

Laura Saetveit Miles

laura.miles@gmail.com

Department of English and Michigan Society of Fellows
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Response to Emanuela Zanotti Carney, “Voices of Despair and Gestures of Grief”

For millenia, Italy expressed grief over its dead by having its women weep violently and publicly, in a ritualized lamentation called a *corrotto* or *reputatio*. Sometimes the women were female relatives of the deceased; sometimes they were hired professionals, *reputatrici*, paid to shed tears that proved the dead man’s worth. These public performances of grief became so conventionalized over the centuries as to become formulaic – but none the less forceful in their extreme emotionality.

Carney explores the fascinating history of this tradition of grieving in order to identify its adoption into a specific genre: the vernacular Marian laments of medieval Latin Passion plays. In these dramatic pieces, Carney argues, Mary at the foot of the cross looks and sounds like the traditional grieving Italian woman – a screaming, crying, furious, and fearsome storm of sorrow. This essay teaches us a lot about the who, what, why and where of the *corrotto*, and the parallels drawn between these ritualized laments and the Marian lyrics are entirely convincing. Carney focuses on at least five distinct vernacular poems from various Passion plays written in Italy (the texts seem somewhat hard to disambiguate if you are not intimately familiar with the corpus; I admit I wished for a bit more clarity). Through her cataloguing of the poems’ “intratextual references” to the terms of the *corrotto*, their common rhetorical moves, parallel narratives, and shared gestures, the reliance of Italian Marian laments on traditional mourning rituals cannot be doubted. This is clearly vital research that greatly enhances our understanding of medieval Marian lyrics and Italian drama. What I would like to offer in this response are a few of the various questions prompted by my reading of Carney’s essay, and some ways in which the connections she draws might be deepened, probed, or problematized in order to produce some quite startling readings.

For me, things begin to get really interesting when Carney moves beyond the survey of ritualized lamentation and its adaptation in *planctus* and begins to offer examples of the “ambivalence towards female grief and the excessive outpouring of emotion” built into the plays themselves. With hair undone and voice wailing, the grieving female of the *corrotto* makes everyone uncomfortable: the archetypal *reputatrice* riled theological, ecclesiastical and civic authorities, while the character of Mary in the plays finds herself upbraided by other women and Christ himself. Carney’s quote from Katherine Goodland most effectively analyzes the situation: “as a social practice presided over by women ritual lament poses resistance to male social authority and the tenets of the dominant Christian ideology” (24). Excessive mourning was not just awkward to watch, it was also regarded as ignoring the salvific promise of resurrection through Christ. If death is not final, there is not that much to cry about. But wait: *Mary at the crucifixion doesn’t know that!* Christ hasn’t risen yet, so doesn’t she have very good reason to rage at her seemingly permanent loss? She rages at a son taken before his time, because the ultimate redemptive power of His time had not yet been revealed. What does this theological conundrum

mean?

As a critic of Marian literary and cultural history, I am predictably drawn to these types of complications inherent in such a rich textual construct of the Virgin. Mary is, as Marina Warner reminds us, “unique of all her sex.” By casting her as a typical, even hyper-stylized female mourner her unreachable uniqueness is exchanged for a remarkably honest and all-too-human conformity. In this way, she becomes indistinguishable from any Italian woman who lost a son. Mary is the unconsolable woman on the street, the grief-stricken neighbor in a small Italian town; her actor (male? female?) no longer plays the Mother of God, but every mother. She is perhaps most human here in this superhuman display of sorrow. The paradoxes of this exchange fascinate me. Surely the women in the audience of these plays saw themselves reflected in Mary at this vulnerable moment—either with a recurring pang of unhealable grief or empathy with it. Who mirrors whom here? Does Mary’s weeping only provide a model, as Carney argues (30), or does it also reflect the raw reality of grief and reaffirm the tradition built to indulge it? Viewers also heard their voices in her voice. The use of the vernacular seems crucial here; I would be interested in Carney’s take on it. What does it mean to have these laments in the mother tongue, within otherwise Latin plays?

In one of the most compelling parts of the paper, Carney describes how other characters in the play chastise Mary after her wild lament and attempt to contain her transgressive behavior (24-30). In one play, Joseph of Arimathea urges her to the privacy of her home; in another play, Christ reprimands her for her weeping; in one or two other poems, her fellow female mourners upbraid her for her lack of restraint. What is so surprising is her different reactions. She scornfully rejects Christ’s criticism, but readily accepts it from her sisters. What kind of gendered power dynamic is behind this shift? Can a close, critical comparison of these contrasting Marys reveal more profound social influences at work? All of these chastising voices, both male and female, I would argue, seem to be ventriloquizing the ecclesiastical authorities so perturbed by uncontrollable displays of grief. How might that interpretation nuance our understanding of gender in the plays?

The frenzied Mary of these laments, of course, does not match the quiet, controlled (and controllable) Mary of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Fulbert of Chartres, and their compatriots. She does, however, evoke the emotional expressiveness encouraged by the later medieval affective devotion, or affective piety, of female visionaries like Marie d’Oignies and Margery Kempe who were known for their boisterous tears. I would be curious how Carney’s assortment of twelfth- to fifteenth-century laments sorts itself chronologically, how they map onto the “history of emotion,” a rightfully trendy topic in medieval studies these days. What do subtle differences between these laments reveal? Being sensitive to shifting climates of devotion and expression might give a more nuanced view of the texts, respecting their individual contexts, audiences, and relationships to each other.

It immediately struck me that both dramatic laments and ritualized mourning share more than common words and gestures: they are both *performances*, both publicly staged events. Acknowledging and analyzing their mutual performative nature would give us valuable insight into the more profound consequences of the parallels between the texts and their social inspiration. Does it make a difference that the staged Mary is echoing a staged cultural practice?

Other Marian lyrical laments were non-dramatic, meant to be read alone or aloud, and not part of a theatrical production. How is it important that these dramatized poems further concentrate the scripted nature of the *corrotto*, a “culturally choreographed act,” as one of Carney’s critics describes it (9)? Further, there is the fascinating issue of the professional mourners for hire, called *reputatrici*, and how it is their acting that Mary also acts out. The actor/actress hired to be the mourning Mary – how does she evoke the paid weeping women of the *reputatio*? And does the paycheck cheapen their emotions?

In the last paragraph Carney gestures in the direction of some of the deeper questions of reception that seem most compelling to me, leading with Rachel Fulton’s important identification of the shift in Marian devotion “beyond praise to identification, beyond supplication to mimesis.” I’m enthralled with Carney’s final suggestion that these laments “transformed audiences from passive recipients of a sacred story to active and engaged participants” (32), but would love to see further critical readings of the plays themselves to support this claim. That is, all the evidence is there, but much more complex analysis – the pressing “so what?” questions – begs to be pursued, whether by Carney or others following on her valuable groundwork.