



Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England

Georgiana Donavin

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Mary, Mother of the Word, became an icon for excellent communication during the English Middle Ages. This engaging work explores the literature that established Mary as headmistress of the liberal arts and exemplar of perfected speech. Given England's rich and extended practices of Marian piety, Georgiana Donavin focuses her research solely on English writers, from the Anglo-Saxon period through the Late Middle Ages. In the writings of John of Garland, John of Howden, Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Margery Kempe, and several anonymous lyricists and playwrights, Donavin illuminates Mary's position as the great teacher of trivium studies and muse of various discourses.

Scribit Mater begins with a survey of medieval English representations of the Virgin Mary as a wise and studious woman. It demonstrates how diverse authors imagined the Virgin's holy speech to be the highest sign of her wisdom. These authors venerated Mary as a Christian Lady Rhetorica because they were taught to read and compose by studying Marian services and hymns, they heard Mary's mellifluous speech in renderings of the *Magnificat* and other popular lyrics, or they saw the Virgin Birth as the purest articulation of the Word. They appropriated Mary's rhetorical powers in many forms: in university textbooks teaching students to imitate the Virgin's oratory, in meditations describing the Virgin's body as a holy grammar, in short lyrics extolling the Virgin's beautiful voice, in long narrative verse seeking the Virgin's inspiration and illumination, and more.

While *Scribit Mater* highlights different medieval English understandings of the Virgin's sapient eloquence according to class, education, and gender, it demonstrates long-standing and widespread traditions acknowledging and celebrating the Mother's verbal prowess.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Georgiana Donavin, professor of English at Westminster College, is the author of *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'* and other essays on John Gower's poetry. Along with Eve Salisbury and Merrall L. Price, she co-edited *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*. She is coeditor of the series *Disputatio*, and her special projects for that series include *Speculum Sermonis: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Medieval Sermon* and *Romance and Rhetoric: Essays in Honour of Dhira B. Mahoney*.



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