

## A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE THIRTEENTH-AND FOURTEENTH- CENTURY ENGLISH CRUCIFIXION LYRICS (I)

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The first English religious lyrics appear in quantity in manuscripts of about 1240 (1) but, as R. M. Wilson has pointed out, «there must have existed a flourishing lyrical literature in English during the 12th century» (2). On the other hand the religious lyric was already a declining genre before 1500. So, for three centuries these short meditative poems were being composed in English even if, in many cases, they were never to be recorded.

The immediate sources of most religious lyrics are to be found in Latin hymns, in single lines from the liturgy or in prose meditations, particularly those attributed to St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Both these writers had a direct influence upon the English Marian lyric. Other sources for medieval poetry devoted to the Blessed Virgin are certain books of the Old Testament, particularly the *Psalms* and the *Song of Songs* from which most of Mary's liturgical titles derive.

As there are comparatively few references to the Blessed Virgin in the New Testament, much emphasis was soon put upon emotive apocryphal detail. Veneration to Mary became an important part of Christian devotion from the early Middle Ages and private prayers to her are already found in the fourth century. At the Council of Ephesus, in 431, Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos*, Mother of God, but a clear distinction was made between the worship due to her Son (*Latria*), and the special veneration that was due to Mary (*hiperdulia*).

By the eight century Marian devotion was widespread in the West, England being one of the chief originators of Marian piety in Europa (3). Thus, devotion to the Blessed Virgin was already well established in this country before the time when the first Middle English religious lyrics were written.

Although these poems are in most cases anonymous, R.H. Robbins (4) has amply demonstrated the important influence that the Franciscans exercised in the development of this genre in England. This influence was particularly noticeable in the period prior to the Black Death (1350). Poetry was used by the friars for the practical purpose of religious instruction and to help Christians to ponder and feel what they already believed in. So the primary aim of these poets was not aesthetic but probably moral and devotional. Accordingly they always employed direct and

plain language, choosing familiar images and realistic details. Another characteristic of this poetry is a fondness for the «collective I» which implies the audience will share in the poet's devotion. This is particularly clear in the case of meditations on the Passion which the Franciscans helped to popularize.

A few of these lyrics have alternate stanzas in French and Latin, in others an influence of certain secular conventions is recognizable. But even where a *reverdie* or a *chanson d'aventure* opening was adapted to religious poems their subjects were considered sacrosanct and, consequently, varied only within narrow limits. Even so, it is possible to trace a development in style as well as in the treatment of religious matter which were probably due to a change in religious sensitivity on the one hand and to an increasing influence of the secular lyric on the other.

This development is particularly noticeable in the lyrics devoted to Mary which, in style and content, present a clear continuity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries while, towards the end of this period and the beginning of the fifteenth century, new types of poems emerge. Perhaps the most distinctive among these new types is the Marian Lament which reached its highest development in the fifteenth century.

Apart from the crucifixion lyrics in which Mary appears, there are at least three other types of pre-fifteenth century Marian lyric. The largest group is formed by all those poems devoted to the Virgin's Five Joys: Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension and Assumption which are usually all treated in the same lyric while, in the fifteenth century, the Virgin's Assumption and even her Coronation as Queen of Heaven became the subjects of individual poems. A smaller group consists of lullabies and poems in which Mary is associated with the Christ-Child. Although there are different types of lullaby lyrics in Middle English they all seem to be fairly late, the first ones belonging to the fourteenth century. Finally, there is another group of poems in praise of the Blessed Virgin, some of them songs of love to Mary while others are written in the form of a prayer, usually asking for her mercy and intercession.

Naturally these are not rigid categories. The Crucifixion theme, probably due to its importance, permeates all types of Marian lyric particularly lullaby songs and even poems devoted to the Five Joys.

The unifying characteristic of all these early lyrics devoted to the Blessed Virgin is her representation as the mother figure. Mary is either seen as a human «mother, fondling her baby, or as the Mater Dolorosa, watching the agony of her child upon the cross» (5).

Although Mary's presence on Calvary was only briefly mentioned in the Gospels —«now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother...» (John 19: 25-27)— this was the germ of some of the finest art and literature of the Middle Ages (6).

Among this fine literature the English religious lyric has an important place.

It is hoped that this short study will help to illuminate the nature of Mary's role in the early English Crucifixion poems.

We have already seen the different type of Marian lyrics which have survived from the Middle English period.

As the present paper is restricted to a study of the Blessed Virgin's role in the thirteenth —and fourteenth— century crucifixion lyrics, we will first of all discuss those poems in which Mary's presence is merely observed by the poet and she conse-

quently remains silent. But, in order to stir the reader's heart and feelings her sufferings at the foot of the cross are often described in much detail.

According to the degree of importance that Mary's role has in each of these crucifixion lyrics, we have divided them into three main groups: *The Minor Role*, *The Intercessor Figure*, and *Mary: The Central Figure*. Naturally the differences between some of these poems are not always perfectly well-defined and a few of them could easily fall into either of the other categories. Furthermore, those lyrics grouped in the third class often share characteristics of the other two.

### The Minor Role

In most passion lyrics the scope of the description is limited to Christ's sufferings but there are a few surviving examples in which the Blessed Virgin is briefly mentioned. She is usually mourning by the foot of the cross and, in most cases, John appears standing by her, thus forming the characteristic three figure Calvary scene.

One of the earliest examples of this type of crucifixion lyric is the short poem *Wenne hic soe on rode idon* (7) that has been preserved in several related versions: Trinity Coll. Cambridge MS.323, St. John's Coll. Cambridge MS.15, Royal MS.12 E.I., MS. Bodley 57, MS. Ashmole 360 and MS. Harley 7322 which is probably the latest. According to Carleton Brown (8) the MS. Ashmole 360 version is the only one that presents a regular stanza scheme. But, significantly in all manuscripts the Blessed Virgin is mentioned either by her name («*sent marie*», «*maria*», «*marie*») or by means of her relation to Christ («*hys moder stant him bi*», «*thi moder wepende*»). John, the beloved disciple of Christ, is also mentioned in every version.

R. T. Davies describes the Royal MS. version of this lyric as a «short and poignant» poem that «calls up in the mind of the devotee some essentials of the scene of the Passion and then turns the pity stirred into self-rebuke and renewed love» (9). Mary's presence at the foot of the cross is used by the poet as an effective means of intensifying the meditative value of his poem which could have been inspired by a thirteenth-century painting of the Passion as Rosemary Woolf (10) points out.

Another early crucifixion lyric, *Somer is comen and winter gon* (11) that has been preserved in B.M. MS. Egerton 613 affords a good example of the way in which a spring opening convention could be adapted to a religious poem. Here again Mary's physical position by the cross is stated: «*Mayde and Moder thar astod/Marie ful of grace*» (11. 50-51) but the poet adds a brief description of her suffering by the introduction of the tears of blood motif that, not only helps to present Mary as the counterpart of Christ's own sufferings, but also serves as a means of heightening the reader's perception of Christ's passion.

*Hi sike, al wan hi singe* (12) extant in MS. Digby 2 and Harley MS. 2 253 (in which stanzas 4 and 5 are transposed), is considered by Rosemary Woolf «the most moving of the Harley Passion lyrics» which «is not a Passion meditation but a poem about the poet's feelings when he meditates on the Passion» (13). Davies (14) praises the poem's restrained tone and plain dignity. Each stanza of this lyric tends to follow the same careful pattern: in the first eight lines the poet meditates on a certain aspect of Christ's passion while, in the last two, he refers to Mary's

sorrow or, in the case of lines 8 and 9, asks for her mercy. There is however no reference to Mary at the end of the fourth stanza (fifth in the Harley version), nor in the final one which is entirely devoted to a reflexion on the immense value of Christ's passion. The loneliness of Mary at the foot of the cross «mari hir-selfe al-hon» (l. 19) is another characteristic of this lyric in which John is just briefly mentioned in line 48. Her unceasing weeping is also stressed by the poet who portrays the Blessed Virgin as a powerless witness of her Son's passion.

There is another short reference to Mary in *Crist makith to man a fair present* (15). This is a meditative lyric on Christ's love to men that has been preserved in several fourteenth century manuscripts: Hunterian Museum MS. V.8.15. MSS., Trinity Coll. Camb. B. 15. 17 and Powis MS. now in the Huntington Library, Pasadena, California.

In this lyric Mary and John are briefly mentioned by the poet as the two persons who knew better the depth of Christ's love: «So Inliche loue was neuer noon/ that with wel marie and Ioon» (ll. 37-38).

*Man thu haue thine out one me* (16) is an earlier crucifixion lyric that has been preserved in MS. Royal 12.E.1. Although this text is printed in his *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, Carleton Brown places it at the end of the thirteenth century (17). This poem is a short and moving appeal of Christ to the sinner in which he briefly mentions Mary, «Mi moder thouth es swithe longe» (l. 12), thus adding her own pain to those He suffered to redeem mankind. Although Mary's role in this lyric seems quite similar to that illustrated in the previous poems, the fact that it is her Son who mentions her gives a new dimension to Mary's suffering. Her contribution in Christ's atonement is particularly stressed here.

*Ihesu that hast me dere I-boght* (18) was undoubtedly a popular lyric that still survives, complete or fragmentary, in ten manuscripts (19). Douglas Gray calls it «a very successful example of an extended meditative Passion poem» (20). It derives from the longer fourteenth-century English poem *Meditations of the Life and Passion of Christ* which, in its turn, is a version of John of Hoveden's thirteenth century Latin *Philomena*.

Once more the poem is a contemplation of Christ's physical passion but its tone is essentially intimate as the poet repeatedly asks Christ to write on his heart the most impressive details of His passion. Rosemary Woolf (21) gives a full account of the development of this image that derives from Biblical writings and she also studies its literary usage as a symbol of man's love for Christ. Particularly dramatic is the poet's request to have written on his heart Christ's sorrowful look to Mary from the Cross (ll. 54-56) and her indescribable grief when her Son is driven to Calvary.

In all the passion lyrics so far mentioned Mary plays a minor role; she is presented as a static symbol of grief. But there is a particularly interesting poem in which Mary's function is more complex despite its brevity. This lyric is *Fadur & sone & holi gost* (22) that Rosemary Woolf describes as a «personal meditation in which the meditator puts on the armour of Christ... in the Crucifixion» (23). She adds that some details of the allegory are unsatisfactory in particular that of ll. 12 and 13 in which a sword is made into a shield: «Mi sheld shal be the swerd of sorwe/marie that stong to the herte.» As the poem survives only in one manuscript, MS. Bodley 416, Rosemary Woolf suggests that the oddities in this lyric may

not have been original. This could certainly be the case but it could also be a mere question of lack of skill on the poet's part. He seems to have simply sketched some images without developing them in full. And this one about the sword is particularly relevant to our study.

The figure of a sword piercing Mary's heart that frequently appears in Marian poetry derives ultimately from St. Luke's account of Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2: 34-35). The significance of this metaphorical sword, its reference to Mary's anguish at the Crucifixion and particularly to the spear that pierced Christ's side when He was already dead on the cross, was developed and explained in the lessons of Matins and patristic writings on which most sermons and meditations on the passion were based. So by the fourteenth century this image was already a commonplace but the poet of *Fadur & sone & holi gost* uses it in an unconventional way. Taken literally, the idea expressed in II. 11-13 seems paradoxical because swords cannot be used as shields, but for a medieval poet writing on the passion the meaning of Simeon's sword would be no doubt perfectly clear. Thus he says that in his fight against the enemy «the fend me tempteth dai & nyzt» (1.5), «aženus him y take the fižt» (1.9), Mary's sword of sorrow, that is, meditation on her anguish at the crucifixion, will serve as a shield or protection to him. Other examples of this shield image will be discussed below. Further evidence that the sword of sorrow image was not arbitrarily used by the poet-meditator in this lyric can be found in II. 56-59 where he again mentions Mary. Here she is shedding tears of blood at the sight of Christ's pierced side from which blood and water spring. Presenting the Blessed Virging as a mirror of her Son's passion the poet not only enlarges the scope of his meditation but adds an affective devotion to it.

### The Intercessor Figure

Because of her unique relationship to God, Mary was bound to have exceptional prerogatives. Furthermore, at the foot of the Cross she had become mother of mankind (John 19: 26-27). On these two facts was based a new devotion that saw in Mary both the Mother of Mercy and the supreme Intercessor with Christ. According to Rosemary Woolf (24) this new cult was well established by the twelfth century and naturally had an important influence upon the medieval Marian lyric.

But the poems that present her as intercessor are, in most cases, prayers of penitence in which the sinner, not daring to approach God directly, turns to Mary in an appeal for mercy and help. For this reason there are very few typical crucifixion lyrics in which Mary is at the same time addressed as intercessor. Even so, there is a series of poems where elements of Christ's passion are blended with a prayer asking for Mary's intercession. These lyrics are relevant to our study and deserve special attention particularly because of the different ways in which the intercessor motif is used.

The most obvious distinction springs from the direct or indirect manner in which the poet handles her role as intercessor; he may either address his request directly to Mary or, less frequently, he may refer indirectly to her in order to reinforce his petition to God.

The direct request implies the poet's belief in Mary as mediatrix of all grace and,

for this reason, her role as intercessor with Christ is often mingled with that of protectress against the enemy; while the indirect method of treating the intercessor figure is usually very brief. We find an early example of it in the poem entitled by Carleton Brown *A Prayer to the Redeemer* (25). This lyric presents an alternation pattern of stanzas in French and English. From line 13 onwards the poet describes in moving terms some details of Christ's passion making a first brief allusion to Mary: «milde bet thi swete chere,/marie sone» (11. 17-18) which will be extended into an appeal through her intercession in the following stanza: «ihesu, thi blisse us bi-see/for thi swete moder loue. Amen.» (11. 23-24). Another instance of the same usage is found in *Nu yh she blostme sprynge* (26). After his meditation on the passion in 11. 16-40, the poet addresses his prayer to Jesus and reinforces it with an invocation to Mary: «al for the swete marie,/that art so dayr and brytht» (11. 46-47). This type of indirect appeal is less frequent in the medieval lyric than the direct method of approach which will be illustrated below. But, in a particularly interesting poem *Fadur & sone & holy gost* (27) both methods have been subsequently used by the poet who first invokes Mary in his prayer to the Holy Ghost (11. 39-40) and, in the following stanza he addresses a double petition directly to her asking for her help as intercessor with Jesus: «that thou preye for my mysdede» (1. 42) and as protectress against the enemy: «Mercy leuedy, thou me schilde/And helpe me euer at al my nedes» (11. 47-48).

The shield image which appears again in this poem would become increasingly popular alongside the development of Mary's liturgical title of Refuge of Sinners (Refugium Peccatorum).

From l. 81 onwards the poem is again addressed to the Trinity but with a final and in this case indirect mention of Mary as intercessor: «For maryus loue, that maydenes host» (1.100). This alternating method of appeal is quite unusual in the religious lyrics of the early period.

Particularly representative of the direct method of approaching Mary are the two macaronic poems found in Trinity College Cambridge MS. 323: *Seinte mari, moder milde* (28) and *For on that is so feir ant brist* (29). The first one is an appeal from the sinner to the Virgin Mary with a shift to Christ in stanzas three and four in which there are references to His passion (11. 33-40). Each petition to Mary is accompanied by different liturgical appellatives, most of them Latin titles, and short phrases in English invoking her mercy and help so that the sinner will be not only forgiven but saved through Mary's intercession: «that i ne misse/of thine blisse» (11. 58-59).

In *For on that is so feir ant brist* there is a similar interwoven pattern of supplications and appellatives on the part of the poet who is well aware of Mary's exceptional ascendancy over her Son: «he nul nout werne the thi bone» (1. 39). Stephen Manning in his detailed study of this poem observes that «The psychology involved here seems to be that Mary, the mediatrix of all grace, is the special recourse of the individual»...«the entire argument is based upon Mary's asking her Son for the grace the speaker requests, rather than approaching Christ directly» (30).

Two fourteenth century penitential lyrics recorded in the Vernon manuscript: *Ilke a wys wiht scholde wake* (31) and *Bi a wode as I gon ryde* (32) also have references to Christ's passion and both end with a plea of intercession addressed to Mary. In the first of these poems which occurs also in BM Addit. 22283 the description of Christ's passion is blended with a prayer (11. 57-64) which immediately turns to

Mary imploring her mercy: «on al mon- / kuynde 3e have Merci» (1.66) and help as intercessor: «vn-to thi sone thou calle and cry, / Crist crounet with kene thorn» (11. 69-70). This reference to His passion acts as a link between the two final stanzas of the poem. In *Bi a wode as I gon ryde* the last stanza (11. 89-96) presents a very similar pattern of prayers and invocations to Christ and Mary. When pleading with Christ the poet significantly refers to His passion: «And si then died vpon the tre» (1.90) while Mary, as in the previous poem is invoked by the poet as «Moder» (1.93), that is Mother of God and, consequently, supreme intercessor for mankind.

Just as in some Nativity lyrics it is possible to find references to Simeon's sword or even more specifically to Christ's passion — the most typical example is probably *Als i lay vp-on a nith* (33), 11. 115-128 — there are two fourteenth-century poems devoted to the Five Joys of Mary in which paradoxically, the poet refers to different stages of Christ's passion. These poems are *Heyl be thou, marie, milde quene of heuene* (34) and *Marie moder, wel the be* (35). As in both the passion theme is interwoven with petitions to Mary it seems appropriate to discuss them in this section that deals with her role as intercessor.

*Marie moder wel the be* was a very popular prayer that has been preserved in thirty-eight manuscripts (36). After a salutation to the Blessed Virgin in the first stanza the poet openly puts his double petition to Mary in the second, using the shield image which will appear again in lines 16, 17 and 19. But the most illustrative stanza is the third in which he implores Mary's help by her Five Joys (in lines 9 and 10), and her grace by the tears she shed under the cross (in lines 11 and 12). Even more characteristic of the same combination of joyful and distressing details is «*Heyl be thou marie, milde quene of heuene*» which occurs in St. John's College Cambridge MS. 256, and also in the Vernon MS., Royal MS. 17A and Lambeth MS. 559. This macaronic poem also begins in the form of a salutation to Mary with references to her Five Joys by which the poet puts his petition to her. But in lines 17 to 28 he bases his plea not on her happiest moments but on details of Christ's passion and of Mary's suffering at the foot of the cross. Thus, in line 19, amidst references to her Five Joys the poet mentions Christ's five wounds, insisting upon the blood He shed in His sacrifice, «that runnen alle a-blode» (1. 19), «on rode blede» (1. 27). He also reminds Mary of the tears she herself shed and all the sufferings she endured when present at her Son's death. He insists particularly on what Mary saw, the verb «seye» is used twice (in lines 23 and 27), and he enumerates precisely those details which would have been most painful to the sight: the wounds and nailed hands and feet, the bleeding body, the running blood. The practical purpose lying behind these painful references is simple but essential. To reinforce his petition to Mary the poet reminds her of her Son's sacrifice to save mankind. The sacrifice must not have been in vain and, for that reason, Mary is bound to attend the poet's plea for mercy and help. There is no paradox in this lyric devoted to the Five Joys of Mary once the practical purpose for which the prayer written is taken into account.

Perhaps the two finest examples of meditations on the passion in which the Blessed Virgin is invoked as intercessor are: *Mayden moder milde* (37) and *On leome is in this world ilist* (38). The first one is a macaronic Harley lyric in the form of a prayer to the Blessed Virgin. In line three the poet asks for her protection: «From shome thou me shilde» by the love of Jesus and, after a short praise of her in the second stan-

za, he describes Christ's passion with brief references to Mary's presence and sufferings by the cross: «thou retest the vnder rode» (l. 27), «thou seze is sides of blode» (l. 29).

As Brook (39) points out, the events described in this poem are not related in the order in which they occurred. In the last two lines there is an allusion to the benefits derived from this prayer when recited with devotion.

*On leome is in this world ilist* is a lyric recorded in Trinity Coll. Cambridge MS. 323 that, as Carleton Brown (40) points out, presents an unusual 10-line stanza form. The technique used by the author of this poem is almost the opposite to that employed in the previous lyric. Here the poem opens with a description of the physical torments of Christ's passion and there is no direct address to the Blessed Virgin until line 93, although there are a few indirect allusions to her as the description advances. Mary is first mentioned in a casual manner in line 11: «of a meide he was iborin». In line 64 there is another brief reference to her. The poet present Mary standing at the foot of the cross with John by her side. This progressive concentration on the Blessed Virgin culminates in the two following stanzas (ll. 71-90) where the crucifixion scenes are presented through Mary's experience with a particular description of what she saw and felt that is intensified by the use of emotive epithets: «suede honden» (l. 75), «suede softe side» (l. 78), and the interrelation between Christ's physical sufferings and Mary's inner sorrow: «I-thurlit depe & wyde / Wey, that hire was wo!» (ll. 79-80) which will be finally exteriorized in her tears of blood «Hire herte bi-gon to bleden / Teres hoe wep of blood» (ll. 89-90).

Once the presence of Mary has been brought into adequate focus by the poet, he addresses his petition directly to her in the following stanzas of the poem thus transforming the initial meditation lyric into a prayer for intercession and praise to Mary. But the transition is so skilfully done that it in no way damages the structural unity of the poem which is probably one of the finest examples among the early Marian lyrics.

### Mary: The Central Figure

The number of English crucifixion lyrics entirely devoted to Mary is relatively small in the early period. Besides, as has already been said at the beginning of the present section, they often share characteristics with the two other types of Marian poems that have been discussed. Even so, they form a group on their own and deserve to be studied in detail.

Probably no other short religious lyric has received more attention from scholars than the one entitled by Carleton Brown «Sunset on Calvary» (41):

Nou goth sonne under wod,—  
me reweth, marie, thi faire Rode.  
Nou goth sonne under tre  
me reweth, marie, thi sone and the.

This quatrain has been preserved in Bodleian MS. Arch. Selden, Supra 74 where



it is preceded by a rhythmical passage in French. The piece is introduced into an early thirteenth-century prose work, Edmund Rich's *Speculum Ecclesiae*. Carleton Brown (42) points out that the English lines could have been composed by St. Edmund himself. Rosemary Woolf on the other hand points to the possibility of its being «originally part of an early poem on the Hours of the Cross or part of a longer Passion poem» (43). Even so she considers this piece quite unlike any other religious poetry of the same period.

It has been assumed that in this short lyric there is an underlying reference to the *Song of Songs* i, 6 («Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me»). According to Pamela Gradon «it is an “imposed” meaning but one which fits the fundamental structure of the text as we have it» (44).

In his detailed analysis of «*Sunset on Calvary*» Edmund Reiss (45) studies the related double meanings of certain key words such as *wod*, *rode* and *tre*, all suggestive of the cross; and *sonne*, used both for the setting sun in the sky and for the dying Christ on the cross. This verbal play is combined with the incremental repetition technique typical of the ballads with lines two and four acting as a refrain subordinated to the action of the crucifixion expressed in lines one and three.

The austere isolation of the two figures, the quietness and sorrow of the moment chosen by the poet conveys a general moving tone to this brief but extraordinarily evocative meditation on the Blessed Virgin's sufferings.

Also devoted to Mary's sorrow are two thirteenth-century English versions of the Latin hymn *Stabat iuxta Christi Crucem* (Dreves, *Analecta*, viii. 55). These are *that leuli leor wid spald ischent* (46) and *Iesu Cristes milde morder* (47), both written in the metre and stanza form of the Latin original and preserved with their respective musical notation.

Significantly in both translations the third person narrative of the Latin has been transformed into a direct address to the Virgin, thus making Mary's experiences more poignant and moving but preserving at the same time the sharp contrast between Mary's inner pain and Christ's external suffering which already appears in the original.

Although the first four stanzas of *that leuli leor* have been lost, it is evident that this is the earliest of the two English versions and the one that follows more closely the primitive Latin hymn.

In contrast with the plaintive tone of the whole poem the terms used to describe Christ's passion are particularly vivid and intense. In ll. 13-18 the poet opposes Mary's sorrow to her joy at the Nativity when she was spared the pains of childbirth. To end his relation of the Blessed Virgin's sufferings he states: «swa sari wmmmon neuer neas» (l. 24). These words are a clear indication of how the poet considers Mary's sorrow superior to any other suffered by a woman before. In ll. 31-36 there is another reference to the Nativity but, in this case, compared to Christ's resurrection from the tomb. Just as He had been born from Mary without the slightest upon her virginity, Christ would rise from the grave without breaking its seal. These notions appear already in the Latin original but what characterizes the English version is the use of emotive epithets that, as Rosemary Woolf points out, suggest «a tender sympathy for the Virgin's sorrow, at which the Latin does not aim» (48). The poem ends with a brief prayer asking for Mary's intercession which does not exist in the original.

*Iesu cristes milde moder* has been preserved in Arundel MS. 248; the version seems to be complete in this case.

The Virgin's looking at her Son on the cross is emphasized by the poet as well as the contact between Christ's hanging body and Mary's standing position. This is a testimony of her dignity and self-control despite all the anguish she is enduring which is particularly evident in this version where Christ's sufferings are stressed: «Hise wundes sore and smerte / stungen thureu and thurw thi herte, / as te bihichte simeon» (ll. 16-18). From line 31 onwards the poem follows the same pattern as *that leuli leor* and it also ends with a supplication to Mary. In both lyrics she is the central figure, chosen by the poet to intensify the devotional effectiveness of his meditation on Christ's passion.

As a final example of crucifixion lyric devoted to Mary we would like to mention the short fourteenth-century poem entitled by Carleton Brown «*The Spring under a Thorn*» (49) which has been preserved in Magdalen Coll. Oxford MS. 60. This poem occurs in the Latin exemplum «*De Confessione*» included in a miscellaneous collection of «*Exempla moraliter exporita*». This fact has helped to interpret it as a lyric devoted to the Blessed Virgin despite its language being reminiscent of popular lore and even of the medieval romance. Nevertheless, the interpretations given to this poem are in no way unanimous.

Peter Dronke places it in «a stream of joyful personal devotion to the Virgin Mary» that presents her «not as a sufferer at the crucifixion but as a romantic heroine in her own right» (50).

Consequently, for him this poem presents the moment of incarnation. Davies points out that «the crucified Christ and His wounds were “commonly represented by the image of a well from which flow mercy and salvation” (51). He also suggests that the «thorn» (l. 1) could be the crown of thorns and the maiden, naturally, Mary.

Theodore Silverstein on the other hand points to the similarity between this brief lyric and the three first stanzas of the fifteenth-century Epiphany song «*Out of the blosme sprang a thorn*» (52) which is a poem connected with the Nativity, not a passion lyric. But, in his detailed examination of *At a sprynge-wel under a thorn*, Douglas Gray takes into account the exemplum in which this brief poem occurs and where it is explained that «the spring under the thorn is the open side of Christ from which flowed blood and water, and that the maiden standing beside it is the blessed Virgin Mary who is always ready to help sinners» (53). He also explores the connotations this lyric has of the romance and the world of fairyland.

This seems a plausible explanation of the poem particularly as in the *Song of Songs* there are prefiguring references to Mary as a «well» and a «fountain» (IV, 12; 15) and as a «lily among thorns» (II, 2). According to modern exegesis (54) while the blood that springs from Christ's pierced side represents the real sacrifice of the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the water symbolizes the Spirit of Life that Christ transmits to the Church, which is represented on Calvary by Mary and John.

Thus the poem, despite its deliberate use of words and phrases commonly associated with the secular love poetry, is a perfectly orthodox religious lyric devoted to the Blessed Virgin and in which she is depicted in her role of mediatrix of all grace and in her characteristic standing posture by her dying Son.

## NOTES

- (1) Woolf, Rosemary: *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Oxford, 1968, p. 356.
- (2) Wilson, R. M.: *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*. London, 1952, p. 175.
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