CHAPTER TEN

THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE KISS:
APOCRYPHAL BIRTH NARRATIVES
AND THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Theologians interested in Mary's role in salvation had little to go on beyond the salutation, Ave, the angel's greeting to her at the Annunciation. The Gospels tell little about Mary's life prior to her becoming the mother of Jesus and relatively little about her after the Christmas story. Her presence in early scenes in Luke's Gospel as well as at the Crucifixion was not enough to satisfy popular interest. From the second century, a number of apocryphal stories began circulating, focusing particularly on undocumented areas of her life. Their existence bears witness to interest in Mary's parentage and birth as well as the events surrounding her death.¹ Creating legends to complete the early life of important historical figures is a phenomenon often associated with the epic, and examples can be seen in the story of Rodrigo, hero of Roncesvalles, a set of youthful exploits known as the *Mocedades de Rodrigo* [The Adventures of the Young Rodrigo]. Soon, interest in Mary's early life led to a desire to celebrate it in feast days. In turn, that led to debate about her preservation from sin and how this could be demonstrated. This chapter will explore how far such apocryphal stories were considered appropriate for representing the Immaculate Conception in literature and art.

The birth story of Mary was replicated in many forms in the medieval period. It is present in Jacopone de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (1995) and it was read as part of the liturgy for the feast-day of St Anne.²

¹ The Legend of Anne and Joachim from the *Protoevangelium of James* was reworked as The Legend of Anne and Joachim in the *Pseudo-Matthew* and also as the Legend of Anne and Joachim in the *Liber de nativitate Mariae*. There are minor differences of detail and elaboration between the three versions. For examination of the relationship between the texts, as well as of the Infancy Gospels, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher (1991: 414–469).

² See, for example, a variety of breviaries: *Breviarium de officio totius anni secundum consuetudinem ecclesiae vicensis* (AEV 86, fol. 192v), *Breviarium vicensis* (AEV 81, fol. 329v), *Breviarium sedis vicensis* (AEV 84, fol. 368v), *Breviarium urgellense* (AEV 82, fol. 116v), *Breviarium sedis vicensis* (AEV, fol. 415v). It is found at the feast of the Conception in
The details are always similar: Mary’s father, Joachim, and her mother, Anne, the priests’ rejection of Joachim’s offering at the Temple because of his wife’s barrenness, Anne’s disappointment at not being able to have children and her song of sorrow in the garden at the sight of a family of sparrows, the double annunciation to the Virgin’s parents, their meeting at the Golden Gate, their embrace and conception of Mary, and the dedication of Mary, a child prodigy, to the temple were aspects of the story replicated in both art and literature.

The stories drew on parallels with the New Testament birth narrative of John the Baptist and with the Old Testament ones of Samuel and Isaac. Each of the mothers, Elizabeth, Hannah, and Sarah, were past the age of childbearing and longed for a child. In biblical versions of the theme of the barren mother, both Sarah and Hannah conceived mighty prophets in their old age. Annunciations are built into each story. Such parallels meant that Mary’s birth was put on a par with that of Old Testament figures and the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. The name of Mary’s mother was modelled on Samuel’s as well as on that of Anna, the Gospel witness to Christ’s presentation in the temple. Stories of miraculous birth have a great deal in common with the birth of Jesus, which they prefigure. The aim of the apocryphal nativity is not only to give Mary parity with important biblical figures but also to defend her purity and nobility from its detractors: ‘The second-century author of the Protoevangelium seems to have drawn motifs for his account of Mary’s birth and childhood from Old Testament infancy stories, in response to anti-Christian versions of Jesus’s origins’ (Clayton 1998: 15–16).

Most saints’ days in the calendar mark the anniversary of the death or ‘birthday into heaven’, of the saint (Rush 1960: 259). John the Baptist’s birth was accorded a feast-day and there was pressure to establish a similar one for Mary, since her role in the economy of salvation was greater. Mary’s Nativity was established by the ninth century in the East and soon spread to the West (see above, Chapter 2). The Conception was celebrated from the sixth or seventh century in the East (Tavard 1992: 207; Warner 1976: 239). In the early days it was known as the feast of St Anne (Bouman 1958: 114–115). St Anne’s feast was transferred to 26 July but, even in mid-fourteenth-century Spain, a separate feast for St Anne was not always established. In Navarre, the Concep-