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Words and Matter: The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Parish Life

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The Virgin Mary was one of the most prominent persons of the European Middle Ages. Although she is only mentioned in the Bible a few times,¹ her cult spread widely and her life reached everyone somehow, rich or poor. As words, her legacy was reiterated and praised in poetry, *exempla*, sermons, and legends. As matter, her image was found in churches around Europe, where she was honored and glorified by the human senses from the visual depictions of panels and manuscripts, to the rhythms of chant. Mary's compassion, her humility, her obedience and all other embellishing virtues were taught to her followers and made commonly known to her worshippers. Interpretation of how these stories were made and disseminated, as well as how these different media and genres intersect, is fundamental to understanding the reach and impact of the Virgin Mary and the Marian cult in late medieval and early modern culture and parish life.

The fascination of the cult of the Virgin Mary has endured. During recent years scholars from many disciplines have discussed Mary, the cult of the Virgin Mary and her place in contemporary societies. The Virgin Mary and her cult have been analyzed from theological, historical, literary, iconographic, and social perspec-

¹ According to Chris Maunder 2007, p. 12, 11 times (plus parallel passages); Matthew 1.1–2.23, Luke 1.26–56, Luke 2.1–52, Mark 3.31–5, Mark 6.3, John 2.1–12, John 7.41–2, 8.41, John 19.25–7, Acts 1.14, Revelation 12.1–6 and Galatians 4.4.

tives. Many monographs and articles have been written,² yet they are by no means exhaustive. Old questions remain unanswered and new standpoints emerge. In the twenty-first century, the Virgin Mary, the words and matter that concern her, continue to arouse our curiosity.

This book is about the Virgin Mary in late medieval and early modern parishes. The late medieval period was the golden age of the Marian cult and she was massively worshipped in both words and material artefacts. Her life and her deeds were praised and glorified in various ways within the church, and her cult impressed the everyday life of parish churches. The contributors to this volume analyze both the words about the Virgin Mary and the objects displaying her in order to enlarge our understanding of the impact of her cult during the late medieval period and the years after the Reformation. By combining words and matter we aim to sketch aspects about medieval life in parish churches, and also to emphasize the importance of Mary in late medieval devotion. Visual and material culture were closely related and worked together in the cult. The essays in this volume therefore concern matter, words and specifically, the meeting of matter and words.

The foundation for this book is a conference held at Umeå University in November 2012. Over three days, scholars from many parts of Europe gathered to discuss the cult, manuscripts, and images relating to the Queen of Heaven. In addition, participants discussed the different temporal and geographical contexts for the cult of the Virgin Mary. Professor Miri Rubin of Queen Mary, University of London opened the conference with an introduction to the field. Other plenaries were Professor Beat Kümin from University of Warwick who presented ongoing parish research at the Warwick Network for Parish Research, Professor Catherine Oakes from Kellogg College, University of Oxford who introduced a discussion about the development of the visual culture about the Virgin Mary, especially from a perspective of materiality, and Pro-

² For example Warner 1976; Clayton 1990; Wright 2006; Rubin 2009.

fessor Nils Holger Petersen, University of Copenhagen, who traced the development of Marian liturgy during the Lutheran reformation in Denmark (see the last chapter in this volume).

Drawn from this symposium, this anthology *Words and Matter: the Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Parish Life* includes articles from 12 participants who represent diverse disciplines and various European universities.³ The articles aim to widen our knowledge about how the Virgin Mary was incorporated within European parish life by words and matter during the late Middle Ages and the immediate years after the Reformation. Historians, art experts, literature scholars and philologists contribute to new knowledge about the Virgin Mary and late medieval parish culture.

The collection is divided into four parts. The first part, *Mary in Medieval Parish Art*, has two contributions. In the opening essay, Ann-Catrine Eriksson discusses a series of wall paintings from the life of Christ found on parish churches from Gotland produced by the anonymous *Passionsmästaren*. While this collection of parish church art narrates the story of Christ's passion, Eriksson focuses on how *Passionsmästaren* constructs the character of the Virgin Mary, maintaining that although subordinate to her son, she is vital to the general message. As indicated by her gestures, Mary is needed in those programmes as the intercessor.

³ In addition to the authors of this book, Dr. Joanne W. Anderson, University of Warwick, presented her research on the Virgin Mary in the mural paintings of late medieval Bolzano; Dr. Rolf Hugoson and doctoral student Esa K. Marttila, Umeå University, interpreted the Virgin Mary on the Skänninge City Coat of Arms; Dr. Antonella Liuzzo Scorpo, Queen Mary, presented the cult of Virgin Mary in thirteenth century Iberia; Dr. Mia Åkestam, Stockholm University, discussed the Annunciation Iconography; doctoral student Don White, University of Warwick, presented a paper considering Marian matter in late medieval parish rood screens; doctoral student Matthew Champion, Queen Mary, University of London, gave a paper about Marian time in fifteenth-century Burgundian towns; Dr. Cecilia Lindhé, Umeå University, presented medieval materiality through digital interfaces; Dr. Anthony Lappin, Maynooth University, discussed Marian statues; and Professor Jonas Liliequist, Umeå University, considered holiness and masculinity through the model of Saint Joseph.

In the second chapter we encounter another sort of Marian parish iconography but this time from Rome, the centre of Western Christianity. Barbara Fabjan describes and interprets the Marian scenes on the glass windows in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo. The differences between the small parish churches on Gotland and the impressive church in Rome are reflected in the Marian iconography. As Soprintendenza of the medieval church art in Rome Barbara Fabjan is saturated in this material as evidenced by her comprehensive and nuanced discussion.

In the second part of this book we meet art and written texts in combination. First, art historian Eva Lq Sandgren discusses images for devotion found in manuscripts made for the female convent of Vadstena Abbey. Sandgren presents a methodology for understanding how images collaborate with written texts outside the monastery even where comparable material from the Swedish parish churches is missing. Sandgren focuses on the nuns' devotion for the passion of Christ, especially His wounded heart, which is a frequent motif in their – usually vernacular – prayer books, but the same theme can also be seen in sculpture and embroidery. The passion theme was central for the Birgittines and it is of interest to how material culture collaborates with textual culture in the Birgittine context.

Anne Mette Hansen's contribution also concentrates on images in prayer books. While Sandgren is an art historian, Hansen is a philologist and she approaches the concept from a philological perspective. With examples taken from Marine Jesperdatter's prayer book, Hansen argues that images of the Virgin Mary interact with texts, resulting in a unified devotional experience. As Hansen mentions, the identity of Marine Jespersdatter is not known but she might have been from an aristocratic family, thus offering a perspective from a different social context than Sandgren's monastic material. According to Hansen, words and matter in combination give us a good glimpse of private Marian meditation, and both media are of importance in the experience.

In the next chapter, Karoline Kjesrud presents conceptions of

the Virgin Mary in medieval Norway and Iceland. By discussing the Old Norse Marian cult, she illuminates similarities with the Marian movement in general, and finds that the interpretation of this cultural context is similar to that of the Western Europe. The first part of Kjesrud's article is theoretical, and the second part establishes how the Virgin Mary is presented in Old Norse texts and images with many rich examples.

In the last chapter of the second part, Salvador Ryan discusses yet another cultural context – the Irish tradition – where the cult of the Virgin differed in many ways from the central cult. Many of the artistic objects from Ireland have been destroyed or have simply vanished, but there are still some stone sculptures. Thus, it is difficult to give a full picture of how the Irish parishes must have looked by examining the material remains. Instead we need to rely on the words. Ryan uses the Irish *Liber exemplorum* to explain the Irish cult and he succeeds in offering an intriguing picture of the Virgin Mary in late medieval Ireland.

The third part of this book focuses on the matter of Mary's body and her followers, following these themes in the experience of worship and texts. This part begins with Camille Bataille's contribution about the transmission of Marian themes in late medieval Sweden, especially the rosary. Bataille discusses the limitations of the conventional theoretical approach, and then he presents how the use of cognitive anthropological tools can illustrate overlooked questions, for example, why the rosary was so attractive during the late Middle Ages.

Virginia Langum's chapter about the Virgin Mary and natural maternity examines what it means to be a *kinde* ('natural', 'affectionate') mother in medieval England, and what implications this has for contemporary understanding of the Virgin Mary. With insight from both medieval English religious and medical texts, Langum carefully describes the medieval understanding of maternity and the place the Virgin Mary occupies within this culture. Themes such as the suffering of labour and the act of breastfeeding by 'normal' mothers are put in dialogue with Marian ideology.

Langum shows that although Mary was clean from Eve's sin and her delivery was painless – as for example Saint Birgitta maintains – Mary's later sufferings, above all at her son's death, extend to compassion for all mothers who suffer and love their children.

A closely related subject is discussed in Katie L. Walter's contribution about the Virgin Mary and the excremental. By analyzing the Middle English translation of *Stimulus Amoris*, *The Prickyng of Love*, and its appended texts, Walter shows how medieval people handled Mary's motherly duties, such as the care of an incontinent child. As the *Prickyng's* appended texts demonstrate, it is Mary's maternal affects of love and compassion disrupt the binary of disgust/*jouissance* otherwise elicited by the excremental body. Walter's article displays devotion to the Virgin Mary on a less discussed but intriguing level.

The last part of this volume concerns the Virgin Mary in the reformed parish. During the conference, this issue was very much in focus: what happened to the parish cult of the Virgin Mary under the influence of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation; were there new contributions to Mary's textual and visual culture. There is often a divide between scholars working with the medieval period and scholars working with the early modern period, leaving a lacuna in our knowledge of what happened during the intervening years. One scholar who rectifies this is Stephen Bates who, in his essay, examines Marian devotion in the vernacular between 1525 and 1537. By analyzing the vernacular English rosary and following its development from the late medieval period until the middle of the sixteenth century, Bates gives an exciting picture of the small changes in the lay Marian view. Just as Anne Dillon earlier has supposed, Bates finds that Rosary devotion in the early sixteenth century was not a 'spiritual remnant' of late medieval piety, but a Jesuit revision.⁴

The second contribution to this theme is Elizabeth Tingle's article about the Virgin Mary and the dead. Tingle argues that despite the

⁴ Dillon 2003.

Protestant Reformers' denial of Mary's intercessory role in salvation and reconfiguration of the geography of the afterlife, Mary's pre-eminence as intercessor was maintained in early-modern Catholicism because Mary catered for departed souls as well as for the living. One reason behind this was that Marian devotions accommodated collective as well as personal religiosity. Tingle demonstrates that the cult of the Virgin evolved in different ways; Mary displaced other saints from the hierarchy of intercession, Mary reassumed her role as the most important patron for the souls in Purgatory, the presence of Mary made the Eucharist more efficacious, and Mary was used as a weapon in the battle for orthodoxy, against Protestants and also against popular heterodoxy in Catholic communities. Tingle maintains convincingly that this development can be seen in the influence of popular post-mortem practices on the material and the physical economy of the counter-reformation Church.

In the last chapter in the volume, Nils Holger Petersen, an expert on premodern liturgy, discusses the development of Marian Feasts during the Lutheran Reformation in Denmark. In a short overview he shows how Marian theology was transformed as Protestants came to reject the traditional intercessory roles of Mary and the saints. By analyzing collections of model sermons written in Danish, Petersen can detail the differences in Marian theology before and after the Reformation. According to Petersen, the concept of Mary developed into a complex and paradoxical figure, every positive description followed by derogatory statements.

Our ambition with this volume is to display how words and matter have defined the role of the Virgin Mary during the centuries before and after the Reformation in different cultural contexts within Europe. Diverse views of her emerge dependent upon place and period. The Virgin Mary's role as an intercessor for all people made her both loved and honored, but also complicated. Both words and matter must be seen as rhetorical tools that display her status in different social networks. By analyzing these media together we can

reach a better understanding of the Virgin Mary, of history, and mentalities – something of which we intend this volume to be a part.

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