



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a chapter published in *Words and Matter: the Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Parish Life*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Langum, V. (2015)

Mary: the return.

In: Jonas Carlquist and Virginia Langum (ed.), *Words and Matter: the Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Parish Life* (pp. 222-225). Stockholm: Sällskapet Runica et mediaevalia

Runica et mediævalia. Scripta minora

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-111856>

## Mary: the Return

*Virginia Langum*

My most profound experience with the Virgin Mary was in Uppsala Cathedral after finishing a job interview about a year ago. Nervous and innervated, and a little sleep deprived, I was perhaps primed for such an experience.

Behind the main chancel, a strange, small woman caught my gaze. She was perfectly still, reflecting upon the ornate chapel where the Swedish King Gustav Vasa lay buried with his wives. I assumed, perhaps due to the head scarf, that she was a conservative believer, a pilgrim. I worked slowly around her trying not to disturb her reflection. After discreetly staring at her, I began to approach, stopping and starting several times, prepared to apologise. As the reader no doubt has already suspected, the woman was made of wax.

'Mary: the Return' or *Maria återkomsten* stands in oblique position to the king Gustav Vasa's tomb, what was once a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages. Gustav Vasa chose his burial place 10 years before his death in 1560; however, Mary was further displaced in the 1800s with a series of baroque, nationalistic scenes from the life of the former king.

Mary returned to Uppsala officially in 2005, with ethnic features and simple clothing that cannot easily be placed. At once eerily vivid and timeless, Anders Widoff's Mary engages in a powerful diachronic dialogue with the older yet more transient icon Gustav Vasa. In so doing, her return to the cathedral witnesses the disillusionment with both Swedish nationalism and secular hubris.

Others have remarked upon her 'return' more generally in the Swedish Church. In the revised hymnbook of 1983, for example, additional hymns are dedicated to her. This may be evidence of her alleged growing importance in Protestantism. Several recent works



Fig. 1. Anders Widoff: *Maria (Återkomsten)*. Photo: Anders Damberg/Geobild 2005 © BUS.

and collections written by or containing essays by Protestant theologians attest to this. Some of these titles include Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby's *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (2002), Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson's *Mary, Mother of God* (2004), Shannon Kubiak's *God Called A Girl: How Mary Changed Her World – And You Can Too* (2005), Tim Perry's *Mary for Evangelicals* (2006), and Scot McKnight's *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (2006).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Mary continues to be a subject of fascination and devotion in traditional and non-traditional sacred sites, attracting more numerous and more diverse pilgrims than ever. She has even featured in online apparitions as documented in Paolo Apolito's *The Internet and the Madonna* (2005).

She has also figured prominently in medieval studies of late, and scholars have produced several comprehensive studies, such as Miri Rubin's *Mary: Mother of God* (2009) as well as many studies with particular geographical, generic or comparative foci, such as Mary F. Thurlkill's *Chosen Among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (2007), Lesley Twomey's *The Serpent and the Rose: The Immaculate Conception and Hispanic Poetry in the Late Medieval Period* (2008), and Adrienne Williams Boyarin's *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England* (2008).

One might wonder, however, whether Mary's return to religious culture was preceded by a departure. Or rather as Miri Rubin suggests she is a 'constant presence' standing, however humbly, in the shadows of the Reformation.

The waxen immediacy of the Uppsala Mary is an appropriate medium for representing a figure characterised by flexibility across communities, periods, and ideologies. As a recent interdisciplinary collection has demonstrated, contemporary Mary represents both a hope for social and economic justice and a tool for repressive regimes (see *Moved by Mary: the Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*). Likewise she has been reappropriated by feminist the-

ologians and denounced as a patriarchal ideal by others, see Tina Beattie's *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: a Gynocentric Refiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray* (1999).

However, Mary's dexterity as a religious and cultural symbol precedes our own recent centuries. Some of her richness and ambiguity is captured in the diversity of essays in this volume. Like the Uppsala Mary, we hope it may invite conversation across not only those interested in the medieval and early modern periods, but also in our own.