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**NOTES ON THE PRESENTATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
IN "MORTIFICATIO CRISTI" IN *THE YORK PLAYS*
AND "THE CRUCIFIXION" IN *THE TOWNELEY PLAYS***

In this study I will examine the character of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the scene of Christ's death in two English mystery cycles, the York Plays and the Towneley Plays. The aim of my analysis is to compare Mary's understanding of the act of the crucifixion as well as her attitude toward Jesus, being both her son and the spiritual son of God, in the two plays. First, the account of Mary's sorrow in the New Testament will be given. Then, I will analyze the presentation of the Virgin in the York Cycle and then in the Towneley Cycle.

The biblical account of Mary's despair in the crucifixion scene is very scarce. Both Matthew (27: 55-56) and Mark (15: 40) merely remark in their gospels that many women, Mary Magdalene among them, followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. The account offered by Luke is even shorter as he mentions only women who mourned and wailed for Jesus (23: 27). It is John who offers the most extensive description of Mary's presence during the event:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son", and to the disciple, "Here is your mother". From that time on, this disciple took her into his home". (John 19: 25-27)¹.

It is clear, however, that none of the evangelists offers a comprehensive account of Mary's despair and grief which permeate and are so conspicuous in the scene in both cycles.

In the York Cycle, upon seeing her son on the cross, Mary laments:

¹ *The Holy Bible, New International Edition*, New International Bible Society, London 1980.

Allas! for my swete sonne I saie,
 þat doulfully to dede þus is digt,
 Allas! for full louely þou laye
 In my wombe, þis worthely wight.
 Allas! þat I shulde see þis sight
 Of my sone so semely to see,
 (p. 363, ll. 131–136)²

Bewailing her sweet and lovely son, the Virgin remembers Christ's infancy. She recalls her womb where Jesus lay. The recollection of Mary's womb creates, as it were, a framework of Christ's life. It is where his life had its beginning and it is again recalled when he is dying. Moreover, it establishes a close link between Jesus and Mary as his mother and emphasizes her connection with Christ.

The despairing Virgin compares her son on the cross to a flower fastened to a tree:

Allas! þat þis blossome so bright
 Vntrewly tugged to þis tree,
 Allas!
 (p. 363, ll. 137–139)

The blossom to which Mary compares Jesus symbolizes progress and life, both earthly and heavenly life made possible through Christ's sacrifice. The idea of freshness and promise of development contained in the image of blossom is contrasted with the image of suffering and pain implied in the word "tugged". As the Virgin sorrowfully notices, precious life is stifled in an act of unjustified violence.

Additionally, the image of a blossoming tree brings to mind one of the most favourite pictorial themes of medieval illustrators, that of the rod of Jesse. The metaphor recalls the tree depicting the generations of Jesse through David to Jesus thus reminding the audience of Christ's lineage and descent.

Mary's pain is even greater due to the humiliating circumstances of her son's death. The Virgin sadly complains:

My lorde, my leyffe,
 With full grete greffe,
 Hyngis as a theffe,
 Allas! he did neuer tresspasse.
 (p. 363, ll. 140–143)

² *The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi*, ed. Lucy Toumlin Smith, Oxford 1885, Clarendon Press. All references in the text will be to this edition.

Despite his virtuous and honest life, Jesus, the son of God, is dying crucified between two villains. His goodness and integrity incomprehensibly clash with the tragic circumstances of his death. The Virgin cannot come to terms with the conditions of his death. It brings her to tears to see her love and life:

pat is dereworty and dere,
Thus doufull a dede for to dye.
(p. 364, ll. 172-173)

Christ's humiliating death recalls the humble conditions of his birth. The cold and poor manger seemed unbecoming for the glory of the Redeemer's birth. The association, implied by Mary's presence in both scenes, stresses the repetitive pattern of the events in Christ's life.

The Virgin's anguish seems to acquire certain physical properties as if her mental suffering was also physically experienced by her. Mary wails:

A swerde of sorowe me smyte.
(p. 364, l. 158)

The sword that pierces Jesus' side seems to stab Mary³. Her sorrow becomes a lethal weapon capable of wounding or even killing. It affects both her mind and her body. Similarly to a mother who carries her child in her womb and can feel the movements of the baby inside her, Mary feels and shares Christ's pain. Although it is unbearable for the Virgin to watch Christ's agony, she wishes to accompany him till he passes away.

Christ's death seems to be even more devastating for Mary since she will have to be separated from her beloved son. The Virgin dejectedly asks:

why schulde we twynne þus in twoo
For euer
(p. 364, ll. 151-152)

She despairs over the severance, therefore she prefers to die together with Christ:

To dede I were done þis day.
(p. 364, l. 160)

It has to be stressed that throughout the scene in the York Cycle Mary never forgets what the actual meaning of the crucifixion is. Even though the scene is charged with grief, Mary's sadness stems from her maternal concern for Jesus and her fear of separation. The Virgin remembers, however, that the physical death Christ is undergoing will bring about the

³ D. Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, London and Boston 1972, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 135.

redemption. Deep in her sorrow, the Virgin is reminded by John and Mary Cleophas, as well as by Jesus himself, that his pain and suffering are “the opportunity – even the cause – of salvation”⁴ and that, paradoxically, his dying body will become a source of life.

The Virgin despairs seeing the pain of her dying son, yet she remembers that Christ willfully took this pain upon himself to “mende all þi misse” (p. 365, l. 184). The audience is thus reminded of the extent of Jesus’ suffering for humankind. It seems that “in the York play the paradox of a death designed to give men life is dramatized fully in an attempt to insure that all might not fail to feel the sorrow and meaning of this event”⁵.

As a result, the Virgin remains solemn and prayerful never exceeding the limits befitting *Theotokos*, the mother of God, and “her *planctus* is characterized by the York Realist’s concern for appropriateness and tact”⁶. Mary is never allowed to forget that the loss she is experiencing has a deeper theological meaning. She becomes an agent of faith who piously mourns Christ’s suffering undertaken for the sake of all people. Douglas Gray aptly points out that even though Mary appears deeply emotional, the motion in the scene is controlled by its reflective framework⁷. Rosemary Woolf also notes that the harmonious form of the stanza reins, as it were, Mary’s distress “so that the Virgin does not appear distracted and uncontrolled but has rather the reserves of dignity befitting her pre-eminence”⁸.

The Virgin’s *planctus* in the Towneley Cycle is much longer. Mary’s lamentation and John’s consolation are not interrupted by other characters, which is contrary to the York Cycle, where also the crucified thieves have their say. The attention of the audience remains carefully focused on the three characters: Jesus, the Virgin and John.

Mary of the Towneley Cycle opens her laments with a direct invocation to Jesus:

Alas! the doyll I dre / I drowpe, I dare in drede!
Whi hangys thou, son, so hee? / my bayll beynnes to brede.
(p. 267, ll. 309–310)⁹

⁴ C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York 1992, Zone Books, p. 117.

⁵ C. Davidson, “The Realism of the York Realist and the York Passion”, *Speculum*, 1989, No 3, p. 279.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

⁷ D. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁸ R. Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, London 1972, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 265.

⁹ *The Towneley Plays. Re-edited from the Unique Ms. by George England*, London 1897, Oxford University Press. All references in the text will be to this edition.

Pain and anguish to see Jesus die seem unendurable for Mary. It is beyond her capacities to be a witness of her son's death. The Virgin complains:

Mi sorow it is so sad / no solace my me safe;
Mowrnyng makys me mad / none hope of help I hafe;
I am redles and rad / ffor ferd that I mon rafe;
Noght may make me glad / to I be in my grafe.

(p. 270, ll. 381-385)

She is, as it were, in an emotional agony over her dying son. Mary admits that she is on the verge of sanity, being inconsolable and in profound sorrow. Her grief, "extreme and unchecked"¹⁰, overpowers her and becomes destructive. Unlike the York Cycle, where Mary sorrowfully yet piously mourns Christ, the Virgin in the Towneley Cycle loses her hope to save her son. Rejecting the idea of hope, Mary seems to question the meaning of the crucifixion. She turns a deaf ear to John's consolation, who attempts to solace the Virgin and to remind her that Christ's suffering is only temporary and leads to a greater end, the redemption. Overwhelmed by the sight of her dying son, the Virgin implores other women, who are present there, to join in her mourning. She moans that she lived too long.

Now witterly thou wyrkys wrang / the more I will wyte the,
Bot if thou will my harte stang / that I myght with hym dee
And byde;
Sore syghyng is my sang, / ffor thyryld is his hyde!

(p. 271, 426-429)

Only death could give Mary a relief and bring an end to her misery:

Good lord, graunte me my boyn / and let me lyf no more!
(p. 271, l. 434)

In accordance with the medieval tradition of inversion, the anguish of the crucifixion is contrasted with the happiness of the annunciation and the nativity. The Virgin recalls the sweet greeting of Gabriel, who descended with the happy news that Mary had been chosen God's bride and was to become the mother of the Saviour. However, the joy of the annunciation seems to be distant and the prophesy appears spurious now:

Gabriell, that good / som tyme thou can me grete,
And then I vnderstud / thi wordys that were so swete;
Bot now thay meng my moode / ffor grace thou can me hete,
To bere all of my blode / a childe oure baill shuld bete with right;
Now hynys he here on rude / Where is that thou me hight?

(p. 271, ll. 435-440)

¹⁰ D. Denny, "Notes on the *Avignon Pieta*", *Speculum* 1988, No 2, p. 213.

Mary doubts the meaning of the angel's words. The tragedy of her son's death overshadows the importance of the act of the crucifixion. She seems to forget about the necessity of the event, and it is her grief, not her faith, that is foregrounded¹¹. Even though, as was prophesied, her son, whom she conceived, was to become the Saviour, yet now he is dying on the cross. The ordeal of "the Mother, shimmering and struggling at the liminal threshold of consciousness"¹² takes possession of Mary and instead of a pious saint, endowed with the understanding of the event through holy foreknowledge, the playwright creates a pained being whose experience seems more palpable and real¹³.

Christ's deformed body gives Mary one more reason to grieve and despair. The loving eyes of the mother notice the sores and injuries suffered by her son. The Virgin tearfully complains:

ffestynd both handys and feete
 With nalys full vnmete,
 his woundes wrynyng wete,
 Alas, my childe, for care!
 ffor all rent is thi hyde;
 Alas! that euer I should byde
 And se my feyr thus fare!
 (p. 268, ll. 329–338)

She focuses on Christ's hands and feet fastened to the cross with nails. It is excruciating for the Blessed Virgin to see her child tortured and subjected to utmost physical suffering. Looking at Christ's still bleeding wounds, the Virgin notices only pain and agony forgetting that only by these wounds could the world be redeemed¹⁴.

The emphasis on Christ's physical suffering and the compelling image of the dying Jesus serve to remind the audience of his humanity and to enhance the significance of his sacrifice for humankind. His deformed body covered in blood testifies to Christ's "humanation"¹⁵. Mary, both as

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 215.

¹² A. Ostriker, *Feminist Tradition and the Bible*, Blackwell, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 50.

¹³ It appears necessary to mention Julia Kristeva's article "Stabat Mater" at this point. As Kristeva argues, Mary's pain and anguish stem from her fear, disappointment and sudden understanding that she was denied both sex and death. "Nothing justifies Mary's outburst of pain at the foot of the cross, unless it be the desire to experience within her own body the death of a human being, which her feminine fate of the source of life spares her". (J. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" in *Tales of Love*, New York 1987, Columbia University Press, transl. L. S. Roudier, p. 250–251). R. Woolf, on the other hand, claims that Mary's grief is so great as she realizes that she must also be redeemed through Jesus' passion, or else she will be condemned to go to hell (R. Woolf, *op. cit.*, p. 263).

¹⁴ D. Denny, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁵ C. W. Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

a woman and a mother, could understand it better since, as C. W. Bynum puts it "to medieval women humanity was physicality, the flesh of the Word made flesh"¹⁶.

Christ's "torn robe" – his anguished and tormented body – is also a proof of his human nature. In a moving exclamation, Mary complains that her son's robe is destroyed thus giving evidence of yet one more crime committed against her son:

To deth my dere is dreyffen,
his robe is all to-ryffen,
That of me was hym gyffen,
And shapen with my sydys.
(p. 270, ll. 386–389)

The motif of Christ's robe is connected with the medieval belief that in the act of the enfleshing, Mary gave Jesus' body its shape and was even called by Francis of Assisi "Christ's robe", or the tabernacle¹⁷. Therefore, the Virgin is capable of experiencing her son's anguish much more deeply than are other characters. For Mary, Christ's pain and affliction seem to be more intense and his sacrifice more poignant.

Despairing over Christ's suffering, she also realizes that her tormented son cannot even rest his head:

Alas! thi holy hede
hase not wher on to helde;
(p. 268, ll. 321–2)

This apparently unimportant and minute detail of Christ's helplessness triggers off even more distress for the loving mother. It seems that Mary, in an act of maternal tenderness, would like to ease her son's discomfort and to uphold Jesus' ailed head. Unable to protect her "swete son", her "childer none bot oone", she despairs as she is unable to alleviate Christ's suffering.

This highly emotional motif brings to mind the iconographic tradition of pietas such as, for instance, the *Avignon Pieta*. "Most often the Virgin had been imagined clutching the body of her Son as if unable to relinquish Him to the tomb, or dreaming that she held Him in her lap once more as an infant"¹⁸. Scenes from plastic arts presenting the moment of Christ's death and his entombment frequently portray Mary or other saints upholding the head of dead Jesus¹⁹.

One more group of images, employed to stress Christ's humanity and his physical connection with his mother, strikes as being particularly

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

¹⁸ D. Denny, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

interesting in the scene in this cycle. Describing Jesus' body, the Virgin often mentions blood and bloody marks. Mary despairs that Christ's face is "with blode red" and "teres of blode" glide down his sides. It causes great woe to see her "barne thus blede". Christ's blood becomes a symbol of his suffering. The blood of her only child makes the Virgin grieve even more.

It should, however, be borne in mind that in the Middle Ages blood, considered to be the basic bodily fluid, symbolized a covenant made between God and Christ. For instance, blood shed by Jesus in the circumcision foreshadowed his suffering on the cross. It became part of the scheme of redemption and signified Christ's humanity and the pain he experienced²⁰.

Moreover, in the Middle Ages blood was closely connected with milk, the food given to infants by their mothers. It was believed that both blood and milk originated from the same source yet underwent different physiological processes to turn finally into one of those fluids. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mary's milk became a relic and was believed to be a cure for different ailments²¹.

It is in the crucifixion scene in the Towneley Cycle that the Virgin makes a reference to her milk, the food used to feed Jesus. She says:

My foode that I haue fed,
In lyf longyng the led,
(p. 267, ll. 313-314)

Recalling her milk, Mary emphasizes her connection with Jesus. She presents herself as a nurturer, food-giver to her son thus being able to experience his agony much more profoundly.

There is still another detail of Christ's body which seems to enhance a close relationship between Mary and her son. The mother compares Jesus' eyes with a clear crystal thus associating them with light and shining:

Alas! thyn een as cristall clere / that shoyn as son in sight
(p. 269, l. 361)

This comparison automatically recalls the medieval way of describing Mary's womb as a clear crystal. Medieval women mystics imagined "that Mary's body was like a crystal, and then Jesus was light as a feather in her womb"²². Certain sculptures, such as the 13th century Visitation Group from Katharinental, show the Virgin's womb as a transparent crystal²³. It

²⁰ U. Rublack, "Women Mystics Experiences in the Middle Ages", [in:] *Gender and History*, 1994, vol. VI, No 1, p. 42-43.

²¹ C. W. Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 49.

²³ C. W. Bynum, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

again establishes a close relationship between Christ and the Virgin and emphasizes the link between the mother and son.

The analysis shows that the playwrights devise two different images of the Virgin Mary. While the Towneley playwright creates a mother whose despair and misery overshadow the meaning of the act of the crucifixion and focuses primarily on her emotional agony, the York Realist presents a holy woman who sorrowfully complains about her son's pain yet her piety and unclouded faith guide her through the event and sustain her hope. In the Towneley Cycle, Mary stresses her physical connection with her son and emphasizes his human nature, necessary for the salvation of the world. Her inconsolable grief and the emotional agony she is going through make her more dramatic and place the Virgin in the centre of the scene. The York playwright, on the other hand, directs the attention of the audience primarily onto the event assigning the Virgin the role of a suffering mother whose duty is both to mourn and to glorify her dying son.

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**PREZENTACJA ŚWIĘTEJ MARIII
W SCENIE "MORTIFICACIO CRISTI" W YORK PLAYS
ORAZ W SCENIE "THE CRUCIFIXION" W TOWNELEY PLAYS**

Tematem artykułu jest prezentacja Madonny w scenie ukrzyżowania w dwóch angielskich średniowiecznych dramatach misteryjnych: *Towneley Cycle* oraz *York Cycle*. Autorka analizuje obraz Marii w *York Cycle* gdzie Błogosławiona Maria jawi się jako pełna pobożności święta osoba uczestnicząca w akcie zbawienia. Cierpienie Jezusa przyjmuje ona z bólem, choć jednocześnie rozumie jego poświęcenie i dostrzega wagę poświęcenia Chrystusa. W drugim dramacie Maria ukazana jest jako matka bolejąca nad męką i śmiercią swego syna, wątpiąca w sens ukrzyżowania. Autorka podkreśla znaczenie bólu i cierpienia Chrystusa jako symboli jego natury ludzkiej, koniecznej do zbawienia świata jak i również znaczenie związku pomiędzy Marią a Chrystusem.