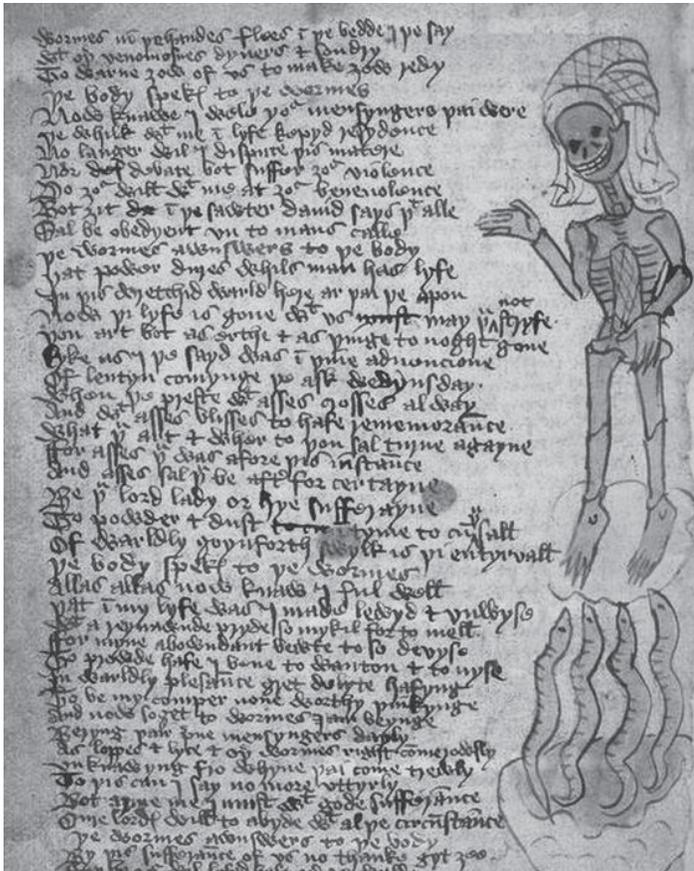


DEVOTION AND DECAY

Death in the Late Medieval Imagination

Medieval representations of death can illuminate how individuals conceptualised the experience. The poem “A Disputacione Betwyx The Body and Wormes” is a productive lens through which to consider contemporary notions of death and wider theological ideas such as the body-soul complex, as well as aiding our understanding of the reasons for the prevalence of the macabre in the late Middle Ages.

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A female skeleton and worms disputing (c. 15th century)
Source: British Library: The Middle Ages Manuscripts

Far from being a concern that was reserved for the end of one's life, one's death shaped and influenced the daily experience of late medieval individuals. Death, of course, was a far more prevalent part of the quotidian throughout the Middle Ages, but particularly so during the unrelenting waves of plague that hit Europe in the mid-fourteenth century and wiped out between a third and two-thirds of the population. One productive avenue into this topic is to consider the art forms of the period that frequently, and indeed prevalently, take death as their subject.

It is important to note, as argues Paul Binski, that the mass emergence of macabre images was not simply a by-product of post-pandemic European culture. Rather, one must ac-

knowledge that such images were equally constitutive of contemporary conceptions of death. To illustrate this, this article will consider several examples of a popular genre in late medieval England: the debate poem. Consequently, it will consider what the genre can reveal to scholars today, as well as how it informed its contemporary audiences, about popular understandings of death in England at this time. Of central focus will be “A Disputacione Betwyx The Body and Wormes.” This piece is narrated by an individual who has himself departed on a pilgrimage to escape the plague and is particularly interesting because it deviates from several of the key conventions of the medieval tradition of body and soul debate poetry.

This poetry commonly focuses upon, unsurprisingly, a conflict between the body and the soul. Having said this, “A Disputacione Betwyx The Body and Wormes” strays from this format somewhat, and this is one of the reasons the piece has received so much attention. Dated to circa 1460-70, the poem builds upon a very solid tradition of conceptualising death, and specifically the journey of corpse, through the debate form. Framed within a dream vision, the poem importantly diverges from several of the key formal and thematic qualities of typical body and soul debates. First, and exclusively, the corpse in question is female. So too, rather than centre upon the torture of the human soul at the moment of death, the poem inverts this and instead highlights the physical suffering of the body. In the original manuscript the text is surrounded by several unapologetically explicit images of the dead and decomposing body. The soul itself makes no appearance, neither within the poem nor in its accompanying illustrations.

Before moving on to a more thorough examination of “A Disputacione” and its forbears, it is first useful to discuss the potential audience of such poems and consequently gauge their intended purpose more accurately. Robert Ackerman looks to explain the enduring vogue of the form. He suggests that an unceasing morbid fascination with the charnel house may have been a superficial reason for it, but more fundamentally he establishes a link between body and soul debate poetry and the ever augmenting instructional responsibilities of clerics during the period. He suggests that such works should be seen as part of the much larger production

of popular religious texts that rendered “doctrinal pills more palatable.” If one conjectures that body and soul debate poetry was intended to induce repentance through the paralleling the decaying corpse to the individual’s corrupted soul, the absence of this dichotomy in “A Disputacione” is, on first appearance, a considerable one.

While it is always ultimately a case of speculation when trying to piece together the readership of a medieval text, Ackerman argues that “So active... were the composers, translators and copyists of the works on popular religion that it is difficult to imagine that many Englishmen of the late Middle Ages could have escaped their influence entirely.” Building upon this, if we assume that these poems were popular forms, but nevertheless firmly religious, it is somewhat surprising that in the case of “A Disputacione” the spiritual progression of the soul to Heaven or even any preparation for this transformation is wholly absent in the poem. In order to work to explicate this seeming anomaly, it is necessary to examine the key themes of “A Disputacione” and perform a comparative close analysis with several earlier poems, both debate and lyric, that use similar means to represent death and for a similar purpose.

Common to many poems about death is the more widespread medieval trope of *contemptus mundi*, the virtue of turning away from earthly possessions and pleasures in acknowledgement of their pointlessness upon one’s death. In other words, those items and life choices that are damaging to the soul and ultimately worthless at the point of death. The mid-thirteenth century six line lyric poem “Wen he Turuf Is Thi Tuur” exemplifies this well. It dauntingly asks:

The gold and silver is not sought by the Worms for their task, they only ask that they are left to complete this instinctual process.

This process of decomposition is a truly rancid one, so explain the Worms. As with the images that accompany the poem in its original manuscript, the imagery used to describe the rotting corpse is far from self-censoring. The worms describe the now senseless body to itself, informing the body that its “orrybyll flesche, rotyng & stynkyng” is only suitable for their consumption because they are unable to smell, see or taste its decayed state. The decomposing body would not have been an uncommon sight, or indeed sensory experience, for the medieval individual. It was, for example, common practice to exhume a body once it has reached the point of de-fleshing and then to store the remaining bones in a charnel house in order to maintain space in crowded grave yards. Resultantly, it is appropriate to regard the Worms’ references to the senses at this point as a meta-textual address to their audience as much as to the Body itself. Through this the audience becomes aware of, through the act of imagining the putridity of their own decomposition, and possibly drawing upon actual experience of human decay, the fragility and impermanence of their own body parts.

The Body’s fate is attributed to the sins it committed throughout its life. The body/soul dichotomy present in debate poetry is bridged in “A Disputacione” because the sins that it refers to are inextricably bound to the human form. The lady admits she was renowned for her pride, her beauty, her promiscuity and her self-indulgence; all of these negative qualities

“... through art, death can only ever be represented... The body’s fate is determined by its soul, inasmuch as the bodily experience depicted... does not end at the moment of death.”

Wen the turuf is this tuur
And thi put is thu bour,
Wat helpit the thenne
Al the worilde winne?

Towards the beginning of “A Disputacione,” the Worms address the Body about this very issue, and explain just why the Body’s riches are of no help now she is passed. They point out that: “For our labour we aske no maner of þing to fange -/ Gold, syyuer, ryches, ne no oper mede -/ Bot onely vs wormes on þe to fede.” Thus the natural process of decomposition upon death is shown to be very different to the optional monetary transactions that the Body has clearly engaged in frequently during her lifetime. Instead, the Worms indirectly criticise the worldly wealth the Body has accumulated because it loses all of its value to the Body when it dies.

sharing a notably corporeal basis. She is the first to describe these as “inwardly” directed qualities that brought about bodily “pleasance.” Wendy Matlock argues that this bodily focus is increasingly foregrounded by the specific characterisation of a female corpse. This is because she draws upon the socio-historical connection between femininity and carnality that is frequently asserted in medieval texts. I would suggest that the feminine characterisation of the corpse in “A Disputacione” does not, in and of itself, increase the sinful state, or the bodily basis of this sin, of the Body in question, but rather usefully draws attention to the connection of sin to the body. Indeed, at the close of the poem the Body claims to have learned her lesson and advises: “As scripture mention makes þe soth to declare;/ [W]erfore gode is to avoyde fleschly temptacone.”

Devotion and Decay

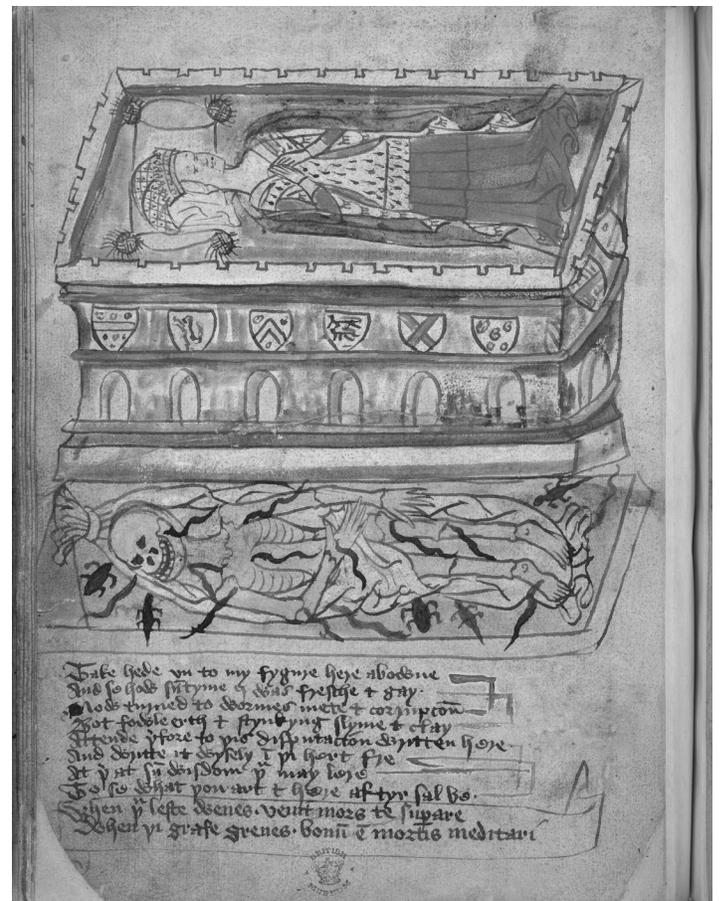
At this point it is useful to compare “A Disputacione” with another debate poem, known by its first line, “Als I lay in a winteris nyt.” This debate is primarily between a knight and his soul. The knight is bound for Hell. The Soul tells the knight in “Als I lay” that “nou3 is to late” to change his ways. Similarly, in “A Disputacione” the Body laments that “Allas, allas, now know I” only when it is too late, that her life of bodily sin has been misled. While it is too late to avoid punishment for both the Soul of “Als I lay” and the Soul-Body of “A Disputacione,” the option of redemption is present in both texts regardless of whether there is a demarcation between the body and soul. The closing lines of “Als I lay” are given to some Devils. Just prior to this the knight’s soul is brought to the mouth of Hell, the horror of which causes the Soul to repent and seek Christ’s mercy. It begs others do the same, although it is made clear it is too late for the knight himself. However, the Devils do praise Christ in gratitude because his good grace ultimately saves them “from mani a qued [wicked person].” For, “Neuere was sunne i-don so gret/ [W]at Cristes merci ne is wel more.” Thus while the knight’s soul will suffer torment in parallel to its body’s decay in the grave, while the physical process is continuous and irreversible, the soul will eventually be redeemed upon the Day of Judgement.

Contrastingly, the Soul-Body is resigned in its new position. She seeks to become neighbour to the worms, who she will rest with until her redemption. Allen Frantzen draws attention to the potential metaphorical usage of decay in didactic poetry. He argues that the “Soul repeatedly refers to decay because physical corruption serves as an image of moral corruption... decay is not simply the inevitable consequence of original sin.” Within the realm of this metaphor, the Body’s request to kiss the worms once again draws attention to the connection between bodily sin and physical deterioration. The flesh is impure and weak as a result of human sin prior to death as much as in result of it.

Augustine’s *The City of God* considers the relationship between the body and the soul and is a useful means by which to make sense of “A Disputacione.” Augustine imagines the human body prior to its inherently corrupted form, and determines that it was through the sinning of the soul, Original Sin, that the body became corrupted. He declares “For the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause of the first sin, but its punishment. And it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible.” Thus the body, lifeless without the soul, is understood as its natural inferior although it is equally impossible to “attribute to the flesh all the faults of a wicked life.” Therefore despite the soul’s instigation of the corruption of the human body, Augustine’s analysis illustrates how the body and soul have become, as a result of human practice, inextricably linked.

This leads us to reconsider the purpose of “A Disputacione” in relation to the other debate poetry that this paper has

discussed. Rather than attempting to induce repentance, as the medium most frequently intends to do elsewhere, “A Disputacione” guides its reader to accept the real experience of the body upon dying. This associates it with poetry concerned with *contemptus mundi* as much as the Christian doctrine of redemption. This is in keeping with the images that accompany the poem in its manuscript. For example, although an image of Christ on the Crucifix with a living man praying at his feet illustrates the poem on the folium at which the dream vision begins, this image is replaced thereafter on each leaf with the structurally equivalent repeated image of the corpse being eaten from below by the worms. At least for the illustrator, the soul’s redemption by Christ was not the central concern of the poem. Rather, the poem’s focus is on the human experience of death until their moment of redemption and attributes the bodily suffering at this stage to human sinfulness.



Drawing of a grave from a Carthusian miscellany of poems, chronicles and treatises (c. 15th century)
Source: British Library: *The Middle Ages Manuscripts*

At this point it is valuable to reiterate a straightforward but essential observation; through art death can only ever be represented. It is an imagined experience. Consequently, bodily experience is the only means through which to describe the suffering of the soul until it is redeemed. Therefore literary works concerning death such as “A Disputacione” need not necessarily be read as literal accounts of the processes of

death and redemption. It is the knight's soul in "Als I lay" that will suffer torment, yet it is described in terms of bodily pain as this is the only way to reflect such an internal ordeal via sensory means. The body's fate is determined by its soul, inasmuch as the bodily experience depicted in these poems does not end at the moment of death but rather when the soul alleviates the body of its status as the vehicle through which the soul can be understood. This allows for the reader or listener of the poem to more tangibly come to terms with their own eventual passing.

Therefore while "A Disputacione" closely aligns itself to respected theology and intellectual theory of the age, and can even be reasonably seen as having a didactic function for its audience, it is best understood as a creative form. This enables

and augments its instructional purpose. Its primary focus is upon the experience of the body after death, and draws attention to the parallels between the metaphorically decayed, fallen and sinful human and the physical decay of the body in the grave. Rather than avoid the relationship between it and the soul, the poem reveals the inherent connection between the two. Not only is the soul's path to redemption expressed in terms of bodily suffering in body and soul debate poetry, but "A Disputacione" also draws upon medieval lyrics about death that focus purely upon the physical nature of dying without mention of its theology. Just as all of the debate poetry of this genre centres upon the wholly fictional dramatic repartee between the body and the soul, so too does "A Disputacione" play with a very tangible, pressing reality in an effective fictive manner. 

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