MARY'S SORROW

SINCE PERHAPS THE ADVENT OF THE RENAISSANCE SONNET, IT HAS BEEN THE
accepted manner of lyric poetry for a poet to focus on the intensity of a
moment of experience, or on a wider experience as if it were only one
moment, or for a poet to make his poem the intense expression of a single
personal voice. It has also been a fundamental conception of criticism that to
be effective as poetry a lyric must convey intensity of emotion.\(^1\) That theol-
ogy by nature has an adverse effect on a poem’s power to achieve this
emotional intensity has been the particular expectation of our modern sensi-
bility that has limited our appreciation of the Middle English religious lyric,
which depends upon theology for its subject matter and many of its aesthetic
qualities. The conclusions of George Kane in *Middle English Literature*
illustrate how this point of view can affect our evaluation of the lyrics.

In his chapter on the religious lyric Kane devotes a major section to what
he calls the meditative lyric; that is, poetry which involves “the intent
contemplation of a religious subject for the purpose of inducing a devout
state of mind.” For Kane, poetry “connected with this contemplative activity
is by its nature more happily circumstanced than that which is concerned
with the simple formal expression of worship,” or simple devotional poetry,
because contemplation and meditation are activities of the imagination.\(^2\) In
evaluating and classifying the meditative lyrics according to their effective-
ness as poetry, Kane separates the emotional effect that an individual poem
might have on the listener from its theological dimension and holds that the
greatest effectiveness is achieved by the most intense expression of “human”
experience, in such a way that "specifically religious treatment" is excluded. To clarify the relationship in the religious lyrics of the emotional intensity of a poem to its theological dimension, I would like to discuss two short poems which restrict the point of view from which the crucifixion is seen entirely to Mary's experience of sorrow. Each poem is composed so that the listener identifies with Mary's perspective, and her suffering is used to make the listener's meditation on the crucifixion more intense. Focusing on a moment of time as though the full meaning of the crucifixion is contained entirely in the agony of the present, each lyric excludes an explicit setting of the event in its total context of sacred history.

The two poems are from the Friar Grimestone preaching book, the same manuscript in which "Als i lay vp-on a nith" is found. As the lullaby did, so these envision through the eyes of Mary, and thus through the love of a mother for her child, what happens to Christ. But in these two poems her Son does not speak. Only Mary cries out. The first poem is an appeal by Mary to those who have put Christ on the cross, in which the listener's perspective is restricted entirely to the suffering caused Mary by her human bond with her Son. The second poem is an appeal by Mary to her Son, in which the listener contemplates what Mary must have suffered from the realization that her Son Who was dying was God and had all power to release Himself and comfort His mother. Both poems are evaluated by Kane for their effectiveness in inducing meditation. In the following two studies, I would like to indicate what kind of importance the theological dimension has in a religious lyric that excludes any explicit setting of the crucifixion in the context of sacred history, and, further, to show that the presence of the theological dimension is not necessarily restrictive, but can in fact deepen the effectiveness of a poem.

"Wy Haue 3e No Reuthe on My Child?"

Fili, dulcor unice, singulare gaudium, vita animae meae et omne solatium, fac ut ego ipsa nunc tecum moriar, quae te ad mortem genui, sine matre noli mori! O fili, recognosce miseram et exaudi precem meam! Decet enim filium exaudire matrem desolatam. Exaudi me obsecreo, in tuo me suscipe patibulo, ut qui una carne viuunt, et uno amore se diligunt, una morte pereant! O Judaei impii, o Judaei miser, nolite mihi parere! Ex quo natum
meum crucifixistis, et me crucifigite, aut alia quacunque morte saeua me perimite, dummodo cum meo filio simul moriar! Male solus moritur. Orbas orbem radio, me Judaea filio, gaudio et dulcore. Vita mea moritur, et salus perimitur, atque de terra tollitur tota spes mea. Cur ergo viuit mater post filium in dolore? Tollite, suspendite matrem cum pignore! 4

In this first lyric which Brown entitles "The Blessed Virgin’s Appeal to the Jews," 5 in contrast to "Pe milde Lomb isprad o rode" the divine perspective has been darkened from the poem. The wider purpose, man's redemption, is excluded. Mary speaks solely as the mother of her Son and is made the intercessor not for mankind, but for Christ. Whereas in "Pe milde Lomb isprad o rode" the intensity of Christ’s suffering was shown to define the intensity of Christ’s love, in this poem where Mary is the central figure, the intensity of Mary’s love for her Son is shown in order to define the intensity of Mary’s suffering. The intensity of her love is expressed in her desire to be united to her Son; the intensity of her suffering is the direct result of her being separated from Him. Christ’s silence in the poem increases the sense of Mary’s helpless distance from the Center of her love. The poem develops according to the two poles of intensity: the intensity of suffering defined by the intensity of love.

Wy haue ge no reuthe on my child?
Haue reuthe on me ful of murning,
Taket doun on rode my derworji child,
Or prek me on rode with my derling.

More pine ne may me ben don
Pan laten me liuen in sorwe & schame;
Als loue me bindet to my sone,
so lat vs deygen boj?en i-same. 6

The poem opens with Mary’s crying out in recognition that her Son’s torturers have no mercy for Him: Why have you no pity on my Child? Have pity on me, full of mourning. She makes herself the medium of Christ’s expression, presenting her suffering, which is caused by His suffering, as the evidence to bend His torturers’ hearts. Then she offers two ways
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in which the torturers may show pity. They may take her Child down from the cross, or they may join her to Him on the cross. By requesting His descent to her or her being joined to Him, Mary's words reveal to the listeners her situation of separation. The alternatives she gives also express to them the fact of her love. In the first alternative she desires to relieve her Son of pain; the first failing, she desires, in the second, to be joined to His pain.

While the first stanza presents the bodily setting of suffering and love—Christ hangs on the cross, Mary stands below—the second stanza develops the inner meaning. The first two lines express Mary's greatest inner pain: No greater pain could be caused me than (while He is dead) to let me live on in sorrow and shame. This inner pain she desires to resolve, in the last two lines, by an expression of greatest love: As love binds me to my Son, so let us die both together.

The poet has organized the poem in a series of oppositions. Each opposition expresses both a desire for union because of Mary's love and an increase of the sorrow that Mary is trying to prevent. The external structure of the first stanza embodies their separation, as its focus alternates twice in balanced pairs of lines from Christ to Mary (lines 1–2), from Christ to Mary (lines 3–4): Have pity on Him or have pity on me; take Him down or raise me up. But what Mary desires expresses indirectly also their union and love. Pity for her will be pity for Him. If he is lowered, they will be together; if she is raised, they will be together. The second stanza expresses the separation and union as two ways of resolving the situation, in the first two lines, separation; in the second two, union. Whereas the first stanza was made up of four lines of syntactically independent clauses, the second stanza is made up of opposing two line syntactic units: "More pine ne may me ben don/ Pan laten me liuen in sorwe & schame" and "Als loue me bindet to my sone,/ so lat vs deyzen bo?en i-same."

Mary's address in the poem is literally to the Jews. Her appeal rises out of her moment of most intense suffering as mother of her Son. Yet even in a poem so clearly and simply restricted to the mother's suffering at the moment of her Son's crucifixion, we can see implicit for its audience a wider context and purpose. According to Brown, immediately above the poem in the manuscript the following saying appears, which suggests the English lyric was directly inspired by the Lamentatio St. Bernardi: "Quare ut ait B. in persona uirginis ad Iudeos. Si non placet compati filio compatimini matri." Upon comparison certain similarities between the two works are apparent. As in the Lamentatio, in this poem the passion is seen from the point of view
of the mother of Christ, and as in the Lamentatio, Mary’s closeness to Christ, her knowledge of Him as His mother, is the source of her great suffering. The two works have essentially the same purpose. The Lamentatio opens with an introductory section in which St. Bernard beseeches Mary in heaven to relate her sorrow during the crucifixion of her Son, so that he too may share in her compassion and receive the gift of tears. The same motive is evident in the saying that introduces the English poem, and the intensity of Mary’s appeal to the Jews in the poem would draw deeply also on the listeners’ compassion for Mary. For the listener, being made aware of Mary’s grief might suggest further not only that he, like St. Bernard, sympathize with Mary, but also that he, like the Jews, have pity on Mary’s Son—that he cease from sin because it is his sins that have nailed her Son to the cross.

Kane professes that to give a subject “religious” treatment the poet must attempt to induce “religious emotion” by explicit means. The increase in effectiveness of the meditative lyric is, he holds, on the contrary precisely in proportion as the artistic considerations are not subordinated to the religious ones, but are made foremost. There must be a creative transformation of the religious subject into poetry by the process of selection, rejection, arrangement. It is because it succeeds in this that Kane places “The Blessed Virgin’s Appeal to the Jews” highest in the group of meditative lyrics. It is illuminating to compare the principles of effectiveness Kane defines as he describes this poem to the practice of the author of the Lamentatio, for they radically contrast those embodied by the Latin work. The contrast will show more precisely how different from the medieval is the modern understanding of the power the theological dimension has to heighten the intensity of emotion.

The excellence of “The Blessed Virgin’s Appeal to the Jews,” Kane explains, is due to the poet’s concentrating on the most striking feature of the situation, which is “Mary’s emotion as a human mother face to face with her suffering Son.” The listeners can take Mary into their hearts because she speaks with the voice of any disconsolate mother to her Son’s torturers:

No detailed description of the crucifixion, and no suggestion of the enormity of the sacrifice made there, could convey Mary’s grief as completely as this desperate plea. Moreover, no specifically religious treatment exists with such a powerful effect of inducing first sympathy and then devotion in the reader. He knows the identity of “my derling,” and will the more readily make the transference from the particular instance to the general
plan which necessitated the suffering and occasioned the unhappi­ness because, as this imaginative experience is presented, it could be the grief of all mothers.9

The modern reader of a religious lyric rarely grasps in what way the contrary principle can be true for a medieval author. It is not the typical, but the individual and particular associations that Mary and Christ have, as it is in all human relationships, that are seen to cause and to convey intensity of suffering. Further, 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. In his method of presenting Mary’s compassion the author of the Lamentatio illustrates these latter principles clearly. It is first of all by recalling the events of Mary and Christ’s life together that the Lamentatio begins to attempt to comprehend what Mary suffered during Christ’s passion. These individual events establish that in the same way as Mary was closest to Christ throughout His life, so she was foremost in grief at His suffering and death. As the dialogue opens, the author has St. Bernard say:

Ipsa enim portauit regem gloriae, illum omni petenti datura. Ipsa genuit eum, lactuit eum, die octaua circuncidit, et quadragesima praesentauit in templo, duos tuttures vel duos pullos columbarum pro eo offerens in holocaustum. Fugiens ab Herode ipsum portauit in Aegyptum, lactans eum et nutriens, curam illius habens, sequens eum fere quocunque pergebat. Credo etiam firmiter quod ipsa mater Jesu erat inter illas faeminas quae ipsum seque­bantur ministrantes ei. Nullus debet inde admirari si sequebatur eum, cum ipse esset totus eius dulcor, solatium, desiderium et solamen. Hanc etiam arbitror fuisse inter illas dolentes atque gementes, quae lamentabantur flentes dominum.10

Although they are facts of the history of God made man, they can, to support Kane’s view, be seen to be restricted to the human facts of her Son’s incarnation. However, reading on in the dialogue, we find that the author builds on the intensity which he has conveyed through the human facts by using also the miraculous or divine aspects of the life of Mary’s Son. It is through these aspects particularly that he conveys how Mary’s grief at her
Son's crucifixion surpasses any other grief immeasurably. The power of the supernatural fact to convey this can be seen, for example, early in the dialogue, in the way in which the author uses Mary's present glorious queenship of heaven. "O that you had shown me your tears of joy on that day when you entered into the eternal joy with your Son," St. Bernard says to Mary, "so I might have known the degree of bitter pain you suffered to see Him die":

Vtinam dolor iste sic quotidie inhaereret visceribus meis, sicut inhaesit tunc tuis! Vtinam die qua assumpta fuisti in coelum ut in aeternum gauderes cum filio tuo, mihi indicasses lachrymas tuas, ut per illas cognoscerem quantum tibi amaritudinis fuit, cum Jesum dilectum tibi, heu, heu et parum dilectum mihi, clauis in ligno confixum, capite inclinato suum sanctissimum exhalare videres spiritum! . . . Quare ego miser non ploro, cum abiectio plebis factus est filius Dei patris? Veruntamen tu, domina, gaude gaudio magno valde ab ipso nunc glorificata in coelis, quae in mente tantis clauis amarissimis fuisti confixa tuae piissimae mortis! 11

"Truly, you, Lady, now glorified in heaven, rejoice with very great joy from Him, you, most devoted one, who were transfixed in your heart by such bitter nails." It is the supernatural magnitude of Mary's glory now which to St. Bernard can reveal the true magnitude of her compassion then. Again, for example, towards the end of the dialogue the author has St. Bernard convey the extent of sorrow just after Christ gives up His spirit, by describing the grief of the angels. In terms which to the modern reader might seem to be rhetorical hyperbole, but which to the Christian soul telling of the death of the Son of God could have the value of fact, St. Bernard says: "O who among the Angels and Archangels, contrary to their nature, did not weep, when the author of nature, the immortal God and man, died."

O quis tunc Angelorum Archangelorumque etiam contra naturam suam non fleret, ubi auctor naturae, Deus immortalis, homo, mortuus jacet? Videbant Christi corpus sic male tractatum ubi impiis, sic laceratum ab pessimis, jacere examine suo sanguine cruentatum. Videbant etiam illum piissimam, illum sanctissimam ac beatissimam virginem, matrem eius, tantis cru-
ciari singultibus, tam amaris repleri doloribus, tam abundantibus lachrymis madidari, sic amarissime flere, quod nullo modo poterat suas lachrymas refrenare. Et quis poterat tunc a lachrymis se abstinere? Fiebat proinde maeror et luctus ab Angelis ibidem præsentibus, qualis decebat spiritus almos: imo mirarer, si omnes Angeli in illa beatudine ubi flere est impossibile non fluissent. Credo propter quod et loquor, quia dolebant, si dolere valebant. Sicut enim fuit possible Deum per assumptum hominem mori, ita forte possibile Angelos bonos dolere de morte Domini Dei sui.

"Rather I would be amazed if all the Angels in their beatitude, where it is impossible to weep, did not weep. Therefore I believe and say that, having the power to weep, they wept. For if it was possible for God through assuming the nature of man to die, it is truly possible for the good Angels upon the death of their Lord God to weep."

It is difficult for the modern reader to grasp how the theological as well as the human dimension can be fertile ground for the imagination. The next poem will illustrate this point further. It is a poem in which the point of view of the telling is also restricted to that of Mary, but one which uses its listeners' knowledge of theology to achieve its full effect. "Suete sone, reu on me, & brest out of þi bondis," or as it is entitled by Brown, "Lamentacio dolorosa," is Mary's appeal to her Son, Who, besides the Jews, is the second possible source of release from suffering. She appeals to her Son because she knows He is God and has the power to release them. The poem is also classed by Kane as a meditative lyric, but he considers it inferior to "The Blessed Virgin's Appeal to the Jews," and he gives only a summary description of it. The poem will provide for us a good example of how knowledge of a theological concept can explain seemingly unrelated aspects of a poem as well as reveal its power.

"Suete Sone, Reu on Me, & Brest Out of þi Bondis"

Suete sone, reu on me, & brest out of þi bondis;
For nou me þinket þat i se, þoru boþen þin hondes,
Nailes dreuen in-to þe tre, so reufuliche þu honges.
Nu is betre þat i fle & lete alle þese londis.
Suete sone, þi faire face droppet al on blode,
& þi bodi dounward is bounden to þe rode;
Hou may þi modris herte þolen so suete a fode,
þat blissed was of alle born & best of alle gode!

Suete sone, reu on me & bring me out of þis liue,
for me þinket þat i se þi detz, it neyhit suiþe;
Þi feet ben nailed to þe tre—nou may i no more þriue,
For al þis werd with-outen þe ne sal me maken bliþe.³⁴

On first reading, the poem seems to be a simple appeal by Mary to Christ, as His mother, to release her from her suffering. The first stanza gives the appeal, the reason for it, and the effect on Mary of Christ’s suffering. The second stanza seems to enlarge on the details of Christ’s suffering to emphasize Mary’s suffering. The last repeats the appeal most intensely at the moment of Christ’s death. This is indeed the basic movement of the poem, but to understand the full dimensions of Mary’s appeal to her Son and to explain certain phrases more fully, a modern reader needs to be aware of the meaning of Christ’s divine identity.

If he reads the poem as if Mary saw Christ solely as her human child suffering, he would understand Mary’s appeal to be one with no possibility of fulfillment, a fruitless one. The poem would seem therefore to have simply the sentimental value of expressing a mother’s inability to accept the extreme pain and ignominy of her son’s situation. The purpose of the poem, as in the last poem, would seem to be solely to effect compassion in the poet’s audience. But when the reader recognizes that the conception of the poem depends fundamentally on the idea that Mary’s dying son is God, he sees the essential question expressed by her appeal and, also, God’s unspoken answer. If this man is God, the all powerful, He can burst His bonds. Why, then, doesn’t He? Mary, who loves Him most and knows Him most fully, because she is most fully aware of the significance of the situation can ask this question most forcibly. Christ’s silent death, through wounding the one closest to Him, is thus recognized to be Christ’s willing choice because of His love for man.

When the reader looks at the poem with this question in mind, he sees that it progresses by two deep movements. The first movement is Mary’s gradual inner realization as she sees Christ crucified that her Son, Who is
God, is dying. The clauses "for nou me āinket ĕat ĕ se" (line 2), "for me āinket ĕat ĕ se" (line 10), phrased in an indefinite way, express two aspects of the incomprehensible to Mary of her Son's death: first, the incongruity of the fact that God, Who is Life itself, should suffer and die; and at the same time, the mother's inability to absorb the full reality of her son's suffering, "Hou may ĕi modris herte jōlen . . . ?" (line 7). The poem shows Mary's gradual recognition of her Child's death as she tells bit by bit how He suffers.

The second movement of the poem is the manifestation of the intensity and value of what is happening to Mary's Child so as to fully define the causes of Mary's pain. First, the progress of His suffering is shown until He reaches the point of death. At the same time in the poem, the value of the One dying is gradually manifested—from Mary's opening statement that He is her son, through her description that He is "best of alle gode," to her final desire to be taken from this life because without Him life itself has no value. The value of Christ is revealed in order to reveal fully the value of Mary's loss and thus to show the full depth of her sorrow.

In the opening two lines Mary's appeal to her Son indicates both her desire to see Him released from suffering and her knowledge that He has the power to release Himself: Sweet Son, have pity on me and burst out of your bonds! It is as if we hear echoed in Mary's appeal the blasphemous taunt in the Gospel called up to Christ as He hung on the cross: "Vah, thou that destroyest the temple of God and in three days dost rebuild it: save thy own self. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." Paradoxically conceived by His mother, the words sound to the audience not as a denial of His godhood, but as an affirmation spoken in faith of it. Mary knows that her Son has the power. Why does He not, then, release Himself?

In lines three and four, Mary gives the reason for her appeal, "for nou me āinket" expressing the incomprehensibility of the fact of which she is gradually becoming aware. For now it seems to me, she says, that I see, through both Your hands, nails driven into the tree, so sorrowfully do You hang. The phrase "nailes dreuen" being suspended in the sentence, as if Mary cannot admit the sight, the syntactical structure acts to emphasize the cruelty of the nails, as does the contrast of her Son's pierced hands to the pierced inanimate wood of the tree behind them. Added at the end, the clause "so reufuliche ĭu honges" can modify the words on the effect of the nails or those on the cause of Mary's realization. Mary's next consideration—Now it is wiser that I flee and abandon these parts—echoes a second time the account of the passion in the Gospels, reflecting back to the way Christ was abandoned by His
disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. Or perhaps this line is a momentary suggestion that if Mary finds her Son is truly powerless, she will despair of life itself, a suggestion looking forward to the desire she will state fully in stanza three, that if her Son dies, she desires to die as well.

The second stanza enlarges on the details of her Son's suffering. In lines five and six, Mary describes Christ's face covered with blood, His body bound down on the cross. The fairness of Christ's face is contrasted to the violation of it by His wounds and His power to move to the fact that He is bound down. Lines seven and eight of the stanza, by showing the value of the One suffering, both increase the sense of the injustice of the situation and intensify the evil of the torture. In these lines Mary frames her experience into a question which is the expression of her dilemma through the whole poem, "Hou may þi modris herte þolen . . ." How can Your mother's heart endure? I know my Son is not simply blessed and good, but most blessed "of alle born & best of alle gode!" How can I support this sorrow, to see so sweet a Child, One Who is not only my son, but Power and Goodness itself, bound and destroyed?

In the last stanza, Mary perceives that Christ is dying: For it seems to me, she says, that I see your death, it is nearing quickly. Before in stanzas one and two, she suffered for His suffering as her son, for His being bound down and wounded as God; now she suffers the actual loss of both her son and God. But as it seems most strongly to be denied by His death, in this last stanza Mary gives her Son's eternal value its strongest affirmation. Looking closely at Mary's last appeal, we see that even at His death she calls upon His supreme power: Sweet Son, have pity on me and bring me out of this life. From the beginning of the poem, through Mary's vision the poet has posed to his audience the incongruity that God could die, and through Mary's appeal to her Son he has shown the value and meaning of this death. Now in the last stanza, as Mary sees Christ's death to be imminent, the paradox shifts, from the incongruity that God Who has power over death could die, to the incongruity that God Who in fact is dying would choose to do so. By the vision that Mary retains of her Son's divinity, Mary reveals God's love for man and man's blind rejection of God that caused the manifestation of His love.

In his summary description of "Lamentacio dolorosa," Kane describes it as a poem "in which Mary prays to her Son either to break out of his bonds or let her die." He criticizes it for being unnecessarily explicit, although, he finds, it is good enough to illustrate the superiority of the method which
concentrates on Mary’s “bewildered grief” and leaves “to the reader some effort of understanding.” “The Blessed Virgin’s Appeal to the Jews,” however, is the best of this kind of meditative poem. Although Kane’s summary is brief, it does show us that to exclude the theological dimension of a poem is misleading, and it reflects the inaccessibility of some of the lyrics to such an approach.

By describing Mary’s last appeal as an alternative to the first appeal she makes, Kane ignores the almost ballad-like progression of Mary’s inner perception as she recognizes the inconceivable, that God is dying. Rather than being too explicit, each detail given of the crucifixion in this poem heightens the inner fact Mary is realizing. To her Son’s omnipotence, Mary’s sight opposes His hands held by nails to a tree. To His value as the most blessed of all born and best of all good, her eyes oppose His face covered with blood, His body bound to a shameful cross. And as she realizes His death, her eyes seem to sink down to His feet nailed to the tree. Far from being the weaker of the poems, “Lamentacio dolorosa” suggests even deeper dimensions to the death of Mary’s Son than “The Blessed Virgin’s Appeal to the Jews.”

Mary’s affirmation of God’s power in the last stanza suggests that for Mary and for man, the loss of her Son will not only be the loss of a son to death which has power over man, but the loss of God Who has power over death from the world, that with her Son’s death, the world’s death will occur. The fact is implied by Mary’s final words in the poem: Now may I live no longer, for even the entire world without you shall never make me happy. As the Son of God leaves the world, virtually all good, all life itself withdraws. Mary’s final words embody for the poem’s audience the dichotomy of man’s situation in present life, which is both a life lived in Christ and a life lived in “the world.” In Mary can be seen the Christian who prays against the temptation of the world. Rather than being separated from God, he will choose death. More deeply, Mary’s appeal expresses the positive desire of the contemplative soul, whose affections are so centered on Christ that he feels to live his present transitory life is only a suffering and separation from Christ, Whom alone he loves, and Whom he can see now only “through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face” (I Cor. 13:12).