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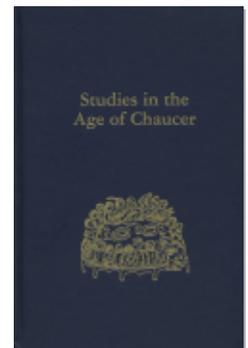
Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England by Georgiana Donavin (review)

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power of the book's central idea. *How Soon Is Now?* provokes an important debate about how scholars might redefine the relationship of their work to the *love* that, as Dinshaw reminds us throughout the book, gives us the word "amateur."

How Soon Is Now? makes a valuable argument about the presence of asynchrony in medieval literature, and, more crucially, dares medievalists to examine the relationship between time, personal commitment, and the centuries-old texts that we teach. Fittingly, the book is lovingly capacious in its outreach to multiple audiences. Non-medievalists looking for work on temporality studies will find the book accessible because of its reader-friendly summaries and translations. Medievalists, on the other hand, will discover a revealing mirror of their own engagements. The book would be perfect to teach in an introductory graduate seminar since its combination of accessibility and provocation would inspire wide-ranging discussion about the future of the field. With its question-mark title and its as-yet unrealized dreams of a different kind of scholarly life, *How Soon Is Now?* issues a call. Readers may find themselves moved to affirm this call with some more lines from The Smiths about strange loves, queer interests, and the amateur pursuit of the past: *A dreaded sunny day, so let's go where we're happy and I meet you at the cemetery gates.*

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GEORGIANA DONAVIN. *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 315. \$69.95 cloth.

As Georgiana Donavin points out in her introduction to *Scribit Mater*, Marian studies have undergone some notable changes in the course of the past half-century, with many postmodern critics treating the emphasis on Mary's virginity as signal evidence of patriarchal misogyny, its determination to encourage women's passivity, and the repression of female sexuality. More recent scholarship has aimed to reconsider and to recuperate Mary's authority within the Christian tradition, and has relied on a wide range of medieval Marian literature. This scholarship

has also revisited the entire ideal of virginity, which, it has argued, may in fact be seen as empowering. We all remember from *Hali Meïðhad* the vividly portrayed woes of marriage and the attendant advantages of virginity.

In the literature considered by Donavin, the sapient Virgin is shown not only to be free of the duress of the conventional married state, but also to be enthroned as the inspiration for the *trivium*: “a steeping in Marian language . . . resulted in representations of the Virgin as a purified grammarian, an accomplished rhetorician, an inspired muse, and a mentor for writers” (17).

Donavin’s introduction is thorough in its presentation of the points that will be made in the course of her study’s six chapters, which cover a wide range of medieval English literature, from “The English Lives of Mary” to “Margery Kempe and the Virgin Birth of her *Book*.” At the introduction’s close, Donavin explicitly challenges “the paradigm of Kristeva’s abject mother,” as she announces her own determination to counter the “scholarly denigration of medieval constructs of virginity.” *Scribit Mater* “represents the Virgin as a powerful linguistic intermediary and occasionally as a force for a radical literature that realigns spiritual and social roles” (26). Indeed, Donavin’s work proves to be an effective refutation to the commonly accepted stereotype of the submissive Mary.

Her goal is clarified by the first sentence of her first chapter: “[In the course of this book] I will show how throughout medieval English literature, the Virgin Mary is associated with academic and narrative arts of speech, . . . her superior knowledge and its impact on salvation history” (27). Specifically, the chapter is dedicated to a consideration of a variety of lives that focus on Mary and her “superior spiritual understanding” (74).

In the English lives considered by Donavin, the Virgin is anything but a passive vessel: she explains the Christian mysteries, and is the crucial “vehicle for Christ’s coming to earth, . . . a teacher of providence’s progress” (29, 30). Her virginity is an active source of strength. The chapter covers a broad chronological period, from the Anglo-Saxon *Advent Lyrics* to Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*. While this might at first seem a rather wide net to cast, Donavin, to the contrary, convincingly establishes a pervasive tradition that “illustrate[s] the divergent audiences—ecclesiastical and lay, courtly and popular—that took Mary to be the mother of wisdom” (28–29).

Scribit Mater’s next chapters deal with John of Garland and his peda-

gogical poetry: Walter of Wimborne, John of Howden, and Richard Rolle, and how they contributed to “northern medieval English traditions for a Marian meditative poetry” (115); and “Chaucer and the Dame School,” in the “era when primary education took place under the Virgin Mary’s wing” (163).

Donavin focuses on Garland’s *Epithalamium Beate Virginis Marie* and *Parisiana poetria*, both of which reveal the Virgin to be instrumental in the teaching of the liberal arts, and of writing itself. “[His] Mary—his book, muse, and teacher—embodies both Wisdom and Word, attributes of Christ, as she bears the Christ child” (113). Garland, attributing his own rhetorical powers to the Virgin’s inspiration, figures her “as a warrior for Christian virtues [whose] divine message . . . depends on conquering the vices”—“an icon of . . . learning and a Christian Lady Rhetorica” (115).

Walter and John—discussed in “The Musical Mother Tongue in Anglo-Latin Poetry for Meditation”—were thirteenth-century contemporaries, whose poetry abounds with Marian imagery. Both “meditate upon . . . the Mother so that her tongue might speak for all to the divine audience” (119). Placing emphasis on music and song, both write of Jesus’ life from his mother’s point of view.

Walter’s *Ave Virgo Mater Christi* “explains that Mary herself is the language upon which his Franciscan devotional verse is built” (127). Within her womb, “Mary reenacted creation [and] became the best of moral rhetoricians” (131). John’s Marian poetry is, as demonstrated by Donavin, more romantic than Walter’s. His songs, as seen in the *Philomena*, “compare to the reflections of troubadours upon an exalted love” (142); his “Marian verses are more effusive [than Walter’s], erupting in imagery” (143). He listens as she sings lullabies to her child: “Mary is the mother of lyric, of both music and words” (153).

This chapter concludes with a consideration of Rolle and his *Canticum amoris*. In contrast to Walter and John, Rolle “is the Virgin’s enamored devotee . . . he desires total union with her” (157). Yet in all three poets we find “a formal presentation of compelling Marian epithets whose images unlock a lyrical language and a personal ritual for meditation” (159).

In Chapter 4, Donavin considers Chaucer’s *An ABC*, *The Prioress’s Tale*, and *The Second Nun’s Tale* as representations of a continuum of Marian learning. While *An ABC* assumes “the Virgin Mary’s presence

at the beginning of language instruction" (182), *The Prioress's Tale* offers the opportunity for the uneducated "to learn a song of Marian praise." The spectrum culminates in *The Second Nun's Tale*, which—as Saint Cecilia converts so many, and so roundly defeats Almachius in their debate—aims to demonstrate "the intellectual power of female asceticism," as well as Cecilia's individual courage. Together these three Chaucerian works serve to present Mary as "an accomplished, heavenly school mistress . . . at the head of the language curriculum" (219).

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with Mary's voice in the Middle English lyrics; and with "Margery Kempe and the Virgin Birth of her *Book*." The lyrics, in a variety of dialects, celebrate the Virgin not as biblical student, but as an "icon of beautiful speech and song" (221). Frequently, Marian verses are presented as appropriate subjects for hymns and sermons. What is shared by these lyrics—which reveal Mary in a variety of settings linked to relevant liturgical feasts—is a "performative nature . . . oral repetition must have been common" (224). They reassert her "linguistic prowess in oral ways" (249).

Magnificent Margery comes last, her *Book* being "very much a maternal act" (251) that reflects her "determination to perpetuate a Marian model of lay piety" (253). Donavin's treatment of Margery and her "labours," as she "ascends spiritually in the ranks of the holy family and establishes her major role as handmaid to the handmaid" (263), is careful and caring. She clearly respects Margery and her visionary experiences. "In all, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is conceived through Kempe's *imitatio Mariae*, and as the Word of Christ, offers the fruit of the Virgin Birth" (286).

Scribit Mater is an impressive work. Donavin's thesis is repeatedly verified as she weaves through centuries and genres, dealing with an enormously complex body of literature. As she demonstrates, the Virgin is indeed central to "a variety of trends in pedagogical and popular culture . . . an icon of rhetorical excellence" (287). Donavin's scholarship, as it must be in such a project, is meticulous. Her writing is compelling and incisive, which is why I have included so many quotes: why try to paraphrase when the original is so good?

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