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978-0-521-76296-0 - The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture

Gary Waller

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THE VIRGIN MARY IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

The Virgin Mary was one of the most powerful images of the Middle Ages, central to people's experience of Christianity. During the Reformation, however, many images of the Virgin were destroyed, as Protestantism rejected the way the medieval Church over-valued and sexualized Mary. Although increasingly marginalized in Protestant thought and practice, her traces and surprising transformations continued to haunt early modern England. Combining historical analysis and contemporary theory, including issues raised by psychoanalysis and feminist theology, Gary Waller examines the literature, theology, and popular culture associated with Mary in the transition between late medieval and early modern England. He contrasts a variety of pre-Reformation texts and events, including popular Mariology, poetry, tales, drama, pilgrimage, and the emerging "New Learning," with later sixteenth-century ruins, songs, ballads, Petrarchan poetry, the works of Shakespeare, and other texts where the Virgin's presence or influence, sometimes surprisingly, can be found.

GARY WALLER is Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies and Theatre at Purchase College, State University of New York. His books include *The Strong Necessity of Time*; *Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke*; *The Sidney Family Romance: Mary Wroth, William Herbert and the Early Modern Construction of Gender*; *Edmund Spenser: a Literary Life*; *Reading Texts* (with Kathleen McCormick); and *English Poetry of the Sixteenth Century*.

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Preface

Julia Kristeva calls the Virgin a “combination of power and sorrow, sovereignty and the unnameable,” making up “one of the most powerful imaginary constructs known in the history of civilization.” This book explores aspects of the poetry, drama, tales, ballads, and something of the theological and polemical religious writings that expressed and explored, in complex and contradictory ways, that “powerful construct” immediately before and during the Reformation period in England. Rather ambiguously we have come to term this period “early modern,” but it might as easily be called “late medieval,” since what I term the Virgin’s “fades” and “traces,” felt long after the so-called Middle Ages were supposedly over, nonetheless had their origins in the medieval period and their transformations often loop back to earlier, only gradually emergent, social practices there. I tie these aspects of the period’s ideological history together with what I hope is a lightly worn but distinctive presentism that arises from an ongoing dialogue with certain aspects of contemporary thought, especially psychoanalytic cultural criticism, the sociology of popular religion, and recent Catholic feminist theology, some of which is influenced by Kristeva herself.

The year 1538 when, as part of the dissolution of religious houses in the late 1530s, a number of “images” of the Virgin were taken to London in the late summer or autumn and burned, is the fulcrum of my study. I move back and forward in time from that date, which was just one incident in a whole process by which the religious and broader cultural life of England was re-directed, but which is of great symbolic significance when we consider the Virgin Mary in England. In what sense, I ask, does that event, and similar ones across the country, mark the end of an era – not just in the material terms but also in the history of ideologies, in men’s and women’s emotional allegiances and their deeply rooted, even unconscious, patterns of behavior? Why (as my opening chapter shows) was the Virgin a target of unusual violence in England for the next century? Why did the reformers become so insistent on removing the presence of the Virgin from

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people's minds? To what extent were they successful? And what happened to the memory of Marian centers such as Ipswich, Penrhys, Walsingham, and Woolpit, and (in a sense) to the Virgin herself, after the Dissolution?

These are some of the questions around which my study is written. Both before and significantly long after the events of 1538, and throughout the following century of iconoclasm, the Virgin Mary inspired a rich tradition of poems, fiction, songs, ballads, musical compositions and folk legends, solemn devotional writings and hostile satire. Although significantly downgraded, marginalized, re-negotiated, or all-but-eradicated (all terms used by modern historians) in the dominant Protestant theology, liturgy, devotion, and the very gradually (and often reluctantly) changing recesses of popular culture, the continuities and transformations of the Virgin, I argue, continue to haunt early modern England.

This book starts with 1538, and contextualizes the Protestant regime's devaluation of the Virgin by examining key moments in the history of English iconoclasm over the next century. Thereafter it is divided into two parts. Chapters 2 to 4 look back at the Virgin's presence in late medieval culture. In Chapter 2, I focus on one of the crucial factors in the reformers' hostility to Mary, the alleged late medieval sexualization of the Virgin in theology, devotion, and popular culture. In Chapter 3, I examine her place in late medieval poetry, romances, and drama. Chapter 4 looks at Marian shrines and especially women's pilgrimages in the light of the emergence of late medieval Christocentrism and Erasmus's influential critique of pilgrimage, which contributed, however unintentionally, to the Dissolution of the late 1530s, a part of which was the conflagration of 1538.

Chapters 5 to 8 look at what I term the "fades" and "traces" of the Virgin in Protestant England, in ballads, poems, music, drama, as well as theological controversy, after 1538, as the Protestant regime tried to get the Virgin, as one early iconoclast put it, "out of their heads." My analysis shows, I believe, only the partial success of such an enterprise, as early modern England, even in its long and contradictory Protestantization, articulated a surprising nostalgia for the Virgin and what she was, or could be imagined to represent, in human life, even if she underwent multiple and contradictory transformations. Finally, I return to the theoretical "polylogue" I set up in my opening chapter and speculate why and how, four hundred years later, we might need to recognize, as Kristeva, the self-styled "Christian Atheist" does, the continuing power of the Virgin.

A Catholic friend remarked that for someone who has a great deal of skepticism about the Virgin Mary, I nonetheless seem to have been given a lot of work to do for (or, as my friend said, "by") her. I am not a professional

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(nor even an amateur) theologian, although some of my earliest publications were in theological journals and, as Terry Eagleton remarks in his 2008 Terry Lectures at Yale, the late 1960s in Cambridge was an era providing exciting theological explorations for impressionistic young minds. My fascination with the Virgin therefore goes back many years, even to when as an adolescent I read, equally avidly, a deliciously contradictory mélange of books on Marxism, Rationalism, and Kabbalistic mysticism in the presence of a very small and very cheap plaster reproduction of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. I have been grateful to have learned thereafter from those with different traditions of religious thought and experience, and none, including Peter Dane, Peter Erb, Bishop Richard Garrard (and Ann), Ken Larsen, Werner Pelz, Fr. Kenneth Prebble, and Bill Sessions (who introduced me to Medjogorie and may be pleased that that particular "madonnine" experience helped bring me back to the larger topic). In the latter stages of writing, Tina Beattie's Catholic feminist writings, both scholarly and popular, have been a continuing stimulus to my thinking, as my many references to her work will show. Regrettably, Jennifer Glancy's study of the "emotional sway" of Mary's sexuality, *Corporal Knowledge*, appeared too late to be discussed except in a few footnotes.

Over the years, many teachers, colleagues, and students have contributed much to this study, though I cannot blame them for its shortfalls or excesses. Many years ago, Professor J. C. Reid directed my first extended piece of academic writing; he would have been pleased by my return to the subject of Catholic devotion. At Magdalene College, Cambridge, I learned much from John Stevens and Jack Bennett, as I did from my students, most notably Andrew Brown and Michael Wheeler. I am very appreciative of the Pepys Librarian at Magdalene, Dr. Stephen Luckett, first, for (after nearly forty years) remembering me from earlier days, and, second, for permission to consult the library's unique copy of the Pynson Ballad. Elsewhere in Cambridge, I benefited especially from the kindness of Derek Brewer and L. C. Knights, and I was privileged to sit, if not at the feet of Raymond Williams, at least within earshot. More recently, Andrea Clough, Craig Dionne, and Susan Morrison have encouraged my work, by kindly reading early versions, especially of Chapter 2, while Michele Osherow has reminded me that Miriam of Nazareth was a Jewish mother before she was Christianized, allegorized, and given titles, shrines, and devotees. I am especially appreciative of Alison Chapman's help, both through her own research on the Walsingham ballads and Milton's hagiography, and for her perceptive comments on some very early draft chapters. My colleague Lenora Champagne's play *Traces/Fades* helped me formulate some of my thinking

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about the way I should describe the presence of the Virgin after the Reformation.

Drawing as it does on history, art history, literary criticism and theory, gender study, theology, and psychoanalysis, my approach is necessarily interdisciplinary and locates itself within cultural studies rather than in the traditions of empirical history or literary history. Despite (or rather, because of) that presentist bias, my work relies greatly on the extraordinary detailed historical research that has been carried out in the past generation on the late Middle Ages and Reformation periods in England, to which I am deeply indebted, both for educating me and for providing models of scholarship of which I am repeatedly conscious of falling short, thus exemplifying my old Cambridge and antipodean friend Richard Bosworth's insistence on the difference between a "real" historian and a cultural studies person (he also plays cricket better than I do). I think of those historical scholars to whom all of us working in early modern studies are indebted, such as Margaret Aston, G. W. Bernard, Patrick Collinson, Alexandra Cuffel, Eamon Duffy, Carlos Eire, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Arthur Marotti, Peter Marshall, Christine Peters, Miri Rubin, Ethan Shagan, Alison Shell, and Alexandra Walsham. My reliance on their and many others' historical researches will be obvious (and, I trust, is appropriately acknowledged) throughout. I have also drawn frequently, initially with amused skepticism and then with awe, on Edmund Waterton's enthusiastic 1879 collage of Mariological trivia, history, legend, and prejudice, the remarkable *Pietas Mariana Britannica*. I am grateful to many vicars, vergers, priests-in-charge, sacristans, friends, colleagues, and guides all across England, from east to west, from Walsingham and Castle Acre to Penrhys and Furness, who have over the years provided hospitality, fielded questions, commented on local legends, and tolerated my hunting around for the remnants of wells and holy trees, not to mention apparition sites, statues, wall paintings, places where the Virgin sat, leaned, or rested, many of which were stimulated by examples from Waterton's obsessive collection. Scilla Landale has been especially helpful for her expertise on (and providing easy access to) Walsingham, Binham, and Houghton-in-the-Dale. My wife and our son Philip have been extremely indulgent to me on such excursions. My older sons, Michael and Andrew, have tolerated accounts of their father's obsessions from a safe distance, and so this book is in part for their daughters (and my granddaughters), Dahlia and Kalina.

As the study developed, I joined a group of scholars who in 2008 met at the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham to share their research in that

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fascinating environment. My colleagues in that venture included Bradley Brookshire, Michael Carroll, Simon Coleman, Susan Dunn-Hensley, Carole Hill, Dominic Janes, Susan Morrison, Tom Rist, and John Twyning. Work in progress toward this book appeared in the volume of essays emerging from that meeting, *Walsingham from the Middle Ages to Modernism*, edited by Dominic Janes and myself, published by Ashgate. Early versions of some paragraphs appeared in the *Sydney Journal*, thanks to its encouraging editor Mary Ellen Lamb, and others in *Medieval to Renaissance*, edited by Konrad Eisenbichler, published by the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies at the University of Toronto.

Research for this book was undertaken with the help of a number of grants from the faculty development fund of United University Professions, the Purchase College Foundation, and Greenwood/Labadorf Faculty Support Awards from the School of Humanities at Purchase, whose office staff, Rosalie Reutershan and Stephanie Acton, were always helpful. I also thank the staffs of the Cambridge University Library, the Pepys Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon, the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, and the Purchase College librarian Patrick Callahan and his wonderfully efficient and persistent interlibrary loan and visual resource librarians. I gratefully acknowledge the friendship and help of Purchase College's Associate Provost Bill Baskin, always willing to keep me updated on niceties of the calendar of the Virgin's feasts and festivals (as well as current apparitions) and former Provost Jennifer Clarke. A number of my students at Purchase aided in the preparation of the book, not least by listening (and contributing) in classes, notably Isabella Kyle and Sasha Piltser. I am extremely grateful for the generous and stimulating comments and suggestions by the two anonymous readers consulted by Cambridge University Press. At the Press, Andrew Brown, Linda Bree, Maartje Scheltens, Christina Sarigiannidou and the Press team of copy-editors, technicians, and designers have been remarkably patient, supportive, and generous.

My greatest debt is to my wife and colleague, Kathleen McCormick, to whom this book is dedicated, and of whom I confess I am close to being, despite the warning of the Laudian biographer of the Virgin, Anthony Stafford, both an admirer and an idolator. My devotions are directed to her not just for her courageous and creative explorations in her writings of many of the issues I try to raise, but for helping me understand more intimately through her life what Kristeva calls the "power and sorrow" of the Virgin Mary. One of Kathy's wonderfully outrageous,

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yet very serious, stories is entitled “I Always Felt Like I Was On Pretty Good Terms With The Virgin Mary, Even Though I Hadn’t Gotten Pregnant In High School.” She has helped me to share and, I hope, express part of the humor and delight, as well as the seriousness, of the power and sorrow that are both celebrated and critiqued in that story and her life work.