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# "So vexed me the Pouztful maladie": public presentation of the private self in Hoccleve's My Compleinte and the Conpleynte Paramont

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"So vexed me the Proudful maladie": public presentation of the private self in Hoccleve's  
*My Compleinte* and the *Conpleynte Paramont*

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The scholarship surrounding the life and work of Thomas Hoccleve is relatively young and lean compared to the vast tomes of knowledge that have been circulated about the slightly older and vastly more popular Geoffrey Chaucer. Up until the second half of the 20th century, Hoccleve came through history with the unfortunate moniker of the "lesser Chaucer." What this insult neglects, however, is that Hoccleve was more than just a lowly clerk who spent his days admiring and emulating the so-called Father of English Literature. Thomas Hoccleve deserves recognition for conceiving and creating works that are impressive both in their form and in their content.

Hoccleve was born around the year 1367 - a year deduced from mentions of his age in *A Dialogue* - and became a clerk in the Office of the Privy Seal about 20 years later. Very little is known of Hoccleve's early personal life, but since the clerkship required knowledge of French and Latin, it is clear that he received an education. Though Hoccleve maintained his position as a clerk for upwards of thirty-five years, he did so reluctantly, hoping for a church benefice that never came; King Henry IV did, however, provide him with yearly annuities and other benefits. Hoccleve relied on noble patrons such as Duke Humphrey of Gloucester and Lady Hereford for work and composed many of his translations and original pieces at the request of these patrons<sup>1</sup>. Records indicate that when Hoccleve was in his 40s and 50s, he began to suffer from periods of madness that have been anachronistically characterized by modern psychologists as a form of bipolar/manic-depressive disorder<sup>2</sup>. While the validity of such pseudo-diagnosis in the dearth of hard medical evidence is too low to allow for an accurate understanding of the nature of Hoccleve's illness(es), scholars have effectively argued that the name of Hoccleve's illness is not so important as what

traces it left on Hoccleve's writing. Hoccleve's mental instability, whatever its source, resulted in writing that is characterized by a distinct tendency towards introspection.

Hoccleve's particular interest and skill in examining his internal experience comes through in one of his most widely-read poems: *My Complainte*, the first piece in the *Series*. However, it is clear that Hoccleve was preoccupied by both his own difficulty in understanding himself as a creature of his mind and of his environment, and by his desire to understand others. In his *Conpleynte Paramont*, Hoccleve takes on the voice of the Virgin Mary to examine how the battle between a private and public self have taken place within one of history's most famous women. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which Hoccleve uses the genre of complaint poetry to explore the relationship that governs the public presentation of one's innermost thoughts.

Hoccleve scholars in the past 50 years or so have picked up where the unkind history left off and I am deeply indebted to the work that has been written before me. Much of my understanding of Hoccleve's life, times, writing, and mental state has been drawn from scholars who are experts in the field. John A Burrow's work has been influential to Hoccleve studies in part because he served to correct the fallacious assumption that convention and autobiography are intrinsically irreconcilable<sup>3</sup>. It is largely because of Burrow, and the work that followed up on his<sup>4</sup>, that we are able to approach these complaints - one semi-autobiographical and one conventionally devotional - as comparable texts at all. Jeremy Tambling's indelible image of the faculties of Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker as "nomadic" beings has profoundly influenced my understanding of the permeability of Hoccleve's internal self and has allowed me to consider the effect of blurring the line between interiority and exteriority in both texts<sup>5</sup>.

Jennifer Bryan's work on Hoccleve's preoccupation with reconciling his private and public experiences has done the most to directly influence the shape of my own argument and I will similarly seek to examine the ways in which the speakers seek to find a balance between their private thoughts and the public presentation of these thoughts<sup>6</sup>. Though the influence that these and dozens of other scholars have had on the body of the essay may be oblique, they have all laid the foundation for my own understanding of the strengths and gaps in the current research.

While much has been written on the *Series*, precious little has been written that explicitly compares *My Complainte* and the *Conpleynte Paramont* as two surprisingly similar poems in the same genre. I suspect that few scholars have compared the two complaints because the *Series* creates a natural separation within Hoccleve's work. Scholars tend to focus on what is taking place narratively and stylistically either inside or outside of the *Series*, but it is less common to see scholars bridge the gap. For the purposes of this essay, the fact that *My Complainte* is semi-autobiographical and the *Conpleynte Paramont* is devotional is irrelevant. This essay aims to examine each complaint - the autobiographical and the devotional - on level ground in order to gain insight into Hoccleve's understanding of the genre as an avenue through which he may publicize his own very powerfully private thoughts.

The complaint is a complex literary genre that has fallen out of popularity since its peak in the late medieval period. The complaint can take on one or more of several directions - political, protest, satire, and religious - and can be conveyed in one of several modes: narrative, lyrics, ballad, drama, treatise, and letter. It is likely that the complaint arose out of a complex melding of troubadour genres such as *lament*, *chansons de geste*,

*salut*, and *planctus*<sup>7</sup>. The term *Complaint* may well have been used in place of both *planctus* and *lament* as the definitions overlapped and shifted<sup>8</sup>. The authors may have harnessed the power of complaint poetry as a means of conveying political or social ideas about divisive issues in a relatively non-confrontational manner. At the same time, the act of complaining is cathartic; the authors could very well have used the complaint as a way to think through and come to terms with difficult personal situations. In the case of Hoccleve's autobiographical *My Compleinte*, the speaker uses the genre as a way to express the desperation of someone who has been socially isolated yet seeks acceptance. Similarly, the *Conpleynte Paramont* details the Virgin Mary's attempt to locate a space for her private emotions in the public sphere. Though the two complaints are indeed very different, Hoccleve uses similar vocabulary, images, and arguments to elucidate the complexities of leading both an internal and external life.

### 1. *My Compleinte*: The Publicizing of the Private Self Through Autobiography

*My Compleinte* comes to the modern reader as the first poem in a group of original and translated pieces, collectively called the *Series*, that Hoccleve wrote around 1420. Through the *Series*, which is composed of three major verse pieces - *My Compleinte*, *A Dialogue*, *Lerne to Dye* - and several smaller verse and prose expositions, Hoccleve tells a semi- or pseudo-autobiographical narrative. The conflict at the heart of the *Series* is that the speaker has suffered from a bout of madness, has recovered from the illness "a Alle Halwemesse/ Was fue ȝeere" but remains on the periphery of society as a result of his inability to appear convincingly well<sup>9</sup>. The speaker, kept awake one dreary November night, is preoccupied by

his inability to be accepted by his community and thus writes out his formal complaint as a way of freeing his mind from his concerns. The next day, the speaker's friend pays a visit and, after hearing the speaker read the complaint, the two men have a dialogue about how the speaker can create written art that can convince the world of his sanity. The friends decide that it would be best for the speaker to write a religious piece that would please his patron Duke Humphrey of Gloucester while at the same time appeasing the speaker's need to create.

Even this most cursory overview of the content of the *Series* brings to the fore one of the most multi-faceted and intriguing questions that Hoccleve's writing suggests: what is the relationship between the speaker's personal, emotional, internal understanding of himself and the external space in which he moves? The *Series* is the creation of an author who very clearly had a profound investment in the inner workings of a person; it is likely that Hoccleve's bout of mental illness forced him to become more aware of his own internal cues and private state of mind. However, the madness also left him very vulnerable to the prejudice of his former friends and colleagues. Madness seems to have been a catalyst for Hoccleve and his speaker to examine the ways in which the external world can permeate and influence the internal.

At the broadest level of external influence, Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker is influenced by environmental factors; the weather both reflects and affects his internal emotional state. *My Complainte* opens grimly, with a vivid description of a dull season:

Aftir þat heruest inned had hise sheues,  
 And that the broun sesoun of Mihelmesse  
 Was come, and gan the trees robbe of her leues,

That grene had ben and in lusty freisshenesse,  
 And hem into colour of ¶elownesse  
 Had died and doun throwen vndirfoote,  
 That change sanke into myn herte roote<sup>10</sup>.

It is the end of November and the leaves have fallen and died. Just as the trees hunker down for a long, cold winter, so too does the heart-root of the speaker. This opening sets the tone for the poem by casting the melancholic emotional world of the speaker onto the environment and visa versa. In this way, the most personal emotional experiences of the speaker are correlated with the world around him.

The speaker further develops his relationship with the weather through the imagery that describes his mental state:

I sy wel, sithin I with siknesse last  
 Was scourgid, cloudy hath bene þe fauour  
 That shoon on me ful bri¶t in times past.  
 The sunne abated and þe dirke shour  
 Hilded doun ri¶t on me and in langour  
 Me made swymme... <sup>11</sup>.

Here, the imagery intensifies considerably in a brief five lines. The weather, and presumably the speaker's mental state, spirals from cloudy to hail to rain and despair so deep as to force the speaker to swim. The suggested threat of drowning in a flood poises the reader to sympathize with the very real fear and loss of control that the speaker experiences as his mental state declines.

The natural imagery continues to build throughout the poem and serves to transform the speaker's abstract feelings of sorrow and despair into tangible experiences. At the same time, the imagery raises the question of the relationship between the speaker's private and public worlds. The speaker describes his shame and fear in public situations by saying that it felt as though his "herte hadde be dippid in Pe brook,/ It weet and moist was ynow of my swoot,/ Wiche nowe was frosty colde, nowe firy hoot"<sup>12</sup>. This image is particularly interesting because describes the external world – the brook – directly affecting the most internal component of a being – the heart. Steven Harper notes that it is in this scene that the speaker is "tormented by...his sense of his body as an object in the world of others"<sup>13</sup>; Hoccleve's speaker fears the loss of control that comes with having the qualities and judgments of the wild, untamed external world infiltrate the internal.

Hoccleve's fascination with the body as an object in space also shows the complex interaction between the natural and the social worlds. Unlike in the genre of medieval romance, where the wild, natural world is often seen as an escape from the bindings of the social realm, Hoccleve's understanding of the relationship between the wild and the tame is that of constant interaction. The term *wilderness* is often understood in literature as a representation of, or reference to, a pure, unaltered, and natural state. The *wilderness* that is the natural environment is tied closely to the social concept of "wildenesse"<sup>14</sup>. Ironically, the label of "wildness" is not applied to the speaker as a result of any natural actions, but is instead thrust upon him by townspeople that deem his actions completely *unnatural*. The townspeople are terrified of the speaker's seemingly wild, uncontrollable movements and see him not as a pure creature of the world but as an untamed beast. The speaker describes the townspeople's impressions of his behavior by saying,

Men seiden I loked as a wilde steer,  
 And so my looke aboute I gan to throwe.  
 Min heed to hie, anothisr seide, I beer:  
 'Ful bukkissh is his brayn, wel may I trowe.'  
 ...  
 Chaunged had I my pas, somme seiden eke,  
 For here and there forþe stirte I as a roo,  
 Noon abood, noon areest, but al brainseke<sup>15</sup>.

Thus the natural environment and the sociocultural environment cross over and interact to form the speaker's understanding of what others think of him. The "and so" in line 120 signals that the speaker is directly affected by what his peers say about him: the men say he looks like a wild steer, and *as a result* he becomes more self-conscious and jumpy around people. The townspeople see the speaker as they see a wild steer, buck, or roe – as something wild, dangerous, other, and "sauage"<sup>16</sup>. The speaker has deviated from the domesticating norms of society and is therefore seen as a creature who cannot be trusted.

The impact that the speaker's sociocultural external world has on his internal sense of identity cannot be understated. When the speaker "with siknesse last/ Was scourged" his friends set out on pilgrimage in his name<sup>17</sup>. However, it does not take much time before all his friends leave him:

A rietous persone I was and forsake.  
 Min oolde frendshipe was al ouershake.  
 As seide is in þe sauter miȝt I sey,  
 'They þat me sy fledden away fro me.'

Forweten I was, al oute of mynde away,  
 As he þat deed was from hertis cherte<sup>18</sup>.

In addition to his problems with his friends, the speaker is plagued by decisions that come frequently to those living in populated areas: is it better to go out in public and risk confirming peoples' suspicions about oneself or to stay at home and allow unfounded rumors to spring up in one's absence? The speaker's extreme self-consciousness in social situations is evident in the following passage:

Thus thouwte I: 'A greet fool I am,  
 This pauyment adaies thus to bete,  
 And in and oute laboure faste and swete,  
 Wonderinge and heuinesse to purchase,  
 Sithen I stonde out of al fauour and grace.'

And thanne Þouwte I on þat othir side,  
 'If that I not be sen amonge þe prees,  
 Men deme wole that I myn heed hide,  
 And am werse than I am, it is no lees<sup>19</sup>.

In these two stanzas, one cannot help but grasp the desperation in the speaker's voice – he wants so badly to be seen as sane by his fellow Londoners but is so deeply unable to communicate effectively with them. The intense self-consciousness that the speaker feels with regards to others' opinions of him seems to perpetuate his mental anguish. Once his friends forsake him, the speaker begins to define himself and his identity in other people's

terms; his complex interpersonal relationships, or lack thereof, influence how he sees himself.

The speaker seems enthralled by the gossiping townspeople and cannot help but overhear what they are saying about him: "I leide an eere ay to as I by wente/And herde al"<sup>20</sup>. Since the speaker is so intently focused on what the townspeople are saying about him, his internal world is shaped by his interpretations of others' expectations. So long as the speaker continues to base his self-worth and sanity (or insanity) on the inferences that the outside world makes about his mental state, he will continue to see himself in the same ways the others do. Through his insecurity, the speaker makes the tacit but important point that a person's value as a sane member of society is not a decision that is theirs alone. The fact that the speaker believes himself to be well has little bearing on how other people react to him. He notes that though he has been the victim of many offences, he remains silent "leste þat men of me deme wolde, and sein,/ 'Se howe this man is fallen in aꝛein"<sup>21</sup>. The cyclicity in defining an identity based first on one's internal cues and then on one's societal cues troubles the speaker greatly.

The townspeople's reliance on physical "symptoms" to diagnose Hoccleve's madness leads not only to their own distrust of his claims and actions, but also to Hoccleve's inability to recognize and trust his own bodily cues. The heavy reliance on observable bodily traits in the recognition of madness does not come as a surprise to Harper; according to Harper, medieval madness was

regarded principally as a somatic affliction, the result of a malfunctioning of the brain of an imbalance of the humours. The symptoms of madness according to textbooks, were easily detectable. The maniac screamed and tore both his flesh and his clothes. The melancholic had a surplus of black bile and was therefore identifiable by his swarthy complexion. In short, insanity was visible<sup>22</sup>.

In a world where madness and mental illness were understood to be mapped onto one's physical attributes, the careful study of somatic afflictions or physical deviations from the norm was common. However, even when the speaker is personally confident that his illness has receded, the townspeople do not trust him and instead continue to map his actions onto their presumptions of his insanity; as a result of the distrust from his peers, the speaker begins to doubt himself as well.

The speaker is so caught up in what the townspeople think of him that he imagines what they would say about him even when he is alone in his house. As James Simpson noted, "paradoxically, this place of privacy [the speaker's home] is registered as being no defense against public scrutiny"<sup>23</sup> since the speaker defines himself not by his own terms - not by the quality of his mind - but by his ability to be accepted by his fellow Londoners. In his overly self-conscious state of mind, the speaker describes how he rushes to the mirror to see what the people are judging him by:

And in my chaumbre at home whanne þat I was  
 Mysilfe alone I in þis wise wrouȝt.  
 I streite vnto my mirrour and my glas,  
 To loke howe þat me of my chere þouȝt,  
 If any othir were it than it ouȝt,  
 Amendid it to my kunnyng and myȝt.  
 Many a saute made I to this mirrour,  
 Thinking, 'If þat I looke in þis manere  
 Amonge folke as I nowe do, noon errour  
 Of suspecte look may in my face appere'<sup>24</sup>.

While modern medicine asserts that mental illness does not necessarily mark its patients with physical manifestations, the speaker believes that citizens of London are able to judge the clarity of his mental state by observing his external countenance; he strives to see what they see. According to the speaker the strangers, acquaintances, and former colleagues he meets on the streets seem to want a label so badly that they take any deviation from the alleged behavioral norm as proof positive of madness. The mirror provides an opportunity for the reader to experience the speaker's internal state as he observes his physical appearance; through this scene, a relationship between the external world (or notions about the external world) and the internal world is illuminated. The speaker feels sane but unfairly ostracized by society and so he seeks to find his faults in the mirror; he imagines what the external world would say and then internalizes the externalized judgment that he created.

According to Jennifer Bryan, "[Hoccleve enacts] himself, bringing his interiority before the public through self-consciously assumed gestures and postures, constructing a persona all the more accurate, paradoxically, for its studied artifice"<sup>25</sup>. Thus, Hoccleve's speaker internalizes what he believes the townspeople to be saying and then ends up projecting just the same, perpetuating his anguish. Throughout the mirror scene, the speaker muses on the reliability of one's physical appearance as an indication of mental health and eventually comes to realize the "impossibility of gaining any objective knowledge"<sup>26</sup> about his appearance and his mental state. This insight leads the speaker to think about how, exactly, one can learn about the true workings of another human being.

In what is a pivotal moment in *My Complainte* as a narrative and in the speaker's personal journey, the speaker makes the assertion that "Many a doom is wrappid in the

myste./ Man by hise dedes and not by hise lookes/ Shal knowen be. As it is written in bookes”<sup>27</sup>. This statement urges the audience to question the differential reliability of sensory input. The speaker asks himself, and the audience, to think about the clout held by an initial, physical impression compared to a deeper understanding of someone’s interior dialogue. From this seemingly concrete observation, the speaker launches into an argument that is bigger and more abstract than his initial claim.

The speaker compares judging other men on their appearance to judging fruit on looks alone – in order to determine whether the fruit is sweet, one has to taste and find out. The speaker implores the questioning Londoners with the provocative statement: “As ¶it this day ther deemen many oon/ I am not wel, may, as I by hem goo,/ Taaste and assay if it be so or noo”<sup>28</sup>.The sensual implication here is that just as one must bite into and internalize a fruit to determine its worth, so too must people push past the metaphorical external skin of a fellow human and “taste” - ingest, internalize - the core components of the individual. This comparison suggests that in order to understand something (a fruit) or someone (an individual) one must internalize it. In this claim, the speaker investigates the connection between the internal and external worlds and shows how they must interact to form accurate representations of an experience. However, it also shows the confusion between what should remain external in human interactions (strangers’ negative comments) and what should be internalized (emotions, intentions, personality). Thus, the relationship between the internal and external worlds is implicit in human connection.

While it is abundantly clear that the speaker puts enormous pressure on himself to conform to what the townspeople expect him to be (in both deeds and looks), he does have his own thoughts as to the state of his mind. As Robyn Malo suggests, Hoccleve uses

penitential discourse as a means of organizing his “impulse to communicate his inner self with a wide audience”<sup>29</sup>. So that he can learn about this complicated inner self, Hoccleve personifies the speaker's illness and gives it intent: “Witnesse vppon the wilde infirmite/ Wiche þat I hadde, as many a man wel knewe,/ And wiche *me oute of my silfe* cast and threwe”<sup>30</sup>. This “wilde infirmite” has echoes of the animalistic, savage view of madness that the speaker was accused of earlier in the poem; it brings to mind an image of a sudden and vicious attacker preying upon a seemingly innocent victim. The involuntary expulsion of “me oute of my silfe,” not only victimizes the speaker, but also necessitates clarification of both “me” and “my silfe.” It is not typically assumed that one can be thrown out of one’s self, since the two components are usually seen as irrevocably tied. However, when taken in the context of the poem as a whole, “me” and “my silfe” seem to be but small parts in the more encompassing inner world of an individual. Hoccleve personifies his illness as a way to cast *it* out of himself and personifies the various faculties of his identity as a way to unify his sense of self. It is only when the illness has been cast out and the faculties have been brought together that the speaker will be able to truly claim a return to sanity.

The speaker describes his mental illness, this savage and brutal thing, as the feeling that “the substaunce of my memorie/ Wente to pleie as for a certein space”<sup>31</sup>. This whimsical and playful description of mental illness is markedly different from the violence of the image of the illness casting and throwing the speaker out of his self. While both images suggest that the speaker has lost control over the components of a coherent identity, the juxtaposition of violence and simplistic whimsy creates a complex picture of the medieval understanding of madness. The speaker distances himself from his memory,

essentially casting it out of his self, as a way to investigate the complicated internal-external relationship that can form even within a single individual.

In addition to the speaker personifying his illness in order to convey the violence with which appeared, he also personifies his Wit as the very thing that was overtaken. Wit was understood as the seat of thought, as consciousness, as disposition. Essentially, wit was the very fiber of a medieval person's being, the facet of identity that profoundly defined them. The first mention of wit comes from the speaker in his time of recovery, when he is thanking God for His "good and gracious reconsiliacioun," by saying, "My wit and I haue bene of suche acord/ As we were or the alteracioun/ Of it was"<sup>32</sup>. This sentiment is echoed several hundred lines later: "Debaat is nowe noon bitwixe me and my wit"<sup>33</sup>. These two instances suggest that the speaker and his wit are two entities that were once arguing but have since come to an agreement. The use of the word "debaat" further suggests that the speaker and his wit were not only separated from each other, but were in active opposition. The speaker builds upon the image of his wit as a separate entity by comparing it to a drunkard's, "buried in the cuppe", and to a pilgrim that "wente fer from home"<sup>34</sup>. The pilgrim imagery is especially interesting because of the parallel that it draws between the speaker's wit (an internal component of his identity) and the friends who went on pilgrimage for him (external influences on his identity). However, the pilgrimage of the wit leaves the speaker in a state of madness, indeed seems the *cause* of the madness, while the pilgrimage of the friends is an attempt to *cure* the madness.

While the speaker personifies the faculties of his identity in order to gain understanding of their function, he also personifies an abstraction that actually can, and certainly does, exist outside of his being: Reason. Not only is Reason an allegorical figure –

a convention often used in medieval literature – but it is also a being wholly outside of the speaker. In fact, the speaker has to read about Reason interacting with another woeful man in order to internalize the lessons: “¶it haue I cau¶t/ Sum of the doctrine by Resoun tau¶t/ To þe man”<sup>35</sup>. The speaker is able to cast off his melancholy and reconcile the disparate aspects of his identity only through reading about a man doing the same. This highlights once again the blurred, yet powerful, connection between the speaker’s external and internal worlds.

Just as the speaker must convince the townspeople that his sanity has returned, so too must he convince the reader that he is a reliable narrator of his own experience. Such convincing is especially challenging when the speaker makes such claims as “My spirites labouriden euer ful bisily/ To peinte countenance, chere and look”<sup>36</sup>. The speaker here has not only separated his spirits and his countenance from the rest of his identity, but also has set up a relationship of actor and person acted upon within his own being. The spirits here are the painters that are shaping the countenance to appear healthy and sane. Since *My Complainte* was allegedly written so the speaker could then read it out loud to his friend, and since the point of the *Series* is to show the process of a man using writing as a way to convey his return to sanity, the question of a reliable narrator is central. Hoccleve spends the *Series* essentially asking how one's internal world can be faithfully transferred to one's appearance or reception by society.

Countenance, or physical appearance, is perhaps the facet of identity that the speaker is most profoundly concerned about. It is in observing his outward appearance - the image that he projects onto the word - that the speaker recognizes a discrepancy between what he feels and what the people perceive. The speaker remarks on the fact that

his appearance and behavior is likened to that of wild animals by the townspeople, but there are other ways in which his physical being betrays him throughout the poem. *My Complaint* muses on the blurred connection between mental illness and physical disorganization and raises the question of whether one can accurately judge the soundness of someone's mind on the soundness of his or her body. Throughout the poem, the speaker attempts to convince the reader that though the townspeople do not think he has fully recovered, he has indeed returned to sanity.

This argument, however, is a bit contradictory; the speaker says that the townspeople should not be able to judge the sanity of his mind based on his physical appearance, yet he describes his madness and return to sanity in terms of losing control over certain physical faculties. The speaker, for example, claims to have "lost [his] tungen keie"<sup>37</sup> and is unable to answer the townspeople in ways that will assuage their fears of madness. The speaker rushes to the mirror to determine how the other people see him because he cannot be convinced that he conducts himself normally when he overhears people say such things as "[his] feet weren ay wauynge to and fro/ Whanne þat I stonde shulde and wiþ men talke"<sup>38</sup>. The townspeople's insults have so deeply affected the speaker that he is unable to believe internal cues as to how his body is behaving. Countenance is an example of the interaction between external conflict and internal conflict both playing a key role in the development, or the failure to develop, a successful identity. The townspeople see the speaker behave unusually, or convince themselves that he is behaving unusually so they can label him mad, the speaker begins to doubt his physical faculties, and therefore the speaker loses some of the regulation abilities that are necessary for proper behavior.

Ultimately, the speaker believes that his illness is rooted in the will of God, but that his perception of his negative reception in society perpetuates the disorder. In fact, in describing the degree of God's influence, the speaker asserts that, "[God] gaf me wit and he tooke it away"<sup>39</sup>. The suggestion that God both gave the speaker his wits and then called the wits on a pilgrimage, leaving the speaker in the throes of insanity, brings yet another tone of fatalism to the picture; the mental state of the speaker was, and is, out of his control. The speaker's ultimate lack of control is further illuminated when the wit returns but the speaker's friends are wary of the remission: "For thou that my wit were hoom come aȝein,/ Men wolde it not so vndirstonde or take"<sup>40</sup>. While the speaker may be glad that God has restored his wit to its proper place, there is still the nagging discomfort of the prospect that other people may not understand or believe that it has returned. Robyn Malo's interpretation of *My Complainte* as a penitential discourse focuses on the speaker's apparent need to "amende [his] sinful gouernaunce"<sup>41</sup> in order to create harmony between the speaker, his Wit, and God. The understanding that his mental health ultimately lies in the hands of God seems to bring relief to the poor, worried speaker. The speaker's reliance on God's will allows him to further externalize his illness to a degree that absolves him of responsibility for it, allowing him to focus on rationally rebuilding ties with his community. A similar arc of overwhelming internal emotion to public representation of the self presents itself in Hoccleve's complaint of the Virgin Mary. Mary, torn apart by grief at the foot of the cross, comes to realize that her duty as the mother of Christ is one that is dictated by God. Mary slowly, perhaps reluctantly, realizes that Christ did not leave her completely of his own volition, but instead had to die to absolve the people of their sins. When she realizes this, she is able to publicly share in the sorrow.

## 2. *Conpleynte Paramont*: The Process of Externalizing the Virgin Mary's Grief

Though Hoccleve's English Complaint of the Virgin Mary survives in only a handful of copies, the original poem that it translates and adapts - *Pèlerinage de l'âme* by Guillaume de Deguileville - survives in dozens of copies and editions, even when the field of inquiry is limited to extant copies that were available in 15th century England<sup>42</sup>. The task of thus narrowing down what, exactly, Hoccleve read and altered is great. For the purposes of this essay, it will suffice to say that though the work in the *Conpleynte Paramont* is not wholly original, it is in many ways a reflection of Hoccleve's personal biases.

That Hoccleve consciously chose to title his interpretation of Mary's experience at the crucifixion a *complaint* is crucial to the full understanding of the piece. Descriptions of Mary's personal crisis at the crucifixion are traditionally understood as *laments*. Though Nicolette Zeeman carefully argues that *complaint* and *lament* are two translations of the Latin genre of *planctus*, the fact that Hoccleve chose *complaint* as the title suggests intention<sup>43</sup>. Roger Ellis proposes that the final words in the complaint, "que Dieu pardoynt" is an indication that Lady Hereford, Hoccleve's patron at the time, died before he finished the translation<sup>44</sup>. Lady Hereford died in 1419, which would, in the absence of other evidence, suggest that the Hoccleve's translation of the *Conpleynte Paramont* may have been in the works around the same time as he was writing the *Series*<sup>45</sup>. Thus, though the genre of *complaint/lament/planctus* may have been inconsistently defined, I will argue that Hoccleve intentionally chose the title of *complaint* to further develop his understanding of this poem's relation to his autobiographical complaint.

The tradition of Marian laments stretches back to the Church of the 5th and 6th centuries, when Mary was confirmed to be the mother of God, though the genre does not begin to emerge as a poetic genre until the intense piety of the late fourteenth century. The lament as a poetic genre was heavily influenced by the literary, artistic, and devotional trends of the late-fourteenth century and modern laments continue to reference this cultural period<sup>46</sup>.

The rise of the lament of the Virgin coincided with the increasing popularity of the Pietà as an art form<sup>47</sup>. In an era where people were constantly exposed to statues and images of a sorrowful Virgin Mary holding her limp, dead son in her arms, they felt for her loss and for her sorrow. As Sarah Stanbury says, the Pietà is one of “many images of the Passion that systematically violate traditional boundaries between self and non-self, male and female [and] the Virgin’s gaze touches Christ’s body...coercing us to confront the spectacle of her act of looking”<sup>48</sup>. The power of Mary’s look, Stanbury explains, comes from the depth of this first love between mother and son. In a Marian lament written in the Christian tradition, this bond, this mother-son connection is the primary focus; even when the mourners are discussed, their pain seems to mirror the pain of the Virgin. The traditional lamenting Mary even implores the women she addresses to cry not for their own children, but for her son:

Than seyde Oure Lady bothe meke and myld

To all women: “Behold and se,

And make ye no mone for your chyld,

Of Godys sond if it dede be.

For if ye do, ye be not wyse

To se my sones as he lyghet here.

Now he is ded – lo, were he lyes.

For thi sone dyghd my dere son dere<sup>49</sup>.

Though the conventional Marian lament is inarguably effective at publicizing the Virgin's pain, Hoccleve likely draws on his own experience of self-reflection to personalize the convention. When read alongside Hoccleve's autobiographical complaint, the complaint of the Virgin is imbued with a sense of intimacy that traditional devotional laments may lack.

Much like Hoccleve's autobiographical complaint, the complaint of the Virgin is preoccupied by the problem of reconciling internal feelings and external pressures. The conflict of identity and expression that the Virgin Mary experiences in the *Conpleynte Paramont* is the result of, and is complicated by, her intimate relationship with perhaps the most public figure of all time. Mary struggles to find an acceptable way of dealing with her son's martyrdom; her pain is great and deeply personal, yet it is shared by the entire Christian community. Whereas Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker struggles to reconcile his internal and external selves to accurately portray himself, Mary attempts to situate both herself and Christ in a *realm* that is both internal (a world in which her pain, and her son, are completely hers) and external (Christ as the ultimate Christian martyr, Mary as just one of many thousands of mourners). Though the stories told in Hoccleve's two complaints are very different, the theme of a speaker struggling to define his- or herself in personal and public spheres remains constant.

As is typical of the late medieval *planctus Mariae*, Mary is portrayed as utterly inconsolable at the loss of her son in the name of mankind's salvation. As a result of her altered emotional state, Mary seems to break down and, like Hoccleve's speaker, begins to

dissociate pieces of her identity. "Poore Marie, thy wit is aweye," cries the Virgin, referring to both herself and her wit as other beings<sup>50</sup>. This realization directly relates to Hoccleve's speaker's claim that his wits deserted him, leaving him mad and stranded. Mary, in her grief, is unable to consolidate this component of her identity and is thus deeply troubled.

Mary continues to dissociate the components of her identity by removing the "I" from her own name: "Maria? Nay, but 'mara' I thee calle"<sup>51</sup>. This single line has a multiplicity of meanings. In the original poem by Deguilleville, "I" refers to the common manuscript abbreviation for "Ihesus"<sup>52</sup>. The Pieta-like bond between mother and son was so strong that Mary wore a piece of her son each day in her name. When Jesus Christ is torn from Mary's life, so too is his sign and memory torn from her name. Furthermore, the removal of the "I" in Maria results in the word "mara": bitterness<sup>53</sup>. The removal of Christ from Mary's life profoundly changes her personality and the way that she views herself.

Mary's bitterness at the foot of the Cross is so integral to her new identity as the mother of a martyr that it essentially takes the place of the reference to Christ in her name. The image of bitterness reappears several lines later as a testament to the profound change that has come over Mary as a result of her proximity to death: "This day therin fynde I a bittir taast,/ For now the taast I feele and the streynyng/ Of deeth"<sup>54</sup>. The concept of tasting, of bringing the external world inside to gain understanding of it, is just as crucial to the reading of the *Conpleynte Paramont* as it is to the reading of *My Compleinte*. Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker claims that determining an individual's worth is like tasting the sweetness of a fruit; indeed, he faces the change that came over himself in the time of madness by saying, "Wondirly bittir is my taast and sent"<sup>55</sup>. Mary is also given this characteristic of bitterness and seems eager to label herself as bitter even before anyone

else is able to make that claim of her. The implication of Mary as something that has gone bitter and less desirable as a result of the Passion suggests that her personal concept of herself is permeable to the outside world.

What impact the image of the Mary-mara change loses in translation from the original it gains in English due in part to the unmistakable meaning of "I" as the personal pronoun. In this sense, when Mary casts the "I" out of her name, she is casting her ability to be her own narrator out as well. Mary's concept of her personal identity, the sense of "I" as the most intimate means of conveying one's internal world, was once deeply tied to her external role as Mother of God. As a result of her son's death, Mary's private self has become a public entity and she has, presumably, lost the ability to have an interesting story in her own right<sup>56</sup>. Additionally, we recognize "mar" as an English verb meaning deface/disfigure/harm/break. In this sense, Christ's death has marred the Virgin, has made her not just bitter, but wounded. Mary, the marred "vessel of care and wo and sorwes alle" is broken and spilling her sorrow into the complaint<sup>57</sup>.

The image of Mary as a vessel that can be both full and empty underscores the role of her womb in the creation of Jesus Christ and complicates the idea of an interaction between the internal and external. The Immaculate Conception necessitated God - here an external force - to infiltrate literally the most personal space in Mary's spiritual and physical being in order to create new life. Christ, though not initially a natural part of Mary's being, was both physically and spiritually integral to Mary's understanding of herself and her duty. Mary then externalized Christ through birth, in a way both giving back a being that had been on loan to her and offering a completely new savior to the people. However, taking Christ and Mary as two separate beings both functioning in the

outer edges of the other's life ignores a powerful connection. Mary raised Christ out of her own body: "Hoolly of my blood, deer chyld, thow art"<sup>58</sup>. Not only is Christ holy, as a result of having God as his father, but he is truly *wholly* a product of Mary's faith, body, and love.

Thus Mary - who conceived, birthed, nourished, and raised Christ - literally had a piece of herself die on the cross. Mary laments further that Christ does not have a "fadir lyuyng/  
That wolde weepe and make waymentyng/ For Pat he hadde paart of thy persone"<sup>59</sup>.

Mary is alone in her grief, stranded without the necessary external support that a traditional, living husband/father could provide. It is therefore difficult to determine where the line gets drawn between Mary's internal self, her personal identity as *I*, as *Mary*, and the piece of herself that got externalized through Christ and then destroyed.

Mary's complaint focuses on the energy she devoted to raising Christ and Mary appears angry that it all seems to have been for naught: "Eek thee to sowke on my brestes yaf Y,/ Thee norisshyng fair and tendrely./Now thee fro me withdrawith bittir deeth/ And makith a wrongful disseuerance"<sup>60</sup>. Mary, the vessel of life-giving forces, poured herself into the creation of Christ. Upon his death, she poured out not sustaining nourishment, but "[Her] salte teeres"<sup>61</sup>. In wringing herself dry of all she can give to Christ, Mary finds herself "bareyn [of ioye]"<sup>62</sup>. Mary is not only barren of the joy and happiness that being the Mother of God provided her, but her womb, so robbed of the living fruit of its creation, is barren as well.

Amid the complex wordplay and multitude of meanings surrounding Mary's denouncement of her literal and figurative "I" is a deceptively complex conversation going on between Mary and...Mary:

O poore modir, whalt shalt thow now seye?

...

Now thow art frosty cold, now fyry hoot,  
 And right as Pat a ship or barge or boot  
 Among the wawes dryueth steereless,  
 So doost thow, woful womman, confortlees.

And of modir haast thow eek lost the style.

No more maist thow clept be by thy name.<sup>63</sup>

Here, Mary is talking to a part of herself and is describing the sorrows as they come to her. In a phrase that echoes Hoccleve's autobiographical descriptions of mental instability, Mary describes her emotions as, "thow art frosty cold, now fyry hoot." Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker adds another dimension to the feeling of now-hot-now-cold emotion by saying, "It weet and moist was ynow of my swoot,/ Wiche was nowe frosty colde, nowe firy hoot"<sup>64</sup>. These descriptions, in their obvious similarity, link Hoccleve's autobiographical speaker to Mary. Their pain, though borne of different circumstances, is a result of the same struggle between extremes: hot and cold, internal and external, private and public. Additionally, Mary tells the externalized piece of herself that she may no longer go by the name "mother," which had defined her and had been her heavenly calling for years. Mary's grief tears apart her sense of identity, leaving her without a son, without an "I," and without the title of "mother."

Mary's conflict between the interior and the exterior is further complicated by her desire to first hide and then display her martyred son's naked body. Mary expresses her need to cover Christ's body, to protect both the internal and external privacy of her son,

from the very moment he is brought into her world: "I had ioye entiere and also gladnesse/  
Whan þu betook him me to clothe and wrappe/ In mannes flesch"<sup>65</sup>. Mary clothes and  
proudly raises the Son of God, devoting herself to his care. This maternal drive to cover and  
care for her son does not leave Mary even as she weeps at the foot of the cross; Mary sees  
the naked and bloody body of Christ on the cross as shameful, as a disgrace. "I needes  
sterue moot syn I thee see/ Shamely nakid, streechid on a tree" Mary cries<sup>66</sup>. It pains Mary  
to see the wound in Christ's side when she is unable to heal it and she laments that the  
public can behold the torment:

Thyn hertes wownde shewith him so wyde  
Pat alle folk see ad beholde it may,  
So largeliche opned is thy syde.  
O wo is me, syn I nat may it hyde<sup>67</sup>.

However, the shame at Mary feels for her son's vulnerability in naked, uncovered, death  
gives way to a desire for the "sones of Adam" to "His blody stremes see now and  
beholde"<sup>68</sup>. At this point, Mary cedes her position as Christ's one and only protector and  
allows the sons of Adam to enter into her solemn reverie. Mary opens her personal grief to  
the public just as Christ's wounds open to reveal the warm human insides glistening within  
the Son of God.

This change in Mary suggests that she has resigned herself to her new station as the  
mother of a martyr. The grief that she experienced personally must be shared with the  
community and her son's wounds must bleed publicly. While Hoccleve's autobiographical  
speaker seeks to limit the influence that the external world has on his concept of his private

self once he allows for God's role in creating madness, Mary allows her role in society to supersede her grief and desire for privacy.

Ultimately, Thomas Hoccleve was able to harness the power of the medieval genre of complaint poetry as a way to examine the complexities of reconciling the internal, private world of an individual with the external, public sphere of life in the world. Through a careful examination of two of Hoccleve's complaints - one autobiographical and the other a translation of a conventional Marian lament - this essay has highlighted the ways in which Hoccleve conceptualized the relationship between the internal and external. Though Hoccleve has come down in history as one of the lesser poets groveling at the poetic feet of Chaucer, it is clear that the complexity, sensitivity, and believability that Hoccleve is able to convey in his work deserves praise in its own right. The intent of this essay is to bring the work of Hoccleve, so often left dusty and untouched on library shelves, out into the living, breathing, thinking external world of scholarship.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Burrow. 'Hoccleve, Thomas (c. 1347-1426).' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn Jan 2008, accessed 24 April 2015. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Medcalf. *The Later Middle Ages*. London: Methuen Press, 1981. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Burrow has made this, and similar claims in many of his essays and books including, famously, *Authors of the Middle Ages/ Thomas Hoccleve*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1994. This particular sentiment is drawn from Isabel Davis's book: *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Again referring to work such as Davis's, above.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Tambling. *Allegory and the Work of Melancholy: The Late Medieval and Shakespeare*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. Print. Also, noted in Davis (140).

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Bryan. *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008. Print. Also see: Jennifer Bryan. "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint." *PMLA* 117:5 (Oct 2002). 1172-1187. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Dean. "Chaucer's Complaint, a Genre Descended from the Heroides." *Comparative Literature* 19:1 (Winter, 1967): 1-27. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolette Zeeman. "The Theory of Passionate Song". *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature*. Ed. Christopher Cannon, Ed. Maura Nolan. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011. 231-51. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Lines 55-56. This, and all quotations drawn from *My Compleinte*, come from Roger Ellis's compilation: Hoccleve, Thomas. "1. My compleinte." *'My Compleinte' and Other Poems*. Ed. Roger Ellis. Exeter, UK: U of Exeter, 2001. 115-130. Print.

<sup>10</sup> *My Compleinte* (to be abbreviated *MC*) lines 1-7

<sup>11</sup> *MC* lines 22-27.

<sup>12</sup> *MC* lines 152-154

<sup>13</sup> Page 390. Stephen Harper. "By cowntyaunce it is not wist': Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint and the spectacularity of madness in the Middle Ages." *History of Psychiatry* 8:31 (1997): 387-394. Print.

<sup>14</sup> *MC* line 107

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<sup>15</sup> *MC* lines 119-129

<sup>16</sup> *MC* line 86

<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> *MC* lines 22-23

<sup>18</sup> *MC* lines 68-81

<sup>19</sup> *MC* lines 185-193

<sup>20</sup> *MC* lines 134-135

<sup>21</sup> *MC* lines 181-182

<sup>22</sup> Harper, page 388

<sup>23</sup> Page 24. James Simpson. "Madness and Texts: Hoccleve's Series," in *Chaucer and Fifteenth Century Poetry*, ed. by J. Boffey and J. Cowen. (Exeter: Short Run Press, 1991). Print.

<sup>24</sup> *MC* lines 155-163

<sup>25</sup> Page 1184. Jennifer Bryan. "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint."

<sup>26</sup> Harper, page 391

<sup>27</sup> *MC* lines 201-203

<sup>28</sup> *MC* lines 208-210

<sup>29</sup> Page 280. Robyn Malo. "Penitential Discourse in Hoccleve's *Series*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 277-305. Print.

<sup>30</sup> *MC* lines 40-42; emphasis is my own

<sup>31</sup> *MC* lines 50-51

<sup>32</sup> *MC* lines 58-62

<sup>33</sup> *MC* line 247

<sup>34</sup> *MC* lines 32-33

<sup>35</sup> *MC* lines 375-376

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<sup>36</sup> *MC* lines 148-149

<sup>37</sup> *MC* line 144

<sup>38</sup> *MC* lines 131-132

<sup>39</sup> *MC* line 400

<sup>40</sup> *MC* lines 64-65

<sup>41</sup> *MC* line 406, see also Malo's article above.

<sup>42</sup> Page 12. Roger Ellis's Introduction to "1. Conpleynte paramont: [*superlative complaint*]." *'My Compleinte' and Other Poems*. Ed. Roger Ellis. Exeter, UK: U of Exeter, 2001. 53-60. Print.

<sup>43</sup> Zeeman, page 138.

<sup>44</sup> Line 245. This, and all other quotations drawn from *Conpleynte Paramont*, come from Roger Ellis's compilation: 1. Conpleynte paramont: [*superlative complaint*]." *'My Compleinte' and Other Poems*. Ed. Roger Ellis. Exeter, UK: U of Exeter, 2001. 53-60. Print.

<sup>45</sup> Ellis, page 63.

<sup>46</sup> Introduction to "The Lament of Mary." *TEAMS Middle English Text Series*. Ed. George Shuffleton. University of Rochester, n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Stanbury. "The Virgin's Gaze: Spectacle and Transgression in Middle English Lyrics of the Passion." *PMLA* 106: 5 (Oct 1991): 1083-1093. Print.

<sup>48</sup> Stanbury. "The Virgin's Gaze"

<sup>49</sup> Lines 9-16. "The Lament of Mary." *TEAMS Middle English Text Series*. Ed. George Shuffleton. University of Rochester, n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.

<sup>50</sup> *Conpleynte Paramont* (to be abbreviated *CP*) line 217

<sup>51</sup> *CP* line 218

<sup>52</sup> Page 16, Ellis

<sup>53</sup> Page 192. Jennifer Bryan. *Looking Inward*.

<sup>54</sup> *CP* lines 213-215

<sup>55</sup> *MC* line 325

<sup>56</sup> Drawn from: Jennifer Bryan. *Looking Inward*

<sup>57</sup> *CP* line 220

<sup>58</sup> *CP* line 112

<sup>59</sup> *CP* line 102-104

<sup>60</sup> *CP* line 76-79

<sup>61</sup> *CP* line 72

<sup>62</sup> *CP* line 40

<sup>63</sup> *CP* lines 221-226

<sup>64</sup> *MC* lines 153-154

<sup>65</sup> *CP* lines 8-10

<sup>66</sup> *CP* lines 83-84

<sup>67</sup> *CP* lines 86-89

<sup>68</sup> *CP* line 232

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