The complaynte of the louer of cryst Saynt mary Magdaleyn (London: Wynkyn de Worde, [1520?]; STC 17568)

The complaynte of the louer of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn is an anonymous, untitled poem of 94 stanzas, rhyming ababcc. Its colophon reads: ‘Here endeth the complaynte of the louer of cryst Saynt mary Magdaleyn. Enprynted at London in Fletestrete at the sygne of ye Sonne by Wynkyn de Worde.’ The STC suggests a publication date of 1520. It is printed on signatures A (lacking A1) and B (lacking B7–8) and appears to be divided into two parts by the blank page A8.

The poem is an imaginative, first-person recreation of Mary Magdalen’s distress on finding that Christ’s body is no longer in the tomb. She believes that it has been stolen and says that now that Jesus’ body, as well as his life, has been taken from her, she will die of grief. The poem is printed on the eve of the Reformation, but belongs firmly in the tradition of affective piety and the private devotion to the Passion which flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As Duffy states, in the late medieval period ‘the Bernardine tradition of affective meditation on the Passion, enriched and extended by the Franciscans, had become without any rival the central devotional activity of all seriously minded Christians’. ¹ Affective piety, visualised in the realistic Crucifixions of artists such as Cranach and Dürer or the violent suffering of Christ in the mystery plays, attempted to make the prayerful Christian imagine him or herself into the events of the Passion. The complaynte of the louer of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn imagines the Passion through the eyes of one who was actually present – Mary Magdalen – in order to aid the reader’s empathetic response to the scene.

The poem marries a devotional emphasis on empathetic suffering – detailing the events of the Passion, the seven sorrows of Mary, and the laments of Mary Magdalen – with secular complaint literature. The poet uses expressive endearments for Christ drawn from love poetry – such as ‘myne owne turtle true’ (sig. A2v) – to intensify the reader’s identification with the Magdalen’s devotion. Throughout the poem sacred and profane rub shoulders as the blandishments of love poetry share lines with fragments from the Vulgate Bible:

Therefore my derlynge (trahe me post te)
And let me not stonde here thus desolate
(Quia non est qui consoletur me).
(sig. B3v)

‘Trahe me post te’ is from the Song of Songs (1. 4), and ‘Quia non est qui consoletur me’ (Lamentations 1. 21) is from a section of the Old Testament used in the liturgy for Good Friday. The reworking of Lamentations known as the Improperia or Reproaches, in which Christ addresses his people during the Good Friday liturgy, has an early and extensive history in the Western Church. The Reproaches proved very popular outside the liturgy as well, and they are found in the mystery plays, the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, sermons, wall inscriptions, songs and numerous medieval lyrics.² George Herbert’s ‘The Sacrifice’ shows him to be intimately acquainted with the Improperia and the burden of this poem is the line ‘Was ever grief like mine?’ – a phrase from the Reproaches taken from Lamentations: ‘behold, and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow’ (1. 12). This phrase is spoken by Mary Magdalen at the end of The complaynte of the louer of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn: ‘Wherefore I may saye (O deus deus / Non est dolor sicut dolor meus)’ (sig. B4v). Mary likewise ends the poem with the words of Christ on the cross: ‘(In manus tuas) My spyryte I commende’ (sig. B6v). These identifications with the suffering Christ, which might seem to the modern ear to flirt with blasphemy, were intended to encourage the reader to enter likewise into the sufferings of Jesus on the cross.

². Rosamond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 32–34, 43–47. The availability of such texts to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers is detailed in an appendix (pp. 204–10).
⁴. For depictions of Christ’s tormentors as dogs see: Marrow, pp. 33, 36–39, 201, figs 3, 4, 6, 22, 25–27.
⁶. See, for example, the knight in The Knight of Curtesy and the Fair Lady of Faguell (1500) who sends his heart to his beloved, or Lisbettat who disinters her lover’s head and keeps it near her in a pot of basil in the fifth story of the fourth day in the Decameron.
⁷. See, for example, the subtle and lyrical weaving of secular and devotional themes in ‘The Corpus Christi Carol’; and, less artistically, a religious verse parody of ‘The Nutbrown Maid’: Here begyneth ye new notborune mayd vpon ye passion of Cryste (London: John Skot, 1535?; STC 14553.7).
⁸. See Shakespeare’s A Lover’s Complaint; Samuel Daniel’s The Complaint of Rosamond; and Thomas Lodge’s The Tragical Complaint of Elstred.
The first section of the poem is concerned with Mary’s lament at the loss of Jesus’ body. After this, stanzas 16 to 33 detail the torments of the Passion and the Magdalen’s intense suffering in beholding them. She describes how:

Than kneled I downe in paynes outrage  
Clypyng ye crosse within myn armes twayne  
His blode dystylled downe on my vysage  
My clothes eke the droppes began to steyne.

(sig. A4v)

This is one of the numerous images in the poem which come, not from the biblical description of the Crucifixion, but from medieval piety. These include the naming of the knight who pierces Christ’s side as ‘Longyous’ (sig. A5r); the enumeration of the seven sorrows of Mary (sigs B1v – B2r); the likening of Christ’s broken body to a ‘leprouse best’ (sig. A5r) and the stretching of Christ’s limbs to fit the cross so that his ‘Joyntes ryued / Partynge a sondre the flesshe fro the bone’ (sig. A5r). The rise in devotion to the suffering Christ in the late Middle Ages led to an inventive expansion of Passion imagery in which the simple formulas of earlier centuries were replaced by elaborately detailed descriptions drawn from an understanding of the literal fulfilment of Old Testament imagery. The Secret Passion, as it became known, was a response to the desire for fuller accounts of Christ’s death, to facilitate empathetic devotion to the details of his suffering. For example, in medieval passion narratives, Christ was often described as having been worried at by his tormentors, as by dogs, because Psalm 22 says ‘dogges haue compassed me’ (22. 16). This is another aspect of the secret passion found in The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn: ‘Lyke hell houndes they haue hym all to torne’ (sig. A4r).

One noticeable aspect of the poem is its virulent anti-Semitism. Unbiblically, and unlike in most comparable descriptions of the Passion, Christ’s tormentors are all Jewish – there is no mention of Roman soldiers. The poem describes Jesus’ sufferings solely as the result of Jewish malice and imputes the removal of his body to their ‘gylefull trechery’ (sig. A3v). Stanzas 34 to 40 return to reviling ‘ye Jewes worse than dogges’ (sig. A6r) because, not content with killing Jesus, they have now stolen his body. In a poem of more self-conscious artistry one might detect irony in using a self-evidently inaccurate idea (the stealing of Christ’s body) as the basis for the poem’s attack on Jews, but here one fears it is simply that the irrational basis of the hatred has not been perceived.

For the first fifteen and final twelve stanzas of the poem, the Magdalen expresses a grief so acute she expects to die of it. At the beginning of the poem she imagines ‘My bones shall rest here in this sepulcre’ (sig. A3r) and at the end of the poem she asks be buried in Christ’s sepulchre, with these words as her epigraph:

Here within resteth a gostely creature  
Crystes true louver mary Magdeleyn  
Whose herte for loue brast in peces tweyn.

(sig. B5r)

The image of the Magdalen buried with Christ is an echo of the heretical idea (which has surfaced in modern times in The Last Temptation of Christ and The Da Vinci Code) of Christ and Mary Magdalen as lovers. The idea of these lovers buried in the same tomb underlies Donne’s ‘The Relic’, which imagines a twin grave that – if opened in an age of ‘mis-devotion’ – might be believed to be that of Christ and Mary Magdalen. The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn allows an implicit suggestion of this scandalous idea, in order to strengthen the poem’s expression of the Magdalen’s spiritual love of Christ as desire for physical intimacy. This idea has, of course, a biblical precedent in the noli me tangere in which, in Mary Magdalen’s delight at the sight of her risen Lord she also tries to touch him (John 20. 17). In many medieval accounts she tries instead – in a more erotic and intimate vein – to kiss him, and this idea can be found as late as Gervase Markham’s Marie Magdalens lamentations (1601; STC 17569). This passionate side of Mary Magdalen’s relationship with Christ is dwelt on in The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn in which she describes him as her ‘paramoure’ (sig. A5r) and asks the women who visit her tomb as pilgrims to present Jesus, in the tradition of the parted lovers of romance, with her heart in the box of ointment, ‘in token of loue perpetuall’ (sig. B5r).

Southwell’s preface to his Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares (1591; STC 22950) contains a critique of secular love poetry, arguing that erotic love has become ‘the Idol to which both tongues and pennes doe sacrifice their ill bestowed labours’. Mary Magdalen’s love is likewise made part of a contemporary programme of rededicating secular poetic forms to sacred use by the anonymous author of The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn. It was a poetic idea which reached its apogee in the lyrics of George Herbert, but although The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn is an early and unpolished example of the genre, it exploits the possibilities of the cross-fertilisation between
sacred and secular poetry by playing with the expectations of the secular complaint form.

In stanzas 62 to 81 Mary complains that Jesus is keeping his distance from her, which weaves together the audience’s understanding that Jesus has indeed risen, and will indeed return to her, with the traditional terms of complaint literature. Women plainning about the unfaithfulness of a beloved are best known from their Elizabethan flowering, but the faithlessness of lovers was a popular subject for ballads throughout the sixteenth century – such as A Lovers complaint being forsaken of his loue (STC 5610.5) or the original of Desdemona’s Willow song. STC records one published at a similar time to The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn which interestingly shares the same rhyme-scheme: Here begynneth a complaynt of a dolorous Louver, upon sugred wordes & fayned countenaunce (London: Robert Wyer, [1531?]; STC 5608).

Secular female complaint about an absent lover would usually entail desertion and The complaynte of the louver of Cryst Saynt Mary Magdaleyn makes this idea into an undercurrent of the poem: ‘I se ryght well my lorde hath me forsake’ (sig. A3v). Mary Magdalen laments that Jesus has withdrawn his ‘noble dalyaunce’ (sig. B3v) from her and calls him her ‘hope of all honoure’ (sig. A2f) as if she were a deflowered maid desiring marriage. The parallel which is thus drawn with secular complaint adds depth to the poem because the reader knows that the very event which leads the Magdalen to believe she has been forsaken is in fact evidence that her lover has returned.

The Magdalen’s complaint that she has been forsaken glances at an understanding that Christ could be present if he willed it:

Now yet good lorde the I beseche and praye  
As thou reysed my broder Lazarus  
From deth to lyfe upon the .iii. daye  
Come agayne in body and soule precyous  
As greete a thynge mayst thou shewe unto us  
Of thy selfe by the power of thy god hede  
As thou dyde of hym lyenge in graue deed.  

(sig. B4r)

Lazarus was actually raised on the fourth day, not the third, and this is one of many allusions to the Resurrection which lies outside the poem itself. The poem begins, as it ends, with an echo of resurrection hope: Mary’s words ‘I wote not (ubi posuerunt eum[)]’ (sig. A2f) are, as the reader knows, spoken in the Bible to her risen Lord. Mary Magdalen’s sorrow is the affective centre of the poem, but the reader knows that she will be comforted, and so despite the fact that the poem ends in apparent despair, the reader is reminded of the hope that lies beyond its final lines.

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