Comme Femme Desconfortée: A Vision of Our Lady of Sorrows as a Disconsolate Woman

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The use of secular tropes within religious artwork by European masters of the XV-XVI centuries was commonplace. There are many instances in which the divine crosses paths with the material in a seemingly endless matrix of allegory, analogy, and symbolic imagery. Musicians and visual artists in Europe were particularly fond of creating minute universes in their work, where the earthly qualities of their patrons were decorated with the holy ones of their patron saints. I will devote the following minutes to a particular strand of musical works from the turn of the XVI century, which cite the tenor of Gilles Binchois’ chanson Comme femme desconfortée in the context of Marian devotion. The liturgy during the period between the Passion and Assumption is rich in celebratory texts concerning the Resurrection. Composers however, chose to build the music for this period around the tenor of Binchois’ song. I will propose that these works, read as a corpus, show an effort to communicate Mary’s suffering for the absence of her Son. Polyphonic settings by Agricola, Desprez, Isaac, and Ghiselin seem to build upon each other with the purpose of providing the afflicted Mother with a voice at times when no evangelist would.

The voice of Mary voice scarcely appears in the New Testament. Only through Luke does she speak; three times in his gospel and once in the book of Acts. John, who is amply believed to have been present during the Crucifixion, does place Mary at his side during the Passion, but does not convey the overt suffering of an anguished woman who
has lost her son. In turn, John gives us a model of stoicism, an image of Mary more akin to the modern idea of Christian resignation.

The idea of Jesus’ Mother witnessing her son’s violent and voluntary sacrifice was fascinating to medieval artists, and it became a model for all modes of devotion in the Middle Ages. The prayer *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* is a prime example of this, composed by the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi toward the end of the 1200s. After the promulgation of the Feast of Seven Sorrows by Sixth IV in 1482, the *Stabat* was added permanently to the liturgy. In contrast to earlier Marian commemorations, the festivities of the Seven Sorrows and the Assumption had no scriptural support. Their importance as part of the Christian Dogmas, however, was undeniable. Even before they became Universal feasts of the Church, they appeared in several devotional documents all over Europe, but none other more influential than the *Legenda Aurea*, a compilation of vitae sanctorum by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine.

His accounts of the Assumption and the Crucifixion burst with details on the attitude and demeanour of the Virgin, an image upon which Jacopone da Todi surely built his *Stabat Mater*. Both the *Legenda* and the *Stabat* were profusely disseminated and incorporated into Marian celebrations across Christian lands. The former served not only as the inspiration, but as the most reliable source of imagery and religious symbolism. Innumerable sermons, motet texts, illuminations, and books of hours reference to it. One example is the famed Hours of Etienne Chevalier, by Jean Fouquet. In the miniature corresponding to the Crucifixion [Slide 1], our attention is immediately drawn to Christ, being offered vinegar. As we move toward the bottom, we see the good thief at Jesus’ right next to Pilate wearing splendid golden armour on a white horse. The Priests, at the left with the bad thief, mount darker horses, gazing upwards
in awe. Other details, such as an almost too conspicuous skull marking the hill of Golgotha, complete the scene. The unconscious Virgin falling on John’s arms, however, is the most striking element in the pictorial. Fouquet was aware of Mary’s silence in the scripture, as was Voragine. Nonetheless, they portray God’s favourite as a woman experiencing an unquestionably human reaction to the violence she has witnessed. We do not see here the stoic model of resignation suggested by John’s silence. Voragine and Fouquet seem to conspire in order to give Mary an excuse for her lack of voice in the gospels.

Further evidence of an effort to humanize the Virgin may be found in the *Stabat*. A quick examination of the first tercet of the sequence will exemplify this point. Da Todi presents a remarkably human portrait of the Virgin: We see the image of a mother in distress for the violent death of her first-born. Here, she is not the “Hailed Queen of the Heavens” or “Mistress of the Angels,” she is but a woman in tears and immersed in deep anguish: “The sorrowful mother stood in tears before the cross from which her son hung.” There is no mention here of divine power, or of the redeeming nature of the sacrifice at hand, or even of the fact that the son mentioned in the text is actually Christ: A direct reference happens only at the fifth tercet. The opening four stanzas are purely a description of the sorrow of a mother, a woman. In a prayer whose purpose is to declare and reaffirm the holiness of the object of devotion, Jacopone chooses to bring her back to her worldly origin.

The tone of the sequence is not that different from that of the most popular fourteenth and fifteenth-century Franco-Flemish secular songs, often referring to the subject of love lost, or unrequited affection. Words such as anguish, tears, discomfort, pain, and even interjections such as the French *hélas* are found frequently on the texts and titles
for these songs. Jacopone, in providing a depiction of Mary as a desolate woman, is perhaps attempting to bring her closer to human experience so that the faithful may relate to her sorrow in a more meaningful way; in the same manner that poets played with the listener’s emotions in order to arouse feelings of sympathy for the protagonists of their verses. Gilles Binchois, in his rondeau Comme femme desconsolée, speaks of a woman who has lost her lover and is now in grave pain, even questioning her will to continue living. Surely, unrequited love is a universal, familiar subject, one which most of Binchois’ audience had experienced. In the Stabat, Jesus’ sacrifice for the redemption of sinners, the most extraordinary event in the Savior’s life, when presented by da Todi through the eyes of a mourning mother, becomes just as familiar for any audience during his time.

One of the earliest polyphonic settings of the Stabat Mater, if not the earliest Continental one, is that by Josquin Desprez, composed no later than 1484. The tenor, drawn from Binchois’ rondeau, is quoted in its entirety and with precise equivalency. Desprez also retains the bipartite structure of the chanson. This attests to the importance of the message transported by the tenor. Josquin used very few secular cantus firmi in his sacred polyphony, in turn, he chose more frequently to use sacred plainsong that was closely related to the liturgical purpose of the motet. The Stabat Mater, with its secular tenor is, then, a somewhat isolated case. There is, as editor Nigel Davidson affirms, an evident parallel between the texts. The person of the narrator, however, marks an important difference. In one case, a third person describes the Virgin’s sorrow as she stands at the foot of the cross in front of her deceased son. The speaker then addresses the Virgin, showing willingness to suffer the same misfortune of being separated from Jesus, ending with a plea for attaining the comfort of Paradise in death. In the case of
Comme femme, a female speaker describes her own misadventures, wishing her own death morn and night and even cursing the day of her birth. The original melody is presented in triple augmentation, and underlay of the Stabat Mater text would be too cumbersome. It is an argument for an instrumental performance of the cantus firmus, an effective method of directing the listener’s attention to it, and to separate it from the texted voices. The tenor, which holds the entire composition together, seems to act as the unspoken voice of Mary. This device is not unlike the subtle gestures by the Virgin seen in books of hours of the time. [Slide 2]. In this image, we see the patron kneeling by the side of the devotional subject with an unfocused gaze directed loosely toward her. A delicate glance from the Virgin symbolizes acknowledgement. In the same manner, Josquin has found support in a popular song in order to show the Virgin’s endorsement of the singers’ desire to participate from her suffering.

More symbolic references to Mary’s anguish may be found in the motets of Johannes Ghiselin. The Marian hymn Inviolata, integra et casta was sung originally as a trope for the feast of Purification, but was later adopted for the octave of Assumption, perhaps as a parting gift from her faithful. Regina coeli laetare, also a Marian hymn, was sung after the end of Vespers from Easter until Trinity. The text celebrates Mary’s rejoice, for her Son has risen from the dead, and onto the Heavens. This liturgical period is book-ended by Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension on one end, and Mary’s death and Assumption on the other; when, according to the Legenda, the Virgin lamented the absence of her Son and longed to be reunited with Him. Ghiselin’s choice of Comme femme as the tenor for his settings may have been motivated by a desire to subscribe to the underlying theme of Mary’s solitude throughout this liturgical period, a concept which would supersede the immediate purpose of either anthem. Mary must bear her
suffering quietly, while all the faithful, legions of Angels, Saints, and the Trinity rejoice in the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ to his Throne. The Mother must still stand in sorrow. Ghiselin merely reminds his listeners through a subtle layered message.

In his discussion of Heinrich Isaac’s *Angeli archangeli*, David Rothenberg argues that the motets based on *Comme femme* were not likely used for a peculiar occasion, but were rather appropriate for all Marian feasts. He does, however, bring attention to the possibility that Isaac’s motet was probably intended to celebrate the Assumption. But there is an interesting correspondence between the texts used with Isaac’s music and those examined earlier. Rothenberg has shown that the earliest appearance of Isaac’s motet was underlain with the text *O Regina nobilissima et domina*, which presents Mary with a mandate to “evacuate the inferno,” “crush the Devil and save the sinners from his very mouth…and lead them to the Father through penance.” Mary unusually stops being the intercessor and becomes the warrior, a *femme armé*. Were it not for the fact that the text mentions her name, the prayer may well be appropriate for a Holy Saturday hymn commemorating the Harrowing of Hell. This prayer, though not widely disseminated with Isaac’s motet, connects the tenor once more to the themes of Christ’s resurrection, and a safe pathway to Heaven through penitence.

The text most commonly associated to the motet, *Angeli, archangeli*, presents a litany-like plea for intercession from the entire Heavenly hierarchy—all except for Mary. Her conspicuous absence is explained by Rothenberg with the argument that the motet may have been connected to the Assumption rather than the feast of All Saints, as the provenance of the text would suggest. By using *Comme femme* as the dominating structural element, according to Rothenberg, Isaac is not only providing a root to his motet; he is sitting Mary above all others, an image that was commonly used in the
Middle Ages to represent the Assumption [Slide 3]. If we take Josquin’s *Stabat* and Isaac’s *Angeli*, we have extraordinary musical manifestations of the liturgical book-ends of Passion and Assumption. The mournful representation of Mary in the former is a fitting tribute to the parting of Christ; just as the reunion of the Heavenly choruses celebrates her arrival to Heaven, her triumph over death.

The earliest known appearance of *Comme femme* as a sacred tenor is that in Agricola’s motets *Virgo sub aetheriis* and *Ave qui sublimaris*. The former was taken from a prayer to the Virgin for protection from pestilence; the latter, displays much compatibility with the theme of the Assumption. Here too, two motets can be heard as book-ends between torment and joy, and both draw upon the “safe passage” topos discussed earlier. Throughout paschal time, and until the Assumption, Mary is in anguish while the chorus rejoices. As in John’s portrait, the Virgin mother must suffer in silence. Only after she has risen, may there be jubilee in Heaven and in Earth.

In conclusion, I propose that our polyphonic masters seem to have found a way to adhere to Mary’s anguish even through the most joyful of celebrations for Christians. The familiar emotions found in Binchois’ *chanson* presented the composers with an opportunity to create intimate connections between the Holy Mother and her devotees. On a deeper level, the tenor also allowed Mary’s anguished voice to be heard in the midst of the most joyous of times for Christians. The effort by our masters may have served to bridge the gap between two Marian mysteries: The joy she experienced after seeing her Son’s work fulfilled, and her lament witnessing his parting. Through the use of a popular tune about an anguished woman, this mystery has become available for all of us who have, even once, experienced the loss of love.
Ere de dieu qui sit
stres mise. Et assise
lassus en throsuc
dunn
Comme Femme Desconfortée

Chansonnier de Jean de Montchenu
(Cordiforme)
fol. 38v.-40r.

Gilles Binchois

131
[Josquinus]

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Transcrito y editado por Samuel Robles
Bruselas, BR Ms. 9426, ff. 160v. a 164r.

Superius

(5/160)

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Juxta crucem lacrimosa, Domen-debat Filiius

Bassus

(5/160)

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Juxta crucem lacrimosa, Domine-debat Filiius

Tenor I

(5/161)

STABAT MATER

Tenor II

(5/161)

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Juxta crucem lacrimosa, Domine-debat Filiius

Como femme

(5/160)

Cecum

(5/161)

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Juxta crucem lacrimosa, Domine-debat Filiius
sì vit gla - di - us. O quam tris - tis et af - fíc -

tem, Per - trans - sì vit gla - di - us. O quam tris - tis et

Fu - it il - la be - ne - dic - ta Ma - ter Uni - geni - tìl Quae ma - re -
Nati poenas inclyti. Quis est homo qui non fleret

Poe-nas inclyti. In inclyti. Chris-ti ma-trem

Chris-ti ma-trem si vide-ret in tan-to sup-pli-ci-o?

Chris-ti ma-trem si vide-ret in tan-to sup-pli-ci-o?

Pi-am ma-trem con-temp-la-rir

Pi-am ma-trem con-temp-la-rir Do-len-tem cum

Non pos-set con-tris-ta-ri

Non pos-set con-tris-ta-ri Do-len-tem cum
Eia mater, fons amoris, Me senti re vim dolores Fac, ut tecum lugeam. Fac, ut ardeat

Eia mater, fons amoris, Me senti re vim dolores Fac, ut tecum lugeam. Fac, ut ardeat

Eia mater, fons amoris, Me senti re vim dolores Fac, ut tecum lugeam. Fac, ut ardeat
Deat cor meum
In amando Christum

cor meum In amando Christum De-

De-

um, ut sibi complaceam.

um, ut sibi com-

plac-

ce-

am.

Virgo vir-

um, Virgo virgi-

num

Iam mihi non sis am-

ma-

ra: Fac me te-

Iam mihi non sis a-

ma-

ra: Fac me te-

ji-num praecla-

ra: Fac me praecla-

ra:
cum plan-ger-e. Pas-sio-nis e-ius sor-tem,

cum plan-ger-e. Fac, ut por-tem Chris-ti mor-tem Pas-sio-nis e-ius sor-tem, Et

te-cum plan-ger-e. Fac, ut por-tem Chris-ti mor-tem Pas-si-

cum plan-ger-e. Pas-sio-nis e-ius sor-tem,

pla-gas re-co-le-re. Fac me pla-gis vul-ne-ra-ni Cru-

o-nis e-ius sor-tem, Fac me te-cum plan-ge-re.

gas re-co-le-re Fac me pla-gis vul-ne-ra-ni

Fac me pla-gis vul-ne-ra-ni

Cru-ce hac ine-bri-a-ri, Ob a-mo-rem Fi-li-i. In-flam-ma-

cru-ce hac ine-bri-a-ri, Ob a-mo-rem Fi-li-i. In-flam-ma-

Cru-ce hac ine-bri-a-ri, Ob a-mo-rem Fi-li-i. In-flam-ma-

Cru-ce hac ine-bri-a-ri, Ob a-mo-rem Fi-li-i. In-flam-ma-
tus et ac-cen-sus, Per te, Vir-go, sim de-fen-sus

Fac me cru-ce cus-to-di-ri, Mor-te Chris-ti pra-em-u-ni-ri, Con-fo-ve-
i.

ri gra-ti-a. Qua-do cor-pus mo-ri-e-tur, Fac ut a-ni-mae do-ne-tur

Qua-do cor-pus mo-ri-e-tur Fac ut a-ni-mae do-ne-tur Pad-

Qua-do cor-pus mo-ri-e-tur Fac ut a-ni-mae do-ne-tur Pa-