

## Marian Studies

---

Volume 53 *The Marian Dimension of the Christian Life: II. The Middle Period*

Article 6

---

2002

### Mary, Motherhood, and Teaching in the Book to a Mother and Chaucer's ABC

Mary McDevitt

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

McDevitt, Mary (2002) "Mary, Motherhood, and Teaching in the Book to a Mother and Chaucer's ABC," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 53, Article 6.

Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol53/iss1/6](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol53/iss1/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu), [ecommons@udayton.edu](mailto:ecommons@udayton.edu).

## MARY, MOTHERHOOD, AND TEACHING IN THE *BOOK TO A MOTHER* AND CHAUCER'S *ABC*

Mary McDevitt\*

### Introduction

*Magistra totius veritatis*: Gueric of Igny's description<sup>1</sup> of the Virgin Mary could very well have been a late medieval description of mothers as well. If Mary was considered the teacher, the mistress of all truth to the faithful, then each mother was seen as the teacher of truth to her children; but what David Herlihy has said of historians of the Middle Ages could also be said of students of medieval literary and devotional texts, namely, that they "have perhaps not sufficiently recognized the importance of woman, of mothers, as receptacles and transmitters of sacred values."<sup>2</sup> I am convinced that, although we moderns may overlook the influence of this distinctively female model on medieval texts and discourse, it nevertheless informs both some of the major and lesser known works of the later Middle Ages. In this paper, I will discuss the idiom of motherhood and spiritual teaching and guidance, especially in its Marian form, as it appears in two specific works, the fourteenth-century spiritual "handbook" written by an anonymous priest—the *Book to a Mother*—and Chaucer's lyric poem/prayer

\*Professor Mary McDevitt, Ph.D. (Stanford U.), has studied Mary in medieval Marian poetry, especially as found in the works of Chaucer and Dante. She is the author of "With a Worde, of the Mayden Spoke: Medieval Marian Poetics" (thesis, Ph.D.; Stanford University, 1993).

<sup>1</sup>From *Sermon 4 for the Annunciation*, cited in an article by an anonymous Cistercian, "Marian Titles in the Sermons of Blessed Gueric," *Liturgy* 2 (1987), n. 2.

<sup>2</sup>David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1985). See also the collected essays in *La religion de ma mère: Le rôle des femmes dans la transmission de la foi*, ed. Jean Delumeau (Paris: Cerf, 1992).

*An ABC.* First, however, I will lay some necessary groundwork by discussing the cultural context out of which these texts emerged, in particular, cultural assumptions and expectations about motherhood and teaching and the Marian forms of this. I would add that in emphasizing these more positive images of woman and mother, I am not setting out to deny the prevalent misogynist and common anti-marital rhetoric of the Middle Ages; however, like Alcuin Blamires and others, I want to focus our attention on another, alternative tradition of discourse about the female.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Mother as Teacher**

Even a cursory survey of medieval texts and art would reveal that mothers were acknowledged as transmitters of the faith. From saints' lives to pedagogical manuals we find the mother cited as the earliest teacher of spiritual wisdom. In a charming early example of this, St. Jerome encourages a mother to use letter blocks to teach her young daughter the foundations of writing:

Have a set of letters made for her, of boxwood or ivory, and tell her their names. Let her play with them, making a road to learning. . . . When she begins with uncertain hand to use the pen, either let another hand be put over hers to guide her baby fingers, or else have the letters marked on the tablet so that her writing may follow the outlines and keep to their limits without straying away. . . . The very words from which she will get into the way of forming sentences should not be haphazard but be definitely chosen and arranged on purpose. For example, let her have the names of the prophets and the apostles, and the whole list of patriarchs from Adam downward, as Matthew and Luke give it. She will then be doing two things at the same time, and will remember them afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the mother's guiding hand leads the child's in a physical manifestation of her larger role as teacher; through her guidance, she teaches the child boundaries.

In keeping with the spirit of St Jerome's advice, mothers often provided the building blocks—literally and figuratively—

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997).

<sup>4</sup>St. Jerome, Letter 107, *Select Letters*, trans. F. A. Wright (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1933).

of their children's learning, particularly their spiritual learning. This is true of both the literate and the unlettered; Dhuoda's manual provides a famous example of a mother herself writing an educational guide for her son, and a woman of humbler origins, St. Joan of Arc, also attributes her faith and her knowledge of the three most important prayers solely to her mother.<sup>5</sup> The life of Beatrice of Nazareth, a thirteenth-century nun, names Beatrice's mother as the person responsible for the girl's early education<sup>6</sup>—a typical element in saints' lives. The very conventionality of this role of the mother suggests that it is grounded in a domestic reality. Although I will be looking at how the larger cultural image of the maternal influences texts, literature and iconography can in turn also provide us insight into the role of the mother because they can reflect realities of family life; in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, for example, it is likely that the poor mother who sends her son to school and teaches him devotion to the Virgin found her counterparts in the real world (as, tragically, did the anti-semitic elements in the tale).<sup>7</sup> A marvelous late medieval image, the Holy Kinship, features St. Anne, Mary and other daughters attributed to Anne in some hagiographical legends; in this representation, the women of St. Anne's family sit with their children, in some cases teaching them. Pamela Sheingorn, who has written extensively about this motif, concludes that "the role of mother as educator can be found to be encoded in these representations."<sup>8</sup> Physical artifacts

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), 249.

<sup>6</sup>See *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200–1268*, trans. and annotated by Roger De Ganck and John Baptist Hasbrouck (Cistercian Fathers Series no. 50; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>"Thus hath this wydwe hir litle sone ytaught / Oure blisful Lady, Cristes mooder deere, / To worschipe ay, and he forgat it nought." *The Prioress's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All Chaucer quotations are from this edition.

<sup>8</sup>Pamela Sheingorn, "The Holy Kinship: The Ascendancy of Matriliney in Sacred Genealogy of the Fifteenth Century," *Thought* 64 (1989): 281. See also Sheingorn, "Appropriating the Holy Kinship: Gender and Family History," in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: St. Anne in Late Medieval Society*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia press, 1990), 169–98. Here Sheingorn argues that the images "deliberately focus on women as progenitors of the sacred."

also point to the mother's pedagogical role; Didier Lett, an historian of medieval childhood, notes that "the religious teaching by the mother no doubt involved all the objects of everyday life. We find . . . rosary beads, abacuses, religious toys for children" from the late Middle Ages, "which show that . . . instruction in Christian values [by the mother] often involved play."<sup>9</sup> A fifteenth-century educational treatise—Italian of course—gives some pedagogical advice related to culinary matters, suggesting that mothers make sweets in the shapes of letters. Some English children (undoubtedly partaking of less savory fare than their Italian counterparts) ate out of bowls decorated with the ABCs.<sup>10</sup> These alimentary ABC tools were a clever means of combining physical with mental and spiritual nourishment; learning the rudiments of language under such amenable conditions would facilitate the learning of first prayers since, it was agreed, the most important use of language was in prayer, and the ABCs were the building blocks upon which the reading of prayers were based. Indeed, some, if not most, of the ABC books that mothers commissioned for their children and from which children learned to read were one and the same as the child's first prayerbook. Along with the alphabet, these primers contained the most important prayers—the Pater Noster, the Ave, and the Creed—and other basics of the faith. Texts used as first readers could also be the psalter or the Office of the Virgin. In 1398, Isabeau of Bavaria ordered a Book of Hours including psalms for her daughter Jeanne and in 1403 an alphabet Psalter, an "A,b,c,d, des Psaumes," for her daughter Michelle.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these later ABC books or books of hours or first prayerbooks contained the image of the *child* Mary learning to

<sup>9</sup>*Children in the Middle Ages*, Daniele Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, trans. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame, Ind.: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 61.

<sup>10</sup>Cited by Daniele Alexandre-Bidon in "La Lettre volée, apprendre à lire à l'enfant au Moyen Âge," *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 44/2 (May-Aug. 1989): 971.

<sup>11</sup>Susan Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," *Signs* 7/4 (Summer 1982): 756. On a related note, we might cite Bishop Grandisson of Exeter who, in 1357, speaks of young scholars learning "to read and write the Lord's prayer, the Ave Mary, the Creed and the mattins [sic] and the hours of the Virgin." Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973), 62.

read from St. Anne, an image that may have first appeared in England in the thirteenth century<sup>12</sup> and perhaps also a case of a religious iconography that mirrored domestic environments in which mothers oversaw education. Thus, the child's first encounter with the written word, often conducted under the eye of his mother, was religious and was, indeed, strongly Marian in nature. The child's ABC row, headed by a cross and ending with an "Amen," was a simple, but no less profound, rendering of the truth he or she would continue to encounter throughout his or her life—all creation, all words, all acts are circumscribed by the eternal Word and take meaning from the Cross and the Mother who stood beneath that Cross.

Maternal instruction, then, was ideally directed to a specific end—to guide the child's first speech in the way of prayer and hence in the knowledge of God. As *nutrix* not only of the body but also the soul—and we might note that in Romance languages "nourish" could signify feeding *or* education—the mother was seen as laying the groundwork for the child's spiritual growth. In fact, so closely associated were the mother's roles as nurse and teacher that the exclusively female act of physically nursing the child was associated with spiritual nourishment in religious texts and iconography and the social sphere itself—we could point to the writings of St. Bernard, Dante and the English mystics of the fourteenth century, and to the lives of physically

<sup>12</sup>Gertrud Schiller says about its appearance as a motif, "In England setzt dieses Bildmotiv früher ein als auf dem Kontinent, so dass die ältesten bekannten Beispiele der lehrenden Anna dort zu suchen sind." *Iconographie der christlichen Kunst* (30 vols.; Gutersloh: Gutersloh Verlagshaus gerd Mohn, 1966), 4:2, 75. According to J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, "the typically Western theme of Anne teaching Mary to read is widespread from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in England and France, both in the cycles and in single representations in miniatures and small statuary." "Iconography of the Blessed Virgin Mary," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), 376. Lafontaine-Dosogne says elsewhere, "le thème est rapidement apparu comme autonome. Dès le XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, on le trouve dans la petite statuette anglaise. Il est très fréquent dans *Les Livres d'Heures*, car on a aisément supposé que la petite Vierge apprenait à lire dans les Heures." *Iconographie de la Vierge dans l'Empire Byzantin et en Occident, Académie royale de Belgique Memoires* (30 vols.; Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1964), 11:108. Brian Coe comments that St. Anne teaching the Virgin to read is a frequently illustrated subject in English stained glass, "shown in figure windows as well as narrative series." *Stained Glass in England, 1150-1550* (London: W. H. Allen, 1981), 62.

childless women such as Catherine of Siena who were nevertheless seen as spiritual mothers,<sup>13</sup> as examples of this association. Thus the earliest learning, the first prayers, and maternal nourishment form a kind of cultural composite in the middle ages.<sup>14</sup>

### Mary as Teacher

As transmitters of sacred learning and values, medieval Christian mothers were not only fulfilling what seems to be a typical role in many cultures, but also, I believe, patterning themselves after Mary. Mary was, after all, the first teacher of the Word made flesh—and this found some representation in medieval culture. Jean Squilbeck speaks of an iconography of the maternal education of the Redeemer in an article on a late medieval motif that appears in sculpture, statuary and painting,<sup>15</sup> a motif that I am convinced grew out of a long existing recognition of Mary's role: the Virgin holding the Christ Child, who

<sup>13</sup>Herlihy asserts that "the spiritual families led by holy women, who were sources of divine knowledge and exhorters to religious perfection, imitated the natural family, where presumably mothers assumed a comparable if less visible role in the religious training of children." *Medieval Households*, 123.

<sup>14</sup>Those medievals were on to something; students of human biology suggest a connection between the primary human vocalizations and the act of lactation. Some scientists suggest that a fundamental sound, the consonant, "is provided by the sucking sound made from the lips of the infant suddenly breaking contact with the nipple, a sharp clicking noise. 'The [same] sound is made by the mother as an encouragement to the infant to resume nursing, whereas the infant emits the sound when searching for the nipple.' Thus the basis of human language is empathic communication developed in the learning context of lactation's oxytocin-driven bonding." William Hurlbut, "Mimesis and Empathy in Human Biology," *Contagion* 4 (Spring 1997): 22-23. Hurlbut cites P. D. MacLean, "Brain Evolution Relating to Family, Play and the Separation Call," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 42 (XXX): 405-17. About a mother's role in infant language development in general, see also the section on "Motherese" in *The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn*, ed. Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, Patricia Kuhl (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999), 128-132. The mother's role is also explored in the evocative *Diary of a Baby*, by the psychologist and psychiatrist Daniel N. Stern.

<sup>15</sup>Jean Squilbeck, "La Vierge à L'Encrier ou à L'Enfant Ecrivain," *Revue Belge* 19 (1950): 127-40. Dominique Rigaux discusses the image of Mary with the child Jesus and a book as a possible image of Mary as teacher; she speaks of a fifteenth-century Italian fresco in which "Jésus apprend à lire assis sur les genoux de sa mère," yet wonders if it does not represent Jesus explicating the Scriptures to His mother (in "Dire la Foi avec des Images, une Affaire de Femmes?," in *La religion de ma mère*, 79).

writes in a book or on a scroll for which she holds the inkpot. Although I have yet to discover a possible textual source of this motif, I believe that it refers on one level to Mary as the earliest teacher of the Word. Indeed, the posture of the figures in these images echoes that of Mary nursing the Infant Jesus—so it is likely that artists were exploiting and making more concrete, so to speak, the nutrix/teaching connection.<sup>16</sup>

Mary was also acknowledged as the teacher of all the faithful, her children, “the teacher of all holy religion” as Rupert of Deutz puts it—the Seat of Wisdom—even, sometimes, *Sapientia* herself. The image of Mary as teacher finds expression in the tradition that she related parts of the Gospel to St. Luke and the other evangelists. Bruno of Segni says: “O thou truly wise mother, alone worthy of such a son! All these words she pondered in her heart, keeping them for us, so that later they may be spoken and preached throughout the world. For the apostles learned all these things from her.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, *The Golden Legend* has it that

The blessed Virgin kept and heled [sic] diligently all these things in her heart, as it is said, Luce secundo, to the end that she should afterward show them to the writers, as the gloss saith, that all things that were done and said of our Lord Jesu Christ she knew and retained them in her mind. So that when she was required of the writers and preachers of the incarnation and other things, she might express them sufficiently, like as was done and were in deed. Wherefore S. Bernard assigned the reason why the angel of the Lord showed to the blessed Virgin the conceiving of

<sup>16</sup>In earlier images that are iconographically related to the Writing Christ Child, the Child Jesus nurses as he writes (in these, Mary does not hold an inkpot). Then, in the “inkpot motif” itself, the Child Jesus sometimes pulls at Mary’s mantle, an echo of the nursing motif. Hence, Mary’s posture in such images echoes the familiar image of her feeding the Christ Child at her breast. Indeed, one art historian says the “nursing-writing nexus was [the] prerequisite for all groups of the inkpot-writing group.” Charles Parkhurst, “the Madonna of the Writing Christ Child,” *Art Bulletin* 23 (1941): 292–306. The conflation of writing and nursing imagery surely could be a reference to education that exploits the maternal nourishment/teaching connection. I believe that the image is also likely a manifestation of late medieval incarnational theology—in physically bearing the Word, Mary provides the “ink” that allows the Word to “write” Himself in history.

<sup>17</sup>Cited in Hugo Rahner’s *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastien Bullough (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), 94. From Bruno’s *Commentary on Luke* I, 7 (PL 165:355).

Elizabeth. . . . The cause of why she retained the ordinance of these things was because she might better show to writers and preachers the truth of the gospel. This is she that fully from the beginning was instructed of the celestial mysteries, and it is to be believed that the evangelists inquired of her many things, and she certified them truly. And specially the blessed Luke had recourse to [Mary] like as to the Ark of the Testaments and was certified of her many things.<sup>18</sup>

From the venerable Akathist hymn in the East to William of Newburgh in the West, we find references to Mary as teacher of the apostles, those who are the magisterial foundation of the Church:

The pious mother was with her associates, that is, the holy apostles; going and coming out she educated the believers with health-giving words. And however much the apostles, having been taught by their anointing, taught all the mysteries of the faith in their fullness, she delighted them nevertheless to hear from her mouth the things she knew through the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

But Mary was seen as teacher not only to her contemporaries in the early Church. As the Seat of Wisdom, the Star of the Sea, she continued her guidance, her role as custodian of sacred memory for the faithful. I am convinced that one manifestation of this is in the Latin and vernacular complaints or laments of the Virgin; sometimes, Mary relates the Passion to an auditor in the text, sometimes to St. Bernard or St. Anselm. In the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et Anselmi de Passione Domini*, for example, the figure of St. Anselm asks Mary to relate details of Christ's passion.<sup>20</sup> This kind of interchange between Mary and the audience/author in these texts is a rendering, I believe, of Mary's role as custodian and conduit of sacred knowl-

<sup>18</sup>The Life of St. Luke from Voragine's *Golden Legend*, from the fifteenth-century translation by William Caxton, ed. F. S. Ellis (London: J.M. Dent, 1900).

<sup>19</sup>William of Newburgh, *Explanatio Sacri Epithalami in Matrem Sponsi: A Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, ed. John Gorman (Spicilegium Friburgense 6; Fribourg: Fribourg Switzerland University Press, 1960), 224.

<sup>20</sup>Cited in the introduction to the *Middle English Prose Complaint of Our Lady and Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. William Marx and Jeanne F. Drennan (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987).

edge and history. In her accounts of the passion in the complaints, Mary becomes a source of spiritual narrative, functioning as a transmitter of wisdom apprehensible to her listeners in the form of a recognizably maternal discourse. And then, the frequent invocation of Mary as a muse—as a *real* muse, not a literary topoi or convention—in medieval religious texts, by authors from Hrosvitha to Alfonso the Wise to John Lydgate, also manifests the belief that the Virgin was a source of spiritual wisdom and a guide for the author of religious works.

### Mary as Model for Authors

My point here, I must admit, is probably the least overt in religious texts. Nevertheless, I find the notion intriguing enough to warrant consideration. I believe that this model, if you will, of the mother, and specifically, of Mary, as teacher of wisdom and spiritual guide, likely affected the self-definition of authors of religious texts. There is no doubt that for writers such as Dante and Chaucer literary authority was frequently masculine. But we are in danger of underestimating the power and influence of this maternal and Marian idiom. Leaving aside the medieval emphasis on Marian devotion and the sheer amount of visual Marian imagery, which in itself would have an enculturating effect on religious writers' subject matter, we should also consider the fact that maternal imagery, especially in its Marian form, does not have to connote weakness or passivity; it could also connote authority and, most importantly, a wisdom superior to any other sort of knowledge. The Akathist hymn famously refers to the Virgin as the "receptacle of God's wisdom, who shows the philosophers to be unwise and illumines the many with Wisdom." This is a belief echoed throughout the Middle Ages and manifest not only in Marian forms, but also in the image and life of holy women like Monica and Margaret of Cortona and Catherine of Siena (as well as in ecclesiology).

In any case, existential experience itself tells us that the maternal is anterior to or concurrent with the formally didactic or pedagogical, which is often subsumed under maternal imagery to legitimate or emphasize authority. The figure of Grammar is sometimes visually represented as a mother (albeit sometimes a

scolding one). And Dante uses maternal imagery to describe the most intense form of teacherliness as embodied in the persons of Virgil and Beatrice. Nor should we forget that Mary is Dante's principal guide, that is, it is she who, in the end, points him to the Beatific Vision; it is she who sets Dante's very journey in motion—the journey that illuminates Dante as pilgrim, the journey that is the narrative which, in turn, is supposed to illuminate the reader.

If we acknowledge that the religious writer had as his goal the transmission and reiteration of belief or the facilitation of religious devotion, then it is more than a little tempting to conclude that the maternal and all its resonances, in particular the figure of Mary, influenced the vision of his text and its end. Put another way—a text whose end is to instruct and assist in the growth of the spiritual life is something tied to the female and, more specifically, motherhood and nourishment. Such a text, mirroring Mary, was a kind of *nutrix* and *magistra* for the reader, insofar as its function was to provide spiritual nourishment, to educate and guide.

For further (and my final here) support of this idea of Mary's relationship to the author's view of spiritual discourse, we can refer to the many texts exhorting all the faithful—men and women—to imitation of Mary, so as to become bearers of the Word. This mandate, if you will, made Mary into an exemplar for both genders. St. Ambrose, for example, says:

Blessed are you who have believed and listened. For every believing soul conceives and gives birth to the Word of God . . . May the soul of Mary be in each one that it may magnify the Lord; may the Spirit of Mary be in each one that it may exalt in God. According to the flesh one is the mother of Christ; according to faith all can give him birth, since every soul accepts the Word of God, when stainless and free from sin.<sup>21</sup>

St. Ambrose elsewhere says that the soul that grows in holiness becomes a "Mary":

When the soul then begins to turn to Christ, she is addressed as "Mary," that is, she receives the name of her who bore Christ in her womb; for it is the soul indeed who in a spiritual sense gives birth to Christ.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>*Commentary on St Luke*, Lib. II (PL 15).

<sup>22</sup>*De Virginitate* 4, 20 (PL 16, 271).

Encouraging his flock to imitate Mary by "conceiving" the Word with their faith and "bearing" the Word with their oral witness, St. Augustine says:

Look with wonder on what happened in the flesh of Mary, reflect on it in the innermost chambers of your own souls. Whoever believes with his heart unto justice conceives Christ; whoever with his mouth confesses unto salvation (Rom 10:10) gives birth to Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The extensive amount of commentary on this spiritual, but unmistakably female, giving birth to the Word led Henri de Lubac to remark that the theme of spiritual maternity was not "of one particular school. It is encountered again everywhere." The Greek and Latin fathers, St. Bernard, Rupert of Deutz, Isaac of Stella, the Rhineland mystics—even the liturgy with its three masses at Christmas—all speak if it, de Lubac notes.<sup>24</sup>

But how does this relate to authorship? To the use of words? The imitation of Mary's maternity, I believe, would have had a special significance for those who worked through and with language to teach or preach because of that inherent analogy between the Word and words. If all Christians were exhorted to be mothers of the Word, other "Marys," then those who brought forth words in sermons or, I would add, in other kinds of religious texts, would have even more reason to see Mary as a model. St. Gregory the Great asserts that

He who is the brother or sister of Christ by believing is made the mother of Christ by preaching, for, so to speak he gives birth to our Lord, who brings him into the hearts of his listeners; and he is made the mother of Christ, if, through his speech/language [*vocem*], he creates a love of the Lord in the mind of his neighbor.<sup>25</sup>

In a later medieval writer we find a similar emphasis on the affinity between Mary and one who uses language to bring the Word to others. Beverly Mayne Kienzle notes how in his

<sup>23</sup>*Sermo 191*, 4 (PL 38, 1011).

<sup>24</sup>Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 41.

<sup>25</sup>*Homilia III in Evangelia*, Lib. I (PL 76:1086).

sermons the Cistercian preacher Helinand of Froidmont employs maternal and Marian imagery. Helinand speaks about looking to Mary for advice on delivering the written word;<sup>26</sup> he describes the preacher as the spiritual mother of the Divine Word—*praedicator . . . divini Verbi mater spiritualis*. Kienzle further discusses how Helinand advises the preacher to show a sermon a “mother’s care and gentleness” and how the preacher should emulate Mary’s offering of her infant Son in the temple in his self-preparation for delivering the word.

While religious poets or authors of devotional works are not in the strictest sense preachers, their texts share many, if not most, of the same functions as the sermon—to instruct, enlighten, affect an inward change, transmit truth, and to encourage the audience to be Christ-bearers. Because of this similarity in function, I believe it is not farfetched to conclude that such authors are in *imitatio Mariae* as “bearers of the Word.” The author becomes “another Mary” in a unique way, precisely because through his/her words and spiritual guidance he/she “bears” the Word. Just as Mary provided the “ink,” so-to-speak, that enabled the Word to write Himself in history, the writer communicates the Word in a tangible form—either spoken or written. John Lydgate subtly weaves this analogy into his description of the Annunciation in his Middle English *Life of Our Lady* when he compares himself as poet, trembling as he begins to put into words his treatment of the Incarnation, to Mary, awestruck by the angel’s message of Incarnation; little wonder, he says, that he “tremble[s] and quake[s]” since Mary, of “vertu tresorere” was “perturbed” at Gabriel’s words.

### ***Book to a Mother and An ABC***

A closer look at our two texts will illustrate better how the Marian and maternal idiom, in all the dimensions I have discussed, is at play in some authors; the prose Middle English manual *Book to a Mother* and Chaucer’s lyric *An ABC* represent two genres of religious literature—one a kind of manual

<sup>26</sup>Beverly Mayne Kienzle, “Maternal Imagery in the Sermons of Helinand of Froidmont,” in *De Ore Domini: Preacher and Word in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas Amos et al. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 95.

that teaches the path to holiness, the other an elegant devotional lyric/prayer—that are nevertheless products of the same cultural context.

### ***Book to a Mother***

*Book to a Mother*<sup>27</sup> was authored by an unknown priest for his mother specifically and the laity in general; it dates from the second half of the fourteenth century. We note right away that the writer, fully aware of all the implications of the child-mother relationship, exploits all the meanings embedded in this relationship. The book opens with a reference to the Scriptural text that informs the entire work (Mt. 12:50): "Whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother"—a text that focuses us immediately on the question of the maternal, physical and spiritual. And then we soon learn that we have before us a book in which the child teaches the mother who first taught him. Because his work is a spiritual manual, he engages in a kind of role reversal as author, becoming the "mother" who teaches; he repeatedly describes his book as "this lesson"; indeed, references to "lesson" and learning appear continually throughout the text, becoming a kind of leitmotif—referring most often to the lessons of Christ and Mary, but always with the implication, I think, that the priest's book itself is a lesson. As a member of the priesthood, the author represents the Petrine face of the Church, but I believe that what Joseph Ratzinger has called the Marian face of the Church is integrated into the discourse as well. As if conscious of the resonances of his narrative voice, the author refers at one point to the reader's childlike position before God, and in so doing refers to the child's learning to read and the prayer that prefaces that learning: "And thus bigynne we to lerne oure a.b.c. . . . seyinge: 'Cros Crist me spede'" [And thus we begin to learn our ABC, saying, "Christ's Cross help me"] (23, 24–25). Interestingly, the text begins with an Our Father,

<sup>27</sup>All quotations are taken from the edition with commentary by Adrian James McCarthy, S.M., *Studies in the English Mytys: I, Book to a Mother* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981). Numbers in parentheses refer to page and line numbers in McCarthy's edition.

a Hail Mary, and the Creed, the ten commandments, and other "basics" of the faith—reminiscent, perhaps, of a child's prayer-book and first reader. Further, in a delightful bit of realism, he also compares men and women taking pleasure in their sin and forgetting God to children who, putting their hands over their eyes, think neither God nor man can see them; like these children, sinners, he says, cover the eyes of their souls (16, 15-17). Mostly, however, the author exhorts his readers to a humility and lowliness that is associated with positive childlikeness.

While he may take on the voice of the teacher, the author does not lose sight of the fact that he is the child of his mother and that he writes out of gratitude for all that he received "through her" about "oure Lord Ihesus Crist" (16, 2). Rather, he also makes use of his actual status as a child by saying that he desires all of his readers—and this includes men as well as women—to be his "mother":

The bettere my purpos in this boke, wite ye wel that I desire euerych man and womman and child to be my moder, for Crist seyth: he that doth his Fader wille is his brother, suster and moder [To know better my purpose in this book, know well that I desire every man, woman, and child to be my mother, for Christ says: he who does the will of His Father is his brother, sister and mother]. (1, 1-4)

In saying this, he is playing on the fact that he writes for his actual mother while again invoking Matthew 12:50. Thus, when he uses the address "mother," as he does throughout, he speaks, on one level, to men and women alike. This kind of pervasive maternal idiom inevitably leads the author to the exemplar of mothers and the model for all Christians: Mary. He weaves numerous references to and discussions of Mary throughout the text. And it is not an exaggeration to say that the text is a perfect illustration of how authentic Marian devotion is, in the end, Christocentric: the many references to Mary come back to this point—namely, that Mary *teaches* us to follow Christ more faithfully—with love and humility. She is the model of authentic discipleship. The text that serves as the author's foundation, Matthew 12:50, was traditionally interpreted not as a rejection or dismissal of Mary's physical maternity, but as

a praise of her exemplarity. Hugo Rahner cites Gregory of Nyssa as one of the Fathers who says that what happened with the Virgin Mother historically is possible in every soul leading a life of virtue.

Our author makes much of this; he refers to Mary as teaching well through her actions and words. "... [Th]ou maist lerne wel of Marie if **thou** wolt close **thin** herte fro **thoughtes** and loue of **this** world" [You may learn well of Mary if you close your heart from thoughts and love of this world] (45, 5), he says, and this runs as a kind of subtext throughout. Following a long tradition, he exhorts his mother and his larger audience—both men and women—to become other Marys: "**Therefore** be **thou** Marie" (86, 17). By following Mary's "teaching," he says, "**thou** maist conceyue **the** same Crist and bere him not onlich nine mon**thes** but **withoute** ende" [You may conceive the same Christ and bear him not only nine months but without end] (44, 23-24). He returns to this in rather lovely ways again and again—like Mary rising up to go to the hills to her cousin Elizabeth, we should rise up from worldly matters into contemplation. In the tender tradition of the Marian lullaby lyric, he exhorts the reader to take the child Jesus and "swetliche swath hit in his [c]radil **with** swete loue bondes" [sweetly swath him in his cradle with sweet love bonds] (50, 4ff.), singing to Him in our soul. Since the reader is to take on this Marian function of bearing the Word, he or she necessarily takes on the pedagogical role that is part of this function: "streche out **thine** desires to teche **this** lessoun of Marie to alle **that** God wol **that** **thou** preie fore; for euere **the** mo konnen **this** lessoun in dede, **the** better" [stretch out your desires to teach this lesson of Mary to all whom God desires you to pray for; for the more who know this lesson in truth, the better] (45-46, 24ff). Perhaps the most lyrical reference to our duty to imitate the "lesson" of Mary comes when the author alludes to Mary as Star of the sea: "**Therefore** be **thou** Marie, as I seide, gostliche. . . . desire to be a sterre, geuinge light to hem **that** gon in dork ny**ght** of synne wy**th** **thi** good liuinge, **that** **thei** mowe **the** better se **the** wei to **the** blisse of heuene: and so be a sterre" [Be Mary, as I said, spiritually. . . . desire to be a star, giving light with your good living to those who go in the dark night of sin, that they might better

see the way to the bliss of heaven: and so be a star] (86, 17, 20-23). He brings this point back to Matthew 12:50 again, explaining that Christ teaches us how to be His mother, how to be this star—by doing the will of his Father. And Mary, he says, teaches us how to do *that* when she says to the servants at the wedding at Cana: “‘Whateuere he seie to you, doth hit’” [Whatever he says to you, do it] (87, 1-2).

The author also makes use of the relationship between Mary, maternity, the Word, and writing. He refers often to Jesus as “Book,” a reference (not unique to this author) to Jesus the Word and His teaching; and it is clear that the priest’s “boke,” the manual, is meant to be a reflection of the Book—Jesus and His Word. The author says “before alle **other** bokes oon I chese that techeth euery man and womman **that** wol do after him to be Cristes brother, sister and moder, and eir with him of al heuene and **erthe**. And what more worschipe myght a child desire to his moder?” [Before all other books I choose one that teaches every man and woman that will follow him to be Christ’s brother, sister and mother, and heir with him of all Heaven and earth. And what greater honor should a child desire for his mother?] (17, 21-25). The reference to the book here is I believe deliberately ambiguous—does he refer to his own book? Yes, on one level—but he also goes on to imply that this book is Jesus. In accord with his own advice, then, the author is acting as another Mary in bringing forth a book that, because of its teaching, is a mirror of Jesus the Book. His book teaches just as Mary and Jesus teach. As I noted, throughout this text are woven multiple references to the lessons that Christ and Mary teach, ending with a reflection about the words Christ has left us, the words of everlasting life—the author closes thus: “And **this**, my leue dere modur, was Cristes lessoun, **that** he clepede alle to lerne of him” [And this, my beloved, dear mother, was Christ’s lesson, that he asked us all to learn of him] (204, 8-10). The priest-author has acted as a “mother” to his mother(s) in providing just such nourishment as Christ and Mary desire that we have. We can appreciate fully the layers of meaning among which the author of this manual moves freely and the significance of his language only if we are aware of the many resonances of his maternal and Marian references.

### Chaucer's *An ABC*

Chaucer's elegant lyric poem *An ABC* perhaps seems a far remove from this prose devotional treatise, but, as we shall see, it too calls on cultural expectations about motherhood and the Virgin Mary. The source of Chaucer's text is Guillaume de Deguilleville's *ABC* alphabetic acrostic lyric that appears in the *Pilgrimage of Human Life*. Among other changes in his rendering/translation, Chaucer, of course, chooses to set it apart from a larger text, and, as we shall see, that setting itself is relevant to its meaning.

Chaucer's lyric is an alphabetic acrostic—each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. It is a praise and a prayer—a plea for her mercy, more specifically—to Mary in which Chaucer uses some of the traditional typology and imagery associated with the Virgin; Mary is a “queene,” “of all floures flour”; the burning bush foretold her “unwemmed maidenhede,” etc. The poem, moreover, contains a good deal of legal language, an aspect some critics highlight, but I believe the more salient aspect is its *form*. First, Deguilleville's and then Chaucer's decision to set a Marian poem in an abecedarian form would have been considered apropos to its subject matter. Abecedarian poems, while not exclusively religious in subject, nevertheless had strong religious associations. Psalm 119 and the first four chapters of Lamentations are abecedarian acrostics. Latin writers such as Sedulius (*A solis ortus cardine*) use the form, and then the alphabet itself represented completeness and perfection to the highly symbolic medieval imagination—Christ is the Alpha and the Omega. Moreover, and most relevant to our discussion, the alphabet was, as I have already noted, inextricably tied to the learning of first prayers and devotions, no small part of which were Marian in nature. As I discussed, the Ave Maria was featured in primers, and children sometimes learned to read from ABCs that contained Marian prayers and devotions. The historian of medieval childhood and education, Daniele Alexandre-Bidon, has concluded that a correlation existed between learning to read and the Ave Maria, noting both the micrographic texts in medieval paintings of books in manuscripts and thirteenth-century Marian abecedarian poems, predecessors of Chaucer's

own text, as indications of that correlation.<sup>28</sup> The visual motif of St. Anne teaching the Virgin to read, which, as I have said, appeared in some primers, was a popular reflection of the maternal and Marian associations the first reader would have. And Chaucer's text appears in England at a time when this image of St. Anne and Mary was fairly widespread there—it appears not only in manuscripts, but on wall paintings and in stained glass as well. Hence, the abecedarian form would undoubtedly have brought to readers' minds familiar images, perhaps reminding some of their own childhood education under the guidance of their mothers.

Chaucer's very structure, then, is immediately suggestive of early spiritual learning and maternal fostering. The physical appearance of the poem in manuscript form would have played a connotative role as well. Heeding George Keiser's sensible admonition that we cannot ignore the original textual form of medieval religious pieces in our attempt to understand how such pieces were read and received by their audience,<sup>29</sup> we should consider how Chaucer's poem would have appeared in its manuscript form. Although no texts of *An ABC* from Chaucer's time survive, George Pace argues convincingly that the fifteenth-century texts are similar to the manuscripts in which Chaucer and his contemporaries would have seen his poem.<sup>30</sup> Most of these manuscripts have capitals heading the stanzas, each of which begins with a letter of the alphabet, some adorned in red. Many of these are Lombardic capitals, and, as Pace observes, such letters would immediately suggest to the medieval reader that the poem has a spiritual subject

<sup>28</sup>"La corrélation Ave Maria-apprentissage la lecture est confirmée par bien d'autres indices que les micrographies: au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, par des poèmes en l'honneur de Marie construits sur l'alphabet et construits sur l'alphabet et constitués d'autant de strophes qu'il y avait de lettres, chaque strophe débutant par une lettre, en suivant l'ordre alphabétique." *La Lettre volée*, 60.

<sup>29</sup>George Keiser, "Ordinatio in the Manuscripts of John Lydgate's *Lyf of Our Lady*: Its Value for the Reader, Its Challenge for the Modern Editor," in *Medieval Texts and Interpretations*, ed. Tim Machan (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1991), 139–57.

<sup>30</sup>George Pace, "The Adorned Initials of Chaucer's A.B.C.," *Manuscripta* 23 (1979): 88–98.

matter. "By the time of the ABC manuscripts," Pace says, "[Lombardic letters] are restricted mostly to capitals marking the start of stanzas and the like (versals) in north European manuscripts. . . . religious writings are their special environment."<sup>31</sup>

If, as Peter Travis convincingly argues, Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* plays upon the literate audience's collective memory of grammar school texts and assignments,<sup>32</sup> might we not conclude that *An ABC* calls upon the collective memory of ABC books, of learning to read, first prayers, and images of Mary—perhaps even of mothers teaching children to read? After all, the entire text is centered around the image of Mary as merciful mother. (Although the theology is sometimes of that questionable medieval variety found in Marian miracles—Mary as Mercy, the last bastion against the ire of God.) The following (the D) stanza illustrates the spirit of the piece as a whole:

Dowte is ther noon, thou queen of misericorde,\*      \*compassion  
 That thou n'art\* cause of grace and merci heere;      \*are  
 God vouched sauf thurgh thee with us to accorde;\*      \*to be reconciled  
 For certes, Crystes blisful mooder deere,  
 Were now the bowe bent, in swich maneere  
 As it was first of justice and of ire,  
 The rightful God nolde\* of no mercy heere;      \*would not  
 But thurgh thee han we grace as we desire.

I would argue that the implicit reference to ABC texts and all their accompanying maternal associations has a twofold purpose: first, Chaucer, like the author of *Book to a Mother*, takes on the role of teacher and "mother." Chaucer, as "mother" teaching children, like the mother in the *Prioress's Tale*, shows his readers how to turn to Mary for succor. He concludes his text:

Therefore this lessoun ought I wel to telle,  
 That, n'ere\* thi [Mary's] tender herte,  
 we were spilt.\*\*      \*were it not for  
    \*\*destroyed, undone

<sup>31</sup>Pace, "Adorned Initials," 92.

<sup>32</sup>Peter Travis, "The Nun's Priest's Tale as Grammar School Primer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, no. 1 (1984): 85.

In other words, Chaucer the religious writer fulfills the call to be as Mary, the bearer of the Word, teaching his readers to pray to the merciful Mother who leads to the Word. Finally, the childhood associations encoded in this poem amplify the stance to which Chaucer calls his readers: that of a child who looks to his mother for aid, guidance, and wisdom:

... thou [Mary] me wisse* and consaile**	*inform, instruct
	**teach, counsel
How that I may have thi grace and socour,*	*succor
All have I* ben in filthe and errour.	*although I have been

### Conclusion

I have looked at only two examples of works in which a greater awareness of the image—and reality—of mother as teacher and its Marian dimension adds to a fuller understanding of the text. Cistercian writers and Dante also employ this Marian/maternal/ teaching nexus, while Chaucer's own *Prioresse's Tale* and the anonymous *Pearl* are two outstanding poetic explorations of this theology of the childlike and maternal. In devotional literature, Juliana of Norwich (and to a lesser extent other fourteenth-century English mystics), drawing on Marian devotion and theology, develops this concept profoundly as she calls on Christians to be like children, trusting in their "mother Jesus."<sup>33</sup> In such works, the author and his/her text function as *nutrix* and *magistra*, calling upon the audience to meditate upon the many valences of the references to Mary, mothers, children, and learning. Just as in the private space of the home the child learned from his or her mother, so the reader, with the help of such texts, is to mature in the "private space" of devotion and contemplation, in turn becoming, like Mary, the mother of the Word, a Christ-bearer to the world.

<sup>33</sup>See Ritamary Bradley, "Mysticism in the Motherhood Similitude of Julian of Norwich," *Studia Mystica* 8 (1985): 4-14.