

63. Lament of an Unwed Mother

Carmina Burana, 126

Earlier in this book we have seen humorous and moralistic stories based on the unplanned pregnancy of a Jewish woman who slept with a Christian. Behind such stories lay a starker reality since such events were socially catastrophic for the women involved. There are many Goliardic poems concerning both the joys and sorrows attendant upon falling in love. But the following poem is remarkable among them for the sensitivity it exhibits concerning one young unwed mother.

This poem is written in three-line verses of seven trochees. Note how the third line of each group often rhymes with other third lines, helping to bind the poem together.

- 1 Huc usque, me miseram,
rem bene celaveram,
et amavi callide.
- 2 Res mea tandem patuit,
nam venter intumuit,
partus instat gravide.
- 3 Hinc mater me verberat,
hinc pater improperat,
ambo tractant aspere.
- 4 Sola domi sedeo,
egredi non audeo,
nec inpalam ludere.
- 5 Cum foris egredior
a cunctis inspicio
quasi monstrum fuerim.

- 6 Cum vident hunc uterum,
alter pulsat alterum,
silent dum transierim.
- 7 Semper pulsant cubito,
me designant digito,
ac si mirum fecerim.
- 8 Nutibus me indicant,
dignam rogo iudicant,
quod semel peccaverim.

Notes and Vocabulary

- 1 **Huc usque:** "up until now"—**me miseram:** the acc. of exclamation—**celo**, (1), conceal, keep secret; note the force of the pluper., stressing that the days of concealment are over.—**callide**, skillfully, cleverly
- 2 **Res:** a euphemism for her condition—**venter**, -tris, *m.*, belly, womb—**intumesco**, -mescere, -muis, swell up—**partus**, -us, *m.*, the act of giving birth—**instat:** + *dat.*, "is at hand for"—**gravidus**, -a, -um, pregnant; supply **mihi**.
- 3 **Hinc:** "as a result"—**verbero**, (1), lash, beat—**impropero**, (1), reproach, chastise—**tracto**, (1), treat, handle—**aspere**, harshly, roughly
- 4 **inpalam:** in **ML** a single word; **CL** would simply use **palam**, "in public."—**ludere:** a telling phrase; she is still young enough to want to go out to play.
- 5 **foris**, outdoors, outside—**inspicio**, -ere, look at
- 6 **uterus**, -i, *m.*, womb—**pulso**, (1), here, "nudge"
- 7 **cubitum**, -i, *n.*, elbow—**designo**, (1), point out—**ac si:** "as if"—**mirus**, -a, -um, wondrous, miraculous
- 8 **nutus**, -us, *m.*, nod—**indicant:** here, "judge"—**rogus**, -i, *m.*, in **CL** a funeral pyre, but since cremation was forbidden by the Church, probably a pyre for capital punishment

- 9 Quid percurram singula?
Ego sum in fabula,
et in ore omnium.
- 10 Ex eo vim patior,
iam dolore morior,
semper sum in lacrimis.
- 11 Hoc dolorem cumulat,
quod amicus exsulat
propter illud paululum.
- 12 Ob patris saevitiam
recessit in Franciam
a finibus ultimis.
- 13 <Iam> sum in tristitia
de eius absentia,
in doloris cumulum.

Notes and Vocabulary

- 9 **percurro**, -ere, enumerate, run through—**singula**: “things one by one”; cf. Ovid *Amores* 1.5.23, **singula quid referam?**—**fabula**, -ae, f., the subject of common talk, gossip
- 10 **Ex eo**: “for this reason”—**vim**: best taken here as “physical attack/abuse”—**lacrima**, -ae, f., tear
- 11 **Hoc . . . quod . . .**: “The fact that heaps up my sorrow is that”—**cumulo**, (1), pile up—**exsulo**, (1), be an exile, live in banishment—**illud paululum**: “that little thing,” i.e., her pregnancy
- 12 **saevitia**, -ae, f., rage, cruelty—**recedo**, -cedere, -cessi, go away—**Francia**, -ae, f., France—**a finibus ultimis**: “at the ends of the earth”
- 13 **tristitia**, -ae, f., sadness—**in doloris cumulum**: despite the odd use of the acc., “in a heap of sorrow”

The World of Nature and Science

Animal Lore

Animals are an enormous presence in medieval literature. Many of us today live in urban areas where only a few animals have taken up a peaceful coexistence with humans and squirrels and pigeons stand in for “wildlife.” A nocturnal encounter with a raccoon or a possum at one’s garbage can is both rare and exciting. Such animals are not pets, but they are far from wild, being habituated to humans. Consider also a Sunday afternoon where parents take their children to concrete ponds to feed ducks or to zoos where they see exotic animals, to be sure, but do so in highly artificial contexts. In such urban areas the rare incursion of a truly wild animal as common as a deer or moose will cause great commotion.

Only those who today live in truly rural parts of the planet can begin to understand the interplay between animal and human that was an everyday part of the Middle Ages. Carrion birds flew into cities to feed at the refuse piles of tanners and butchers. Dogs ran howling through the forests, helping their masters track and kill deer and boars in the highly popular medieval hunt. The cat, far