

## THE *LÆRÐIR MENN* OF THE OLD ICELANDIC MARIAN LAMENT *DRÁPA AF MARÍUGRÁT*<sup>1</sup>

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As the title suggests *Drápa af Mariúgrát*<sup>2</sup> is a laudatory poem in honour of the Virgin Mary which deals with her *grátr*, or lamentation, at the crucifixion. Thematically it belongs to a group of poetic and prose works known generally as the *Planctus Mariae* ('The Lament of Mary'), the most famous of which is perhaps the Franciscan hymn *Stabat mater dolorosa* formerly attributed to Jacopone de Todi (Raby 1959, 435-37 and 501).<sup>3</sup> Despite the poet's declarations in the opening stanzas of *Drápa af Mariúgrát* that the text is about the mother of God and is written in her honour, this narrative is essentially concerned with and directed towards *lærðir menn* ['learned men' as opposed to 'learned people'] and, it will be argued, has particular associations with male dominated domains. There is a good deal of internal information in the poem which reflects the types of audiences it may have appealed to and for whom it was probably written. Didacticism, devotion, meditation, Marian apparitions, gender, and the literary medium of this text, for instance, reveal particular groups of listeners and readers, namely those labelled within the text as its *lærðir menn*.

In contrast to an abundance of information concerning its audiences, *Drápa af Mariúgrát* contains few clues as to its date, provenance and authorship. Both Jón Þorkelsson and Finnur Jónsson dated the poem to around 1400 (1888, 41; and 1920-24, 3:16). While it is possible to set a tentative date of composition at 1375-1425, the exact date remains open due to a lack of conclusive evidence. Without doubt it was composed in Iceland, though where exactly is unknown. In a rare autobiographical moment in the text the poet reveals something of his vocation as a cleric who was, it seems, associated with a monastery. In stanza 42 he states that he will not only hear the five joys of the Virgin together with the *Ave Maria* but also teach and recite them to *lærðum monnum* who are probably monks.

Indeed this didactic theme occurs throughout the poem constantly reminding its audiences to practice, learn and/or teach various aspects of veneration and devotional matters generally. Such instructions and statements as *lof guðs syngja / lærðir menn ok þórum kenna* [learned people sing the praise of God and teach it to others, 31.7-8] and *sólar konung ... / syndalausnar biðir ok yndis* [pray to the king of the sun for redemption and joy, 39.7-8] emphasise the importance of both veneration and teaching its prescribed forms (see also 24.1-4, 40.1-8, 42.5-8, and 50.1-3).

<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this paper are rudimentary but will be refined and developed further for the conference in August.

<sup>2</sup> For editions of *Drápa af Mariúgrát* see Kahle (1898), Sperber (1911), Finnur Jónsson (1908-15), and Kock (1923-44). Quotations from the poem, which are taken from Finnur Jónsson's edition, are accompanied by stanza or stanza and line numbers. English translations are my own and are provided as a guide to my interpretation of the poem. Quotations from other Old Icelandic texts and Latin works are not accompanied by translations.

<sup>3</sup> Yrjö Hirn, however, does not group the *Stabat mater dolorosa* with the *Planctus Mariae* because it presents the lamentation of the poet rather than Mary, though he does recognise that the Franciscan hymn corresponds to the *Planctus Mariae* texts in subject matter (1912, 395).

The depiction of Christ is also influenced by the theme of didacticism, though such a portrayal appears to be at odds with the general context of this Marian lament poem. When Longinus stabs Him in the side, the poet refers to Christ as a *lærifaðir* [teacher, 29.5], which would seem an unusual word to use in this setting since Christ's role as teacher and His passion are not commonly connected in literature on the *Passio*. Similarly, in a description of the Annunciation, Mary refers to her Son's didactic role when she relates how *sik mínu holdi / meistari alls fyr mínu brjósti* [the master/teacher of everything adorned Himself in my flesh under my breast, 43.6-7]. At the conclusion of the narration when the poet reflects on the Last Judgement, he again refers to Christ as a *lærifaðir* (51.4) where one might expect a word like 'Saviour' to be used. Though somewhat unusual in the context, such descriptions are indicative of and serve to reinforce the importance of didacticism in the poem.

Given the emphasis on instruction, devotion and spirituality in *Drápa af Martuigrát*, and judging by the references within the text, its audiences are more likely to have been ecclesiastical than lay and were probably monks and/or clerics. More often than not learned rather than lay people are referred to, for instance, *lærðir menn* [learned men/people, 23.7, 31.8, 42.6], *lærðir lýðir* [learned people, 40.5], and a certain *fróðr munkr* [learned/wise monk, 41.1-2]. Furthermore, those who listened to or read this *drápa* were probably familiar with the events of the Old Testament and the Gospels and must have had some understanding of the meditative process often implicitly referred to in the poem. A lay audience may not have recognised, for example, the significance of *aldri brann þó viðrinn kaldi* [the cold bush that never burned, 1.5-6 cf. Exodus 3.2] as a type of the Virgin — just as the bush burned but was not consumed, so the Mary conceived Jesus without losing her virginity.

Similarly, the importance of the many references to weeping, praying and remembering as part of the meditative process may not have had a substantial impact on a secular audience not familiar with the mode of contemplation often associated with monastic customs. For instance, the kennings for tears *laugin hvarma* [bath of the eyelids, 49.8] and *lón hvarma* [the inlets of the eyelids, 49.5], and the references to weeping, praying, and remembering in the Virgin's wish that *á lýða tungu / léki jafnan dómínús tēcum* [*dominus tecum* (i.e. the *Ave Maria*) may always play on the tongue of mankind, 47.3-4] may well have had no real bearing on the lives of lay audiences.

Besides the ecclesiastical readers and listeners of *Drápa af Martuigrát*, there are many embedded audiences implicit in the text most of which are also described as learned. Perhaps the most significant embedded audience is the Virgin herself. At the foot of the cross she is an audience of both an event (the crucifixion) and of the spoken text of Christ concerning her care, the Resurrection, the Assumption, and His last words (27.1-8, 30.1-4, 31.1-4). Since Mary was not the only observer at Golgotha, she cannot be an exclusive audience of that event, but she can be viewed as a singular audience in this poem. By presenting her account of the crucifixion, as opposed to that of another observer, the text not only authorises her words but also singles her out as a central figure through whom the readers and listeners of the poem receive details of both the *Passio* and the *Compassio*. She is also singled out by the dialogue between herself and her Son since His speeches are directed specifically at her. Although the Virgin as an audience is not said to be learned as such, she can certainly be considered knowledgeable given that she has first hand experience of some of the most momentous events in the history of Christianity.

A second embedded audience is found in Saint Augustine who is a one-person observer and listener of an apparition of the Virgin in which she reveals her sorrow at Golgotha (4.1-4 and 9-10). The saint's renowned learnedness is represented in the poem by the descriptives *fyldr af spekt* [full of wisdom, 4.4] and *fróðr* [learned/wise, 10.4]. The *lærðir menn ok lýða ferðir* [learned and lay people, 5.3] whom Augustine instructs on praying and weeping constitute a third audience which is partly learned partly lay, and the *prestar* [priests, 8.1-3] whom he addresses on the belief that Mary never parted from her Son during the crucifixion make up a fourth, learned audience. A fifth audience can be found in the baptized and learned people to whom the Virgin relates her sorrow at and the significance of the crucifixion (22-23). Finally, towards the end of the poem, Mary enumerates and describes briefly her five joys (the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Assumption) for a sixth audience consisting of a certain learned monk about whom nothing else is revealed (41.1-4).

While learnedness is characteristic of most of these embedded audiences, another feature worth considering is the gender of these listeners, or receivers of information, and what it may reveal about the external audiences of the poem. Of the six embedded audiences, three are male (Saint Augustine, the priests, and the monk), only one is female (the Virgin), and the remaining two are not specified either way but probably consist of both women and men. Significantly the two audiences which Augustine addresses in the poem, the learned and lay people in the first instance and the priests in the second, are actually learned women in the vernacular source text with the Latin title *Planctus siue lamentatio beate Marie* and the Latin parallel *Liber de passione Christi et doloribus et planctus Matris eius*.<sup>4</sup>

In all three texts Augustine's words are directed at Christian audiences, but in the *Planctus siue lamentatio beate Marie* and the *Liber de passione Christi* they are further defined as nuns. In the vernacular source, for instance, the narrator identifies the audience as *Jorsalaborgar dætr* and *guds brudir*, as young women and widows who have given themselves to God in holy matrimony:

pier iungfrvr eda pier eckiur, er gudi allzualdanda hafa iatad sinum  
hreinleika, ok sua þær sem i heilugu hiuskaparbandi ero teingdar  
(Unger 1871, 1003.27-28, 1004.6-8).

Similarly in the Latin parallel the audiences are addressed as *filie Iherusalem* and *sponse dilecte*, whom the narrator urges:

Currite filie, currite virgines sacre, currite matres, Cristo castitatem  
vouentes, omnes ad virginem currite, que genuit Cristum (Mushacke  
1890, 41.5, 6 and 11-13).<sup>5</sup>

Augustine's audiences in the poem have been "un-gendered", as it were, and specified instead as learned and lay in one case and re-gendered as learned males in the other. By eliminating the female gender of the saint's audiences and by explicitly labelling them as learned or unlearned and/or male, the poet maintains a consistency with

<sup>4</sup> The source from which *Drápa af Martugrát* ultimately derives is the popular medieval Latin text known as *Liber de passione Christi et doloribus et planctus Matris eius* by the Italian Cistercian abbot Ogerius de Locedio (1136-1214; see *PL* 182: 1133-42 and a variant in Mushacke 1890, 41-53). The poet, however, probably did not work directly from this Latin text but rather seems to have used an Icelandic rendition of it called *Planctus siue lamentatio beate Marie* (Unger 1871, 1003-12).

<sup>5</sup> These references are absent from the text in *PL* 182.

the other references to audiences in his text. Nearly all the embedded audiences are described as learned and at least half of them are also male. Given that the references to nuns do not appear in the poem, it is likely that it was not intended for women. This poetic rendition of the *Planctus siue lamentacio beate Marie*, then, seems to have been directed away from learned women towards their male counterparts.

That *Drápa af Mariúgrát* consists mostly of a narration given by the Virgin during an apparition to Saint Augustine is perhaps also indicative of the gender of the poem's external audience. The theme of the religious vision, in particular the appearance of the mother of God, underlies the entire text. The first reference to this motif occurs in stanza 4 when we are told that Augustine *alloppt beiddi ... Mártu ... at vitrazt skyldi* [very often asked Mary to manifest herself, 4.1-4] and presumably tell him about her ordeal at the crucifixion so that he could explain her sorrow to others. When she does finally appear to the saint in stanza 9 *með ljósi mikku, ... með ilm ok sætu and í skráða fögurum* [with great light, with perfume and sweet odour, (and) in beautiful apparel, 9.6-8], she begins an account of the events at Golgotha which occupies most of the remainder of the poem.

The theme of the Marian apparition, and devotion to the Virgin in general, may have appealed especially to men rather than women in medieval western Europe. Numerous studies have pointed to a connection between men and Marian apparitions. For instance, it has been shown that the Virgin actually appeared more often to men than women, especially in northern European visions (see Roisin 1947: 108 and 111-113; on similar findings for Marian hallucinations see Carroll 1992, 131-32). Weinstein and Bell's study of sainthood in western Christendom, including Scandinavia, from 1000-1700 shows that veneration of Mary was a more common occurrence for male saints than female saints, with the actual number of male saints who supported devotion to the Virgin increasing with each of the three age groups from child saints to adolescents to adults (1986: 123-37, esp. Tables 1, 2 and 5). Unless medieval Iceland was significantly different from other parts of western Europe, one might expect similar associations between some aspects of male religious experience and the Virgin Mary to have been the case there too. The Marian apparition in particular and devotion to the mother of God generally in *Drápa af Mariúgrát*, then, may well reinforce the emphasis on the masculine in this text.

Moreover, the learned men who may have read or listened to this poem, perhaps as all or parts of it were read out in a refectory or used in the liturgy, may also have been used to the traditional association between the literary medium of this text and the male domain to which skaldic poetry belonged (Jesch 1991, 151). As a skaldic poem, *Drápa af Mariúgrát* is part of a group of texts which in many respects (composition, delivery, audience, subject matter) was dominated by men, especially in the Viking Age and early Middle Ages when skalds composed poems in honour of the military achievements of men. These were predominantly male poets who were commissioned by lords to praise and document male activities in a frequently male-dominated space — the court. The world of the skald certainly doesn't seem to have been a woman's domain.

The monastic world, at least within the walls of the monastery, can be similarly defined as masculine space. The choice of skaldic verse as a literary medium, then, may have had some significance for such an audience. It is perhaps not unreasonable to assume that most Icelanders, religious and secular, would have been familiar with, or at least known about, the literary tradition of skaldic verse both in its pagan heyday in the Viking Age and later as a popular medium for Christian subject matter. Medieval Icelanders must have been quite used to the association of matters skaldic and the masculine, even if they did not think of that association in these terms.

Although *Drápa af Martuigrát* is a late medieval skaldic composition, it exhibits a number of features of earlier skaldic verse which can be associated with men and their domain. Despite a lack of evidence for the identity of the poet, so uncharacteristic of early skaldic verse, it is probable that this *drápa*, like the majority of skaldic poems, was composed by a man. As the internal evidence suggests, it would seem that the poem was intended for male audiences and, if it was part of a monastic culture, it would have been delivered by a member of a monastery to his fellow monks. Like the select, and often elite, audience of court poetry, the audiences of this poem were also select as part of a monastic community. The poem's subject matter gives some indication of its place in a masculine world. It may have the apparition of the most famous female figure in Christianity as its main focus, but this very aspect of the text may well indicate its special place in the sphere of male religious experience.

Even the kennings of this poem illustrate a dominance of masculine referents. Although most of the poem is devoted to the Virgin and her appearance before Saint Augustine, there is a Christocentric tendency embedded in the language of the text. Out of a total of 110 kennings, just over half have male referents.<sup>6</sup> Fifty refer to Christ, as opposed to just 17 for His mother, four are bishop kennings referring to Augustine, three refer to God, four are man kennings, one refers to Moses, and the remainder is made up of kennings for angels, tears, the cross, the Ave Maria, the Holy Spirit and heaven.

Moreover, the Virgin's lament is itself Christocentric. Most of the poem focuses on Mary's account of the crucifixion and the events surrounding it. Both the *Passio* and the *Compassio* are of central concern as Mary details her Son's suffering together with her own. The *Passio* and the *Compassio* exist within the text as a dual theme which in many respects cannot be separated. Any mention of one necessarily implies the other and reinforces the Christocentricity of the account as a whole. Mary suffers because her Son suffers. According to her version of events, she endures sorrow *with* Him. She reports how her breast and shoulders bore the grief of it all, how she literally helped carry the cross by placing her hands under it, lost consciousness as if she were dead when her Son was nailed to the cross, and felt a sword pierce her own body when He was stabbed in the side.

As a skaldic lament poem, *Drápa af Mariuigrát* can be further associated with the male domain since it uses a poetic medium which was customarily reserved for male lamenters. According to Carol Clover, the lament in Old Icelandic poetry is of two types:

One is the fictional/legendary female lament, represented mainly in the so-called heroic elegies but also found here and there in other poems in the Eddic style. The other is the male lament of skaldic tradition, the so-called *erfíkvæði*, associated with historical persons and related to encomiastic tradition (1986, 153).

*Drápa af Martuigrát* does not sit comfortably in either of these varieties but rather combines features of both. The main difficulty is that this poem consists of a lamentation by an historical female figure (the Virgin), as opposed to an historical male figure, represented in the form of skaldic verse. In other words, it is a "male lament of the skaldic tradition" in a female voice. Like Augustine's regendered audiences, the female lament within this poem has been subtly "masculinised" through the use of skaldic verse

<sup>6</sup> This total consists of kennings and what I call 'kenning-like phrases' which structurally resemble kennings (with a *stofn* and *kenniord*) but which are often semantically less complex than most traditional kennings and are usually drawn from a stock of phrases and images common to Christian dogma and literature, such as *sonr guðs* and *móðir dróttins*.

form.

The choice of skaldic verse for the *Planctus Mariae*, rather than eddic, which would have been customary for a female lament, not only illustrates a conflict between gender and literary tradition but is also in keeping with the notion of guiding, or controlling, the expression of the only female figure in the Christian pantheon and indeed medieval women writers in general. Because the Virgin Mary is an historical figure and the subject of the lament (Christ) is also an historical figure, according to Christian convention, and because the *Planctus Mariae* is part of the encomiastic tradition of Christianity, skaldic poetry would appear to be a more "natural" choice of literary medium than eddic verse. The result, however, is that this particular female lamenter is given a male-style lament, which is part of a male dominated literary form, through which to speak. Her voice, though always female, is underscored by the "maleness" of the verse form and certainly by the general Christocentricity of the subject matter (namely, the crucifixion) and the kennings. Her voice is not muffled as such but it is kept within certain limits.

The image of the Virgin as restrained or restricted by God is evident in other aspects of medieval literature and art. For instance, the notion of almighty constraint on Mary's written expression can be seen in Botticelli's famous fifteenth-century painting *Madonna del Magnificat*, which has been commented on extensively in Susan Schibanoff's article on constructing the woman writer in early humanist Italy (1994). This painting depicts the Virgin with the Christ child on her lap literally surrounded by male representatives of God, all of whom function in one way or another to guide her writing, in effect to control the Virgin as a woman writer. While looking towards heaven for inspiration from God, with His mouth slightly ajar as though dictating, the Christ child guides His mother's hand as she writes her hymn of praise. Mary is also surrounded by five male angels one of whom is looking over, as if supervising, this act. Indeed, in a broader sense, Schibanoff has argued that this painting participated "in the widespread humanist rhetoric of impossibility that sought control over and eventually silenced most of the women writers the movement had fostered" (1994, 190).

I would suggest that many of the medieval literary and iconographic representations of the Virgin reflect to varying degrees a rhetoric of both male control over women and female dependence on men. The mere image of the motherhood of Mary, which is such a significant part of her general portrayal, whether she is presented as the mother with the Christ child in texts like the *Madonna del Magnificat* or the sorrowing mother in works like *Drápa af Marlugrát*, brings to my mind a mixture of related events, phrases, and concepts, such as the incarnation of Christ, the Biblical phrase "the word became flesh", and constructions of authorship, gender and the body.

It is not difficult to see God as a sort of ultimate author, as author - ity, with Christ as His text, and the Virgin as a type of quill or instrument through which the word becomes flesh and is written into humanity, Scripture and Christian dogma. Christ is literally written into her body. To use the terminology of Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury's introduction to *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, the Virgin's body becomes "a politically charged discursive construct, a representational space traversed in various ways by [and in Mary's case, I think, reflecting] socially based power relations" (1993, ix). Far from being an author herself, then, the Virgin becomes an instrument of divine authority. She takes on a unique, special, and significantly secondary position, one in which she is both controlled by and dependent on the male members of the pantheon. Just as such images of the motherhood of Mary can be read as depicting divine constraints on the Virgin's written expression, so the skaldic verse form works as a means of confining her speech.

It might be said that the figure of the Virgin conforms to behavioural modes of masculine hegemony as presented in Christian dogma and in various aspects of social fabric generally, especially in terms of male dominance and female dependence. A similarity can be drawn here between these concepts and the view put forth by Carol Clover that Old Icelandic society as represented in the extant literature was essentially made up of one gender based on masculine modes of behaviour (1993). The majority of women, who did not fit into this one gender, can be viewed as a type of other, a second, peripheral and comparatively powerless group of people including children and the elderly of both sexes. The Virgin Mary, who in some regards occupies a special place in heaven as, for instance, the unique Mother of God and a sympathetic mediator between mankind and God, is nonetheless a peripheral figure existing in a sort of otherness on the border of the masculine space of the Trinity. She is really no closer to a masculine powerbase than were most women presented in the medieval Icelandic material.

*Drápa af Mariugrát* exhibits a similar picture of the relationships between men and women. The central voice in the poem is made to conform to a masculine dominated literary medium. I would argue that this poem is essentially a men's text, part of what might be called "men's literature". It was probably written by a man for men, especially those who can be described as learned, on issues relating predominantly to male religious experience. The poem can be situated within a widespread sphere of male religiosity, of male devotion to the Virgin, of a particular relationship between men and the veneration of the Virgin Mother.

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