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Emanuela Zanotti Carney's fascinating account of the Italian Marian laments of the Late Middle Ages adds an important chapter to the ever-expanding literature on lamentation, mourning, and the role of women as leading figures in the rituals of death. More narrowly, the figure of the Virgin Mary as a lamenting mother whose grief causes her even to upbraid Christ for abandoning her, a trope familiar in the Greek vernacular tradition,¹ is enriched, in Carney's paper, by many examples in Latin and Italian. In both traditions, injunctions to the bereaved mother to contain the excesses of her mourning are not uncommon. In the anguish of her grief, Mary transgresses the boundaries imposed by the Church and by her son; she also becomes a figure with whom bereaved woman can identify.

The association of female mourning with dangerous excess is an ancient one. Greek literary texts are full of examples of female mourning taken to extremes. Both Elektra, in all three of her literary incarnations, and Antigone insist on observing the rituals of mourning even when this brings them into conflict with the authority of the state. Their stubborn attachment to private grief poses a danger to themselves and to civic authority. Clearly, elements of vernacular tradition inform the themes and texts of tragedy, although precisely how and when these elements were incorporated into the plays is difficult to establish. Tragedy blossoms in Athens less than a century after laws are passed restricting the role of women's lamentation in funerals. Similar laws are passed in other city states in what appears to be an effort to restrain excessive, possibly inflammatory expressions of grief in public places.

Greece was not unique in its distrust of public lamentation. In the Roman tradition, the *nenia* or funeral dirges were regarded as a necessary component of public funerals, but the women who performed them were both paid and ridiculed for their feigned emotion and self-mutilation.² Much of the evidence for the nature of the *nenia* comes from parodies, and from the laws of the Twelve Tables, in which luxurious funerals were the targets of legislation. The laws included injunctions against excessive lamentation and lament-singers' scratching of their cheeks until the blood ran.³ Although we have only secondary evidence of the texts of the Roman women's laments, the relationship between Greek and Roman lamentation is evident. Indeed depictions of women loosening and tearing their hair, scratching their cheeks, beating their breasts and singing or crying in piercing voices suggest a remarkably common vernacular vocabulary of gesture and vocal expression in the ancient Mediterranean.

¹ Margaret Alexiou's account of the discrepancy between the vernacular laments for the Virgin Mary in rural Greece and Orthodox Church doctrine is contained in her path-breaking book *The Ritual Lament in the Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 62-82.

² Dorota Dutsch examines the phenomenon of these laments in her chapter "*Nenia: Gender, Genre, and Lament in Ancient Rome.*" In *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Suter (Oxford:OUP, 2008) 258-279.

³ Dutsch, op. cit, 262.

That Christianity should absorb this tradition is not surprising. The association of women with lamentation and violent mourning is sufficiently strong that it would have been more surprising if Mary had not become an archetype of the lamenting mother, although, as Alexiou notes, the only reference to the Virgin's mourning in the scriptures occurs in the Gospel of St John and even there it is not explicit.⁴ In the Byzantine *kontakion* by Romanos, "Mary at the Cross", dating from the sixth century, the theme of Mary's mourning is given what may have been its first literary expression. As in the vernacular examples quoted by Carney, the Virgin and Christ engage in a dramatic dialogue in which she pleads with her son not to abandon her. Their dialogue takes place not at the foot of the cross, where Marian laments were commonly set, but on the way to the crucifixion, giving Mary an opportunity to plead with her son not to give up his life. Romanos's *kontakion* is notable for the restraint Christ imposes on his mother's grief, urging her to dry her tears and not give way to lamentation.

As Steven Shoemaker comments,⁵ it is probably in the *Life of the Virgin*, a text surviving only in Old Georgian and ascribed to the seventh century theologian Maximus the Confessor, that Marian's extravagant grief makes its earliest appearance. In Shoemaker's view, this text had a profound impression on the later Byzantine tradition.⁶ Whatever the earliest source of the tradition, Mary's grief became a common theme of both religious and vernacular works during the Middle Ages. Both Margaret Alexiou and Peter Dronke have observed that in their literary or liturgical form, the Marian laments suggest a close relationship to vernacular, non-theological laments.⁷ What is so striking in both the Greek and Italian traditions is the features of the text linking them to ancient and modern ritual lamentation. The Virgin's transition from sorrow to anger, the dialogue of Mary with the dead Christ (one that links the world of the living with the world of the dead), references to the Virgin barefoot, tearing her garments, even to her seeming madness—all these characteristics can be found in ancient and modern lament traditions from Greece to Ireland. The example that Carney quotes of the crazed Mary walking the streets of Jerusalem (Quasi un modo de femena svolta/k'avesse la memoria cagnata) is overwhelming in its portrait of maternal grief carried to the point of insanity. How powerful these expressions of crazed maternal grief are in their intensity and pathos! Carney's paper adds another important voice to the scholarship on lament, rightly insisting that the Marian laments of Medieval Italy are performative and transformative expressions of grief with ancient and ritual dimensions.

⁴ Op cit. p. 62

⁵ Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Mary at the Cross, East and West: Maternal Compassion and Affective Piety in the Earliest *Life of the Virgin* and the High Middle Ages," *Journal of Theological Studies* (2011) 62(2): 570-606.

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Alexiou, op. cit., and Dronke "Laments of the Three Maries: From the Beginnings to the Mystery Plays," in *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift für Klaus von See, Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition*, ed Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), 103-4.