Diane Watt  
University of Surrey

Mary the Physician: Women, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages  
17:30 p.m. on Wednesday, November 6, 2013  
CEU–Faculty Tower #409  
Budapest, V. Nádor u. 9.

Reception to follow!

This lecture explores the interaction of spiritual and physical health in writing by and about late medieval English women. The idea of Christ the Physician was widespread in the Middle Ages because cure of the soul was seen as an essential aspect of medical care. Yet for women in particular, the Virgin Mary seems to have had particular associations with healing that went beyond her more generally recognized association with childbirth. One of the defining and distinctive qualities of women’s visions in the post-Conquest period is the increasing importance of the role played by the Virgin Mary. This lecture argues that there was a widespread belief in Mary as Physician in late medieval England, and that this was closely linked to, and indeed validated, the role of the woman as healer. Focusing initially on examples taken from two medieval English visionary and devotional text—The Life of Christina of Markyate and The Book of Margery Kempe—the first two sections of this paper explore devout women’s attitudes to, understandings of, and management of physical and mental illness, paying particular attention to the importance of the Virgin Mary. The lecture will then go onto to contrast these texts with evidence taken from secular women’s writing, namely the fifteenth-century letters of the Paston women to demonstrate the continuation of the tradition of women as healers and the connection between their performance of this role and their devotion to the Virgin Mary through the later Middle Ages.

Professor Diane Watt

- 2011-present: Head of School of English and Languages and Professor of English Literature, University of Surrey
- Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts
- Co-general editor of University of Wales Press’s series Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages
- Co-general editor of Boydell and Brewer’s Medieval Gender series
- Programming Committee member of the annual International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds
- 1993-2011: Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and then Professor of English Literature at Aberystwyth University