixities. Visuality in itself serves as an inclusive space than it would have been through text. Visual arts offer the space to depict this maternal body's both physically and mystery, something that is difficult in text to depict.

Mary's body is a space where biblical narratives unfold. Her maternal body serves as the very embodiment of incarnation, being both the point of origin and destination of divine-human relations. Mary's body serves as a site where God plants the seed of man for humanity's salvation. At the same time, it is the same body that is "humanity's final destination." This makes Mary's body a central space of assemblage, holding a "gynecological power" as God's Mother.<sup>86</sup> Even medieval gynotheology<sup>87</sup> has rendered Mary's womb a

<sup>76</sup> Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 237.

<sup>77</sup> Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England*, 98.

<sup>78</sup> Hardy and Wiedmer, *Motherhood and Space*, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Moreland, "Toward a Rhetoric of Body as Space," 406.

<sup>80</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*.

<sup>81</sup> Featherston and Painter, "Spatial Politics."

<sup>82</sup> Bassin, "Woman's Images of Inner Space."

<sup>83</sup> Hardy and Wiedmer, *Motherhood and Space*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Priest, "The Volumes of Violence," 91.

<sup>85</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

<sup>86</sup> Caviness, *Visualizing Women*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Waller, "The Virgin's 'Pryvytes.'"

space of pious relevance as it is in Mary's body that believers can also experience the "nearness" of the divine to the human. Mary is even mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, in which the phrase, "Born of the Virgin Mary"<sup>88</sup> indicates her womb's relevance. This approach implies that Mary's maternity in the Bible is relational and weaves together biblical events rather than a mere story in the Bible. By viewing the maternal body as a space, it has been possible to examine the Christian doctrine not only as a series of religious beliefs but as linked to carnal processes, in contrast to pure spirituality. In this context, the maternal body is beyond a biological entity but rather extends as a site that is imbued with positions and relations.

Ultimately, the spatial motifs of being transitional, landmark, and liminal space of Mary's maternal body altogether present an alternative reading of the Marian pregnancy as a space of interaction. The image of natality does not solve the contradictions found in a secularized world but rather serves as a space to interact.<sup>89</sup> These artworks are spaces themselves where we can discover, which we can navigate and go back to. Spatiality is integrated into broader visual structures, which are anchored through the Marian imagery. The images of Mary's maternal body bring our sense of sight to the influx of distant elements such as sacred-secular and private-public. The images show a meeting place where biblical texts, characters of different time periods, and physical realities interact. These images can visually dramatize, simplify, exaggerate along with many other illustrations how the maternal body serves as a space that invites interaction. All these representations of impossibility and fluidity reveal "The Marian Paradox"<sup>90</sup> that entails the theological complexity of Mary's character in the Bible and in Christianity. This also manifests in Mary's body being "shrouded in ambivalence since she [Mary] was often shown as both authoritative and submissive."<sup>91</sup> The spatial ambiguity of the backgrounds also reflects how various temporalities and localities overlap. Moreover, Mary's "maternal authority over God" gives some fluidity to theological authority.<sup>92</sup> This resonates with the concerns of feminist theologies to leave behind the dualisms and hierarchies that pit the carnal against the spiritual or the body against the soul.<sup>93</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to explore how Mary's maternal body can be understood as a space. Through the theoretically informed analysis of Marian iconography undertaken herein, this work contributes to discussions concerning Mary's role in Christianity through her maternal body as a lens. What is significant in terms of analysis is that the images of Mary's conception of Christ put forward how visual arts broach bodies to be seen as spaces. Thus, imagining Mary's body as a space needs to be understood within a broader consideration of invoking a whole picture of Mary's pregnancy. Mary's pregnancy is not only about the function of her uterus and other anatomical parts but rather represents Christianity's core doctrines. As such, Mary's body is a space that represents a unified and complex body rather than a compartmentalized body that can be "zoomed in" into its parts. This analysis brings to light Mary as "a polyvalent figure"<sup>94</sup> whose theological nature meddles with her human character. This approach also made it possible to place Mary "at the center of a narrative while still defined by her relationship to Christ."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, this framework of the maternal body as a space sheds light on rethinking the link between women and religion in general. In much broader terms, this article places emphasis on the relevance of thinking about women's bodies beyond being a reproductive tool. The maternal body is a space by virtue of being a "contested

<sup>88</sup> The Holy See, *Apostles' Creed*.

<sup>89</sup> Bellah, *Beyond Belief*.

<sup>90</sup> de Haardt, "The Marian Paradox," 168.

<sup>91</sup> Polinska, "In Woman's Image," 40.

<sup>92</sup> Pelikan, *Reformation of Church*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*.

<sup>94</sup> de Haardt, "The Marian Paradox," 169.

<sup>95</sup> Gibbs, "Four Coats for Our Lady," 7.



terrain”<sup>96</sup> that is sexual, reproductive, and often objectified. Thus, the maternal body serves as a space to produce and reproduce discourses beyond those that can be normalized in the institution of religion, with all its structures and practices.

The Marian images discussed in this work are more than time capsules of medieval Europe. Mary’s images remain relevant because they guide contemporary audiences in reading and reflecting on biblical scriptures. Beyond a subject of gaze for aesthetic appreciation as museum pieces, such images are instrumental for the substance of biblical passages to unfold. The audience of these artworks can read the overarching storyline of salvation. In a single gaze, one can see the narrative of conception, gestation, and birth. As such, Marian representations are not static archives. Not only do their religious and social roles change but so do the opportunities and restrictions of frameworks in which they are discussed. As Derrida argues, archives are problematic spaces that are perpetually a means to conserve the remembrances of the past; but at the same time archives are open spaces for outsiders to reinterpret and disrupt the established understandings of the past.<sup>97</sup> In seeing Marian images as more than a collection of artifacts embedded in a religious context, the maternal body lends itself to being read as a space that accumulates meanings over time and that continues to resonate in the present. If, indeed, pictures are worth a thousand words, then one could argue that the Marian images with Christ’s complete body, albeit limited in number, play a crucial role in assisting the Scriptures.

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<sup>96</sup> Mathur, “Body as Space, Body as Site.”

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