

THEME, STYLE, AND STRUCTURE IN THE *DISPUTA DEL CUERPO E DEL ÁNIMA*

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Literary criticism has not been slow to recognise that out of the tortured apprehensions and anxieties of the latter Middle Ages, there was a sizable increase in the production of important works concerned with the themes of death and salvation¹. Indeed, as with most European cultures, long before the dawning of the Renaissance, this particular social phenomenon had already left an indelible imprint on the literary and philosophical development of late medieval Spain. The *Dança de la muerte*, for instance, depicts with near perfect symmetry the hand of death levelling each rank and class of society with equal zest; Jorge Manrique's *Coplas por la muerte de su padre* centre on the death of his father Rodrigo but ultimately demonstrate that even the most personal type of grief can have universally wide-ranging implications; and even Ferrant Sánchez Calavera's often forgotten *Dezir de las vanidades del mundo* is propelled forward by a recurrently touching aura of simplicity to conclude that just as the might of kings and emperors will eventually come to nothing, then so will the humble lives of brothers and sisters, poets and troubadours. In all of these great works the treatment of the themes of death and salvation is markedly different: each has a different point of departure, each a different emphasis, and each an entirely individual conclusion. What these works retain in common, however, is a willingness to demonstrate that if mankind, in its fallen state, can overcome its own essential debility and fulfil a valid and useful role within a Christian society, then beyond the immediate dread and consternation associated with death, there is a far greater glory to be awaited in paradise. In

¹ See in particular the excellent studies by Huizinga (1924), Boase (1972), and more specifically on the theme of death in Hispanic texts, that of Green (1968).

other words, that death, an event pushed into even sharper focus in this period by war, starvation, and the ravages of plague, is not the end of life but the beginning.

I should like to add something more to our understanding of this complex and often baffling period of Spanish literary history by drawing the reader's attention to another outstanding work; one which, although properly belonging to the same thematic category as the above texts, has more often than not been overlooked in their favour: namely the *Disputa del cuerpo e del ánima*². Looking principally at the areas of theme, style, and structure, I intend to discuss not merely the manner in which the poem functions as a literary text, but also, as in its more widely acknowledged contemporaries, the way in which it embodies the almost neurotic convictions of late medieval European philosophical views on the complexities of death and salvation. It is hoped that as a result this poem might receive a more favourable critical reception than it has been afforded in the past.

The *Disputa del cuerpo e del ánima*, like a great many other romance body-and-soul debates, begins by acquainting the reader with its narrator. In contrast, however, to our knowledge of the narrator of *Visión de Filiberto* (the Castilian prose debate from which this poem is in part derived), we learn almost nothing tangible about his background. In the first stanza, for instance, the only important detail to emerge is the fact that he is suffering from a bout of insomnia as he lays wide awake in his bed³:

Después de la primera hora pasada
en el mes de enero la noche primera
quatrocientos e veint, entrante la era⁴,

² The text is probably of the late XIVc. It is presented in MS Paris Bibl. Nac., f. esp 313, and MS Paris Bibl. Nac., f. esp 230, Kræmer (1956) labels these respectively P1 and P2.

³ I have made a number of slight textual emendations to the text of the *Disputa* as well as to those of the *Visión de Filiberto* and the *Tractado del cuerpo e dela ánima* (both of which are straight palaeographic transcriptions). These include the regularization of i/y, ç/c, and u/b/v, and the inclusion of punctuation and accentuation conforming to modern standards.

⁴ Eric von Kræmer, the editor of the only full edition of this poem argues that 'se conoce la fecha del poema anónimo por ser indicada en la primera estrofa de la obra' (1956: 5). In other words, the year 1420 of the Spanish era, or A.D. 1382. While I admit that this observation is plausible, I feel inclined to question Kræmer's judgement on two grounds. Firstly, there is the obvious possibility that the work is actually situated in the recent past, this date thus being a convenient literary fiction rather than a factual indication of when the poem was composed: this is something to which I shall return. Secondly, given that this date is present not only in the two manuscripts that contain this poem (P1 and P2), but also in the later E manuscript (which is a reworking of this poem called the *Revelación de un hermitaño*), then it is likely that only the first

estando acostado en una posada,
non pude dormir essa trasnochada; (Kræmer 1956: 40)

The narrator is evidently perplexed. Something is keeping him from sliding off into the blissful world of sleep, and as yet we are allowed only to guess what it might be. No discernible details, however, are on offer. In this respect then, as characterisation is deliberately kept to a minimum, it seems inevitable that we must interpret the narrator as something of an Everyman figure. He is an anybody or a nobody, whose insomnia is merely a convenient metaphor for a more profoundly-rooted mental agitation, and who in himself is a representation of the implied reader of this poem. What the cause of his uneasiness might as yet be is far from clear, but given the unusual precision and importance attached to the date of the poem, 1 January 1382 at one o'clock in the morning, there is perhaps an important clue. January, for instance, although not the first month of the year in the medieval calendar, is nonetheless the month of Janus, the two-headed Roman god whose dual countenance looks both forwards to the future and backwards to the past⁵. Furthermore, as we all know from experience, it is a bitter, cold, month in which leafless trees and heavy grey skies give an unending impression of death and sterility. It is, therefore, a portentous and ominous turning point in the seasonal cycle, a dark depressing time in the deep midwinter which looks, with equal flexibility, both forwards to the uncertain future and backwards to the lessons of the past. The time of the poem, then, is not merely a straight-forward setting of the scene, but an important aspect of the poem's imagery which ultimately reflects the emotional state of its narrator. In other words, then, the root of the narrator's agitation is the fact that like the world outside his window, he himself is at a crossroads, a junction, a turning point in the life-cycle, searching without success for a solution to his thoughts of mutability and change.

In spite of his emotional turmoil, the narrator does in fact manage eventually to fall asleep, collapsing wearily into a dream which lasts from the time of matins until daybreak:

vínome un sueño allá al maitino:
diré vos, señores, lo que me avino
fasta que pasó toda el alborada. (Kræmer 1956: 40)

of the manuscripts could have been written in that particular year. I do not, therefore, believe that this date can safely be taken as proof of the poem's date of composition.

⁵ For this observation I am indebted to Professor V. J. Scattergood.

In falling asleep after a bout of insomnia, in many ways the narrator of this poem resembles that of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, a figure who after having searched in vain for a remedy for his overpowering sense of grief, proceeds to fall into a deep sleep where, in the dream that he subsequently experiences, he finds a more lasting solution to his problems⁶. In this poem, of course, the principal emotion felt by the narrator is not so much grief, but a difficulty in coming to terms with mortality and salvation. The comparison, nonetheless, is highly informative, for it clearly expresses an important characteristic of the widely-held medieval belief that in dreams the subconscious mind comes to terms with the difficult realities that have been encountered through everyday experience. In another of Chaucer's poems, *The Parliament of Fowls*, this belief is described succinctly:

The wery huntere, slepyng in his bed,
 To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon;
 The juge dremeth how his ples been sped;
 The cartere dremeth how his cart is gon;
 The riche, of gold; the knyght fyght with his fon;
 The syke met he drynketh of the tonne
 The lovere met he hath his lady wonne. (Benson 1987: 386)

Unhampered by its waking perceptions the subconscious mind thus revisits the territory previously covered only by the rational, conscious self. In the *Disputa* this belief can also be detected, for in subsequently dreaming about the separation of a body and soul after death, the narrator's struggle to come to terms with the challenges posed by the afterlife can be seen to be carried structurally from the first words of the poem, through to its conclusion. Writing on English dream-debates, Conlee sums up this structural technique with an admirable precision, 'in the introductory frame the narrator manifests fears or anxieties which have led him to a precarious emotional condition. His troubled state of mind may stem from his uncertainties about love, or *from his fears concerning death and its aftermath*, or from other causes, but regardless of the specific cause, he falls asleep with an uneasy mind' (1991: xxx, italics mine).

⁶ The late-fourteenth-century English poem *Pearl* is also similar in a number of respects. The narrator, for instance, is troubled by the death of his daughter, his 'pearl'. He goes to the place where she lies, and then, in a state of grief, falls asleep. In the dream that follows he meets his daughter once again, and though her comments on Christian salvation are not easy for the dreamer to take at first, on waking he feels that he has achieved a greater reconciliation between the emotional bonds that he felt for her and his knowledge of the inevitability of death and salvation. Though the insomnia motif is not as developed as it is either in the *Disputa* or in the *Book of the Duchess*, I believe that the text of *Pearl* provides some illuminating correspondences.

In the following stanza the narrator begins to describe the specific details of his dream. First of all he finds himself in a dark, isolated valley full of flowers, and as much as though he would like to escape, he can not locate a way out:

En un valle fondo, oscuro, apartado,
 espeso de xaras soñé que andaba
 buscando salida e non la fallaba. (Kræmer 1956: 40)

Once again, just as the date of the poem functions as a metaphor from which to infer specific details about the emotional state of the poem's narrator, here in this description of the valley there is another example of the narrator's emotions being externalised upon the landscape. As the valley is inescapable, for instance, so is fear of mortality, and just as it is dark and intangible, so the narrator's understanding of the complexities of human salvation is in urgent need of clarification. The dream which follows, therefore, is more than just a convenient narrative device, it is a means with which to communicate a series of answers to some difficult questions. In this respect it is, to a large extent, easy to understand how the medieval imagination often came to believe that the content of dreams was particularly authoritative, for beyond all the initial confusion created by the spectacular and the impossible, there is a clear, and often didactic, message for the rational mind to consider. In religious dream-visions, as indeed it is here, this central moral instruction is inseparable from the form of the poem itself. The possibilities that this affords must have been particularly appealing to Christian poets, for as Hieatt notes: 'it does not seem surprising that the dream was considered by a great many poets to be a highly suitable vehicle for religious teaching. It was used throughout the Middle Ages for material that was didactic or supernatural. The dream convention leads to a sort of authority, and authority was dear to the medieval public' (1967: 20).

Before the debate begins, however, there are two further developments. Firstly, in his thwarted attempts to escape the valley, the narrator eventually stumbles across the rotting corpse of a man lying on the ground:

Topé con un cuerpo que estaba finado;
 olía muy mal, seía finchado,
 los ojos quebrados, la faz denegrida,
 la boca abierta, la barba caída,
 de muchos gusanos bien aconpañado. (Kræmer 1956: 40)

In an advanced state of decomposition this corpse is designed not so much to symbolise death as such in an abstract sense, nor even a type of *memento mori*, but more the fact that if a man is corrupt during life then the cumulative value of his sins will lead to death and the eventual putrefaction of his body. This may sound strange from a twentieth-century perspective, where we take it for granted that a dead body will decay unless treated, but as Cohen perceptively notes in connection with the late medieval explosion of interest in *transi* imagery, 'death and corruption are not natural processes, but are the result and punishment for sin; the corollary to this belief is found in the many legends of exhumed bodies of saints discovered to be completely uncorrupted and sweet-smelling, undoubtedly reflecting the words of Psalm 16:10 «Thou wilt not suffer thy Holy One to see corruption»' (1973: 23). This body then, is at one and the same time both a symbol of the fate of the sinful, and yet another physical manifestation of the narrator's anxiety over mortality and salvation. In fact, given that the only detail we learn about the corpse is that it is male, it may not be too much to imagine that in the symbolic world of his dream, the narrator may actually be looking at a future projection of himself. This is certainly not a possibility that can be dismissed lightly, for as Hieatt explains, 'the dream-setting is [...] used as a setting where the unreal and the imaginative, because they are possible, can not be judged by the standards of waking reality. It is a device to lend credence to the marvellous' (1967: 20).

Having unexpectedly encountered this rotting body, in the following stanzas the narrator meets even greater marvels, for his attention is suddenly caught by the arrival of a white bird:

Mirando aquel cuerpo de chica valor,
oí una voz aguda muy fiera.
Alçé los mis ojos por ver quién era:
vi venir un ave de blanca color,
deziendo contra el cuerpo: «Ereje traidor,
del mal que feziste si eras represado,
por tu vana gloria e muy poco seso
jamás nel infierno vivirá en dolor».

Asentose queda a su cabecera
e anduvo el cuerpo todo enderredor
batiendo las alas con muy gran temor,
faziendo llanto de estraña manera,
deziendo cuitada: «¡Commo soy señera,
non fallo lugar do pueda guarir!
Escuro fue el día que ove a venir
a ser tu cercana e tu compañera». (Kræmer 1956: 41)

Like the rotting corpse, the entrance of the bird introduces yet another symbolic dimension into the poem, for in a tradition which almost certainly antedates the advent of Christianity, the bird is a symbol of the dead body's soul⁷. Though this image is a common one in the earlier Middle Ages, appearing for instance in Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* («Vidieron palombiellas essir de so la mar, / más blancas qe las nieves contra'l cielo volar; / credién qe eran almas qe querié Dios levar / al sancto Paraíso, un glorioso logar» [Dutton 1971: 179]), in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it becomes more frequently associated with the souls of the damned. This is particularly true within the body-and-soul tradition, for in being released from hell each seventh night to wander the earth until the first cockcrow, the bird form is obviously a more effective means with which to represent the idea of a soul's journey⁸. In this respect then, the narrator has stumbled across not merely a rotting body, but also its damned soul: the results of an evil and sinful life and the guarantee of an eternity in hell are thus directly in front of him. It is entirely in his hands, therefore, whether he makes either one of two natural connections. Firstly that a potential answer to his intellectual wrangle over death and salvation is now in front of him, and secondly that should he not himself reform, he might too suffer a similar fate. Probably there is an even higher dimension than this, for given the narrator's lack of characterisation, the more fundamental message at this point of the poem is that the narrator might well be you. We must all attempt, therefore, like the narrator, to understand what is happening before it is too late.

Having begun its criticism of the body with a couple of strong invectives, in the fifth stanza the soul settles into a more sustained attack. It commences its assault by censuring the body for its spiritual failings:

Bien sabes tú, el mi mal amigo,
que por tus errores e tu mal usar
pecaste e feziste a muchos pecar,
de lo qual represo ser non quesiste,
e aún penitencia jamás non oviste

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the survival of this folkloric belief, see Armstrong (1958: 211).

⁸ At the beginning of the following stanza there is, perhaps, an echo of this folkloric belief: 'En tanto que puedo agora aquí estar / quiero fablar un poco contigo' (Kræmer 1956: 41). In a number of other works within the body-and-soul corpus this theme is developed more noticeably. In the Anglo-Saxon *Soul & Body*, for instance, the soul states that: 'sy(m)le ymb seofan niht; sawle findan / þone lichoman þe heo ær longe wæg / þreo hund wintra butan ær <þeodcýning>, / ælmihtig god, ende worlde' (Moffatt 1990: 48); similarly, in the *Visión de Filiberto*: 'aun quiero estar aquí et desputar contigo mientras me dexan e tengo tienpo' (Octavio de Toledo 1878: 55).

por que yo, mezquina, avré de lazdrar.

De Dios e del mundo pavor perdiste,
 pasaste su ley e sus mandamientos.
 Incrédulo fuste en tus pensamientos,
 juraste en vano, falsaste e mentiste,
 a pobres cuitados sienpre corraste.
 Por tu gran gula, luxuria, avaricia,
 acidia, homicidia, invidia, cobdicia,
 do yo era linpia, gran mal me feziste. (Kræmer 1956: 41-42)

Singling out the body's tendency to sin while leading others along the same path, its failure to offer penance and its lack of fear in either God or Christian teaching, and then finally its attachment to the seven deadly sins, the soul paints a particularly iniquitous portrait of its former companion, characterizing it as the antithesis of ideal Christian servitude, and as a reckless and dangerous member of society. The most serious consequence of this, of course, is that the soul, which was once cleansed of sin through the Sacrament of Baptism, became sullied and contaminated while on earth, and now in the afterlife is subject to everlasting pain and misery. In the soul's opinion, then, the body is exclusively to blame for its present predicament, and though one feels naturally inclined to believe that a more likely cause of damnation would have been a partnership in sin, the soul's extensive catalogue of the body's spiritual shortcomings provides an effective corollary to its present state of putrefaction. The rotting corpse is in itself, therefore, a physical reminder of this list of accusations. The subsequent implication is that if the Christian readers of this poem wish to avoid the same fate, then they must comply with the religious teachings that the body so comprehensively declined to heed.

In the following stanza the soul changes tack somewhat and instead of censuring the body's spiritual negligence, it moves on to consider the more specific subject of worldly goods. Drawing on the ancient *ubi sunt* topos, a figure present in romance literature from its very inception, it accuses the body of squandering its valuable time in a vain pursuit of the transient:

¿Adó tus moradas, dó es tu arreo,
 tu oro e tu plata e tu gran aver,
 tus joyas muy ricas e tu gran poder?
 ¿Dó es tu gracia, adó tu asseo
 dó es tu argullo, adó tu meneo?
 Mira agora que fue todo nada:
 todo fizo fin en una braçada
 de tierra en que estás, segun que ora veo. (Kræmer 1956: 42)

In a tone which is perhaps closer to that of Manrique's *Coplas* or Calavera's *Dezir de las vanidades del mundo* than it is to earlier Castilian body-and-soul debates, the soul laments the body's fondness for material possessions such as expensive dwellings and precious metals⁹. All of these, it argues are now of no use to the body as it lies decomposing in the ground. The glories, therefore, that seemed so tangible on earth, are in the afterlife no more than a hindrance to salvation. Rendered in these terms the function of the *ubi sunt* is thus a clear means with which to inculcate Biblical doctrine, for in effect the passage is stating as much as the conclusion to Christ's parable on the fate of the wealthy: 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:25). In this light, then, the narrator would do well to grasp the fact that there is a need not only to accept one's obligation to perform Christian works and comply with Christian doctrine, but also to recognise that life is but a fleeting moment, at the end of which the goods acquired during the course of a lifetime count for nothing.

In the following stanza, having completed an attack on the body on two major fronts (religious observance and worldly vanity), with a clear tone of spiritual superiority the soul orders the body to justify the actions that it took when it was still alive. Hardly surprisingly, feeling battered and bruised emotionally by the force of the soul's harangue, the body replies without further ado. What is most interesting in this instance, however, is not so much the fact that the body responds at all, but that in doing so it reveals a set of rhetorical skills and a knowledge of Christian doctrines which are equal to, if not more sophisticated than of those of the soul¹⁰:

⁹ In the *Disputa del alma y el cuerpo* (early XIIIc), for instance, the mood of the soul's *ubi sunt* is quite antagonistic: 'Dim' ¿O son tos dineros / que tu mi ... estero? / ¿O los tos moazaris / et melequis, / que solies manear / et a menudo contar? / ¿O son los palafrés, / que los quendes ie los res / te solien dar / por te loseniar? / ¿Los cauallos corientes, / las eppuelas ferientes, / las mulas bien amblantes / asuveras trainantes; / los frenos esdorados / los pretales dorados; / las copas d'oro fino / conque beutes to vino? / ¿Do son tas bestimentas / e las tas guarnimentas, / que tu solies festir / e tambien recebir [...] (Octavio de Toledo 1878: 62). This forms quite a contrast with Calavera's more relaxed and contemplative persona: '¿A do los thesoros, vasallos, servientes; / A do los fymalles, piedras preçiosas; / A do el alfojar, posadas cosstossas; / A do el algalia é aguas olientes; / A do paños de oro, cadenas lusientes, / A do los collares, las jarreteras, / A do peñas grisses, á do peñas veras, / A do las ssonajas que van rretinentes?' (Pidal 1949: 607). Despite appearances, however, it would not be true to suggest that this topos became more elegiac as the Middle Ages progressed, for in the *Dança de la Muerte*, where there are a number of echoes of this figure, the tone is particularly hostile.

¹⁰ This polished refinement is even more noticeable in the *Disputa's* source, the *Visión de Filiberto*: 'pregunto te si eres tu aquel que agora fablaba conmigo, cierto si tu

El cuerpo essa hora fizo movimiento,
 alcó la cabeça, pensó de hablar
 e dixo: «Señora, ¿por qué me culpar
 quieres agora sin merescimiento?
 Ca si dixe o fize fue por tu talento;
 si non, ves agora cuánto es mi poder,
 que aquestos gusanos non puedo toller
 que comen las carnes del mi criamento». (Kræmer 1956: 43)

In contrast to the soul's impression of the body, then, as a grossly incompetent spiritual ignoramus, more content to amass great wealth during a transitory lifetime than prepare for the eternity of the after-life, the body speaks with a skill and precision which is in every way as convincing as that of the soul. If it was so powerful in life as to be able to overrule its own soul, for instance, then why in death can it not defend itself from creatures as unassuming as earthworms? Indeed, if this holds true, then the blame for their current predicament must almost certainly lie with the soul and not the body. Although it is possible that the logic of this argument is flawed, the body's reasoning thus casts the soul's earlier black and white picture into confusion, and leaves the narrator in a tricky position¹¹. Should he, for instance, take these words at face value and now side with the body, or should he simply appreciate that the relationship between body and soul is not as straightforward as the soul initially suggested? Whatever he does, it remains clear that the debate poses far more questions than it could ever hope to answer.

Having initially caught the soul unawares by counter-arguing so effectively, the body rapidly progresses in its line of reasoning, and in the following stanza, having detected the flaws in the soul's diatribe, it expands upon its observations:

Tú mi señora e yo tu servidor:
 mis pies e manos por ti se movieron;

eres non es verdad todo lo que tu dixiste agora que en algo dello mentiste e quierotelo probar por claros e manifiestos argumentos' (Octavio de Toledo 1878: 53). In the *Disputa* it is worth noting that the body's bookish approach is replaced by a more spontaneous style of argument.

¹¹ Whether the logic of the body's reasoning is flawed is not as clear an issue as it might at first appear. Power in life and power in death are, of course, different things, but on the other hand, in deciding that this is so, would one not be making the assumption that during its own lifetime the physical body has a power which is distinct and separate from that of the soul. In Christian teaching after all, the body is often considered to be little more than a fleshy vessel with which to house the soul until it is claimed back by God: to suggest, therefore, that the body has its own power during life is possibly to contradict Christian teaching. In this light the body's arguments may in fact be sound.

adó tu mandaste, allá anduvieron.
 Yo era la morada e tu el morrador.
 Pues ¿por qué me cargas la culpa e error?
 Puesto que algo yo cobdicié,
 pues, poder entero, señora, en ti fue;
 ¿Por qué me dexavas conplir mi sabor? (Kræmer 1956: 43)

Characterizing itself as the inferior half of a master-and-servant relationship, or as nothing more than a shell with which to house the power of the soul, the body asserts that right down to the movement of its limbs, it was never in a position to give orders or to take control¹². On the contrary, since it is nothing more than a slave, its own rudimentary desires could easily have been checked by its superior. In this light, then, the body concludes that the damnation of the soul and the putrefaction of the body are a consequence not so much a of its own actions, as of the soul's failure to occupy its proper position within the body-and-soul relationship. In reaching this resolution, once again the body has constructed a witty and intellectually sound reasoning which at the same time stands on familiar theological ground. Indeed, as Brown explains in connection with the body-and-soul theme in antiquity: 'the body must not be permitted to force its needs upon the tranquil mind: it was to be kept well-tuned according to its own, intrinsic laws. The mind, in turn, must constantly refine itself, lest, through weakness and uncertainty, it come to participate in the lability of the flesh' (1988: 27). In this light, then, having failed to block the impetus of the body's animalistic cravings, the soul can no longer be seen to occupy the high moral ground within the debate: there are too many question marks hanging over its conduct.

¹² The image of master-and-servant appears in a number of other body-and-soul debates. For instance, in the *Visión de Filiberto*, the source of the *Disputa*, the body states that: 'tu eras mi sennora para me mandar e para me regir e para me constrenir que feziese tu voluntad e tu mandamiento et tu non quisiste usar deste sennorio que Dios te dio sobre mi e feziste a mi tu sennora e tu fueste mi sierva pues segiste mi voluntad [...] pues la culpa es tuya e non es mía' (Octavio de Toledo 1878: 54). Interestingly, in later debates the master-and-servant image becomes one of teacher-and-student. In Antón de Meta's *Tractado del cuerpo e dela ánima*, for instance, the body uses an argument, which although relying upon this slightly different underlying image, bears some startling similarities to the above quotation: 'Haun mas te digo que fues perezosa / en darme doctrina y buena lición / con que me aprendiste la ley provchosa / la qual faze al hombre ganar salvación / por tu negligencia y gran ocasión / de no instruir me en la fê católica / irás a la corte que es diabólica / dó está aparejada cruel damnación' (Jones 1963: 125). Whether this shift away from feudal imagery could be taken as an indication of the waning of the Middle Ages and the advent of a new style of Renaissance humanism is an interesting question.

Having suffered the shock of seeing its previous arguments torn to shreds by the body's careful counter-claims, in its next speech the soul regains its composure and makes a series of drastic changes to its rhetorical strategy. In contrast to its earlier self-righteous bluster and moral indignation, the soul now sounds distinctly apologetic:

Tres contrarios de mala perdición
 fezistes en mí muy grand dañamiento:
 el diablo, el mundo e tú el cimientio
 trayades me puesta en vuestra prisión. (Kræmer 1956: 44)

Like the body, the soul now also attempts to emphasise its own essential debility. Whereas in its first speech, for instance, the soul considered the body contemptuously from a position of impregnability, in this enunciation the soul metamorphosises its own image of the once feeble body, by transforming it into a powerful adversary both willing and adept enough to corrupt the virtue of a once undefiled soul. As it continues, however, we learn that the body was not in sole command of this onslaught, for in drawing on the assistance of the world and the devil, the soul in fact faced three rivals, an unholy trinity of corruption which eventually procured its downfall. In this respect the *Disputa* makes a considerable improvement on both its own immediate source, the *Visión de Filiberto*, as well as on the poem which generated this second flowering of the body-and-soul debate in western literatures, the Latin *Dialogus inter corpus et animam*. In these previous works, for instance, it is the body who falls back on the excuse that the combined force of the world and the devil were sufficient to undermine its determination. In changing the speaker, then, the poet of this work not only effects an improvement in structure, this passage now mirroring the body's claims to a fundamental weakness and frailty, but also, perhaps, in numerological symbolism. The number three, after all, is particularly suggestive in Christian contexts: there are three parts to the Trinity, (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), three parts to the soul (Mind, Will, and Understanding), and so to present the soul as being vanquished by a tripartite enemy, a whole new strand of imagery naturally presents itself. All in all this is a very effective improvement¹³.

Having activated a new line of argument with which to demonstrate its blamelessness, in the following stanza the soul expands on

¹³ This aspect of numerological symbolism can also be found in the English XIVc morality play, *Wisdom*. In this work, for instance, three characters called Mind, Will, and Understanding represent the fall of the soul (Anima) while she is away from the eyes of the audience.

its initial statements by setting out in detail the way in which the world, the flesh, and the devil forced it to succumb to their heinous desires:

Non avía lugar de me defender
 con tales contrarios que me perseguían:
 yo iba sin grado do ellos querían,
 pues al non podía con ellos fazer.
 E tu con tu acucia e tu bollescer
 cargaron a mi de carga conplida,
 por lo qual agora non fallo guarida
 nin fallo lugar do pueda estorcer. (Kræmer 1956: 44)

Though in this stanza the soul introduces very little new material into the debate, through the manner in which it is expressed a number of new dimensions open up. Firstly, in contrast to the body's assertion that it was the slave within the relationship, the soul claims that in being outnumbered, it had no option but to debase its own higher origins and to submit to a disagreeable form of emancipation. In effect then, while both parties have now claimed that they are the weaker element within the relationship, at the same time this suggestion has been reinforced through imagery of enslavement. In addition to this dimension, a further potent suggestion is created by the soul's selection of words at the end of the stanza, for as with previous speeches a theme of entrapment is emphasised textually. Casting our minds back, for instance, to the soul's first speech, it is evident that just as in life the soul lacked a place to hide, so too in death it finds itself without a refuge: '¿Non catas agora mi tribulación, / que en alto nin en baxo non fallo abrigo?' (1956: 42). The obvious implication of this thematic parallel, of course, is that like the soul this poem, if the narrator chooses not to prepare for the afterlife, then he too will find no refuge.

In the following lines, with individual speeches now shortening considerably, the body chooses to ignore the soul's previous comments, and instead launches a final offensive of its own. The body claims that while it has found its proper place, the soul has only found even greater torment:

Por justa razón te quiero provar
 que fuste la causa de todo pecado,
 ca desque la muerte nos ovo apartado
 fallé sin embargo mi propio lugar.
 Tu nunca podiste aver nin fallar
 lugar nin manera para guarescer
 nin te aprovecha ya rebollescer;
 por tanto tú mesma te debes juzgar. (Kræmer 1956: 45)

Once again, arguing with an impressively polished sense of deductive, syllogistic reasoning, the body comes to the conclusion that as it has now returned to the earth from which it came, it has ended its days naturally. In marked contrast to the body, the soul, an element which does not have the physical capacity to decay, is now in a state of eternal damnation. In this light then, the body suggests that while it has achieved the end for which it was prepared, the soul has not. In consequence, no blame for the soul's current predicament can be attached to the body. While again, the logic underlying this argument may be subject to a possible flaw, (the belief, for instance that the bodies of saints and other perfect Christians did not decompose), one can only wonder at the almost effortless ease with which the argument is delivered. Clearly, in considering this speech alongside the body's previous locution, there is strong evidence to suggest that through the rhetorical strategies that both body and soul employ, the poet was attempting to construct a sharply individual character for each speaker. This characteristic sets this work aside not merely from its source, but also from other Hispanic debates such as the *Razón de amor* or *Elena y María*.

The soul, however, is clearly not impressed by the body's latest effrontery, and in its final speech it retaliates angrily by hurling insults and reproaches at its former partner:

Cuerpo maldicto, lixoso enconado,
 por el gran fedor de tu fedentina
 metiéronte en foya, cobriénonte aina,
 dexáronte dentro a mal de tu grado.
 Tu piensas por tanto que ya has librado;
 conmigo has de ser aún a derecho;
 avrás gualardón de todo tu fecho:
 nel infierno por sienpre serás condenado. (Kræmer 1956: 45)

In an attempt to refute the body's accusations, the soul once again changes tack, and having spoken in the first part of the debate with moral indignation, and in the second by drawing attention to its own weaknesses, it now concludes bitterly with a cluster of insults and invectives. Contradicting the body's relaxed and natural view of its exit from this world, the soul paints a bleak picture of its former companion, noting that with its decay and foul smell (in themselves physical manifestations of its sin), people could not wait to hurl the rotting carcass into a tomb and to forget about it. The soul thus preys on the fickleness and insubstantiality of human bonds, but as it proceeds in its harangue, there is a prospect which is even more dreadful than this: the final judgement. According to Christian belief both body and soul

will be united once more at the end of time in order to face God's everlasting judgement, and so if the body believes that its present fight against the worms and eventual decomposition is the worst form of punishment that it will have to face, then it is very much mistaken. As Brown explains, fear of the final judgement has been a cause of consternation ever since the dawn of Christianity, for 'all mankind stood before the majesty of God as other and inferior to him. Body and soul faced him together: He had created both and would judge both' (1988: 35). In this sense, then, the debate has effectively come full circle and reached a suitable thematic climax, for long after the disputation has ended, the parties will meet once more as they were on earth to suffer an even more terrifying conclusion. In the deeply pessimistic environment of the latter Middle Ages, for many people this final judgement was probably not all that far away.

Having remained silent throughout the debate, in the following stanza the narrator recovers his voice and then proceeds to relate the entry of a fearsome black devil carrying a set of steel pincers in its hand. As we might expect, the devil has come to claim the soul for its own:

Estando mirando esta porfia,
salió un diablo negro de una espessura,
mortal espantoso de fuerte figura.
tenezas de fierro en la mano traía.
E dixo contra el ave: «Vos sodes mía,
conmigo iredes a ver mi posada
donde seredes por sienpre heredada;
allá fallades assaz grand compañía». (Kræmer 1956: 46)

Following straight after a series of short speeches, the effect of yet another highly compressed stanza is to enhance the already tense mood within the poem and to prepare the reader for a sudden and inevitable conclusion: the exit of the soul along with the devil and his minions. In this instance, by emerging through a thicket, there is once again a reminder of the geography of the dream frame in the first part of the poem, for just as the narrator was trapped by the dense undergrowth in the second stanza (a feature which like the time of year suggested his internal confusion), now the devil emerges through the same vegetation to stake his claim on the soul. The implication for the narrator to consider is that confusion is in itself a recipe for disaster, for if an individual can not come to terms either with the certainty of death or the need to find a perfect balance between body and soul so as to be able to face death with a clear conscience, then through the confusion the devil will surely find a pathway to the soul. The central

message of the poem, therefore, is that one must find a balance between body and soul before it is too late. The consequences of not doing so are spelled out in this stanza.

Having heard the devil's grimly ironic invitation for it to join him in hell for all eternity, in the poem's final stanza the soul utters a desperate last appeal for God, the Lord of Pity, to intercede in this matter. As one would imagine, however, this final request is utterly out of the question:

El ave essa hora dió grand apelido
e dixo: «¡Dios mío, tú que me crieste,
Rey de piedat, líbrame deste,
Senyor, pues tenés el poder cumplido!»
Tómala el diablo con ella ha fuido. (Kræmer 1956: 46)

No matter how great the soul's desire for the intervention of Christ, as the poem has taken pains to point out throughout the development of its complex and interwoven frame of motifs, that once death has parted body and soul, there is no longer even a remote possibility of redemption. A suitable compromise in accordance with Christian theology must therefore be sought while still on earth. The anguished screams of the soul of this debate come far too late to save it. The only effect that they will have will be to echo around the empty pit of hell for all eternity.

At this point in the dream the narrator awakes with a start, and after informing the reader of his great sadness, he faints in horror of the spectacle which he has just witnessed:

Con el grand pesar luego desparté:
del suenno que vi pasmado finqué,
aina perdiera todo mi sentido. (Kræmer 1956: 46)

The poem thus ends on an ominous note. The soul is dragged down to hell, the flesh of the body will rot and fester, its bones eventually being picked clean by the worms that devour it; finally the parties will once more be reunited when God summons all the dead to rise and face the wrath of his final judgement. From his earlier position of anxiety, then, the narrator has travelled the path of a learning experience. The message that he receives may at first be too horrific to contemplate, but when internally digested and acted upon it will be the only means with which to save his soul. The same is true for the reader.

In conclusion I should like to highlight a number of points which I believe make this poem a valuable addition to the late medieval Spanish corpus of works concerned with the themes of death and sal-

vation. Firstly, inasmuch as the poem make uses of a debate within the context of a dream vision, it is clear that while it belongs simultaneously to two different genres, it handles both of them with a dexterity which is unmatched by similar medieval works. The debate form, for instance, is well structured and coherently presented; individual speeches are neither too short, nor padded with an excessive amount of unnecessary detail. As the work progresses, there is a steady reduction in length, and this has the effect of injecting a tone of urgency and immediacy into the arguments of each speaker. Indeed, by the time of the devil's entrance, while the body has become blunt and forthright in its assertions, the soul is unstable, panicky, and audibly terrified. In this respect, the work achieves a certain, though modest, degree of individual characterisation. The debate, however, has no evident winner; the soul is damned while the body is left to rot. The arguments of both sides, therefore, are all to be considered at a distance, for it is only when the reader stands back from the disputation that the real complexity of the poem becomes evident. The two parties have an equal degree of truth on their sides, but at the same time, through their failure to integrate these truths into a coherent whole, they have an equal measure of culpability. The reader, therefore, must not so much appreciate the content of each argument, but look further ahead to the eventual implications of a failure to integrate body and soul in a unified partnership. The consequences of not doing so are presented at the end of the poem: the debate is thus a negative *exemplum*, an illustration of what the reader should not do.

As the debate itself is a highly successful adaptation of a familiar genre, so too is the dream vision, the poem's sub-genre. Achieving its unity through the central figure of the narrator, it both broadens and strengthens the scope of the central debate. The narrator, perplexed by thoughts of death, suffers from insomnia. The world outside his window is bleak and barren. It is January, a turning point in the seasonal cycle. He is alone with his conscience. In the dream which follows these elements are transposed firstly onto the landscape of the valley, then onto the angered soul and rotting body, and finally onto the disputation itself. In this weird and abstract world the narrator is able to view his own difficulties in the form of a clash between conflicting and contrasting viewpoints, neither one of which is wholly accurate, but neither of which can be entirely dismissed. In this light then, the poem is an abstracted working out of his problems, a massive series of 'what ifs?', which provide no ultimate conclusion in themselves, but which if viewed rationally contain a definitive answer to his own psychological conflict. In being a universal figure, however, the ultimate purpose of the poem goes far beyond the narrator, for in provoking the

reader into a detailed examination of his or her own spiritual awareness, the work becomes a powerful piece of philosophical thought with the ultimate aim of alleviating some of the pain and pessimism associated with death during the latter Middle Ages. In this respect the *Disputa* is a worthy equal to the works mentioned at the start of this discussion¹⁴.

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¹⁴ I am grateful for the assistance kindly given to me by Professor Alan Deyermund during the production of this article. It should not be assumed, however, that his opinions necessarily coincide with my own.