

Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary by Miri Rubin

London: Allen Lane, 2009
(ISBN 978-0-7139-9818-4). 532pp.

Monika Winiarczyk (University of Glasgow)

In the introduction of *Mother of God*, Miri Rubin, medieval historian and Professor of Early Modern History at Queen Mary, University of London, states that the text aims to present the 'history of the ideas, practises and images that developed around the figure of the Virgin Mary from the earliest times until around the year 1600' (p.xxi), and that is exactly what the author accomplishes. Divided into six parts, the text traces the history of the Virgin Mary chronologically, from her early representations following the death of Christ through to the sixteenth century and the Reformation.

This is a well-written work which manages to effectively and clearly navigate through the beliefs surrounding one of the most complicated and perplexing figures of the Christian faith. Each part of the book is arranged according to a specific time period which allows for easy referencing. The text as a whole can be viewed as six self-contained studies which can be consulted individually according to the specific interest of the reader, without impeding the cohesive flow from one part of the text to the next.

Part one begins with the 'Earliest Glimpses of Mary' and concludes at the year 431AD. The chapters focus on Mary's role in the Christian Empire and how her image and importance altered in the face of changing political power structures. Part two traces the spread of Mary's popularity across Europe throughout the first

millennium while part three examines the establishment of Mary's domination in the Christian Church between the years 1000 and 1200. Part four discusses how Mary featured in everyday devotion from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century and the difference in her relationship with medieval men and women. The last two parts of the text consider Mary's depiction as the 'Queen of Heaven' in the fifteenth century and how her portrayal was transformed after the sixteenth century and the Reformation. Throughout these various sections, the text shows how Mary's figure was changed and transformed from the mother of Christ to bride and companion for the female-deprived clergy.

One of the most noteworthy features of the book is the amount of material which the author manages to cover. For example, in part two, Rubin sets the difficult task of studying the representation of the Virgin Mary from the fifth to the eleventh century, from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Irish Sea. Cohesively covering five hundred years of European history, the author explores the role of the Virgin Mary from her relationship with Judaism, to the accusations of idolatry which plagued representations of the Virgin Mary following the Christian confrontation with Islam and the Virgin's emergence in Western European culture. Part of this success can be attributed to the wide range of material which Rubin manages to tie together into a clear and structured narrative. From the portrayal of Mary in the writings of medieval theologians, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, to fifteenth-century poems from the court of Burgundy, Rubin draws on a wide variety of primary sources. This allows her to discover how the role of the Virgin Mary was transformed from the mother of Christ to the female substitute for

celibate monks and from the human face of the Christian faith to her disregard by the Reformation.

There have been numerous studies dedicated to the Virgin Mary since Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* was published almost 30 years ago. However, what sets Rubin's treatment apart from many of these studies is that throughout the text she does not present the Virgin as an abstract theological concept or satire but rather as a concrete, historical figure who needs to be studied in light of the historical material available.

Mother of God can be seen as aimed at a diverse academic audience from a wide range of disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of the sources studied, which range from literary to theological sources, and the in-depth nature of the text means that the book would be a useful source for any scholar, whether a postgraduate student or an established academic. Any scholar will also appreciate the comprehensive index which allows for quick referencing and navigation through the text, as well as the extensive bibliography and end notes which provide numerous sources for further reading. However, none of this prohibits *Mother of God* from being accessible to a general readership. The book could be easily understood and appreciated by anyone who wants to understand the development and history of the Virgin Mary, even if they have no knowledge or experience of the Christian faith.

That is not to say that *Mother of God* is without faults. One of the drawbacks of the piece is the limited engagement with visual representations of the Virgin Mary. Tracing almost 1600 years of history, *Mother of God* only includes 29 images. More importantly, instead of focusing on stock representations of the figure, Rubin prefers to focus on mostly obscure images. *Mother of God* does not

disregard the importance of the Virgin Mary in the visual arts completely; the author herself notes the prominence of the figure in Western art in the opening lines of the introduction. However, considering the rich nature of the visual sources available, one would expect a more in-depth engagement with the material than the text manages to offer.

Furthermore, Rubin has the tendency of sometimes slipping into a rather literary tone which transforms the Virgin Mary into a revolutionary figure who managed to survive accusations of idolatry and the Reformation. An example of this can be seen in the conclusion where Rubin presents the Virgin as the protector of the Christian faith against the atheism of twentieth-century Communism. This can sometimes give *Mother of God* the tone of historical fiction. When dealing with a figure as iconic as the Virgin Mary, such hyperboles are difficult to avoid and may even be considered necessary in order to convey the sheer impact and omnipresence of the figure in Western history. However, such exaggerations call into question the validity of the text and distract from its scholastic merit.

None of these criticisms deter from the fact that *Mother of God* is one of the most comprehensive and clearly structured studies of the Virgin Mary currently available. Accessible to a wide range of audiences and full of novel interpretations of primary sources, Miri Rubin's text presents a comprehensive history of one of the most abstract and enigmatic figures of the Christian Church in less than 600 pages: a praise-worthy feat indeed.

Bibliography

Warner, Marina. 1983. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Vintage Books.

The Kelvingrove Review
www.gla.ac.uk/tkr