

Lamenting or Demented?

The Psalmist-Subject of the Complaints and the Possession at Loudun

Fiona C. Black, Mount Allison University

In an effort to investigate the poetic contours of lament as a consequence of subjectivity, this essay reads the lamenting subject in the Complaint Psalms against the backdrop of Michel de Certeau's evaluations of the Ursuline nuns in the Possession at Loudun. The 17th-century nuns, possibly as part of a response to the major metaphysical crisis of a plague, began to exhibit signs of possession, and eventually an elaborate system of classification and exorcism developed around their illness. A major interest for Certeau, and for this essay is not, however, the actuality of demon possession, but the apparent creation, social control and management of alterity—in the nuns' case, madness—in the psalmist's case, (hysterical) lament. In the psalms, lamentation provides a means of articulating an alternative reality, one that has its own conventions and limitations. In this context, the lamenting utterance threatens to position the subject of the psalms as a place of siege; the subject fights to be heard above the din of "normality" and the rigours of divine expectation. Moreover, his body is a contested site for enemies and illness, among other afflictions. On the other hand, though, the ultimate act of confession at the end of the complaints threatens to undermine his existence, to make him vanish into that very context from which he initially differentiated himself as a speaking subject. The essay considers, therefore, the psalms' alternative reality as the locus of a balancing act between the subject's complicity and annihilation. This, in turn, is pondered within the context of poetic discourse, which might be viewed as an impulse to showcase—and manage—"possession".

Though much has been written on the individual psalms of lament (or complaint psalms),¹ both singly and as a corpus, the bodily act of *making lamentation* in the psalmic literary culture would still benefit from further investigation. By this I mean that the literary (formal) characteristics of these psalms have been intensely scrutinized by scholars, but the poetics of lament, specifically as it bears on the body and the subject who speaks the lament, remain cloudy.² Indeed, the complaints play out an intriguing dynamic around speaking, grief, and the body in pain, where in speaking and portraying his body, the lamenter is in effect in negotiation with his agency as subject. This paper explores that dynamic through a somewhat unconventional means. In an effort to investigate the poetic contours of lament as consequential to subjectivity, I read the lamenting subject in the complaint psalms against the backdrop of Michel de Certeau's evaluations of the Ursuline nuns in the *Possession at Loudun*. The commonality that I explore here is not possession (by demons) per se, but the apparent creation, social control and management of alterity that is at play in both the nuns' madness and the psalmist's lament.

So designated because of their formal characteristics, one might say that the complaint psalms are anatomically bound: their prescribed forms (pre)condition their identification. In addition, it

could be observed that the speaker of this type of psalm—the lamenter—is also subject to limitations of anatomy. Most literally, his anatomy is one of the causes of his complaint.³ On another level, what we might punningly call *figural* restrictions, limit and delimit the speaker. As scholars such as Robert Culley, Craig Broyles and Patrick Miller have shown, stock imagery illustrates the body in pain, or the body on the point of annihilation, or the threat to the body by enemies.⁴ These are not, it is held, typically evidence of particular realities, but merely wave in the general direction of distress, grief, and penitence. Their presence allows the lamenter a voice, but they neither illustrate his actual situation, nor provide concrete clues on how he might be released from it.

Most interestingly, these human and literary forms appear to resist their boundaries in the classifications of scholars. It hardly needs to be documented that for every psalm that exemplifies a lament, there is another that reveals exceptions to the rule. Scholars continue, even today when form criticism is not assumed to be the first recourse for psalm studies, to ponder a particular psalm's place in a given generic category. One could mention Harry Nasuti's "Plumbing the Depths: Genre Ambiguity and Theological Creativity in the Interpretation of Psalm 130" (2004) or Carleen Mandolfo's "Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response" (2007) as two recent examples. These endeavours speak to the lasting influence of genre in psalms scholarship particularly as much as they might to biblical critics' desires for systematisation and classification of these and other bodies of similar texts.⁵

Similarly, I detect another kind of resistance towards the laments' position in this generic class in readers' interpretations of specific parts of the psalms. Doubtless because of the influence of theological approaches (at least initially), scholars have traditionally taken the last word of the speaker in the complaints, the vow (together with its hymnic/thanksgiving elements), as a sign of Yahweh's enduring faithfulness to his people. Despite the deity's possible complicity in the speaker's current situation, Yahweh can be relied upon to furnish the afflicted one with rescue—even if only psychological. Today, form critical studies of the laments do not abound (excepting their vestiges in nomenclature), but their predilection for neatness, for an orderly completion does. This is true as much for literary judgments as for theological extrapolations from the texts. The desire to wrap things up neatly, to give the complainant his time, but to silence him tidily into a brief expression of hope (salvation, rescue)—a cue taken from the Psalms themselves, after all—still exists in criticism.⁶ And, if the reader does not especially align herself ideologically or literarily with the salvific ending, then considerable energy is spent on trying to come to terms with the "problem" of the sudden shift to praise in light of the primary focus of the psalm.

Then, in this *contestable* literary space, the lamenter's body is delineated. The speaker moves through his complaint making examples of his enemies, his isolation and his body.⁷ These are rhetorical texts, after all: the speaker must make every case that he can for Yahweh's hearing. Bones, mouths and skin make a frequent appearance, and though there is variation, the figures are remarkably similar: he is melting, dried out, on fire, etc. Recent work on these images, in fact, suggests that, as stock images, they have a compendial quality. Culley comments on the traditional nature of the laments, meaning that they share a body of material with which their audiences would have been familiar (1991). This means that an invocation of one of the relevant images would evoke the rest (though the particular contribution of each specific psalm is not meant to be ignored, in this analysis).

So, variously, the speaker of these psalms complains that his body is threatened by destruction and disease.⁸ It is as if it will dissolve at any moment. His bones melt (102:4), the body is wasted (32:4; cf 31:11), he is poured out like water (22:15). While the mouths of animals open menacingly at him (22:8, 14; 35:21), his own mouth/throat is parched (22; 16; 69:4), his tongue sticking to his palate (22:16). It is no wonder that the speaker bemoans that his days are numbered (102: 4, 12), or that he says he has been laid in the dust of death (22:16): on first appearance, his situation is, indeed, extreme, whatever the particularities of his afflictions might be. Enemies, too, are a threat to

the physical body: they wait to ensnare, to trap (31:5; 35:7, 8), but even mock and demoralize with their own bodies (opening wide their mouths, laughing, whispering, plotting etc.; cf particularly Pss. 22 and 35). And, when the speaker describes his isolation, it is as much the body as it is the soul that feels this distancing. "I have passed out of mind like one who is dead", the speaker moans, "I have become like a broken vessel" (31:13).⁹

Only—and here we see another aspect of psalmic resistance—the artifice of his complaint threatens to undo him as soon as he speaks. His cleaving tongue still utters a florid lament to a waiting audience; his melting bones still anchor his muscles to spring away from capture; his last breath still manages a final aria, despite the knife to the heart. He speaks, in fact, as one afraid of the plans of his enemies, or surrounded by them, in a past or future moment, but always from the safety of reflection (no matter how urgent) or retrospective. Does the artifice of his lament betray his relative security to the deity? If his words intend to compel, he cannot, it would appear, compel his body to perform completely the decay of which he complains.¹⁰ It is a case of almost, but not quite.

Moreover, the images he uses defy him: their abject qualities refuse stasis; they are the body *becoming* the un-body, the logical or rhetorical *extension* of his fear, but not his reality. They are always articulated in relation to the normal. And why, anyone who hears his lament would ask, are the tongue, the mouth, the heart and the bones the images of choice? Are they metonymic for the whole body? Or do they signify the actions that they perform (do they signify the parts that speak, feel and move)? Do they not ask us to weigh these parts against the rest as we evaluate what we hear? So sketchy are the body's tracings that the speaker must, in fact, rely on interpreters to finish this work for him: the body in lament, they would dutifully write, is an ill body, a body in distress. It is almost dead, or near enough to death to warrant relevant language, as Broyles explains (1989: 88). It needs the deity's attention, before it comes undone and before (as we might read between the lines) it is the undoing of the speaker.

Here, therefore, are bodies, literary and human, that can be perceived to stretch beyond the bounds of their descriptions. The literary form of the lament shows itself an uneasy companion to its prescribed parameters, not to mention its own content, and the body therein seems less than agreeable to the discipline to which its enemies or its owner would subject it. But, perhaps I am making unfair demands for consistency on the psalms. (Job calls out from his ash-pit that it is, after all, a poem. He explains, as he paints on another boil, that there is an art to the lament that readers who ask whether it really happened, or who attempt to classify, are missing.) Poetic licence, surely, buys the speaker a little liberty in his theatre of distress. Indeed, it might appear that to ask questions about genre, classification, effectiveness of body imagery and the like is to close oneself to the spirit or vision that is so very much at the heart of the process of lamentation. Such texts have affective qualities and designs, and affect cannot—should not—be measured in terms of consistency or degree.

We *are* speaking of poetics, though. Part of an investigation of the poetic contours of the complaints involves inquiring how the metaphors that are chosen fulfil the rhetorical requirements of their speakers, but also involves noticing when they sometimes exceed them. Hyperbolically or not, the body is bound up in the management of grief and the struggle for justice and liberation. If not the source of the complaint, it becomes the vocabulary of it, an abecedar of agony. And yet, the trouble with bodies (literary and corporeal), is that they are not easily disciplined in the ways that enemies or complainants expect.¹¹

If we are trying to elucidate the subject as speaker, a possible recourse to the imbalances just described is to not to try to reconcile them, but to explore the shifts and disproportions of body and text as emblematic, as signs of a flickering person on the margins of society (in his grief or pain) and a variable text, operating to express difference for the experience of life in the community. It could, thus, be said that the practice of lamentation reflects a struggle by the lamenter himself and/or

more globally by the tradition to manage what is different, what does not seem to fit. In this context, the lament takes on a predictable and recognizable format. In order to routinely explore difference, it would have to. The body, too, is discursively produced, subject to the “regulations” of both writing about and resolving that trauma. It becomes manipulated in such a way as to make that discourse the most effective—emotionally and poetically—that it can be. The speaker, himself a fictional entity, becomes “everyman”—the sufferer, the person of faith, the penitent seeking God. The psalms, in their perceived timelessness, are easily linked to a variety of narratives in Israel’s story, and eventually therefore translatable on to the context of a modern readership. This open-endedness or porousness may be circumstantial, but it is opportune: the imprecision or variability of the speaker’s physical person can be read as a cipher for his subjectivity, which is able to be aligned, maligned or confined as readers desire. This ability to make the subject shift about, it seems, makes the lament a unique and strange space indeed. It also makes it successful.

We might look at what is arguably one of the most impactful complaints, Psalm 22, in order to see this process at work. Whereas, as already discussed, the complaint psalms particularly employ the tropes of body and enemies to construct the lamentations, we see in this extended psalm that there is a concentration of both. So, the enemies, interchangeable as they are with animals, make mouths and shake their heads (7); they surround him (16); the psalmist speaks of their mouths (13, 21), their horns (21), their power (20) as being menacing and threatening. Enemies mock and call; they stare and gloat; they treat him as one who is already dead, dividing his clothing and taunting him to call on God for deliverance. The body, too, is at the heart of the speaker’s distress. It is decomposing before his very eyes. He can count his bones; his body is poured out like water; his mouth is dried up, so that his tongue sticks to his jaws. His hands and feet seem to be oddly afflicted, maybe pierced or shrivelled.¹² Perhaps it is the extremity of evocative statements such as the speaker is laid in the dust of death that make this psalm so effective.

It is very likely that intertexts also add to the psalm’s effectiveness. One can agree with LaCocque (1998: 189) that the process of lament is ongoing, picked up by another psalm as soon as the first ends. The presence of stereotyped or conventional language certainly also bears this out. Moreover, the speaker’s experience in Ps. 22 is decidedly Joban, in that it is hyperbolic, extreme. Then, even if one initially chooses to read the Psalm from a perspective that is other than biblical (Hebrew) and/or Jewish, the voices of the Christian afterlife of this text are so culturally pervasive and *loud* that they cannot easily be ignored. So, for many readers, the Psalm’s expression of grief and loss becomes even more vivid when it is applied to the actual and specific body of Jesus. The gospel writers were certainly convinced of the text’s applicability to Jesus’ experience: their accounts are styled so that the broken, dry-mouthed body who utters cries of abandonment and despair is here. Even his clothes are divided up by lot among his enemies (e.g. Mark 15: 34; Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:34; John 19: 24).

And yet, despite the observations of psalms scholars about stock imagery and phrasing, one cannot say that this or any other complaint psalm is so typical, so generic that it refuses a specific vision. To the contrary, each psalm offers a unique impression in its particular combination of the signs of distress. In the case of Ps. 22, there is a strangeness that predominates, despite its conventions or even its predictability. It is, in fact, so effective as a peculiar statement on distress that LaCocque has called it a *LI par excellence* (189).

The vision advanced by Ps. 22 is an alienating one. The concentration of animal and body imagery just discussed, rapidly alternating in the complaint, goes a long way to effecting that vision. It is compounded even further, though, by three striking contrasts that I find developed among them. These frame the speaker’s humanity and suffering as if they are fleeting or precarious—or, flickering, as I indicated above. To be sure, that much is true of the laments of many complaint psalms, because they intimate the very real possibility of the speaker’s ultimate demise. Here, though, the three contrasts suggest another kind of precariousness, one that threatens the speaker’s integrity as

a lamenting subject. They threaten to propel him into non-existence; to subsume him into what is animal, or, to state it more baldly, into what is other.

In v. 6, the speaker bemoans his loss of humanity: “I am a worm, not a man”. The statement is striking, in part because it appears to be unprecedented in the psalm so far. The speaker has been calling for help (vv. 1-2), and his cries are “answered” after a fashion by the cries of those who mock him. The mention of his wormy nature appears almost to function as some kind of explanation of his plight: the deity responds to those who cry out (vv. 4-5), but not to the speaker, for he apparently does not merit answer. He is not even human. In the perverse justice of the complaints, furthermore, those who scorn him might even appear to be justified in their mockery, so much so that he is othered now, and they represent the mainstream. For YHWH rescues the one in whom he delights (v. 8), and that is not, it is implied, the speaker. The first major juxtaposition of the psalm occurs precisely at this point, and it serves to elaborate the speaker’s precarious relation to his own humanity. Despite his precariousness as a human being, in the verses that follow (vv. 9-10), the speaker attempts to persuade the deity that what may be apparent to him and to his enemies is not true. After all, he reminds the deity, his birth and childhood were normal, generated by human beings, even divinely facilitated: YHWH is both midwife and surrogate parent for the (human) speaker. Which is it, then, to be, worm or man? So pitiable is the speaker’s situation that it prompts a crisis of an existential nature, begun here and carried on throughout the psalm.

The speaker’s cries and the torment of his enemies identify a second major contrast. The enemies “make mouths” at him, but physically, his own mouth is unable to convince the deity to act (vv. 1-3). He cannot or will not be heard. Perhaps it cannot even answer the charges of the enemies, for as we later learn (v. 15), it is parched. The opponents, though, are vociferous; they do not appear to have the problem of silence to impede their negative work; they urge the speaker to speak, though they seem to see that he cannot. Ironically then, the “speaker” of the psalm is speechless; the subject is without voice. To complicate matters further, enemies mock, shake heads and make mouths in their human guise, but the poet crosses the line easily to the animalistic; they also use their mouths in what is a more typical figuration of enemies—as beasts of prey (vv. 12-13). They open their mouths, roaring like lions. The dual images of animals encircling and threatening with open mouths are interspersed throughout the psalm. The overall impression is menacing and alienating.

Finally, since a major preoccupation of this poem is about speaking and being heard, it is not surprising that the mouth indicates a third major contrast that I read here. The speaker’s parched mouth includes a tongue that sticks to his jaws (v. 15). In fact, this contrast opens up a whole set of related images. The lack of liquid in the speaker’s mouth is unwelcome, since it prevents his speech, as we have seen. The mouth, however, is part of a general impression of desiccation, where the body’s bones can be counted (he is wasted away); and he is laid in the dust of death. And yet, despite this desert, the speaker also complains of its reverse. He is poured out like water (v. 14); there is excess fluidity of the joints and bones. They melt. His heart is like wax. The integrity of this body, then, is always under threat. It suffers from physical afflictions that occupy alternate ends of the spectrum of dissolution; either situation is unbearable.

Naturally, we are reading metaphors, so from them we do not take a literal description of disease, but an impression of distress—and serious distress at that. In all of this, a truly puzzling statement is poised potentially to encapsulate the three contrasts that I have just discussed. Literally reading “like a lion my hands and feet”, the phrase כָּאֵרִי יָדַי וּרְגְלֵי in v. 16 is translated as “my hands and feet are shrivelled” (NRSV) or, most frequently, “they (have) pierced my hands and feet” (following LXX: NKJV, NIV, ASV, RSV); or, in line with other leonine images, “like lions they maul my hands and feet” (NJPS); or most creatively, “[closing in on me] as if to hack off my hands and feet” (NJB). Commentators usually explain the puzzle as a textual/scrabal error, and emendations often follow.¹³ The imagery of piercing or cutting seems in keeping with the animal imagery, yet it is decidedly odd, even if we reject demands for literalness, striking the reader as something gone

amiss in the figurative stream of consciousness. After all, lions do not attack hands and feet; nor do they attack only with “hands” and feet—an oddity given the preponderance of mouth-related images of attacking animals). The statement also smacks heavily of Christian interpretation.¹⁴

One might, however, choose to read the puzzle *as* puzzle, meaning that its mixing of imagery and its mysterious nature might be taken not as a further or more extreme oddity in the symptoms of the psalmist’s distress, but as paradigmatic of them. They also might indicate something of the existential difficulty in which he appears to find himself. Rather than being incidental to it, the confounding image wraps up the case that the speaker makes on his own behalf (indeed, it comes almost at the end of the lament language in the psalm). Put another way, instead of being a grand summary that saves the best for last, the speaker saves the oddest for last. The mystery of hands and feet (shrivelled, desiccated, watery, melting) and lions (roaring, menacing, mouthing and, oddly, speaking) are peculiarly piled on top of each other, each image or reiteration building more strangeness as the pile grows. The mystery of hands and feet encapsulates the strangeness that the speaker experiences; it embodies the alienation of his body and his life. It is, in short, a kind of madness that the psalmist’s body and spirit perform, sometimes at his behest, sometimes despite his wishes; it is the utterance of strangeness in a sea of disconnected, but familiar statements about his distress. It is the mumbling of an individual quite at loss with his own humanity; the raving of a madman.

And now, thinking of strange places, some other bodies and texts about bodies make for an intriguing backdrop against which to view these psalms. Let us go forward quite a few hundred years (from the psalmist’s perspective) to the once sleepy town of Loudun, 1634. There, after a rather devastating plague, the townspeople became embroiled in a fantastical affair wherein a number of Ursuline nuns, spurred on by eager exorcists, vengeful families and their flamboyant and indomitable Prioress, Sr. Jeanne des Anges, became wildly possessed by a series of demons, reputedly invoked by none other than the curé of the local parish, Fr. Urbain Grandier. It might seem a *crazy* proposition, but the commonalities between the discourse around the possessions and the hysteria of the possessed women on the one hand and the madness of the lamenter and scholars’ attempts to contain it on the other, strike me as provocative. It might be that reading one in light of the other allows for some further investigation of some of the questions that I have been asking. The point is not to argue that the lamenter is demon-possessed, of course, but to see what the social and literary management of possession (alterity) has to say to the production of the lament in these psalms.

Certeau suggests throughout his study that the Loudun possessions are a result of a problem of nomination (*passim*): the seemingly ahistorical, sublinguistic or multi-linguistic realms of panic and possession evidence a failure of existing historical discourse. The possession—this one or any other—is not the root cause of the failure, but it is symptomatic of it. In other words, this crisis was surely coming with the dawn of early modernism, but the transition could only be experienced or articulated by more metaphysical means such as these. So, the symptoms of the women “bore witness to an ‘alteration’ of the human subject, which threatened in turn to contaminate the propriety of the social order” (Ahearne, 81-82). The response was to classify, to name and to systematize their experiences, which would “enable the exorcists to produce working simulacra of comprehension and order” (Ahearne, 81-82).¹⁵ The naming, of course, is not simply a matter of identifying the demons responsible (of allowing the subject an identity under which she would assume normality—*unpossession*), but identifying and interpreting bodily actions and behaviours as well. As Certeau remarks: “Therapy ... consists essentially in naming, in giving a name to what manifests itself as speech, but as an uncertain speech inseparable from disturbances, bodily gestures and cries” (1988: 247).

Naturally, it did not become just a case of a team of practitioners and politicians responding to this crisis of order, but it developed into a circular or spiralling series of events where both victims

and practitioners acted to respond to and perpetuate the crisis—for a variety of reasons. The only result could have been a rather climactic catharsis, which took the form of a violation of Grandier's body through torture and his subsequent death by fire.¹⁶ This crisis was not, in other words, ever able to be resolved by a series of successful exorcisms and a re-consecration of the convent. Then, what ultimately occurs is a transmuting of the chaos into one of a more comfortable kind. After the possessions cease, that is, after the death of Grandier, Sr. Jeanne suddenly becomes the channel for another kind of power in her possession of a sacred chemise on which a healing unguent never fades, and in her own hands, which begin to bear the names of the Mother of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. The notoriety of the convent and its sisters is forever maintained, but the social chaos it promulgated is resolved into something more manageable.

What interests me about this event is that a specialized language develops where the symptoms of strangeness are able to be interpreted, but are also in effect *produced* by this language. Certeau comments of the stories around possession generally that: "writing is haunted by the unstable *vision* which is both a *spirit* within the spectator and an *object* in front of him: there is a dangerous ambiguity between what the subject produces himself and what he perceives of the world" (1990: 110).¹⁷ In other words, the line between reality and fantasy is not obvious, but this does not actually matter, much.

The other intriguing aspect of Certeau's analysis is that the body which is so much a part of this presentation is frequently controlled and controllable, but just as frequently escapes the rigorous confines of what the exorcists/medics expect, and even what the energumens themselves anticipate. Most interesting for Certeau is that when the body does so, the possessed has the ability not only to resist the process of exorcism, but also to ridicule it and the exorcists along with it. This might take place by the silence of the possessed subject, a lapse back into consciousness, or a deviation from the expected behaviours of a particular demon. The result is an undermining of the process, which means that it has to be suspended, or taken up with another subject, or even another "professional" exorcist in order to keep this trajectory of the maintenance of order moving in the right direction.

The same irruptions of alterity take place by virtue of citation or quotation of the discourse of possession. When the words of a demon are conveyed to the witnesses, they are subject to a heavily regulated system of interpretation. But it is quite another matter when these become part of the official record. Certeau remarks that: "...what is cited is fragmented, used over again and patched together in a text. Therein it is altered. Yet in this position where it keeps nothing of its own, it remains capable, as in a dream, of bringing forth something uncanny: the surreptitious and altering power of the repressed" (1988:251). These potentialities are of course not so easily regulated. Ahearne explains that in them Certeau sees the "mark or wound of an alterity which threatens to undo the linguistic fabric in which it is cited" (84).

Are we, then, to drag the psalmist through time, kicking and screaming, into a convent in Loudun? And should he be exorcised, or merely consoled on account of his afflictions? Some of the implications of the nuns' possession—their madness (for, the lines between possession and mental illness, of course, become more visible only as history progresses)—for the psalms of lament are probably obvious. The faithful follower of Yahweh (or a community, depending on how we view the psalms functioning) engages in what I am going to assume is a traditional, that is, sanctioned and regulated method of articulating his grief or repentance. Within the confines of the genre, he gives voice to his experience, which is one which critics insist is not specific to his crisis, but symptomatic of it. Hebrew literary society—if I can presume such a thing for the Psalms—provides and regulates the tools or conventions in which this speaker might work, as well as the interpretive framework through which an audience or subsequent user of the text might understand it. Those tools include the enumeration of adversaries and body parts and, to make an analogy with the nuns, a

classification or categorization of them. Furthermore, this process exceeds, eventually, the biblical text and stretches into the interpretative tradition.

I am not, of course, simply pondering the presence of a social convention: that there is a vocabulary for lamentation, just as there is a vocabulary for possession, is clear and has been investigated by others before me (see above). The pressing issue is that both activities represent instability for the community in which they present themselves, and also for the subjects who experience or manifest them. Instability for those on the receiving end of these demons, moreover, is significant in that it threatens their very existence as subjects: their involvement in the process of exorcism and/or articulation of the lament puts them in a position where they must both find a way to be heard, and at the same time risk their own annihilation, simply because they speak.

The vocabulary that develops to articulate the lament has, as has been seen, an identifiable and dependable profile. As with the possessions, it both describes the speaker's experience—his time in the pit, as it were—but yet it also creates it. Language about the body, the enemies, or any other desolation is powerful. Take Psalm 22, for instance, with its initial cry of abandonment. What follows may well be the best example of lamentation, as I quoted LaCocque above (1998:189), yet, in its wild swings from assurance to despair, and in its vivid images of starvation, desolation and decay, is not the Psalm also filling in the colours of the picture as it is spoken? There is, as Certeau asserts (see above), “a dangerous ambiguity between what the subject produces himself and what he perceives of the world” (1990: 110).

The common denominator between the two cases, a demonstrable hysteria, is what provides the primary risk to those who are experiencing such “aberrations” from the outside. It is a risk that must be managed, and which might also be serendipitous, in that its packaging/marketing could be directed towards greater ends. What is especially obvious about the possessions at Loudun is the utilization of the sisters' cloistering, their spiritual experiences (which might have included doubts and objections) and their bodies to further religious and political ends. For the psalmist, might we speculate that, along with its abnormal physical posturings, the articulation of remorse or grief calls up what is not expected or desirable to his community (i.e., sin or death)? Would not protest (as Brueggemann has called it)¹⁸ be something, though allowable, that might place the protester on the margins, and indeed, himself and his family at risk?¹⁹ Like Certeau's madman in the square (1992: see esp. ch. 1), his ravings make him a compelling spectacle, but also function to ostracize him from the community. He cannot be dispensed with entirely, for society needs his alterity to convince itself of where its normal boundaries lie. So it is with Certeau's madman; he speaks alternately, an alternate or mystical truth that is truer than the most erudite of all speech.²⁰

In all of this, the speaker's body is played and displayed for maximum rhetorical effect, to be sure; and yet, it is also carefully managed. The speaker complains not of headaches or gut pains, or twisted, broken limbs, not only because he is generalizing, but also because he must figure his body in a way that is acceptable for lamentation (for society and the deity). The physical postures of the nuns were always dutifully recorded, but remain remarkably similar, from exorcism to exorcism, and from nun to nun. As I have already indicated, though, the body refuses the generalizations in some part, leaking here, melting there, burning this way and cleaving that, so that it irrupts the confines of the tidy lament and becomes quite ... other. And, the speaker cites the body, as do we, ostensibly delimiting it, but in reality allowing it to linger there, threatening its uncanny reprisals.

What, then, about the speaking subject? He appears to be a place of siege, fighting on the one hand to be heard above the din of normality, against the wagging tongues of his enemies and the witnesses to his hard luck. He positions himself as man-who-would-lament, but finds the tools wholly unsatisfactory. They fail to have their desired effect (if LaCoque's [1998: 189] observations about the endlessness of lamentation can be believed), and they trouble in their inaccuracy. His

voice utters the expected, and he wills his body to conform (a raspy throat here, a hand clutched at his heart there), yet it resists, contending with him to paint an altogether different picture.

Confession, which Certeau notes is central to the process of possession and its management, further complicates the siege. The classificatory system of the language of possession and its related exorcisms and confessions is subject to conflict and flux. Moreover, the “I” who confesses is unstable due to its impropriety. This is an impropriety that is both required by the community, but at the same time offends it. The confessor is marked as one on the outside, one to be avoided, one who is rightfully derided and threatened by those who oppose him. What is more to the point is that, naturally, the confessor aims his energies at resolution, at being in a place where he no longer requires the confessional, or the lament. He aims, therefore, to tidy his alterity into normality (and the censors urge this on, with their expectations of assurances of rescue and vows of praise). These impulses are undeniably natural, but they threaten to obliterate the psalmist-subject, making him a virtual other in what was once a context that gave him, at the very least, a voice.

ENDNOTES

¹ The more frequent generic designation in scholarship is LI or Lament of the Individual. I follow Culley and others who refer to these texts as complaints.

² To be sure, the lack (or opportunity) that I perceive in psalms scholarship has as much to do with the current shift away from form-critical readings as it does with more recent literary-critical trends, which also coalesce with issues of subjectivity and agency.

³ Though it is entirely plausible that the psalms might have been used by men and women in the community of faith, I write on the assumption that these were likely male-authored texts and, like most of the material in the Hebrew Bible, display logic that is andronormative.

⁴ Culley (1988, 1991, 1993); Broyles (1989); Miller (1986).

⁵ Indeed, without suitable alternatives, I find myself relying on the category in this present study. One wonders what psalm studies, especially literary ones, might look like without Gunkel.

⁶ Examples abound and are especially prevalent in commentaries, as one might anticipate. See, for instance, the following readings of Ps. 22, a psalm that I discuss in greater detail below: Anderson (“Psalm 22: God is Able to Deliver”), p. 184; Weiser (“The Psalm leads us down into the uttermost depths of suffering... then soars to the heights of a hymn of praise and thanksgiving”) p. 219; Knight (“Does God really forsake us?”), p. 106ff. But other studies of the psalms, for example literary ones, also make the same interpretive move, such as Culley’s study of the rescue patterns in the complaints (1991 in particular), and Patrick Miller’s chapter on the Complaints (1986). One could also note Villanueva’s book-length study of the problem (2008), whose strategy is to consider similar shifts from praise to lament, ultimately concluding that the relation between the two in Psalms and in extra-psalmic material is by no means straightforward. Indeed, readers would do well to reconsider the typical emphasis on praise in lament psalms. Perhaps the most extreme example, however, can be found in a recent article by H.G. Williamson, who, noting the disjoint between efforts to understand the place of the vow and the temporal logic of the speaker’s experience suggests instead that their true context might be what comes at the end: hence he advocates reading the psalms backwards, so that the suffering of the speaker is understood as retrospective. Or, to put it differently, he reads for the ending. Against these, the work of, for example, André LaCocque on Ps. 22, stands out in its insistence that the praise is part of—in the service of—the dynamics of the plea (1998, *passim*).

⁷ See Culley (1991) especially for this formulation.

⁸ I homogenize the speaker as a single person for ease of comparison. I do not make a judgment here on the specific identity of the speaker of individual psalms.

⁹ The examples I have chosen clearly illustrate Culley’s observations, for it seems that the psalms do not incorporate all themes at once, but seem to align themselves with particular issues, as with the enemies (Pss 31 and 35), or the physical body (Pss 22, 102). This does not mean that the other themes are ignored, but they may be downplayed in favour of others.

¹⁰ There is, to be sure, an issue of logic here (not to mention literalism). The psalmist clearly cannot complain if he is actually dead. My point is simply that the artifice of the psalms suggest staged performances rather than specific situations, as indeed others have argued in other directions with respect to the imagery (see above).

¹¹ Despite Foucault's evidence to the contrary in such influential studies as *Discipline and Punish*, it seems to me that the body's processes, once invoked in the service of rhetoric, sometimes act in unexpected ways, and are therefore able to exceed the terms in which they are set.

¹² This particular description is problematic (v. 16). See below for more details.

¹³ See Craigie (1983: 196) for a lengthy list of suggested possibilities.

¹⁴ Indeed, a quick search for the phrase on the internet reveals a lot of polemical material about the co-option or manipulation of the text by Christians.

¹⁵ Sarah Ferber explains that exorcism became dialectical in early modern France. In effect, it worked to respond to the changing religious climate, but also spurred on a fear of the devil in the collective consciousness when public displays of exorcisms were made. Naturally, the fear worked to increase the appetite (and opportunity) for more such displays, thus increasing the need for more order in the climate of the day ... Exorcism becomes a proving ground for ecclesiastical authority (3).

¹⁶ One does not want to suggest that Grandier's punishment fit the "crime", for what he experienced was certainly consistent with other ecclesiastical methods of his day, but it is interesting that the sentence is in fact a hyperbole of the constant corporeal violations of the nuns' bodies by demons and confessors.

¹⁷ Certeau is writing here of Callot's painting, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, attempting to show that in painting as in literature, the lines between the fantastic and the "real" are more blurry than we would like to imagine. The visual images serve to explicate the "hair-raising" visions of the Loudun possessions, among others.

¹⁸ Brueggemann (2003, *passim*).

¹⁹ Both madness and hysteria, as models, are apt in reflecting the speaker's (or energumen's) marginal status. For the women of the convent, the journey through their diagnosis, "illness" and "recovery" is viewable as a precursor to the later medicalization and management of hysteria in the 19th C. as a woman's "disease" with its requisite treatments. See Showalter's classic study (1985), Foucault (1988) and a more recent compendium for more recent treatment of the history of hysteria (Gilman *et al* 1993) for various histories of hysteria. Of course, one needs to be cautious in applying a clearly gendered phenomenon as a label to a putatively male figure of the psalms, but without co-opting the trauma of women's experiences, it is permissible, I think, and useful, to align this ostracized and marginalized figure—who is not explicitly gendered—with other marginalized figures from other times.

²⁰ I take my lead here from Certeau's study of mysticism, where "madness" has a particular social function and usefully exhibits for him the alterior speaking of mystics. This observation of his (and mine) is not meant, thus, as a judgment on mental illness, but rather the status of madness as social practice. I see lament as undertaking a similar function.

REFERENCES

Ahearne, J. 1995. *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Anderson, A.A. 1972. *Psalms*. Vol. 1. London: Oliphants.

Broyles, C. 1989. *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Brueggemann, W. 2003. Necessary conditions of a good loud lament. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (1): 19-49.

Brueggemann, W. 2001. Voice as counter to violence. *Calvin Theological Journal* 36: 22-33.

Brueggemann, W. 1986. The costly loss of lament. *JSOT* 36: 57-71.

Certeau, M. de. 1988. *The writing of history*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Certeau, M. de. 1990. *The possession at Loudun*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Certeau, M. de. 1992. *The mystic fable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Craigie, P. 1983. *Psalms 1-50*. WBC, 19. Waco: WordBooks.
- Culley, R.C. 1993. Psalm 102: A complaint with a difference. *Semeia* 62: 19-35.
- Culley, R.C. 1991. Psalm 3: Content, context and coherence. In *Text, Methode und Grammatik: Wolfgang Richter zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. W. Gross, et. al., 29-39. St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag.
- Ferber, S. 2004. *Demonic possession and exorcism in early modern France*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 1975. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Random House.
- Foucault, M. 1988. *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. London: Vintage.
- Gilman, Sander L., et. al., eds. 1993. *Hysteria beyond Freud*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Huxley, A. 1952. *The devils of Loudun*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Knight, G.A.F. 1982. *Psalms*. Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- LaCocque, A. 1998. Psalm 22. In *Thinking biblically: Exegetical and hermeneutical studies by André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur*. Trans. David Pellauer, 187-210. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Liettaer, H.; Corveleyn, J. 1995. Psychoanalytical interpretation of the demoniacal possession and the mystical development of Sister Jeanne des Anges from Loudun. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 5: 259-76.
- Mandolfo, C. 2007. Psalm 88 and the holocaust: Lament in search of a divine response. *BibInt*, 15: 151-70.
- Mandolfo, C. 2002. Finding their voices: Sanctioned subversion in Psalms of Lament. *Horizons of Biblical Theology* 24: 27-52.
- Miller, P. 1986. *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Nasuti, H. 2004. Plumbing the depths: genre ambiguity and theological creativity in the interpretation of Psalm 130. In *The Idea of biblical interpretation: Essays in honor of James L. Kugel*, eds. H. Najman and J. Newman, 95-124. Leiden: Brill.
- Rapley, R. 1998. *A case of witchcraft: The trial of Urbain Grandier*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Showalter, E. Hysteria, feminism and gender. In *Hysteria beyond Freud*, ed. S. Gilman, et. al., 286-344.
- Showalter, E. 1987. *The female malady: Women, madness and English culture, 1830-1890*. New York: Penguin.
- Villanueva, F. *The uncertainty of a hearing: The sudden change in mood in the Psalms of Lament*. SVT. Leiden: Brill.
- Weiser, A. 1962. *The Psalms*. OTL. London: SCM Press.
- Williamson, H.G.M. 2003. Reading the Lament Psalms backwards. In *A God so near: Essays on Old Testament theology in honor of Patrick D. Miller*, eds. B. Strawn and N. Bowen, 3-15. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)