

Emanuela Zanotti Carney, PhD.

VOICES OF DESPAIR AND GESTURES OF GRIEF IN RITUALS OF MOURNING  
AND ITALIAN MARIAN LAMENTS IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES.<sup>1</sup>

Laments (or, alternatively, lamentations) of the Virgin at the foot of the cross are one of the most significant sub-genres among the extensive body of medieval Marian literature. Devotion to Mary as Mater Dolorosa flourished with unprecedented fervor in medieval Europe from the twelfth to the fifteenth century; it is not coincidental that this is also the period of greatest expansion of the genre in Italy. To be sure, Italian vernacular laments both reflected and contributed the popularization of precisely this devotion to the Virgin as sorrowing mother.

Appearing in both dramatic and lyrical forms, these texts weave an imaginative narrative of Mary's grief and suffering in intensively pathetic tones and with extraordinary psychological subtlety. Typical of late medieval Passion narratives, laments of Mary sought to instill and reinforce piety and devotional practices among the faithful. And, as such, the intense pathos and sharp focus on the Virgin's grief was geared toward provoking deeply affective responses from the audience.

Laments greatly amplified, varied, and expanded upon the emotional and psychological compass of Mary's grief. Representations of Mary in this vernacular poetry do not harmonize with the way believers had perceived Mary through many centuries. Unlike most of the visual narratives produced in the same period of time, laments present a less restrained, less carefully scripted testimony of Mary's grief. The Virgin is no

---

<sup>1</sup> A first draft of this paper was given in April 2011 at the Medieval Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago. Portions of it also appeared in Chapter 3 of my PhD dissertation. I am grateful to Vince Evener, who invited me to present this revised version to the Forum.

longer portrayed as in traditional images, looking quietly and reflectively on the events that take place on Golgotha. The pensive Virgin of the Gospel becomes a woman struggling to understand the messianic prophecy and unwilling to accept the Passion and Death of her son on the Cross for the salvation of sinners. As the virginal body of Mary dissolves under the burden of grief, the very physical expressions of Mary's sorrow and despair take center stage and, at times Mary's parossistic behavior seems to come perilously near to exceeding the boundaries of orthodoxy. The affective language associated with the Passion narrative ably expresses the exuberant emotionality of the Virgin's outpouring of grief. From the start, readers and listeners of laments must be willing to share with the narrator the central conceit of the lament: that Mary, in witnessing the Passion, engaged in trasgressive performances of grief and uttered words at times so inflammatory that they jolt listeners and readers with their own violent force.

Mary's voices of despair and gestures of grief may appear to simply mark the physical and psychological breaking down of the Virgin as *mater dolorosa*, as the sorrowful mother of Jesus seen in his palpable humanity. However, I would suggest that such utterances and gesticulation are drawn and adapted from a formulaic repertory traditionally associated with ancient rituals for mourning the dead and that Mary, in her prolonged lamentations, mimicks the speeches of mourning and gestures of grief performed by women when lamenting the death of their husbands and sons. It is the relationship between these ritualized expressions of female grief and Mary's experience at the Passion as described in vernacular laments that I intend to explore here. This paper argues that poets and compilers of Marian laments in Italian vernacular conveyed the emotional experience of the Virgin at the cross by embodying traditional rituals of

mourning performed by women (the *corrotto*) into their lyrical and dramatic texts. A comparative analysis of literary laments and ancient rituals of death in Italy shows that ritualized mourning practices traditionally performed by women were assimilated into Italian Marian laments and that narrative structures, themes, imagery, and conventions associated with these ancient female rituals are strikingly similar to those we encounter in these vernacular literary texts.

Popular as these exuberant portrayals of Mary's grief were, ambivalence toward female grief and the excessive outpouring of emotions can be detected in several of these poems. I will point out examples of residual ambivalence toward Mary's exuberant grief discernible in several laments, as Christ, Joseph of Arimathea, or Mary's 'sisters' direct sharp criticism to the Virgin and chastize her despair as transgressive and her weeping as inappropriate. Lastly, I will conclude with some general remarks on the audience of Marian laments and how these affective poems contributed to the shaping of late medieval spirituality.

In Italy, the lamentations of the Virgin at the foot of the cross make their first appearance not as independent lyrical poems but as rudimentary vernacular pieces embedded in elaborate Latin Passion plays. The oldest extant Italian lament of Mary in the vernacular is incorporated in a Latin Passion play from the Benedictine monastery of Montecassino, in central Italy, in the mountainous region of Abruzzi. The Montecassino manuscript dates to the middle of the twelfth century, which makes this play one of the oldest extant Latin plays on the Passion in medieval Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> Discovered in

---

<sup>2</sup> Noting that the Montecassino lament is "perhaps two to three decades earlier than its German counterpart among the *Carmina Burana*, Dronke states that he sees no reason to date it to earlier than ca. 1150. Peter Dronke, "Laments of the Three Maries: From the Beginnings to the Mystery Plays," in *Idee, Gestalt,*

1936 and published by M. Iguanez, the Montecassino Passion play represents, together with the *Ufficium Quarti Militis* from Sulmona, an extraordinary attestation of the existence of a well-developed, sophisticated liturgical dramatic tradition in Italy. Structured on the meter of Latin sequences (the kind of tripartite verse widely used by Adam of Saint Victor) and destined for representation during the rites for Holy Week, as the surviving captions make clear, the Passion play was a canonical dramatization of the events leading up to Christ's passion and death, from his capture to the crucifixion.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the play, after the scene in which Christ promises eternal life to the good thief, the dramatist inserted a three-verse strophe in the vernacular, spoken by the Virgin herself. Amidst loud cries (*ingenti clamore*) and pointing to the maternal womb where she had borne Christ (*ostendens ei ventrem in quo Christum portavit*), Mary addresses her son on the cross. Echoing the dying Christ's words to the good thief, the Virgin pleads with her crucified son (*vocat filium crocefixum*) to be remembered in his kingdom, for it was from her that He took his flesh:

...te portai nillu meo ventre  
quando te bei [mo]ro presente  
Nillu teu regnu agi me a mmente.<sup>4</sup>

[I bore you in my womb/when I look at you I die at once/ remember me in your Kingdom.]<sup>5</sup>

---

*Geschichte: Festschrift Fur Klaus von See, Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), 103 and note 26.

<sup>3</sup> F. Mancini, "Temi e stilemi," in *Scritti filologici* (Pisa: Giardini, 1985), 396.

<sup>4</sup> "Un Dramma della Passione del secolo XII", ed. D.M. Iguanez, in *Miscellanea cassinese* 12 (1936), 7-36; reprinted in *Miscellanea cassinese* 18 (1939) with a foreword by Giulio Bertoni, 7-55, 42. The vernacular lament was sung, for traces of musical notation are still visible today in the lower margin of the folio.

<sup>5</sup> This and all other translations from the Italian are mine. Please note: translations are provided here as aid to the readers unfamiliar with Medieval Italian; they are not, however, of publication quality.

The vernacular insert poetically renders, in intensely lyrical tones, the human tragedy of the Virgin as *mater dolorosa*. Archaic Latin Passion plays employed little elaboration of the Gospel narratives; they related scriptural events in close accordance with the canonical Gospel narratives and they paid great attention to transcribing accurately the Gospel dialogues onto their text. Faithful to canonical narratives, archaic Passion plays made no mention of any verbal exchange between Mary and Jesus. Furthermore, they neglected to include Jesus' testament as found in John's Gospel ("Mulier, ecce filius tuus"). It is in the twelfth-century Cassino play, as Franco Mancini has pointed out, that the Passion of Christ and the Lamentation of Mary at the foot of the Cross coalesced for the first time.<sup>6</sup>

The vernacular Cassino lament, inserted in the narrative of the passion of Christ (in Latin), grafted the expression of Mary's maternal suffering to the experience of the enfleshed Christ's martyrdom on the Cross; it did so by modeling Mary's expressions of grief on ancient lamentations performed by women over their dead. As Peter Dronke has argued in relation to the origins of the literary genre of Marian laments, "When these laments surface in the learned world, they still bear all the marks of a non-theological genre and lyric impulse, the marks of a traditional type of women's lament." Furthermore, the presence of a lament of Mary in the vernacular in a Latin passion play can be explained, in Dronke's words, as a "clerical dramatist's tribute to the songs of the non-clerical world."<sup>7</sup> A strong association of Marian laments in Italian vernacular with ancient ritualized practices of lamenting the dead, performed largely by women, has also been made by Ernesto De Martino, in his research on the anthropology of mourning in

---

<sup>6</sup> Mancini, "Temi e stilemi", 396.

<sup>7</sup> Dronke, 103-4.

Southern Italy.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, literary scholar Franco Mancini maintains that the vernacular insertion in the Cassino play gives official investiture to a popular ritual for the dead, the *corrotto*.<sup>9</sup>

In order to better understand how Marian laments in Italian vernacular were rooted in and shaped by ritualized practices of mourning the dead, we will need to answer some preliminary questions: what is a *corrotto*, what was its function, who performed it, and how widespread was its use in Italy in the late Middle Ages?<sup>10</sup>

In Italy, the term *corrotto*, also known as *reputatio* or *computatio* (with a battery of derived terms such as *reputatrici*, *computatrici*, *fare il corrotto*, *reputare*, *computare*) is well attested. In the late Middle Ages if not before, the term *corrotto* was used to designate ritualized practices for lamenting the dead.<sup>11</sup> As documented in Du Cange's glossary for the Middle Ages, the *corrotto* or *reputatio* was performed by women (called *reputatrices*); these *lamentatio mulierum* sought to excite all present to tears (*omnes ad lamentandum excitabant*) with funereal songs (*suis cantibus luctuosis*), which recounted (*reputarent seu enarrarent*) the deeds of the deceased and celebrated his virtues (*defunctorum gesta*).<sup>12</sup> In Giuseppe Pitre's compendium of popular traditions in Sicily,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e Pianto Rituale nel Mondo Antico: dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Mancini, "Temi e stilemi," 396.

<sup>10</sup> In her study of Greek ritual laments for the dead, Margaret Alexiou suggested that "the problem of poetic forms and their origins cannot be solved in isolation, without an investigation of their relation to ritual and official practice." Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, eds. Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Areputa', far corrotto, piangere il morto. Non è corrotto a primo sfogo di dolore, che non ha parole ma gemiti e lacrime; è il richiamare, dir le lodi e raccontar la vita dell'estinto.* in *Vocabolario dell'uso abruzzese, compilato da Gennaro Finamore*, 2. ed., (Città di Castello: Tipografia dello stabilimento S. Lapi, 1893), 51. Full text available at Google Book Search.

[http://www.archive.org/stream/vocabolariodell03finagoog/vocabolariodell03finagoog\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/vocabolariodell03finagoog/vocabolariodell03finagoog_djvu.txt)

<sup>12</sup> du Cange, *et al.*, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, Par les Bénédictins de St. Maur (1733-1736), dans éd. augm (Niort: L. Favre, 1883-1887), t. 7, col. 137b.

<http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/REPUTATIO2>

both terms *reputare* and *computare* are associated to ritualized lamentations performed by hired professional women. Weeping for the dead and performing a *corrotto* (or *reputatio*) were both the domain of women and established practice in medieval Italy.

This particularly illustrative passage describes the *corrotto* traditionally performed in late medieval Florence:

In Florence of the twelfth to the fourteenth century, mourning was a ritual, performed to strictly formulated rules. When a citizen died, particularly if he occupied a socially respectable position, his death was announced by a public speaker and his fellow citizens were called to assemble in front of his house. This, it was said, occurred “secondo il costume della terra” (n.d.r. according to the customs of the land). [...]. Inside the house, the dead man was laid on a low bier, and around him gathered the women of the family and the neighborhood. Huddled on the floor, they started the ritualized lamentation. The rules of the mourning customs demanded that the women closest to the dead loosen their headdresses and allow their hair to flow freely. Then they began crying with loud voices, tearing their hair, rending and wounding their faces with their fingernails, and rending their garments down to the girdle.<sup>13</sup>

Rituals of mourning performed by women have ancient origins and they are a cross-cultural, trans-historical phenomenon, as recent studies have cogently shown.<sup>14</sup> The thirteenth-century Italian grammarian and professor of rhetoric Boncompagno da Signa (d. circa 1240) explored these ritualized expressions of female grief in his *Rhetorica antiqua*, where he describes funerary rituals in ancient Rome:

Ducuntur etiam Rome quedam femine precio numario ad plangendum super corpora

---

<sup>13</sup> Moshe Barasch, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 57-88. For such rituals in Renaissance Florence, see Sharon T. Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> See the seminal work on ancient Greek laments by Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*; Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e Pianto Rituale nel Mondo Antico: dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008); Gail Holst-Warhoft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Nancy Sultan, “Private Speech, Public Pain: The Power of Women's Laments in Ancient Greek Poetry”, in *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions*, ed. Kimberly Marshall (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993); Angela Bourke, “More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry”, in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Laments for the Dead in Medieval Narrative* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966).

defunctorum, que computatrices vocantur, ex eo quod sub specie rithmica nobilitates divicias formas fortunas et omnes laudabiles mortuorum actus computant seriatim. Sedet namque computatrix aut interdum recta, vel interdum proclivis stat, super genua crinibus dissolutis, et incipit praeconia laudum voce variabili iuxta corpus defuncti narrare, et semper in fine clausule ho vel hy promit more plangentis, et tunc omnes astantes cum ipsa flebiles voces emittunt. Set computatrix producit lacrimas pretii, non doloris.<sup>15</sup>  
[Some women in Rome are said to weep over the bodies of the deceased for a monetary compensation. They are called ‘computatrices’ because they recount, in songs, the nobility, riches, beauty, fortune, and all the laudable deeds of the dead in succession. The ‘computatrix’ sits, or occasionally stands or reclines, bent upon her knees, her hair untied, and begins narrating the praises in front of the body of the deceased with a changing voice and always, at the end of a clause, utters ‘ho’ or ‘hy’ as is the custom of those who weep, and then all those present let out feeble sounds with her. However, the ‘computatrix’ weeps for money, not out of grief.]<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Roman funeral practices appear to have hardly changed in the course of many centuries: the rituals described by the medieval rethorician for antiquity made use of the same gestures of grief and speeches of mourning of their medieval counterparts.

According to Boncompagno, it was the custom in Rome to hire women to come and weep over the bodies of the dead for monetary compensation. These professional lamenters were called *computatrices* for they recounted rhythmically all that the defunct had accomplished in life (his deeds, wealth, fortune, beauty). This task was performed according to an established pattern: the *computatrices* would kneel, recline, or stand around the corpse, their hair loose; they would begin the proclamation of praises before the body of the defunct, with changing voices; they would always conclude their praises with the formulaic *ho* or *hy*, as was the custom of people wailing; all those in attendance would accompany the *computatrices* with lamenting voices.

---

<sup>15</sup> Latin text quoted from Carol Lansing, *Passion and Order*, p. 64, note 53.

<sup>16</sup> The translation from Latin to English is mine.

Far from being a spontaneous expression of grief, an uncontrolled outpouring of emotions, ritualized weeping for the dead was “a culturally choreographed act,” a tightly scripted program of stylized acts “complete with actors and an audience.”<sup>17</sup> Praises for the deceased and expressions of grief for the loss of his life were accompanied by expressions of concern for the future of the female survivors. To add to the pathos of the circumstances, women accompanied their wailing with physical expressions of grief: common gestures were tearing out their hair, scratching their faces, and pounding their chests.

The practice of hiring professional *reputatrici* was still much in use in Italy in the XVIII century and possibly beyond, as attested by Giuseppe Pitrè’s work on popular Sicilian traditions. Here the *reputatrici* (also called *prefiche* or *ripetitrici*) were hired for the specific job of lamenting the deceased and to “hold the visitation” (*tenere visitu*) in “the customary fashion.” According to this highly ritualized tradition and its conventions, three times a day (at dawn, midday and sunset) these professional mourners would shout out in a loud voice, their harrowing cries, sounding like howling to better give full-throated expression to their grief for the death of the deceased. Lack of screaming or a moderate outburst of emotions was indicative of the scarcity or lack of merits in the dead person.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Gary L. Ebersole, “The Poetics and Politics of Ritualized Weeping in Early and Medieval Japan,” in *Holy Tears. Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, eds. Kimberley C. Patton and John S. Hawley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane*, (Palermo: Pedone Lauriel Editore, 1872), 237; idem, *Usi natalizi, nuziali e funebri del popolo siciliano descritti da G. Pitrè* (Palermo: Pedone Lauriel Editore, 1879), 145-182, [http://books.google.com/books?id=IF8pAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Usi+natalizi,+nuziali+e+funebri+del+popolo+siciliano++By+Giuseppe+Pitre&hl=en&ei=9EoKTtyuK7PDsQLXp6TGAQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=IF8pAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Usi+natalizi,+nuziali+e+funebri+del+popolo+siciliano++By+Giuseppe+Pitre&hl=en&ei=9EoKTtyuK7PDsQLXp6TGAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2001

Rituals of mourning included the celebration of the deceased's life. The *reputatrici* would interrupt their wailing from time to time and each of them would take turns in uttering a eulogy and praising the virtues of the deceased. The sentences uttered belonged to a traditional repertory: the inevitability of death, the particular circumstances of the deceased's death, the expenses incurred by the family in an attempt to restore their loved one to health, that God takes away the good but leaves evil people alone, that the dead are better off than the living, etc. In the absence of professional mourners, wives, mothers, and daughters would carry out the ritual of the "*ripitari*" of the dead husband, son, or father. The women would cut their tresses and spread them over the body of the deceased; standing in front of his corpse, in chorus or alone, they would sing, praising him for his affection, hard work, and devotion. They would weave the story of his life while "dando in ismanie" (that is, engaging in wild displays of grief), thrusting their hands in their hair and pulling their hair, scratching their faces, pounding their breasts, and tearing at their clothes. The "piagnisteo" was shared by female visitors, who would show compassion for their bereaved relatives and echo their grief in acts and words.<sup>19</sup> This exuberant display of emotions was accompanied by the distressed cries about the future of the female survivors, now left without male support and protection.<sup>20</sup> When it came time to remove the corpse from the house, the women would throw themselves over it and try to stop the men from taking away the corpse of the deceased.

These ritualized practices associated with the folk tradition of laments for the dead, rooted in pagan practices and beliefs though they were, had survived the inception of Christianity, much to the chagrin of some early Fathers of the Church, who condemned

---

<sup>19</sup> In many medieval laments 'piagnisteo' was translated as 'lagna,' 'lagnarsi.'

<sup>20</sup> Pitrè, *Biblioteca*, 208.

the rituals as harming oneself and engaging in excessive displays of mourning, for their close associations with pagan cults, and as contrary to Christian doctrine. In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea, for example, argued that women should be restricted from engaging in excessive outpourings of grief and suggested that the proper way to mourn for a dear one was to show only a measured amount of affliction and distress, and a modicum of tears; the faithful were to do away with the wailing and tearing of clothes, practices deemed “ungodly.”<sup>21</sup> As early as the fourth century, John Chrysostom had upbraided contemporary Christians who discredited the salvific work of Christ by engaging in endless weeping and loud lamentations, as if they did not know that Christ had transmuted death into peaceful sleep.<sup>22</sup> Concerned that their practice cast ridicule on the new faith, he railed against women mourners for lacerating their cheeks, rending their clothes and wailing loudly, a custom, he warned, more appropriate to followers of Bacchus than to Christian women and offensive to God:<sup>23</sup>

But in our days, among our other evils there is one malady very prevalent among our women; they make a great show in their dirges and wailings, baring their arms, tearing their hair, making furrows down their cheeks. And this they do, some from grief, others from ostentation and rivalry, others from wantonness; and they bare their arms, and this too in the sight of men. Why doest thou, woman? Dost thou strip thyself in unseemly sort, tell me, thou who art a member of Christ, in the midst of the marketplace, when men are present there? Dost thou pluck thy hair, and rend thy garments, and wail loudly, and join the dance, and keep throughout a resemblance to Bacchanalian women, and dost thou not think that you art offending God? What madness is this? Will not the heathen laugh? Will they not deem our doctrines fables? They will say, “There is no resurrection—the doctrines of the Christians are mockeries, trickery, and contrivance. [...]” (Homily LXII)

---

<sup>21</sup> Alexiou, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, PG, 57, 374.

<sup>23</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John ” in *A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian Church*, edited by Philip Schaff ; in connection with a number of patristic scholars of Europe and America, (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Eerdmans, 1969-1975), Vol. XIV.

Text in English can be found online, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.lxiv.html>.

Moderation in weeping and restraint in bodily movement, he advised, were proper behavior for believers in the Resurrection:

“What then?” says some one, “Is it possible being man not to weep?” No, neither do I forbid weeping, but I forbid the beating yourselves, the weeping immoderately. I am neither brutal nor cruel. I know that our nature asks and seeks for its friends and daily companions; it cannot but be grieved. As also Christ showed, for He wept over Lazarus. So do thou; weep, but gently, but with decency, but with the fear of God. If so thou weep, thou dost so not as disbelieving the Resurrection, but as not enduring the separation. Since even over those who are leaving us, and departing to foreign lands, we weep, yet we do this not as despairing. (Homily LXII)<sup>24</sup>

The Church was not the only institution to look at ritualized mourning practices with disdain. Historical records for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries document the efforts sustained in Italy by city governments to curtail funeral practices such as ritualized weeping, curbing the number of mourners allowed to funeral ceremonies, and banning the use of hired women to lead the funeral dirges. In the Abruzzi, for example, the term appears in an injunction of the Statutes of the city of L’Aquila against the use of *reputatrici* during the *corrotto* (or *corruptu*); the Statutes of the town of Noemi likewise prohibited the use of *reputatrici* in the church during the funeral rites for the deceased, in order not to interfere with the Office of the Mass. In the *Constitutiones* of the emperor and king of Sicily Frederick II, to cite another example, we read that the performance of any *reputatio* was banned.<sup>25</sup> The Sicilian Statutes also prohibited the presence of hired

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem

<sup>25</sup> With its singing and music-making, this ritual of mourning was charged with stirring up the souls of all those attending the funerary rites to *luctum* and tears; it was thus deemed injurious to God. Furthermore, the Sicilian legislators did not permit the use of any musical instrument (*funebria guidernæ vel guiternæ, vel timpana, vel alia solita instrumenta*), as they provoked more ‘gaudium’ than sadness [Quoniam Reputationes (Reputationes) cantus et soni, qui propter defunctos celebrantur, animos astantium convertunt in luctum, et movent eos quodammodo ad injuriam Creatoris, prohibemus Reputantes funeribus adesse, vel aliæ mulieres, quæ earum utuntur ministerio, nec in domibus seu Ecclesiis, vel sepulturis, vel alio quocumque loco, nec pulsantur circa funebria guidernæ vel guiternæ, vel timpana, vel alia solita instrumenta, quæ ars magis ad gaudium, quam ad tristitiam adinvenit, pœna

*reputatrici* at funerals, whether these took place in a church or at home, at the grave or elsewhere. Those *reputatrici* who tried to perform these traditional rituals of mourning were heavily fined or, should they be unable to pay, scourged. Such were the social disruptions of the *ripitari* that these displays of emotions were assiduously and repeatedly targeted by civic and religious authorities (kings, universities, bishops, among others) as threatening to the social order: the use of *reputatrici* and their laments were believed to stir up the hatred between warring factions and families and often resulted in further deaths and vengeance.<sup>26</sup>

Now that we have answered, however briefly, the preliminary questions posited at the beginning of this section, we will consider whether indeed there is any evidence that the ancient *corrotto* affected the writing of Marian laments. Explicit intra-textual references to this ancient tradition and the ritual character of Marian laments are indeed copious. In a fifteenth-century Passion play from Abruzzo, one of the rubrics introduces Mary's lament as a *corrocto* ("Incommensa lo Corrocto facto alla sepultura del Signore") and the Virgin herself refers to her inconsolable weeping as a *corructo* ("Che deio fare, oimè, ch' el mundo tucto/ non bastiria a ffare il mio corructo?").<sup>27</sup> In the *Lamento della Dopna abruzzese* Mary invites her "sisters" (Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobi and Mary Salome) to sit down on the ground and "to make a *corrotto*" for Christ for he had suffered atrocious torments: "Oymé sorelle, or vy ascidate/ in plana terra et

---

unciarum auri quatuor mulctandis iis, qui eas admiserint circa hoc, et ipsis Reputatricibus similiter : quæ Reputatrices, si pœnam solvere propter paupertatem non possint, ne pœnalis prohibitio eludatur, fustibus cædantur per civitatem et terram, ubi prohibita tentaverunt].

<sup>26</sup> For examples of civic rife fomented by funeral practices see Carol Lansing, *Passion and Order: Restraint of Grief in the Medieval Italian Communes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 206-8.

<sup>27</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Il Teatro Abruzzese del Medio Evo* (Sala Bolognese: A. Forni, 1997), 183-185. Reprint. Originally published as *Il teatro abruzzese del medio evo* (Bologna : Zanichelli, 1924).

buy corroctate, dello mio Figlio sì nne plangate, / Dello mio Figlio que pene pate!”<sup>28</sup> In the thirteenth century *Lamentatio Mariae de Filio* (ca.1290), the author refers to his poetic work as a “repotare” instead (*Or è conplitu sto repotare*). *Repotare* is rendered as *cumpotare* in a *Planctus virginis* in the *Laudario Urbinate* where Mary prepares to spend the night at the foot of the cross and invites her “sisters” to go home, because of the late hour, so that she can take on the lament (*cumpotare*) for her dead son: “tanto ‘affrige lo radiare /de voler plangnare e-ssospirare, /ke-nno me lassa ben satiare / de lo fillolo mio cumpotare.”<sup>29</sup>

The terms “repotare,” “cumpotare,” and “corrotto,” so often found in vernacular laments of Mary, therefore explicitly liken these poetic compositions and Mary’s outpouring of grief over the death of her crucified son to women’s ritual performances of mourning for their dead husband and sons. Marian laments evoke several aspects of a traditional *corrotto*. In the *Pianto delle Marie*, for example, the lamentation over the Passion and death of Christ is performed by a group of characters, much like traditional rituals of mourning performed by women. Mary Magdalene and Mary Jacobi (whose lament is explicitly termed by the poet a “repotare”) take turns expressing their bewilderment at the loss of their Lord and Savior and then recollecting events from his life (the resurrection of Lazarus, the washing of the feet, the flight of the apostles, and the betrayal of Judas) and Passion. Their speeches of mourning alternate with John the Evangelist’s pained words: he regrets the flight of the disciples, Peter’s denial and the loneliness of Jesus at the time of his death:

Maria Jacobi per grande dolore

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. The *Lamento della Dopna* is part of a fifteenth-century codex compiled after 1347, see 347-9.

<sup>29</sup> Rosanna Bettarini, *Jacopone e il Laudario Urbinate* (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1969), 489

Scì reputava lu Salvatore;  
 Dicialli: - «Patre iustu et Seniore,  
 Morire vorria per lu toi amore!»  
 Multu plangia la Madalena;  
 Jungia le manu, ad pè li sse enclena:  
 - «Veiate, Sere, en sî gran pena,  
 so dolorosa multu e taupina!»  
 Plangia Johani lu Vangelista;  
 La sua persona multu era trista;  
 Dicialli: - «Sere, gran pena è questa  
 K' errecevetate da la gente trista!» (*Pianto delle Marie*, ll. 174-185)<sup>30</sup>

[ Mary Jacoby, because of her great grief, thus lamented the Savior and said to Him: “ Just Father and Lord, I wish to die for your sake”. Mary Magdalene copiously wept, joined her hands, and bowed down to His feet: “ I see you suffering and I am very sorrowful, poor wretched me!” John the Evangelist wept, he was very sad, and said to Him: “O Lord, it is a great punishment you receive from this miserable people.”]

The Virgin Mary interrupts their mourning and invites the apostle John and the other Marys to rest. As in a traditional *corrotto*, Mary declares that it is her right as well as her responsibility to ‘make a lament,’ for, with Christ’s death, she has lost, at once, a son, a husband, and a father:

Poi li respu[n]de la Gloriosa  
 - «Ad me lassate far questa cosa,  
 Ké lli so matre, ancella et esposa  
 Et sopra ll’ altre so dolorosa.  
 Or ve deiate, sore ‘rpusare;  
 Lassate trista me lamentare;  
 Ka lli so matre, deiolo fare,  
 Et sinça lui non poço stare! (*Pianto delle Marie*, ll. 186-193)<sup>31</sup>

[Then the Glorious One replies to them: “ Let me do this, because I am His mother, handmaid and bride, and I am the most sorrowful of all women. Sisters, now you must rest and let me lament, poor wretched and sad me! I am His mother, I must do it, and I cannot live without Him.]

The suggestion that the *Pianto delle Marie*, like several vernacular laments from Italy, maintains the main outlines of ritualized lamentations for the dead receives further

<sup>30</sup> Francesco A. Ugolini, *Testi Volgari Abruzzesi del Duecento* (Torino: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1959), 124-5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

corroboration when we (briefly) compare the stylized narrative of a traditional *corrotto* and the narrative of the *Pianto*. Addressing Jesus “*si pietusu*” and “*pigitusu*” (merciful and beautiful), Mary gives vent to her wrenching grief and loneliness, as she reviews his life and deeds and compares the joy she felt at the Incarnation with her present sorrowful circumstances (the *then and now* structure common to ritualized laments). The Virgin bitterly bemoans the futility of the maternal care spent in raising her child, now taken away from her: she had given birth without pain; she became with child when the Angel had greeted her, filling her with joy; she had borne him in her womb for nine months, she had nursed him at her breast and followed him everywhere. Now she was alone and forced to live with the other women, the *doliose*, without appearing in public anymore. Mary wishes to be buried with Jesus rather than live like that. She recollects important episodes of Jesus’ early life (Nativity, the Magi, the flight into Egypt) and says, as though speaking to him: “*Poi che crescisti, che entrasti a fare?*” (“When you grew up, what did you start doing?”).

It was common, in ritualized laments, for female grief to quickly turn into anger directed to the deceased, and for speeches of mourning to host criticism of his deeds (or lack thereof). Likewise, Mary questions the wisdom of Christ (“You started preaching to the Jews, curing the sick and even raising the dead, and what for? Honor has turned into dishonor, you have no friends, and everybody wishes you ill”). She directs thinly veiled criticism to her son: Jesus’s decision to die for the salvation of mankind entails deplorable consequences to be suffered by Mary and her ‘sisters’. The Virgin points out that even Mary Magdalene now is alone and abandoned, without any family to look after her. Mary Magdalene intervenes and she too laments the condition in which Jesus’

crucifixion has catapulted her: she was a sinner, rejected by her own family and abandoned by relatives, yet Christ made her feel like an empress.

References to rituals of mourning abound also in the *Lo Lamento della Dopna* from Abruzzo. In this lament, Christ calls Mary the “woman who is making a great lamentation” (*quella che fa sy grande lamentare*), then again the “female” who weeps and leads a great lament and languishes because of her grief (*Femmena, che pure piagny/ et de dolore men tale lamento/ et della pena tucta te languy*). Mary, surrounded by John, Mary Jacobi, Mary Salome, and Mary Magdalen, laments with them the “ruin” that has befallen her and bemoans being entrusted to John.<sup>32</sup>

Another common motif in ritualized practices of mourning the dead is the lamentation over the loss of a youth. Likewise, in the same *Lo Lamento della Dopna* the Virgin, immersed in her grief, rends her garments in despair as she mourns the premature death her son, who was only thirty years old and now is dead:

Vedete, gente, che belly cangny,  
che perdo Cristo et agio Johanni,  
per te me squarto tucty li panny;  
ché me cte perdo nelli trenta anny! (*Lo Lamento della Dopna*, ll.11-14)<sup>33</sup>

[Behold, people, what a great exchange, I lose Christ and I receive John in his place; for you I rend my garments, because I lose you when you are thirty years old]

Yet another trait shared both by burial rituals and Marian laments is the Virgin’s insistence that her grief is legitimate and her weeping justified. She has, Mary insists, every right and every reason to cry and lament not only the death of Christ, but also the cruel manner of his death, a death usually reserved for thieves:

Vedete, sorelle, se agio rascione  
de plangere bene con grande dolore,

---

<sup>32</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Teatro Abruzzese*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Teatro Abruzzese*, 18.

dello mio Figlio, carnale amore,  
che è posto in croce como latrone. (*Lo Lamento della Dopna*, ll.23-26)<sup>34</sup>  
[See, o sisters, if I have reason to weep with great sorrow, for my son, my carnal love, is  
hung on the cross like a thief.]

As in Greek and Irish folk traditions,<sup>35</sup> in Italian laments of the Virgin the  
behavior of female mourners extended to Mary. The Virgin is portrayed as a traditional  
*reputatrice*, barefoot, with disheveled hair, tearing at her face, and beating her chest. She  
calls herself the “maestra del pianto,” equating herself to those ancient Roman *reputatrici*  
who gave “the manner of lament” to the women; she is most qualified to lead the lament  
for she is Christ’s mother and her grief exceeds everyone else’s. Mary reacts to the  
passion and death of her son Jesus with an uncontrollable frenzy of physical  
destructiveness, beating her breasts, wildly scratching her face, moving around  
“concitata” (extremely agitated), sobbing, groaning and lamenting in a loud voice:

Tant’è forte addolorata,  
tucta pare esmemorata,  
e spesso cade pasmata  
del dolor k’al cor li va.  
Relèvase esbaguttita  
e•ttèn mente a la firita,  
ke de la carne polita  
lo virmillio sangue tra’.  
Li capilli à per nigente  
quella povera dolente;  
bactese crudelmente,  
pieta de sé non à.<sup>36</sup> (*De Planctu Virginis*, Urbinate VIII [13]ll. 33-44)

[She is so sorrowful that she appears to have lost her memory and oftentimes swoons and  
falls down ‘cause of the pain that pierces her heart. Terribly frightened, she raises herself  
and gazes steadily at the wound from which vermillion blood flows on the beautiful flesh  
[of Jesus]. The hair of that wretched and sorrowful woman is disheveled and she cruelly  
strikes her chest, without pity for herself.]

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous voices*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Rosanna Bettarini, *Jacopone e il Laudario Urbinate* (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1969).

At the burial of her son, her grief renews and she works herself into a frenzy (*la smania ch'i' menava dir non posso*), throwing herself this way and that, stamping her feet, and lacerating her face:

E vedendo lui al sepolcro portare,  
la smania ch'i' menava dir non posso,  
ché cuor alcun no la poria pensare.  
Io me squarçava, io me gitava adosso  
a questa, a quela per qualche conforto,  
dicendo: «Omè, quanto 'l cor m'è percoso!» (Lamentatio B. V. Marie, ll. 1293-1299)<sup>37</sup>

Lo cuor, topina, tanto mi dolea  
ch'io rabiava con piedi e cun mane  
e tuta quanta squarçar mi volea. (Lamentatio B.V. Marie, ll. 1327-29)

[Seeing that he(Jesus) was brought to his sepulcher, I worked myself into such a frenzy that I can hardly express it in words, for no heart would be able to fathom it. I rent my face, I threw myself now against one woman, now against another, saying:“ Woe me, my heart is struck so!”/ My heart, woe me, was hurting so that, in a frenzy, I beat my hands and feet, and wished to strike myself all over.]

Scholars have drawn a parallel between lamenting women in Greece and madmen,<sup>38</sup> and this association between female grief and madness survives in Italian laments, where a crazed Mary walks the city streets of Jerusalem in a daze:

Quasi un modo de femena svolta  
k'avesse la memoria cagnata,  
cusì vai per la via daiendo volta.  
Per aventura, non te•nni si' addata?  
Forsi li toi te fecer mal' accolta,  
sì t'è partuta da lor corçoata?  
Oi qualke cara cosa t'anno tolta,  
ke pari quasi folle diventata? (De Planctu Virginis, Urbinate I[5], ll. 9-16)<sup>39</sup>  
[You [i.e. Mary] are going back and forth in the street like a woman unhinged, and whose memory is altered. Where have you been? Could it be that your relatives have not welcomed you? Have you left them in anger? Have they taken away from you something you loved, that you seem to have gone mad?]

In a typical ritualized lament women who have lost a husband or son bemoan their

---

<sup>37</sup> Enselmino da Montebelluna, *Lamentatio Beate Virginis Marie (Pianto della Vergine)*, ed. Alvise Andreose, Editrice Antenore (Roma-Padova, 2010), 571-2.

<sup>38</sup> Holst-Warhoft, *Dangerous Voices*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Bettarini, *Laudario Urbinate*.

precarious social status and the lack of a male figure to protect, shelter, and provide support for them. As Gail Holst-Warhaft noted, “female relatives [...] mourn their loss in terms of emotional, economic, and social deprivation.”<sup>40</sup> Mimicking women mourners, Mary too deplors the uncertainty of her future. The Virgin laments that she will have to live with other women who, like her, are destitute and without male protection (the “*doliose*”). Fearing that she will become homeless, forced to wander about without a place to sleep, and reduced to begging for a piece of bread, Mary asks her female companions to beseech help from their male relatives on her behalf. In all laments, Mary cries out in distress bemoaning her new condition of lonely widow, sorrowful mother, and abandoned woman, one “without comfort” because she has lost *lo bello Figlio, marito et patre* (her beautiful son, husband, and father). In the following lament, for example, the spiritual sorrow of Mary is accompanied by concrete and pressing concerns over the absence of ‘a man,’ a male relative the Virgin can trust and lean on for material support as well as for solace:

Quantunque mente teng[n]a,  
 Eo no poço trovare  
 Omo ke-mm’ appartengg[n]a  
 O’ me poça fidare:  
 Mort’ è la mia sostengna  
 Non saçço ove m’ andare,  
 Ki-mme reconolare  
 Non trovo in mio dolore (*De dolore matris*, ll.20-25)<sup>41</sup>

[Even though I have thought about it, I cannot find a man who belongs to my family, or whom I can trust; my support is dead, I don’t know where to go, and I find no one who can comfort me in my sorrow.]

This especially true as Mary feels the enmity of the city around her, as we learn from another text:

---

<sup>40</sup> Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Bettarini, 547.

In questa sagura me-nno trovo amici,  
Le case e le mura me paio nemici:  
Remasa so' scura,  
Ke 'l fillo ke-ffici

Veio morto stare (*De compassione matri ad filium*, ll.67-73)<sup>42</sup>

[In this tragedy, I find no friends, homes and walls are my enemies; I have become a 'dark one,' for the child I gave birth to is now dead.]

As she wanders amid the city streets, a desolate Mary compares her present

“mendicanza,” which likens her to an ordinary pilgrim, to her previous exalted condition of noble woman:

De regge e-dde regina  
Eo so' descesa e-nnata,  
La potença divina  
In meve aio portata;  
Or como pelligrina  
K' è-ffor de sua contrata,  
Eo, lassa, so' lassata,  
Non aio guidatore. (*De dolore matris*, ll.12-19)<sup>43</sup>

[I hail and I was born from royal lineage of kings and queens, I bore in my womb the divine power; now I am like a pilgrim far from her home town, and I, poor wretched me, have no male guidance and protection.]

Mary experiences these emotions with wrenching intensity. She is powerless to change the course of the events and stubbornly resists their unfolding. She is troubled by them, and terrified by the future. Mary's desperation for the turn of events which see her turn from queen to pauper is expressed vehemently in anguished cries of dereliction. Here again, Mary makes references to being a beggar (“mendicare”) forced to supplicate strangers for bread:

O regina dolente,  
L'onor della corona  
Te lassa et abbanduna:  
Merràte mendicare.  
Fillo, quign' omo pare !

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 547.

Egina gir peccente  
Pro lo pane a la gente ! (*De Planctu virginis*, ll. 244-50)<sup>44</sup>  
[O doleful queen, the honor of the crown has left and abandoned you; you will have to go and beg. I will be like a tramp begging for bread among people.]

In another lament, Mary confesses to be afraid that people will chase her away and deny her a place to stay, now that she has no home or male relative to protect her:

O dolce mio Figliolo, et che farraio  
Da poy ch' io so remasa abandonata?  
Casa non ho; oymé dove gerraio!  
Donca yo vo, oymé, sarò cacciata!  
Poy che tu e' morto, io la vita non voglio;  
Con te na seppultura entrare voglio. (*Passio volgarizzato*, ll. 4-9)<sup>45</sup>  
[O sweet son, what will I do now that I have been abandoned? I have no home, o poor wretched me, where will I go? Wherever I will go, poor wretched me, I will be chased away! Now that you are dead, I wish not to live, I yearn to be buried with you.]

As we have shown, Marian laments in Italy show structures, imagery, and conventions that are strikingly similar to those of ancient folks songs to which Dronke alludes, and to ritual practices for the dead, the *corrotto*, discussed above. Additionally, we need to point out that vernacular laments also draw, time and again, from the traditional performative vocabulary of gestures of grief that were part and parcel of traditional *corrotti*. Grief for the loss of Christ finds expression in the conventional ritualized gestures of mourning: Mary and her “sisters” sit on the ground, strike their heads, beat their breasts, tear their hair, lacerate their faces until blood flows from their cheeks, and rend their garments.

In the *Pianto delle Marie*, for example, the poet tells us that the Virgin engages in a “lamentation” and portrays Mary acting out her anguish and sorrow with gestures traditionally associated with the physical expression of the pain, dejection, and despair of

---

<sup>44</sup> Bettarini, 501.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 313

women mourners or *reputatrici*. Barefoot, her face pale, and her hair disheveled, the Virgin tears her face as she utters her lament:

Facia la Vergene gram lamenta[ç]a,  
Multu plangia de la pietança;  
Era scapiliata, scenta et escalça,  
Tuca scarscava la sua faça blanca (*Pianto delle Marie*, ll. 120-23)<sup>46</sup>  
[The Virgin performed a great lamentation, weeping copiously for compassion; she was disheveled and barefoot, and rent her white face.]

Distraught and feeling abandoned, Mary is unable to rest and is caught in a frantic mood of self-destruction:

Dàvase i pùini per lo pecto  
e•nno volea posare in lecto,  
e•ddiça: “Fillo benedecto,  
a•ccui me lassi, dolçe amore? (*De planctus Virginis*, Urbinate X[17, ll. 86-90])<sup>47</sup>  
[She struck her chest and punched herself, and did not want to rest in bed, and said: “Blessed son, to whom will you entrust me, my sweet love?”]

Kin and friends often accompany the Virgin in acts of self-mutilation. In the *Lamento della Dopna*, John the Evangelist laments the loss of Jesus, his dear brother (*caro fratello*); Jesus’s death leaves the Evangelist ‘a poor little wretch’. His hair disheveled (*scapilliato*) and his chest rent (*tucto squartato*), John performs the obligatory gestures of mourning and tears his garments (*per te me squarto tucty li panny*).<sup>48</sup> In a dramatic lament from Abruzzo, Mary Magdalene is described as she mercilessly strikes at herself:

La Magdalena l’avea nelle braccia  
recolta et faceva grande strida;  
colle soe mani se percote la faccia:  
“Oymé! Oymé! Yhesu! Magistro!” grida;  
El biundo capo pela et lo viso straccia  
et dice: “Oymé! Non è chi me occida,

---

<sup>46</sup> Ugolini, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Bettarini, 559.

<sup>48</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Teatro Abruzzese*, 17.

o Signor mio, Yhesu, Magistro et Patre,  
insieme con teco morerà toa matre!”(*Sermonale di A. De Ritiis*, ll.51-58)<sup>49</sup>  
[Mary Magdalene was holding her [i.e. Mary] in her arms, and cried out in a loud voice; with her own hands she strikes her face: “Poor wretched me, Jesus! Teacher!” she screams; She tears her blond hair off and rends her face and says: “Poor wretched me, is there anyone who will kill me? O my Lord, Jesus, Teacher and Father, your mother will die with you!”]

Church authorities were, as we have seen, uneasy about accomodating female grief and ritualized laments. In her study of female grief in the Medieval English Lazarus Plays, Katharine Goodland writes that “[a]s a social practice presided over by women ritual lament poses resistance to male social authority and the tenets of the dominant Christian ideology.”<sup>50</sup> She also notes the coexistence, in literary laments, of two opposing systems of values:

Women articulate the residual view that their cries are both obligatory and necessary, while the men represent the Christian view that they are useless and therefore excessive.<sup>51</sup>

In speaking about the “gendered conflict between two discourses, female grief and male control” Goodland points out that

There is more at stake here than just gender. In its deep structure it is an encounter between two different constructions of death and mourning: the dominant Christian belief that faith in God brings eternal life, and therefore one should not grieve over the dead; and the residual practice of lament for the dead, an oral tradition usually led by women in which ‘eternal life’ - living on in the memory of the community- depends upon the repetitive performances of mourning.”<sup>52</sup>

When it comes to Marian laments, Goodland observes that dramatists and poets reconciled this ambivalence by framing Mary’s weeping for her dead son as the physical manifestation of compunction for sin. However, a brief review of Italian laments of the

---

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 324.

<sup>50</sup> Goodland, Katharine, “‘Vs for to wepe no man may lett’: Accommodating Female Grief in the Medieval English Lazarus Plays,” *Early Theatre* 8.1 (2005): 69-94, 69. Article 4. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/earlytheatre/vol8/iss1/4>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 77

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 69

Virgin reveals that a measure of uneasiness still exists in these literary artifacts and that in many cases Mary's grief and her weeping is chastized (by Joseph of Arimathea, by the 'sisters', and by Christ) as excessive, inappropriate, hurtful to Christ, and contrary to Christian doctrine.

In the following passage, for example, Joseph of Arimathea enjoins Mary to stop her lamenting and to return home, warning her that the hour is late and that it is inappropriate for women to be staying out at night. In the privacy of her home, he suggests, Mary can then continue to weep for Christ alongside her "sisters":

Madopnna mia, pillia un poco posa;  
lassateme omay Christo seppellire;  
Vidi ch'è tardo; non è honesta cosa  
Debbiate de nocte ad casa regire;  
Per Dio vi prego, vui vi confortete,  
Colle toy sore ad casa piangerete. (*Lu Lamintu della Nostra Dopna lu Venardy Sancto*, ll. 16-21)<sup>53</sup>

[My Lady, rest a bit, and let me bury Christ. You know the hour is late, and it not an honest thing that you return home late at night. For God's sake, find a measure of comfort, and weep at home with your sisters.]

Often, it is Christ that, from the cross, upbraids the Virgin for her unseemly behavior and accuses his mother of causing him, with her tears and wails, a deeper pain than that suffered on the cross:

Quella me pare la mia Matre  
la quale me pare de sentire;  
quella che fa sy grande lamentare,  
quasimente me fa morire;  
pegio me fao ly soy lamenty  
che mme non fanno ly mey tormenti!  
Femmena, che pure piagny  
et de dolore men tale lamento  
et della pena tucta te languy,  
sosté per me sì grande tormento;  
esso Johanni, tou figlio sia,

---

<sup>53</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Il Teatro Abruzzese* 31.

isso te lasso in vece mea. (*Lo Lamento della Dopna*, ll. 10-20)<sup>54</sup>  
[That seems to be my mother, the one I hear, the one who is making such a lament, and almost causes me to die; her lamentation hurts more than the torments of the cross; Woman, who are weeping and lamenting so for grief, and are languishing from sorrow, bear this torment for my sake; John will be your son, I leave him to you in my stead.]

In the following dialogue between Mary and the crucified Christ, fraught with dramatic tension, the two systems of value discussed by Goodland seem to clash, as Mary refuses to accept as valid and legitimate the argument espoused by Christ on the necessity of his death and the inappropriateness of her grief. Here, Mary's lament becomes a venue, as in ritualized weeping, "to offer or provoke a critical commentary on interpersonal relations"<sup>55</sup> and "create, or re- create morally good orders on a number of cosmic and human levels."<sup>56</sup> Christ reprimands the Virgin for her weeping is like a knife that tears at his heart (*Mamma, lo planto ke•ffai si•mm 'è uno coltello/ ke•ttucto me va tormentando*);<sup>57</sup> he wonders bitterly why she would stand there and weep, instead of showing pity for him (*Mamma, or un 'èi venuta a•ffarme innanti isto planto?/ debiri aver pïetança del fillo c'amasti tanto!*); the tears flowing from Mary's eyes are weapons that pierce his heart and make him suffer (*Le lacreme, mamma, k'io veio per l'ocli toi belli 'scire,/a lo core me so' lançuni,/ k'appena li poço soffrire*); she should have pity for him, Christ remarks, and let him die, though she seems utterly unwilling to console him (*Mamma, faime murire,/e•nno par ke•nn'agi cordollo/de volerme gir consolanno*). Christ then enjoins Mary to show restraint and moderation in her lamenting (*però, o*

---

<sup>54</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Il Teatro Abruzzese*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Gay Ebersole, "The poetics and politics of ritualized weeping in early and medieval Japan," in *Holy tears*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Kay Almere Read, "Productive tears: weeping speech, water, and the underworld in Mexica tradition," in *Holy tears*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> The following citations are from *De mutua lamentatione matris et filii IX*[15] in Bettarini, *Laudario Urbinate*, 555, ll.1-34.

*mamma mia, vollo dirte/k'agi temperamento*), for she is charged with offering help and consolation to the faithful (*Mal volunterte te çe lasso, omamma mia pïetosa;/ma perké di' aiuto a la gente vollo ke si' cordollosa,/a•ddare aiuto e•cconforto, ai miei fidili consillano*).

Mary's reaction is vehement and unforgiving. She brushes aside the idea that her weeping is inopportune and inappropriate, and marvels at Jesus's insensitivity to her plight: after all, she replies, he has left her an anguished 'pilgrim' who knows not where to go (*Fillo, e•nnon m'aio anvito, ke veio ke•tte voli partire/ e•lassime pellegrina/ ke•nno sacço dove me gire?*); Mary then reminds Jesus of all the time, effort, and love she had poured into raising him and keeping him safe in Egypt, without ever leaving him (*Fillo, muçaitte inn•Egitto per te potere campare/e•ssai k'a li toi bisogni io non te volçi lassare*); not without a note of sarcasm she remarks that all that care and maternal love seems to have gone unnoticed, since Jesus thinks nothing of abandoning her (*et or me vòì abandunare!/Fillo, nol fici a•ttene, ka molto te gi' arciveranno*). When Jesus exhorts her to show moderation in grief, Mary turns to her audience and, in bitter and caustic words, launches her attack against her son. It is Jesus, Mary maintains, who transgresses the rule of appropriate filial behavior, his legendary charity so well hidden now that Jesus himself cannot find it (*Venite, gente, ad audire que 'l fillo vol fare a la mate,/ ke la pò da morte guarire e•nnon à de lei pïetate!"/ Et ov'è la tua caritate?/co' la m'ài così recelata ke•nno la pòi gire artrovanno?*). Mary then requests that Jesus mend the personal and societal relationships his death is about to fracture, and entrust her to a male protector, for she has no mother or father to go home to (*Fillo, ora te pensa a•ccui me voli lassare,/k'io non ò pate né mate a•ccui poça artornare*).

In yet another striking example<sup>58</sup>, the task of chastizing Mary and containing her transgressive behavior falls upon a group of *sore* ('sisters, or female mourners). Here, the literary lament becomes a venue to host a severe moral judgement of Mary's grief. The sisters upbraid the Virgin for her lack of humility and restraint in times of sorrow, and enjoin her to give proof of the 'marvelous' humility she had become known for; she should, they add, bear life's vicissitudes with patience, self-restraint, and modesty, virtues she should have learned from Christ and that she would do well to imitate. This world, the women say, is 'like a sea, full of anguish and confusion' (*ka questo mondo è como lo mare/ pleno d'angrassa e de confusion*), and there is no point in trying to escape from it (*Sorella, lunga fuga vorr' fare/acço ke non avissi affliction*). Mary's attitude in relation to life's many vicissitudes should be exemplary, the 'sisters' remark, her task is to speak to the faithful and model for them appropriate Christian behavior (*Mèrete co la gente conversare/e•ddare bono exemplo a le persone*); in particular, Mary must teach the faithful how a Christian should bear life's tribulations, and model for them the virtue of humility (*cun multa humeletate comportare/l'angustiosatribulatione*), as Christ did when he took on human nature to pay our debt (*Exemplo da lo to fillolo pilla,/ke per salvare nui s'ahumiliao/e•dd'omo prese propria similla,/unde lo nostro debeto pagao*). With a cutting remark about her presumed exemplary humility, the women urge Mary to dry her wet eyes, and to imitate the 'way' Christ had taught her (*La gente ne raconta maravilla,/sì grande humeletate te donao:/no•nne mustrare plu grundose cilla,/teni lo modo k'Ello te lassao*).

---

<sup>58</sup> De Planctu Virginis I [5], Bettarini, *Laudario Urbinate*, 488-9

In the previous example, the literary lament closes without any response from Mary, and we never learn whether or not the Virgin formally renounces her behavior and confesses her error. Instances of the Virgin's *peripeteia*, however rare, do occur from time to time in laments, as the following example illustrates. In this poem, Mary is confronted, again, by a group of women, who at first listen to her lamentation and offer a sympathetic response to her grief. However, the initial empathetic response gives way to gentle scolding. The 'sisters' chasten the Virgin for the exuberance of her sorrow and instruct her that true wisdom rests in a life led in moderation, both in times of sorrow and of joy:

Ma quello è lo savere:  
 quand'omo è tribolato,  
 essare temperato  
 e•ccon senno menare  
 lo planto e•ll'allegrare (De planctu Virginis, Urbinate IV[18], ll. 306-10)<sup>59</sup>

[That is what wisdom is about: to behave with moderation amid tribulations, and to weep and laugh reasonably]

Christ will resurrect, they remind Mary, and on that day he will lead the faithful into His kingdom. She then will receive great honors from her son and be Queen of the divine majesty. The women convince Mary of the necessity of the crucifixion for the salvation of all and exhort her to have faith in Christ: his promised resurrection indeed will take place. They enjoin the Virgin to cease her lament and be hopeful (*Però donna, da' resta/a lo planto menare/ e•nno te sconfortare*) for, as promised, Christ will rise from the dead and her grief will turn into joy (*Tucto lo tuo dolore tornarà in allegrança, non aver dubetança, ké 'l to fillo dilectoa•tte tornarà çettoda morte suscetato*). A 'good hope', they instruct Mary, takes away the sadness (*Una bona sperança leva grande tristança*

---

<sup>59</sup> Bettarini, *Laudario Urbinate*, 502.

*e•nne la fine pare la cosa da laudare*): the Virgin should therefore cease her weeping and remember the consolation and hope promised her by Christ, for her son never lied (*Adunque lassa gire/lo planto k'ài menato,e•ssiate recordato/lo conforto e la spene de ço ke a venire ène;ké•ssai ke•nno mentio/Christo, fillolo tio*).

Mary feels embarrassed for her behavior: her entire being is sorrowful that she did not 'keep reason' (*Tanto la carne dole,ço•cke rasone voleeo non aio servata*) and lamented 'the vital death' that cures all sickness (*ké•mme so' lamentata de la morte vitale ke guarisce onne male*). Mary offers an excuse for the impropriety of her grief: wherever love passes through, reason flees (*ma dove amore passa, a rasone se cassa*). The Virgin then asks forgiveness for her sadness (*Si•mme so'ne attristata,aiàteme scusata*) and promises her female companions that the 'sweet Redeemer will repay with his love their their 'beautiful warning' (*De lo bello ammunire vo deia meritire lo dolce Redemptore per lo So grande amore*).

With the rise of literacy among the laity, the role played by ordinary men and women in medieval devotion became increasingly significant. Members of the clergy and of the mendicant orders turned to laments of the Virgin in vernacular as an efficacious tool well-suited for their widespread program of "education in feeling" directed to men and women of urban medieval Italy.<sup>60</sup> It was Mary's weeping that provided a model for the faithful, and it was her pain that taught Christians what it was like to see Christ die on the cross.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> I am borrowing this expression from Sarah McNamer, in *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2010), 151.

<sup>61</sup> Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 199.

The fifteenth-century dramatized sermon *Amore langueo* from Abruzzi suggests, I would argue, that this is the very reason for the programmatic use of voices of grief and gestures of despair, which Marian laments borrowed from the traditional *corrotto*. The author of this rhymed sermon calls upon angels, patriarchs, prophets, martyrs, the cosmos, wild beasts, popes and cardinals, abbots and friars, hermits, nuns, religious women, emperors, kings, and so on and so forth, to “weep with doleful heart,” with deep sighs and devout words for the death of Christ, a death caused by our sins. He then invites “gentlemen and loving people,” married and unmarried women, virgins and widows “who believe in our faith” to teach “sons and daughters” to “make a sorrowful lament”:

Piangate tucti col core dogliuso,  
Con gran sospiri et devote parole,  
Insengiate li figlioli et le figliole  
De far con vui pianto doloroso; (ll. 1-4)<sup>62</sup>  
[Weep with doleful heart, with great sighs and devout words. Teach your sons and daughters to make a doleful lamentation with you.]

Addressing his audience, the author calls upon those “who have in their mournful hearts sons and other beloved dead” to weep ceaselessly for their death; they should perform a ritual lament as they please (*Ciascun **repute** chi li piace forti*), striking their breasts and crying out in a loud voice to Christ the Creator, who has died for their sins a painful and cruel death:

O vui che de figlioli et cari morti  
Avite el vostro core assay dolente,  
Piangate tucti et non cessate niente,  
Ciascun repute chi li piace forti,  
Bactendove el pecto fortemente,  
Gridando ad alta voce: «O Creatore,  
Omé, ch’ èy morto per lo nostro errore

---

<sup>62</sup> De Bartholomaeis, *Teatro Abruzzese*, 315.

Con tanta pena et sì crudelmente!» (ll. 9-16)<sup>63</sup>  
[You, whose heart is sorrowful for your deceased children and beloved dead, weep and do not cease your wailing, each of you lamenting those you love, striking hard at your chest, and crying in a loud voice: “Creator,, woe me, you died for our sin, cruelly and with great suffering!”]

The transformative power of the devotion of Mary at the foot of the cross meant, in the words of Rachel Fulton, to lead down the path “beyond praise to identification, beyond supplication to mimesis.”<sup>64</sup> Laments, I would suggest, transformed audiences from passive recipients of a sacred story to active and engaged participants in the history of salvation (their own), for they called upon the audience to respond to Mary’s suffering and anguished speeches with appropriate emotional reactions, sharing in the mother’s grief and identifying with her doleful circumstances. It was by adopting ritualized expressions of female grief that medieval Christians were taught this new ethic.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Fulton, 202.