

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

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In order to obtain an adequate response from the reader, poets make frequent use of two powerful devices borrowed from Latin medieval verse: the dramatic monologue and the dialogue. Both these forms are effective because they demand a certain degree of participation from the reader-meditator, who often has to imagine himself present at the Crucifixion and even addressed by Christ from the Cross.

## The Dramatic Monologue

The dramatic monologues that have been preserved among the Middle English religious lyrics seem to fall into one of two categories: *a*) those in which the meditator, standing at the foot of the Cross, grieves over the signs of Christ's suffering; and *b*) those in which Christ Himself appeals to man from the Cross in a reproachful but loving tone. The ultimate sources of these complaints are to be found in the Old Testament but most of them have more immediate Latin precedents.

When we turn our attention to the Virgin Mary, who is the central figure of the present study, we find among the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century religious lyrics very few examples of dramatic monologues by her. As Rosemary Woolf explains «it was not until the fifteenth century that the complaint of the Blessed Virgin emerged as a clear branch of the lyric» (1).

Her grief, being a direct reflection of Christ's sufferings, was stressed only after His Passion had acquired poetic emphasis.

The flourishing of the Marian Lament in the fifteenth century had an important influence on the growth and development of the English religious drama as Professor George C. Taylor (2) pointed out in 1906. The Pietà motif as iconographic form did not appear in England before the fifteenth century. It was then adopted by some poets who saw in this representation of Mary with Christ's dead body in her lap the perfect form for her complaint. Yet, the increase in number of Marian Laments among the fifteenth-century English lyrics was not always equalled by real literary achievement. On the contrary, dignity and moderation were often lost in favour of more strident emotionalism.

The surviving specimens from the earlier period deserve particular attention.

*Why haue ze no reuthe on my child?* (3), that Carleton Brown entitles *The Blessed Virgin's Appeal to the Jews*, appears only in one manuscript, Advocates Lib. 18.7.21 (also known as John of Grimestone's Preaching Book, compiled about 1375). Although there seem to be no other versions of this poem, its Latin source can be found in the *Liber de passione Christi* (4) which was exceptionally popular in most western European countries during the late Middle Ages. In the Latin version Mary gives an account of the Passion as she herself saw it. The English lyric being very short, only two four-line stanzas, is more like a fragment detached from the dramatic action. It concentrates on a specific moment of time with exclusion of any kind of setting or introduction. The use of the present tense throughout Mary's monologue helps to create a powerful impression of vividness and reality. The subject is also restricted, in this case to the Blessed Virgin's intense suffering for her Son on the Cross. He is about to die and Mary cries out in a desperate appeal to the Jews for mercy.

The poem opens with a rhetorical question which shows on the one hand Mary's recognition of the Jews' utter lack of pity and, on the other, her own relation to Christ whom she refers to as *my child* (1.1). Once this motherly relation has been established, Mary's petition in the second line —*Haue reuthe on me ful of murning*— is perfectly natural although her role as intercessor, not for mankind but for Christ, is quite unique as there are no parallel examples of it in other religious lyrics of the same period.

The antithesis expressed in lines four and five:

Taket doun on rode my derworthi child,  
or prek me on rode with my derling.

shows Mary's physical separation from her Son and her desire for union with Him regardless of any other consideration. Apart from stressing her condition of loving mother, these lines convey a sense of helplessness on the part of Mary which will be increased by the second and final stanza:

More pine ne may ben don  
than leten me liuen in sorwe & schame;  
Als foue me bindet to my sone,  
So lat us deyzen bothen i-same.

Here the Blessed Virgin not only reveals that Christ's death would cause her the deepest sorrow but, by asking to die with her Son, she gives the greatest proof of her love for Him. The last two words of the poem sum up that desire for union which Mary has been expressing throughout her monologue. The language used in it is so human and simple, it insists so often on Mary's motherhood —*my child* (1.1), *derworthi child* (1.3), *my derling* (1.4), *my sone* (1.7)—that it almost seems the lament of any mother for her dying son on a cross. But the particular religious implications of the poem would be no doubt clear for a medieval audience. And, as Sarah Weber points out:

«the fact that Mary is not any mother, her Son not any child, but that she

is the mother of God and that she shared the uniquely profound experiences of His life and death is what reveals their suffering to be far greater than any other human being's suffering» (5).

The purely human perspective from which the poet has presented the crucifixion theme enhances the artistic merit of this touching monologue.

*Suete sone, reu on me, & brest out of thi bondis* (6) is another example of dramatic monologue found in the same fourteenth-century Preaching-Book. C. Brown entitles it *Lamentacio dolorosa* noting that immediately above this poem is written in the manuscript: «Beda Audi cum Maria quae dixit». Thus, the editor draws attention to a general similarity between the poem and *De Meditatione Passionis Christi per Septem Diei Horas Libellus* sometimes ascribed to Bede. But Rosemary Woolf (7) disagrees with Carleton Brown on this point and Sarah Weber (8) quotes a passage from the *Liber de passione Christi* which seems closer to the spirit of Mary's lamentation in this lyric.

On first reading, this poem seems to have many points in common with *Wy haue ze no reuthe on my child*; it is again a brief monologue that Mary utters while standing at the foot of the cross; the moment is the same as Christ is about to die; also the present tense is used here throughout the poem. Yet, the two lyrics differ in some essential respects. In *Suete sone, reu on me, & brest out of thi bondis* Mary's appeal is not addressed to the Jews but to her own Son. The poem is divided into three four-line stanzas each one beginning with the words «*suete sone*» and, although the Blessed Virgin speaks always in the present tense, her lament is uttered at three different moments; thus the poem shows a progression in time that runs parallel with that in feeling.

In the first line Mary appeals to her Son for compassion on her own sufferings. She asks Him to break out of His bonds and in this petition, as Sarah Weber (9) points out, Mary's knowledge of Christ's divine nature is implicit.

In 11.2-3 the Blessed Virgin's gradual realization of her Son's physical torture on the cross is presented by the poet through the sense of sight:

For nou me thinket that i se, thoru bothen thin hondes  
Nailes dreuen in-to the tre, so reufuliche thu honges.

In the Middle Ages and according to Aristotelian tradition, sight was held to be the strongest of all senses (10). Only by visual perception is Mary capable of conceiving, though not of understanding, her Son's ignominious crucifixion. The sight of His pierced hands and the cruel way in which His body hangs on the Cross is so unbearable to her that she cannot endure it any longer and thus cries out:

Nu is betre that i fle & lete alle these londis (1.4).

When Mary speaks again at the beginning of the second stanza some time has passed, but she is still at the foot of the cross not knowing how her heart can bear so much suffering. Her eyes are fixed on Christ's face, all covered in blood now, and on his bound body. Although in her description of Christ's sufferings there is an

increasing acceptance, she still cannot understand the reason for His sacrifice when He is «*best of alle gode*» (1.8).

In the final stanza Mary appeals to her Son again but in this case to let her die with Him as she perceives the proximity of His death and knows that the world without Him will have no meaning for her. With this appeal Mary once again manifests her Knowledge of Christ's divine nature even if she cannot see the need for Him to die.

In her description of Christ's physical sufferings Mary follows a descending movement from the pierced hands to His face covered in blood down to His body and finally to His feet nailed to the Cross. Mary's gradual awareness is based on this descending description.

### The Dialogue Form

According to George Kane (II) the religious poets' use of the dialogue is one of the less successful means of treating the crucifixion theme. He adds that these dialogues tend to diffuseness and, when compared with dramatic monologues such as the ones studied so far, they seem weak and diluted. Yet, a careful reading of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century dialogues that have been preserved in English will show how this direct method of approaching the religious subject has effective and valuable qualities when successfully handled by medieval poets.

The main sources of all English religious dialogue poems may be found in two Latin meditations of the Virgin that have already been mentioned: the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et Anselmi de passione Domini*, attributed to St. Anselm and the *Liber de passione Christi* attributed to St. Bernard.

Before studying the dialogue lyrics in detail we would like to concentrate our attention on a thirteenth-century crucifixion poem, *the milde Lomb isprad o rode* (12) found in Arundel MS. 248 and entitled by C. Brown *Jesus Sorrows for His Mother*. Although Rosemary Woolf has described it as «a third person narrative, embodying a speech of Christ addressed to the Virgin» (13), this lyric provides an excellent example to show how a dramatic monologue can develop into dialogue form. By representing Christ through the Biblical figure of the Lamb covered in blood, the poet emphasizes the value of His sacrifice as well as His innocence which is contrasted in line three with the meditator's own guilt. Immediately there follows an account of His disciples' desertion, which adds an interior pain to Christ's physical sufferings.

In the second stanza Mary and John are introduced by expressions that indicate their physical and emotional relation to the Lamb. Her abundant tears and the disciple's mournful face are not only a reflection of Christ's passion but they also intensify His sufferings as stanza three amply illustrates. The climax of intensity which has been building up is reached in these four lines through Christ's realization of His mother's sorrow. There has been an emotional communication between mother and Son before He appeals to her with a double petition for acceptance of His sacrifice in order *to helen man that was forlon* (1.32) and to co-operate with Him becoming spiritual mother of mankind.

When, in the short prayer at the end of the poem (11.45-48), Mary is addressed as intercessor by the poet we know that Christ's petition has been answered (if not ver-

bally) by His Mother. This communication between Mother and Son which is entirely lacking in the other crucifixion dramatic monologues illustrates our point of view about *the milde Lomb isprad o rode* as a link poem between two poetic conventions. Besides, its carefully planned structure, steady progression of feeling and the tenderness it distils are among the unique qualities of this poem, one of the most perfect medieval crucifixion lyrics.

*Stond wel, moder, ounder rode* (14) affords a characteristic example of dialogue between the Blessed Virgin and her Son on the cross. It also raises a number of textual problems as the poem has been preserved in four different manuscripts. According to Carleton Brown (15) the earliest complete text is that in Digby MS. 86. Even so, it is the fourteenth-century Royal MS. 12, E.I which seems to offer the most authentic text. Another version of the same lyric has been preserved in the well-known Harley MS. 2253. Apart from certain differences in the arrangement of material (stanza six in Royal appears as stanza three in Harley), Royal and Harley agree in adding stanzas ten and eleven which are lacking in the Digby version. Finally, there is an incomplete text in St. John's College, Cambridge MS. III. In this early thirteenth-century manuscript and in Royal MS.12. E.I. the texts are accompanied by musical notation, which emphasizes the form of the poem as a sequence.

Although the English dialogue has no known Latin original, its ultimate source is again the *Liber de passione Christi* and Rosemary Woolf (16) also points out its similarity in musical setting and stanza form with the translations of the Latin hymn *Stabat iuxta Christi crucem* that have already been examined in the first part of the present study.

In his article on the English «Planctus Mariae», George Taylor considers that *Stond wel, moder ounder rode*:

«belongs to that form of poetry which, without actually becoming drama, is highly dramatic and is closely akin to the drama as a form — it belongs among the “estriif” or “debat” poems so much in vogue at this date» (17).

There is indeed a fundamental opposition in the poem which is established from the first stanza and reflects the difference between Christ's divine perspective and the purely human one of His mother.

The symmetrical arrangement of this dialogue allotting the first half of each stanza to Christ and the second half to Mary helps to emphasize the contrast between their respective sufferings. That of Jesus is mainly external while Mary's is internal although, as a reflection of Her Son's physical sufferings, in the third stanza Mary sheds tears of blood which paradoxically cause Christ's greatest sorrow, an interior one:

thū wasse away tho blodi teren      (1.14)  
it don me werse than mi ded      (1.15)

But apart from this interchange between the two speakers, the difference in level of their speeches is maintained up to the tenth stanza. To Christ's doctrinal and controlled words Mary invariably replies with human unrestrained laments, since for her, no abstract reasoning or mental image has any meaning compared with the

crude reality she is perceiving with her eyes. She sees Christ's agony and approaching death and her comprehension extends no further. Thus, it is not by way of reasoning but by the acute sensitivity derived from her own sorrow that Mary's scope is widened and her motherhood enlarged to enfold all mankind. Once she understands the supernatural value of her Son's sacrifice, she becomes the mother of all men and specifically intercedes for all women:

«Sune, help alle al nede,  
alle tho that to me greden-  
mayden, wyf and fol wyman.» (11.46-48)

It is on account of man's spiritual rebirth that Mary suffers worse pains than those spared to her when her own Son was born.

Only when Mary accepts the role of intercessor is the poet entitled to address her as *moder* (1.58) and to put his petition to her.

At this stage in the poem there is a transition from past to present and in the last two stanzas the poet takes over the *moder* form of address; thus, the air of dialogue is retained. The lyric ends with a traditional prayer to Mary.

In this poem there are two well-defined dimensions; that of time is marked by the transition from past to present in the tenth stanza. Sarah Weber (18) points out that the poet suspends the movement of time so that the succession of events depends upon Christ's will. Another dimension is reflected in the dialogue, rising from Mary's to Christ's level in the first nine stanzas and from the poet's level to that of the Blessed Virgin in the last two.

In the same way that the author of *the milde Lomb isprad o rode* had stressed the image of Christ as victim, here the poet insists upon His role as Redeemer of mankind: «hi thole this ded for mannes thinge» (1.8), «better is that ic one deye // that al man-kyn to helle go» (1.20,21) «for adam ut of helle beyn, // and al mankin that is for-loren» (1.32, 33). Also the role of Mary as intercessor had been specifically accepted by her in this poem.

Probably no other crucifixion lyric conveys so vividly the series of transcendental transformations that take place at the moment of Christ's death. And it is precisely by means of the dialogue, not of the narrative form, that the poet of *Ston wel, moder under rode* successfully transmits his message in so powerful and effective way.

Another dialogue lyric of the crucifixion that has been preserved in several manuscripts is *Maiden & moder, cum & se* (19). According to C. Brown the earliest text is that recorded around 1372 by John of Gimestone in his Preaching Book (Advocates MS. 18.7.21). Another version in seven four-line stanzas has been found in Sloane MS.2593. There are finally two later versions: Bodl. MS. Eng. poet. e I and Balliol MS. 354 in which a refrain has been added thus turning the lyric into carol form.

An interesting peculiarity about this lyric is the introduction of a third character in the dialogue. The speech in 11.I-8 is usually ascribed to John, Christ's beloved disciple, although it is wrongly assigned to *Ihesus* in the MS. Rosemary Woolf calls the poem «embryonic drama» and she adds: «it is drama in the sense that there is narrative and three people speak» (20) although the speeches are only thematically

related to one another. There is certain abruptness of transition throughout, particularly between stanzas one and two.

In the first eight lines of the poem John describes Christ's passion to Mary in vivid and pressing terms, urging her to go and see for herself how He has been crucified. There is no answer by the Blessed Virgin to the apostle; instead, in the following six lines, Mary addresses her complaint directly to Christ on the Cross. The progression from stanza two to three is smoother as Christ indirectly answers Mary's question: *Mi dere child, quat is me best?* (1.14) by entrusting her to the care of John. Once this is done Jesus emphasizes His absolute loneliness: *Alone i am with-oten make* (1.17); *is gamen alone me must pleyze* (1.20), and, in a doctrinal form He expresses the causes of His death. The words Christ uses to entrust his soul to God, «Fader, my soule I the be-take» (1.27) are notably similar to those used when entrusting His mother to John: «Womman, to Ion I the be-take» (1.16). In His final appeal to man Christ mentions Mary as intercessor «For sche helpet the stedfastliche» (1.34).

A comparison of the early version with the fifteenth century carols affords an excellent example to show how poetic effectiveness is lost by transforming a brief lyric into a smoother poetic narrative.

*A sone! tak hede to me whas sone thou was* (21) occurs in two manuscripts: Balliol Coll. Oxford MS. 149 and Worcester Cath. MS. F.10. In the first of these manuscripts some Latin words are written above the poem (Crisostomus et ymaginatur de planctu virginis quod beata virgo stat sub cruce dicens filio suo sic: O fili agnosce matrem), which led Carleton Brown to the conclusion that the Latin original for the lyric would be found among the works of Chrysostom, but it seems more likely that the source was once more St. Bernard's *Liber de passione Christi*.

This brief dialogue between Mary and her Son on the Cross contains all the essential information found in the other examples that we have examined but here it is less skilfully presented. The poem is dull particularly from line seven onwards when Christ speaks doctrinally from the cross. Accordingly the poet's didactic purpose is more evident here than in any of the previous poems. Studying Christ's doctrinal speech to Mary we perceive clearly what was the role of the Virgin in these dialogue lyrics.

Christ speaks from the Cross first of all to soothe His mother's grief. What in a narrative lyric such as *thu sikest sore* (22) would be: *To hire thu speke hire sorwe to sleke* (11.15. 16), is transformed in *A sone! tak hede* into direct speech: «stynt now, modir, & wep no more» (1.6) or, more poetically, in *Stond wel moder*: «bihold thi child wyth glade mode, //blype moder mittu ben» (1.3).

Christ's second reason for speaking is linked to the first one; in order to lessen Mary's pain he entrusts her to John: *Iohan thi cosyn, schall be thi sone* (1.14). Furthermore, in John mankind is represented and that is the third reason for Christ's appeal to Mary. Asking her to co-operate with Him in the redemption of mankind Christ raises Mary from the human level of a suffering mother to the divine level of spiritual mother of all men.

Despite G. Kane's comments on the failure of the dialogue form when used in religious lyrics, it seems to me that this poetic technique is the most successful when dealing with the much repeated but always new theme of the crucifixion.

## Conclusion

From a strictly aesthetic point of view the early English religious lyric can be considered an unpretentious genre written in most cases by anonymous friars with a didactic purpose in mind. Some of the most popular lyrics were primarily composed as prayers to be sung or read aloud. The language of these poems is plain, immediate and on the whole bare of imagery.

Although the crucifixion theme, owing to its importance, permeates all types of Marian lyrics, the number of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century crucifixion poems entirely devoted to the Blessed Virgin is relatively small. These short meditations, often based on emotive apocryphal detail, present Mary as the *Mater Dolorosa* or counterpart of her Son's suffering, and her restrained grief has the power of heightening the reader's perception of Christ's passion.

The possible correspondences of medieval English poetry and pictorial art of the same period exceed the purpose of this short study, but judging by the relatively small number of graphic representations of Mary on Calvary that have been preserved in England from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there seemed to be at that time close connections between iconography and poetry, particularly lyric poetry, devoted to the Blessed Virgin.

## NOTES

- (1) Woolf, Rosemary. *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Oxford, 1968. p. 237.
- (2) Taylor, George C.. The English «Planctus Mariae». *Modern Philology* (IV). 1906. 7. pp. 605-37.
- (3) Brown, Carleton (ed.). *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*. 2nd. edn. revised by G. V. Smithers. Oxford, 1957. p. 81.
- (4) Migne, J. p. (ed.). *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina*. Vol. 182. Paris. 1879. Cols. 1133-42.
- (5) Weber, Sarah A.. *Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric*. Ohio State University Press, 1969. p. 115.
- (6) Brown. *Op. cit.*, p. 82.
- (7) Woolf. *Op. cit.*, p. 256.
- (8) Weber. *Op. cit.*, p. 249.
- (9) Weber. *Op. cit.*, p. 117.
- (10) Gray, Douglas. *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*. London and Boston, 1927. p. 40.
- (11) Kane, George. *Middle English Literature*. London, 1951. p. 148.
- (12) Brown, Carleton. *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*. Oxford, 1932, p. 77.
- (13) Woolf. *Op. cit.*, p. 245.
- (14) Brown, 13. pp. 87-91.
- (15) Brown, 13. p. 203.
- (16) Woolf. *Op. cit.*, p. 243.
- (17) Taylor. *Op. cit.*, p. 603.
- (18) Weber. *Op. cit.*, p. 144.
- (19) Brown, 14. p. 85.
- (20) Woolf. *Op. cit.*, p. 250.
- (21) Brown, 14. p. 228.
- (22) Brown, 14. p. 87.

