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**CHAUCER'S CONSTANCE AND THE SORROWING MARY
THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE (MLT), 841-854¹**

According to Thomas Hoccleve, his literary disciple in the fifteenth century, Chaucer was a true "servant" of Mary, who wrote, "with high devotion, full many a line" in her honor.² Chaucer's veneration of Mary appears chiefly in "An A B C," an early alphabetical hymn addressed to the "Glorious virgine," and in the invocations by the Prioress and Second Nun in *The Canterbury Tales*. These three works treat virtually all aspects of Mary's dignities and privileges found in traditional Catholic teaching and late medieval devotion, with the exception of her agony on Calvary.³ In "An A B C," the young Chaucer expressed his inability to describe the Virgin's suffering at Christ's crucifixion: "Ladi, thi sorwe kan I not portreye / Under the cros" (82-83).⁴ But the portraits of suffering women in several of his later tales, including in *The Clerk's Tale of Griselda* and *The Man of Law's Tale of Constance*, owe much to the older poet's vision of the Sorrowing Mary.⁵

The Lady Constance, to be sure, imitates Mary during her many trials by resigning herself to God's will and accepting the many misfortunes that befall her with patience and fortitude. Chaucer also presents her as a holier woman than her namesake in his French source, especially by adding several prayers to his story of her life. She prays to God and the "merciful mayde, Marie" (MLT 640-41) when she is falsely accused of murder. Later, before one of her severest trials, as she is about to be cast adrift for a second exile at sea in a rudderless boat—this time with her infant son Maurice—she expresses her trust in Christ, "and in his mooder deere, /

¹ Editor's Note: This is an updated version of an earlier essay accepted by the editor of this journal before the publication of the articles and books cited in several of the notes below.

² *The Regement of Princes* (modernized), quoted in Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357-1900* (3 vols.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), 1:22.

³ For a discussion of Chaucer's Mariology in these works, see Sumner Ferris, "The Mariology of *The Prioress's Tale*," *American Benedictine Review* 32 (1981): 232-254; for critical assessments, see the explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 913-14, 942-44, 1076-77; and Georgia R. Crampton, "Chaucer's Singular Prayer," *Medium Aevum* 59 (1990): 191-213.

⁴ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 633, 638. Further citations from Chaucer's works are from this edition and will be made in the text.

⁵ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 193.

[4]

That is to me my seyl and eek my steere" (MLT 832-33), and then prays to Mary in these words⁶:

"Mooder," quod she, "and mayde bright, Marie,
Sooth is that thurgh wommanes eggement
Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
For which thy child was on a croys yrent.
Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment;
Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.

"Thou sawe thy child yslayn bifore thyne yen,
And yet now lyveth my litel child, parfayl
Now, lady bright, to whom alle woful cryen,
Thow glorie of wommanhede, thow faire may,
Thow haven of refut, brighte sterre of day,
Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse
Rewest on every reweful in distresse." (MLT 841-54)⁷

To emphasize the resemblance between the sufferings of the woeful Constance and the Mother of Sorrows, Chaucer has placed in this prayer (846-47) an allusion to Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations:

O vos omnes qui transitis per viam,
attendite et videte, si est dolor
sicut dolor meus. (1:12)⁸

This verse was used in the liturgy of the Church during Holy Week as a complaint of Christ from the cross, and as such it was also quoted in Middle English lyrics and mystery plays on the passion.⁹ Beginning as early as the twelfth century, however, and continuing throughout the medieval period, the same verse was used

⁶ In Chaucer's French source, Constance offers no prayer before her second exile; instead she accepts it willingly, hoping in God's protection. "Mes puis qe a dieu plest et a mon seignur, le rois, moun exil, a bon gree le doys prendre, en esperaunce qe dur comencement amenera dieux a bon fyn, et qil me porra en la meer sauuer qi en meer et en terre est de toute pusaunce." W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), 174-75.

⁷ John C. Hirsh proposes to emend line 847 to read "Thy wo, and any woman may sustene." See "Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* 847: A Conjectural Emendation," *Chaucer Review* 20 (1985): 68-69, and his response to MacDonald (note 8 below) in *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 332-34.

⁸ *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart, 1969), 2:1249. The allusion has also been identified by Alasdair A. MacDonald, "Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* 847: A Reconsideration," *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 246-49; and by Kevin J. Harty, "Chaucer, the Liturgy (Again), and Constance's Ever-increasing Pathos: *The Man of Law's Tale* II (B 1) 846-47," *Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (1994): 489-90. Harty cites a popular song version of the verse by the fifteenth-century French composer Loyset Compère.

⁹ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), 36, 42-45.

by spiritual writers, liturgists, and poets to evoke pity for the sufferings Mary endured beneath the cross. St. Amadeus of Lausanne, for example, writing on Mary's constancy (!) during the Crucifixion, declared that Jeremiah's complaint, which belongs especially to Christ, can also fittingly be exclaimed by his Sorrowful Mother:

Poterat ergo beata Maria illud, quod specialiter
Christo convenit, exclamare: *o vos omnes qui transitis
per viam, attendite et videte, si est dolor similis, sicut
dolor meus.*¹⁰

Richard of St. Victor, a contemporary of Amadeus, also alluded to Jeremiah's words, while explaining that Mary endured a spiritual martyrdom when the sword of sorrow prophesied by Simeon (Luke 2:35) pierced her heart as she stood beneath the cross.

Ipsius enim animam pertransivit gladius,
non materialis sed doloris. Quo martyrio gravior
passa fuit quam ferro. Quanto enim incomparabiliter
amavit, tanto vehementius doluit. Unde sicut
non fuit amor sicut amor ejus, ita *nec fuit dolor
similis dolori ejus.*¹¹

Veneration of Mary's Compassion, as her spiritual martyrdom was often called, became one of the most popular subjects of devotion to the Virgin during the late Middle Ages, and with the passing of time was expressed in the form of an ever more tender, "affective" piety. Instead of emphasizing Mary's dignified physical control and mental fortitude as Amadeus, in reference to St. Ambrose of Milan, had done, later spiritual writers and poets stressed the intensity of her overwhelming sorrow and preferred to depict her as a weeping, swooning, fainting, anguished human mother.¹² St. Bonaventure several times spoke of Mary's sufferings in these terms, and quoted Jeremiah's words on these occasions. In one place he argued that Mary experienced the pains of motherhood not in Bethlehem but on Golgotha,

¹⁰ *Homilia V: De Mentis Robore seu Martyrio Beatissimae Virginis* (PL CLXXXVIII, 1330). The homily continues in part: "Propterea in tanta posita adversitate, nec resolvit pudorem verecundiae, nec amisit vigorem constantiae. Ad cuius rei probationem ait de ea beatus Ambrosius Mediolanensis episcopus: Lego stantem juxta crucem Domini, non lego plorantem. Stare namque in illa cordis amaritudine magnae ascribitur constantiae, abstinere a lacrymis summae summae verecundiae adnotatur. Cohibebat illa lacrymas prae pudore, stabat sublimissima quadam animi magnanimitate. Itaque nec dolor excussit lacrymas, nec animum poena dejecit. Quin hinc pudor honestus, illinc fortis constantia decertabant."

¹¹ *In Cantica Cantorum Explicatio* XXVI (PL CXCVI, 483-484), emphasis added.

¹² Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Lyric* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1972), 135-136.

where, in fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy, her soul was transfixed in a loving compassion for her son:

Sed beata Virgo non habuit dolorem antecedentem partum; quia non concepit ex peccato, sicut Eva, cui maledictio data est; sed habuit dolorem post partum. Unde peperit, antequam parturiret. In cruce parturivit; unde in Luca: *Et tuam ipsius animam pertransibit gladius*. In aliis mulieribus est dolor corporis, in ista est dolor cordis; in aliis est dolor corruptionis, in ista est dolor compassionis et caritatis. Unde invitavit nos ad considerandum dolorem ipsius in Ieremia: *Omnes, inquit, qui transit per viam; attendite et videte, si est dolor sicut dolor meus*.¹³

And in one of his sermons, Bonaventure stated that Mary's pains during her compassion were greater than those experienced by any other person except Christ, and directed his audience to listen to the sound of her pitiful voice during her agony:

Secundo doluit in *visione passionis dominicae*; unde dicitur Threnorum primo: *Attendite et videte, si est dolor sicut meus*. Audiamus Virginis Matris Mariae lamentabilem vocem et attendamus eius vehementem dolorem, et videbimus, quia non est dolor sicut dolor eius, excepto dolore Filii, ad cuius exemplar dolor suus assimilatur.¹⁴

Liturgical observances of the Compassion were first instituted about twenty-five years after Chaucer's death, when a local feast was authorized at Cologne in 1423,¹⁵ and the first "Missa Compassionis" appeared in an English missal in 1497.¹⁶ Nevertheless, private devotion to the Sorrowing Mary flourished during Chaucer's lifetime. Commemoration of her seven dolours began in the early fourteenth century,¹⁷ and an office—*Cum Maria Virgine fervere ploremus*—enjoyed such widespread popularity "from the late fourteenth century" that versions of it "can be found in several English manuscripts of private devotions."¹⁸ This office, some-

¹³ *Collationes De Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti VI* (Quaracchi, 5:487a).

¹⁴ *Sermones De Tempore: Dominica Infra Octavam Epiphaniae I* (Quaracchi, 9:172b). In a sermon for the Assumption, Bonaventure also quoted Jeremiah's verse in connection with Mary's sorrows during her Compassion. See *De Assumptione B. Virginis Mariae, Sermo VI* (Quaracchi, 9:705a).

¹⁵ For the origin of this feast, see D. Capelle, "La Liturgie Mariale en Occident," in *Maria: Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed. Hubert du Manoir (8 vols.; Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), 1:229-30.

¹⁶ R. W. Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 97-99.

¹⁷ C. M. Berti, "De Cultu Septem Dolorum S. Mariae," *Marianum* 2 (1940): 86.

¹⁸ Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts*, 100.

times attributed to Bonaventure, does not contain the *O vos omnes* verse,¹⁹ but an allusion to it does appear in an office printed by Caxton in the fifteenth century under the rubric *Commemoracio lamentacionis sive compassionis beate Mariae*. The fifth antiphon at Lauds in this office is:

Virgo cum aspiceret natum cruce Mori
nullus dolor similis est suo dolore.²⁰

The author of this prayer alluded to Lamentations to describe the intensity of Mary's sufferings, and, like Chaucer, he attributed her great sorrow to the fact that she stood before the cross and watched Christ's death with her own eyes. This antiphon, therefore, provides a clue as to how Chaucer might have seen Jeremiah's words in a book of private devotions honoring Mary's Compassion.²¹

Like the first liturgical expressions of devotion to the Compassion, most of the Middle English poems on the subject belong to the fifteenth century.²² These poems were strongly and directly influenced by two Latin dialogues—the *Dialogus Beatae Mariae et Anselmi de passione Domini* and the *Liber de passione Christi*—from which they derived “much of their detail and also the excessive emotionalism which colours both [their] content and style.”²³ References are repeatedly made in these lyrics, for example, to such themes and motifs as the sword of sorrow that pierced Mary's heart in fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy, her desire to suffer and die with her son, her emotional outbursts beneath the cross, and her uncontrollable grief at the sight of Christ Crucified.²⁴

The *O vos omnes* verse does not appear in these Latin dialogues, and, probably because theologically it was better suited to express Christ's suffering on the cross,

¹⁹ The office is not contained in the Quaracchi edition of Bonaventure's works (1898), but its authenticity is discussed there in Tom. VIII, cvii. I have consulted it in a photocopy of *Ufficio della S.S. Vergine de Sette Dolori composto da S. Bonaventura* (Napoli, 1794), 3-36, which was provided through the courtesy of the University of North Carolina Library.

²⁰ The only surviving copy of this office is in the University Library of Ghent (Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts*, 97). I quote the antiphon from M. L. Polain, *Catalogue des livres imprimés au quinzième siècle des Bibliothèques de Belgique* (4 vols.; Brussels, 1932), 1:729.

²¹ In the modern office for the feast of the Seven Sorrows celebrated on September 15, the *O vos omnes* verse is recited at Matins, Lauds, and Terce. See *The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin*, ed. L. J. Doyle, et. al. (3 vols.; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1963-64), 3:1553, 1556-1557.

²² Rosemary Woolf (*The English Religious Lyric*, pp. 239-273) has written the best discussion of the literary qualities of these poems. David L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), discusses how the Sorrowful Mary “became a popular aid to the affectual piety promulgated by Franciscan spirituality,” and how this image influenced early Middle English poetry: 60-64, 234-38.

²³ Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, 248.

²⁴ George C. Taylor, “The English *Planctus Mariae*,” *Modern Philology* 4 (1907): 614-615.

there are very few references to it in the English poems on Mary's Compassion.²⁵ Echoes of it, however, are heard in some of the *planctus* where the Virgin is depicted in the image of the Pieta, seated and holding the dead body of Christ in her lap. In one such lyric, versions of which survive in several manuscripts, Jeremiah's complaint is echoed in Mary's appeal for sympathy from all mothers who can still laugh and play with their children.²⁶

Off alle women þat euer were borne
That berys childur, *abyde and se*
How my son liggus me beforene
Vpon my kne, takyn fro tre.
Your childur 3e dawnse upon your kne
With la3ying, kyssyng and mery chere;
Biholde my childe, beholde now me,
Ffor now liggus ded my dere son, dere.²⁷

Another appeal by the Virgin for sympathy appears in an early fourteenth-century poem, *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord*, and is expressed in what is a paraphrase of the *O vos omnes* verse found in any of the English *planctus*. This poem dates from about 1315-1330, and has been attributed to Robert Mannyng of Brunne.²⁸ It contains many of the themes and motifs usually found in the genre. In a highly emotional opening Mary swoons (785), falls to the ground (786), and expresses her wish to die with Christ (792-93). Then having been consoled by some women of "here felawshepe," she speaks to them in these words:

Now 3e gode wymmen, seeþ with 3e yen,
3yf Þyr be any sorowe lyke vnto myn:
My sone ys slawe here afore myn ye. (809-811)

Mary's words in this passage bring us close to those of Constance:

Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment;
Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.
Thow sawe thy child yslayn bifore thyne yen. (MLT 845-48)

Thus, it appears Chaucer may have had his eye on a poem like the *Meditations* while writing Constance's prayer.

²⁵ In the Digby play of the Burial of Christ, which is classified as a lament of the Virgin, Joseph of Arimathea paraphrases the *O vos omnes* verse to refer to Christ's passion (11. 277-282). See *The Digby Plays*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS ES 70 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 181.

²⁶ Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, 255-257 and 392-394 (my emphasis).

²⁷ *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 13-16.

²⁸ This poem is printed in *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord, and the Hours of the Passion*, ed. J. M. Cowper, EETS OS 84 (London, 1875), 25-35. Ruth Crosby, "Robert Mannyng of Brunne: A New Biography," *PMLA* 57 (1942): 27-28, argues against Mannyng's authorship.

That he had in mind "the popular devotional form of the *planctus*," so generally suitable to the story of Constance,²⁹ is suggested, not only by his allusion to Jeremiah's complaint, but also by the similarities between characterization, form and language in the English *planctus Mariae* and his tale.³⁰ The Holy Virgin suffers intensely in the *planctus* because of the isolation she experiences at the death of her son. Constance, whose "herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse" (MLT 167), also suffers intensely from the isolation caused by her separations from parents (274-80) and husband (862-68) during her two exiles in the "salte see" (445). Structurally, the English *planctus*, as Keiser has pointed out, is built upon various kinds of antithetical contrasts, as for example between Mary's earlier joys and present sorrows, between the pity shared by Jesus and Mary and the hardheartedness of Christ's executioners. Chief among the several antitheses between Constance and her tormentors in *The Man of Law's Tale* are the devilish plots of her two wicked mothers-in-law, the "Sowdanesse" and Donegild, whose aggressive efforts to control their own destinies by murder (344-57) and deceit (739-56) contrast dramatically with Constance's passive acceptance of the "wyl of Crist" (824) throughout all her trials.

These contrasts are reinforced in Chaucer's tale with a language of pathos similar to the affective diction found in the *planctus*. While Constance is "full of benignytee" (446), the "Sowdanesse" is a "nest of every vice" (364), and Donegild is full of "malice" and "tirannye" (779). Like Mary herself, Constance is described as a second Eve, graced with goodness, beauty and humility, for "syn the world bigan . . . Nas nevere swich another as is shee" (157, 159), whereas the "Sowdanesse" is a "serpent under femynnytee" (360), and Donegild has a "feendylch spirit" (751). And like the sorrowful Mary of the *planctus*, Constance is a "woful womman" (522), who speaks in "ful pitous voys" (450), and weeps "bitter teere" (537).

This rhetoric of pathos reaches its height in the scene where Constance is about to be cast adrift in a rudderless boat for the second time (771-875). To evoke pity for Constance, Chaucer lets his reader see her "deedly pale face" (822) and watch her tender affection for her "litel sone" (836) as she covers his eyes and lulls him to sleep.³¹ The last words of her prayer to Mary for pity on her "litel child,"

Rewe on my child, that of they gentillesse
 Rewest on every reweful in distresse (MLT 853-54),

²⁹ P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry* (2 vols.; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 2:193.

³⁰ See George R. Keiser, "The Middle English *Planctus Mariae* and the Rhetoric of Pathos," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. T. J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 167-93.

³¹ Thomas H. Bestul, "The *Man of Law's Tale* and the Rhetorical Foundations of Chaucerian Pathos," *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 222.

inverts a common motif from complaints of the Virgin at the cross,³² and recalls Mary's cries for pity in several of the other *planctus*.

The prayer of Constance has been judged to be "one of the greatest of Chaucer's lyrics," even though "it can hardly be read with a dry eye."³³ Standing on the Northumbrian seashore and facing a second bitter exile at sea with an infant son, Constance appeals to Mary for pity and protection by reminding her of her anguish on Calvary. Like Mary, Constance is also a sorrowful mother, and the echo of Jeremiah's complaint—a verse widely used in medieval homiletic, devotional and poetic texts—heightens the pathos of her situation and underscores the resemblance between her sufferings and those of the Mater Dolorosa. Moreover, similarities in form and style between the Man of Law's Tale and the *planctus Mariae* suggest that Chaucer was familiar with some of these works and that they helped to shape his vision of the Sorrowing Mary.

³² Kean, *Chaucer and the Making*, 2:192.

³³ Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 143.