

Maggie Fritz-Morkin
Response to Emanuela Zanotti Carney
“Voices of Despair and Gestures of Grief”

Among the very earliest examples of vernacular Italian poetry - of vernacular Italian writing of any sort, actually - are the 12th- 15th-century Marian laments taken up by Emanuela Carney in her essay “Voices of Despair and Gestures of Grief.” Rather than appearing as independent works, these emotive lyrical compositions first hatched within the texts of Passion plays composed in Latin as early the mid 12th century (3). Carney’s essay works to excavate some of the cultural and religious factors shaping Mary’s voice - vernacular, female, parascriptural - which erupts from the plane of orthodoxy suggested by its Latin backdrop. In turning to the long history of popular grief rituals, Carney demonstrates that the Virgin’s laments are modeled on physical performances of female grief seen, even in the 13th century, as direct descendants of ancient Roman rites (7-8), in which women mourners moved audiences to tears through the frenzied rending of the hair and clothes, breast beating, scratching of the face, and wailing. Medieval Italian statutes forbidding the hire of women to perform these rituals offer evidence both of their continued popular practice as well as official distaste for what early Christian writers had already deemed wanton, unseemly, and threatening to the credibility of Christian doctrine. Carney’s argument suggests that by inscribing Mary’s wild display of grief in the official investiture of church-sponsored Passion plays, pagan exuberance is co-opted by religious authority. Ultimately, the mourning frenzy once seen as dangerous takes on a pedagogical function in the church’s new push for an “education in feeling” of lay men and women (30). Mary’s lament “transformed audiences from passive recipients of a sacred story to active and engaged participants in the history of salvation” (32) - their own, in particular - by tapping into familiar forms of grief.

One aspect of Carney’s research which interested me particularly was the uneasiness that we can see in official and learned discourses in regard to commodified grief. It seems to me that an aesthetic of disciplined Christian decorum is not the only impetus to suppress the *corrotto* ritual, but that the participation of paid mourners was also troubling. In the medieval city statutes aimed

at curtailing the practice of the *corrotto*, a universal feature seems to be the prohibition of tears for hire (12), suggesting that public and dramatic mourning rituals were not entirely unacceptable when performed for one's own dead. Boncompagno da Signa's anatomy of the ancient Roman ritual concludes with the terse observation that the mourner produces *lacrimas pretii, non doloris* [tears at a price, not from sorrow] (8). In the economy of tears, those purchased from the hired mourner are intended to produce even more from all who are present (6). What must be at stake is the authenticity of grief. Even the tears produced in reaction to the hired mourner's spectacle seem tainted by its inauthenticity - they are passion for the sake of passion, a threat to civic order and the Office of the Mass (12), not to mention a distraction from the Passion (with capital 'P'), the contemplation of which seemed to bear increasing theological import even for the laity, as evidenced by the emerging genre of Passion plays (3) and the ecclesiastic program of "education in feeling".

Despite the rejection of inauthentic tears for hire, it seems to me that traces of an economic understanding of grief persist in several of the laments that Carney discusses. In these, Mary not only performs all of the traditional gestures of a paid mourner (18), but, as Carney demonstrates, she also applies the terminology of the *corrotto* ritual to her own mourning (13). I was particularly struck by Mary's line in the 15th-century Abruzzese lament, "Che deio fare, oimè, ch' el mundo tucto/ non bastiria a ffare il mio corruccio?" [What am I to do, alas, since the whole world/ would not suffice to perform my *corrotto*?] (13). Here, Mary acknowledges the proportionality between the scale of the *corrotto* and the honor of the deceased, and her concern regarding the impossibility of achieving the proper magnitude of grief essentially maps theological content onto the suspect folk ritual. It is not impossible to imagine her distress as that of a paid mourner who, though compensated handsomely, cannot provide her service; other laments cast her loss in the explicitly economic terms of her fall from queen to beggar (21-22). In terms of the authenticity of grief, which is undermined by economic exchange, here the Marian lament is wholly unlike that of the paid mourner, as the genre is necessarily committed to the authenticity of the Virgin's sorrow. Still, it is interesting to note the insistence with which one version of Mary triples her claim on authentic grief by identifying herself as the "matre, ancilla et esposa" [mother, handmaid, and bride] (*Pianto delle Marie*, cited on 15).

As the “maestra del pianto” (18), Mary is both the master of mourning the loss of Christ, and Christians’ best teacher of mourning, Carney suggests. Across the genre of vernacular laments, Mary adopts the rhetorical strategies of popular mourning rituals while neutralizing the damage done to authenticity in the commodification of grief. Mary’s personal claims on Christ qualify her voice as one of the church’s best tools to evince *lacrimas doloris* [tears of pain], rather than *lacrimas pretii* [tears for a price] from their flock.