

**NIGHTINGALES NEVER LOSE: FORCED CLOSURE
AND IRRESOLUTION IN SOME MIDDLE ENGLISH
DEBATE POEMS**

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CHAPTER ONE

Winners by Default: Forced Closure

Fundamental Habits of Mind

A preoccupation with the interaction of opposites is perhaps nowhere more evident than during the Middle Ages, when it became a fundamental habit of mind. A concern with dualities, polarities, and dichotomies is reflected in nearly every variety of writing by writers who perceived that virtually any thing, concrete or conceptual, animate or inanimate, could be seen to have a natural or logical counterpart which it often rivalled but also complemented (Conlee, 1991, xi).

While this may be true of at least part of the medieval mindset, it must also be equally true of the modern one. If Abelard's *Sic et Non* could stand as the great symbol of an age's cognitive preoccupations, then the little computer switch, that has only two states, 0 and 1, is the symbol of our times. And it is, of course, merely a numerical representation of Abelard's verbal dichotomy. The too easy taking of sides in massively complex issues like legalising abortion; a so-called cold war that divided the entire world into East and West; an economic system that divides society into haves and have nots; an education system that declares people either literate or illiterate; a political system that could produce too many people who cried, "Either you are for the struggle or against it" are only some instances of the modern preoccupation with the "interaction of opposites."

The modern world is as much obsessed with a “concern with dualities, polarities, and dichotomies” as the medieval one was. Umberto Eco talks of “the return of the Middle Ages” (Eco, 1986, 63), describes the present time as “neomedieval” (73), and presents parallels between the two periods that are more than just amusing speculation. That much of what we are, as westerners, is rooted in the medieval world, needs no elaboration.

But the modern world, as we know, is much more complex than its obsession with bureaucratic labelling and categorising. The post-modern perception, for example, with its notions of “complicitous critique” and “inherent paradox” (Hutcheon, 1990, 13, 15), with its crossing of the boundaries between genres and discourses, with its pastiche and parody, and with its more than incipient relativism has such high status currently because it represents a movement other than or away from the apparently simplistic modernist drives for conformity, categorisation, grand narratives (everything in its place, and a place for everything) and control. It declares itself to be the inevitable development of modernism. Postmodernism relishes the shades of grey, glorifies the fracture of form, and encourages diversity of viewpoint. Whether one accepts the post-modern perspective or not, it is difficult to deny that it reflects a deeply inherent, fundamental habit of mind of our times. Our literature, music, architecture and film reflect a world that perhaps too ardently eschews the simply predictable or the neatly categorised product.

In the same way that it would be careless to describe the modern mindset as having one predominating way of seeing things, so it would be rash to assume that medieval minds worked exclusively in either-or terms, or were unaware that much of life is beyond dichotomies and polarities. The Church itself presented three options after death, as well as a divinity who had three forms. In fact, three was probably a more significant number than two. The incessant drive to clarify and categorise exists when there is a confusion, a messy uncertainty that seems in need of sorting out. Works like *The Book of Margery Kempe* show all too clearly that people did not necessarily live and think in a world dominated by either-or thought processes. The debate poems,

described by Reed as the literary genre “most dear to the Middle Ages” (Reed, 1992, 201) are often left undecided; and, perhaps more disturbingly, the “wrong side” can have the stronger or better arguments. While it would be stretching definitions to suggest that as Middle Ages moved towards Renaissance they went through their very own post-modern period, it would be equally questionable to suggest that debates were so popular because this was an age obsessed with *sic et non* and was not aware of the greyness that declares, in the end, the contrived absurdity of thinking that is determined exclusively by an either-or mentality or world view. Debate, when the grey areas are taken seriously and seen as being all too clearly a part of one’s reality, can become exercises in exploration and irresolution. It seems that this lack of clearly defined certainty is reflected in as many Middle English debates as there are ones that have clearly stated winners.

Thomas Reed, in his book *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* seeks to make the point clear. He writes in his introduction,

My specific concern will be with the curious but marked formal and ideological irresolution which characterises some of the greatest of the English debates, a trait that may be seen as something of a problem not only in a genre which naturally leads its audience to expect conclusiveness, but also in an age whose dominant aesthetics would seem to have required the artistic revelation of a unified truth (1990,2).

Reed’s thesis is not that many of the debate poems reflect a kind of intellectual rebellion against the order-imposing hierarchies of the time, a need to challenge, rebel against or deconstruct what is taken for granted. They are not, in the modern sense, “post-modern”. Rather they reflect a need to show that things are not as simple as they seem; the world is a complex place in which taking one side or the other is not always as clear-cut as it may be presented. The poems exhibit what he calls “experiential realism”,

a kind of reactionary intransigence to profound order...indulged in a controlled ludic context (1990, 26-27).

Reed's position has within it echoes of "complicitous critique" and of parody that sits near the heart of much post-modern thinking. At its best these moments of ludic irresolution are playful within a context that allows the playfulness, but that in the end may demand a return to the real world. (Many of what Reed calls the "resolved" debates might fall into this category.) At its worst, they may turn into outbursts of cynicism and irresolution of an inevitably destructive and relativistic kind. (Some of the unresolved debates may be described in this way, but it is important to remember the unresolved in terms of a winner not declared may not automatically mean that the debate remains undecided.) Referring extensively to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Reed seeks to explore the idea of the "ludic" more deeply. He suggests that there is a safety valve function in much of the unresolved debates; that the aesthetic irresolution, and the laughter generated by many of the debate poems gave release to the criticism and laughter that would otherwise not have been permitted:

The Church tolerated carnival...perhaps because it had to, but perhaps also because the potentially grave disruptiveness of laughter was always implicitly controlled by its proximity to those sacred rites upon which all Christians depended for salvation (Reed, 1990,30).

That the "horizontal" debates were many of them secular, and that the "unresolved" debates did not normally deal with matters of religious doctrine suggest to Reed that they tended more to reveal the dynamics of the Dionysian rather than the Apollonian in their intentions. He submits that, like the Misrule festivities, the forbidden thoughts and arguments are permitted in debate poems in order to release pent up criticism or opposition. This is very much Bakhtin's point about the importance of laughter being oppositional "because it had been eliminated in the Middle Ages from official cult and ideology" (Bakhtin, M, quoted in Reed, 1990,30) and that therefore it needed expression elsewhere.

My feeling is that the debate poems are rich in parody (their origins would have been the very serious contexts of education, law and parliament); that apart from the overtly didactic ones, they were more to be seen as digression, as "Dionysian" for want of a

better term (ludic, perhaps), and as having the potential to critique status quo beliefs and ideologies, without necessarily being fully oppositional. Even when the status quo representatives win, the other side's arguments have been well aired—in some cases they are even better than those of the status quo. All the debates take place within the clearly defined norms and beliefs of the period, and however far they may stray from them, they implicitly accept the limits and the hierarchies. This is not a modern or a post-modern age in that respect. Critique is only possible within the ideological framework, beneath the over-arching symbols of the times. The fear of hell keeps everyone in their place.

This is not to reduce the powerful concept of Reed's "marked formal and ideological irresolution", nor to diminish the idea that the medieval world's fundamental habits of mind were a good deal more complex than an obsession with polarities. The debates, precisely because they required two opposing points of view, provided the ideal literary genre for the manifestation of critique or for the revelation of irresolution not only in the mind of the writers, but one must assume in the social milieu in which they lived.

Also of interest from Reed's book is his "categories of opposition". Resolved debate poems and unresolved debate poems stand in opposition to each other in terms of their most significant characteristics. In this way he shows how the unresolved debates reflect more the Dionysian, ludic or critical intentions of the author, while the resolved debates reflect more the political and religious status quo. These resolved debates tend, says Reed, to be "ordered, official, allegorical, conventional, deductive, authoritative, certain, axiomatic, predictable, traditional, rational, serious, didactic"; while unresolved debates are "disorderly, popular, individual., novel, inductive, experiential, confused, ambivalent, allowing indecision, sensual or imaginative, insecure, irreverent, recreational" (1990, 38-39)¹. Reed says that these "apparently polar...antitheses should in fact be seen as interdependent and inter-reactive" (39), and

¹ These two collections of adjectives are a selection from a table listing, in two columns, what Reed considers to be the characteristics of resolved and unresolved debates.

he takes some pains to point out that this is not simply another dichotomy, another categorisation. In fact, this distinction helps in some way in deciding on whether debate poems display “experiential realism” or not; whether they challenge in the ludic context of parody, or whether they teach in the ludic context of learning and instruction.

Winners and Losers

A discussion about irresolution and critique should not be allowed to diminish the contrary tendency of wanting to classify and categorise. In his book on the *Gawain* poet, Davenport writes about the tension that is part of the writer’s art: he describes it as

the impulse to shape, classify, simplify, illustrate and generalise, as opposed to the impulse to envisage, individualise, complicate, decorate and specify (Davenport, 1978,208).

Debate poems share both these impulses. By definition, they represent opposites, and necessary tensions must develop between the two points of view. But there is the further tension within the writer’s intentions: to make things clear and simple; or to make them complicated, individual. The four debate poems in this investigation tend to show the latter bias rather than the former. They are all characterised by critique and irresolution in varying degrees of seriousness and tone. In all four poems, the “winners” are not convincing, even though a particular party is declared the winner: in *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*; and *The Debate of the Body and Soul* nightingales and soul are described as the winners in one way or another (in fact, all three are winners because their opposition either submits or is forcibly removed) and the other poem, *Mede and Muche Danke* appears not to have a declared winner. (The poems with winners are also far more “ludic”.) But whether there is or is not a winner must not obscure the fact that the debate poems as a whole may still have all the signs of complication and irresolution embedded within them.

Winning debates needs to be carefully clarified in this context. Modern middle class boys and girls who go through any school system even vaguely reflective of first world paradigms will have endured the Debating Society in all its sanitised, boring rituals of argument, counter argument, summing up and declaration of winner, either by adjudicator or by popular vote. This underlying pattern of debate, or argument, is fundamental to almost all modern western societies: law, politics and education are based on the assumption of argument, counter-argument, winner. Lakoff and Johnson have pointed out that one of the dominant metaphors used with argument is war. (1980,4). People win or lose arguments; they shoot down arguments in flames; they have battles of wits; they hit back with counter arguments and so on. Our emphasis is more often than not on who wins and who loses. (Argument-is-war metaphors strongly suggest ideas like winning at all costs , and winner takes all.)

Not so the medieval emphasis: according to Reed, debate poems

often seem less interested in settling on a winner than in the apprehension or appreciation...of the differences that give rise to the debate (1990,2).

Conlee makes the point more generally:

...some poems offer nothing at all in the way of a resolution, some contain implied resolutions, and some are resolved absolutely, with a winner clearly specified or with a loser freely offering his own capitulation. In some of these last cases, the dice have been loaded from the outset (1991,xix).

Davenport points out that in debate poems

the two opponents are characterised in terms of their skill and cunning in escaping from the tight corners of argument; there is no positive 'right' answer to the argument (1988,130).

Here he is describing what he calls “equal contests” as opposed to “unequal” contests as for example, between teacher and pupil. Equal contests are likely to be more rhetorical exercises than attempts to win the argument.

The four debates in this examination are equal contests: nevertheless, in three there are “winners”; in one there is not.² The two debates about love and women waged by the birds, appear to have winners; the one about who best serves the king remains entirely open; and the one about which is more guilty of the punishment of damnation may appear to have winner, but in the context of the poem as a whole, it hardly seems to matter. Win or lose, damnation awaits.

The bird debates have winners who employ devious tactics to get there; the other two debates reveal a pointlessness that goes beyond what might originally have been intended. In *Mede and Muche Danke* the courtier’s and soldier’s speeches are not clearly indicated in the original manuscript, and this debate is marked by the shifting ambiguities brought about by the persistent uncertainty of who actually is speaking. That some stanzas could be spoken by either is strongly indicative of the irresolution of the poem. Body and soul batter each other in splendid rhetorical fashion, and while the soul appears to be the winner, it is hard to deny the body some real sympathy for his condition, and not a little respect for his arguments.

It is difficult to accept (though in the end one might have to) that these debates were satisfying merely because of their rhetoric, of their characters trying to get out of tricky intellectual situations. The medieval audience can hardly have had no interest at all in who in the end carries off the kudos. That there *are* winners in some cases seems to suggest that the modern satisfaction of reaching a clear-cut conclusion and declaring a winner was not entirely unfamiliar to the medieval mind. And even when

² *Mede and Muche Danke* has a very clear winner if the punctuation of Kail (1904) is followed, but Conlee’s punctuation—which I much prefer—leaves no clear winner at the end, at least ostensibly. This particular version of the body and soul debate is clearly between equals, although it could in general terms be regarded as an “unequal” kind of debate.

no winner is overtly declared, there is more often than not a clear enough indication of who *should* or *could* have won.

But not just anyone can win. Institutionalised beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions are basic to all social groups, more so in some than in others. Even in modern, first world societies it is rare that the evil, the weak or the “foreign” element is allowed to win in television series, movies, popular novels, comics and magazines. Where the contrary forces are allowed to win, the audiences are likely to be small. There is little point in going into debt in order to show life as it really is. (Even in such post-modern movies as Clint Eastwood’s *The Unforgiven*, in which almost every Western movie expectation is overturned, the relatively good guy wins; the clearly bad guy loses.) As Hume points out, “the most pleasant, most attractive contestant wins *unless* one has an overwhelming moral superiority to which the author feels obliged to bow” (1975,35).

Legitimation serves to explain and justify the perpetuation of the dominant institutions in any society. Defined by Berger and Luckmann as the “process of ‘explaining’ and ‘justifying’ the salient elements of the institutional traditions” (1979, 111), legitimation is used by anyone who seeks either to convince or reinforce aspects of the dominating paradigm. Berger and Luckmann posit four levels of legitimation, each level growing in complexity, and the power to make the reluctant or rebellious to tow the line.

Legitimation not only tells the individual why he *should* perform one action and not another; it also tells him why things *are* what they are. In other words, ‘knowledge’ precedes ‘values’ in the legitimation of institutions (Berger and Luckmann, 1979,111).

The first level of legitimation resides in language, and the choice of language provided for understanding any significant concepts. Teachers and parents skilfully, and largely unconsciously, instil in children the “right” ways of thinking about people, customs, relationships, “other” people, God, time, space, and so on. This is not

necessarily dangerous or evil; indeed, societies depend on a shared, common understanding of reality in order to survive together.

Level two comes into play when these basic meanings are challenged. Here, common proverbs, tried and tested saws, folk wisdom and the deeply rooted truisms of the society are brought out: “He who steals from his cousin gets warts on his hands or Go when your wife cries, but *run* when your cousin calls for you” (Berger and Luckmann, 1979, 112). Level three is serious: any objection after level two brings on the level of “explicit theories by which an institutional sector is legitimated in terms of a differentiated body of knowledge” (1979,112). Since the legitimator is likely to be in possession of the theory, and the recalcitrant one is unlikely to, the contest at this stage becomes decidedly uneven. Throwing Bourdieu or Althusser or Gramsci at the undergraduate student who dares to challenge the lecturer’s statements about dominant ideology is not likely to receive counter-challenge. It is the chief weapon in the arsenal of the academic.

The fourth and final level of legitimation appeals to the “symbolic universes”:

The symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of *all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe (1979, 114).

To argue against this is to argue against the very base of shared social and cultural beliefs. It is to deny one’s own existence, one’s own sense of reality. Against this, there can be no real argument: one either shapes up or ships out. Ostracism, excommunication or some such action is the inevitable response from the legitimising agencies.

It is no accident that participators in arguments may use the various forms of legitimation to beat an opponent into subjection. Unlike counter-argument, which seeks at an intellectual level to prove the opponent incorrect or unsound in his

thinking through a particular issue, and which opens up the user to getting the same back, legitimation is the great silencer, against which to argue puts one in a relatively helpless or increasingly dangerous situation. In many Middle English debate poems techniques of legitimation are used effectively to silence the opposition. In those debates in which “the dice are loaded” the levels of legitimative argument tends to be high. Two of the debate poems under examination here exemplify these techniques very well.

It is in such debates that the element of forced closure is high. When the wrong side is clearly showing the better arguments the status quo position has to be reaffirmed, and the argument is forced into closure by the use of a higher, or the highest level of legitimation. In some cases, if argument itself is of no avail, closure is forced in other ways, usually physical or in some other way disruptive. Both nightingales win by default.

When there are no clear winners, forced closure is not as self-evident. Kail’s version of *Mede and Muche Thanke* is closed forcefully enough; but Conlee’s version suggests that something more complex is happening in the debate. In *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* forced closure is devastating and rather final; the preceding argument tends to pale into insignificance at the dramatic exit of the soul. It is forced closure as its most obvious. And it may well be perceived as the ultimate level of legitimation.

In the following four chapters, each of the debate poems under discussion in this dissertation will be examined in more detail. Of specific interest will be the extent to which each debate reflects irresolution rather than clear-cut categorising; forced closure rather than well-deserved winning; and whether the intention of the writer indicates clear support for status quo ideology, or a cynicism that might suggest something more than permitted critique.

CHAPTER TWO

Mede and Muche Thanke: *Shifting Ambiguities*

Mede and Muche Thanke has been published only twice: once in the *Early English Text Society* series, and edited by J Kail (1904), and once in an anthology of Debate Poetry edited by J Conlee (1991). The original text is recorded in MS Digby 102.

Conlee points out that “the manuscript provides no indication of who is speaking” (1991,210) and presents a text in which some of the allocations of stanzas to the Courtier are preceded by a question mark. He points out that Kail’s allocation of the last four stanzas to the soldier is “entirely defensible” (1991,214) but this appears to go against the poem’s plan of each speaker presenting arguments alternately. Kail has very little to say about the poem, and his decision to present the soldier with the final silencing argument is based upon his generalised description of the themes of all the poems in Digby 102:

They (sc the poems in Digby 102) warn against worldly folly, and praise virtue, always setting a great value on the works of a man, but none on his words. They frequently recommend righteousness for practical reasons....In time of war, the pious may rely on God....The wicked are threatened with cowardice, dread and strife and defeat (Kail, 1904, vii-viii).

Before examining the punctuation of the poem further, a summary of the poem, as presented by Kail and Conlee might be in order.

Stanzas 1-7. (Kail and Conlee)

As I was walking through some blossoming woods, I came upon two men who were arguing. One was arguing that words of appreciation were more than enough; the other was in favour of more tangible rewards. One was a soldier, dressed very modestly; the other was flashily dressed in courtier's clothing.

"See, fellow," said Courtier, "I can choose between a palfrey and a steed. You explain the virtues of thanks alone; I'll show the advantages of tangible reward."

"Sir," replied Soldier, "I see you have riches, but men will honour you only in accordance with how you got those riches."

"I please my lord all the time, no matter how trifling; I embellish what he says; I always agree with him."

"Flattery is the Fiend's method. You scorn lords and make them your fools. True labour for a wise lord, though, would never go unrecognised."

"Why are you upset with my flattering? Should my sovereign ask you whom he should advance? You get your thanks, clothing and food through fighting; I'll take my chances and stand by tangible rewards. My flattering does no harm and I am well off; when you are in trouble, ill or old, who will find you food and clothing? Then let "appreciation" give you what you need."

Stanzas 8-11

[Here Kail and Conlee diverge. Kail gives the rest of the poem to the soldier, thus:]

"A flatterer is like a weather vane. He is like a drone that destroys the garnered honey; he has brought beggary to Hall and Chamber. Your wicked speech does worse than you think. You want wars only for profit, pillage, and the spilling of Christian blood. You have no conscience. . You wouldn't do all that except for tangible reward. There can be no good advice from wicked people. I wish you could be brought to a real test: then you might follow a wiser course. When you get up in the morning you clothe yourself and you feed yourself. You surely do this only for your own good, otherwise you'd die of cold and hunger This proves that you serve tangible reward!"

[Conlee renders the end of the poem thus:]

"A flatterer is like a weather vane," replied the soldier. "He is like a drone that destroys the garnered honey; he has brought beggary to Hall and Chamber."

"Your wicked speech goes too far," retorted the courtier. "You speak evil, you do worse. You'd want to wage war forever for the profit and

pillage you might gain. You spill Christian blood, and burn towns. You have no conscience. You wouldn't do all that except for tangible reward."

"There can be no good advice from wicked people. I wish you could be brought to a real test: then you might follow a wiser course."

"When you get up in the morning you clothe yourself and you feed yourself," said the Courtier. "You surely do this only for your own good, otherwise you'd die of cold and hunger. That proves that you too serve tangible reward!"

Clearly, the different allocations of speeches in the last four stanzas shift a number of aspects of the poem. For Kail *Mede and Muche Thanke* is an allegorical poem, in which two concepts, "reward beyond desert" on the one hand, and good service on the other, fight it out with an inevitable conclusion. Kail sees the soldier as the status quo representative, whose words, polite at first, justifiably accusatory at the end, make him the fitting speaker to end the poem. He is not a real character at all: he is a type, a representative, with his plain clothes ("mene array" 110), his polite and humble speech ("Syre, Y see thou hast riches...117) and his fierce refusal even to consider Mede as having any value in society all.

*"fflateryng is the fendis scoles!
 Youre awen werkys preueth yow nys;
 Ye skorne lordes and make hem youre foles
 To playe & lawhe at youre delys. (33-36, Conlee's text)*

In Kail's version, the soldier mercilessly rounds on Mede and accuses him of being a drone—the symbolic social parasite—and of corrupting the Court and turning it into "faytour lane" (163) through his flattery for reward. And it is the courtier, as Mede, who is responsible for terrible wars for, one assumes, mercenary reward and for "pilage":

*ffor profyt & pilage thou myght glene
 Cristen blod destroyed clene
 And townes brent on a glede. (68-70)*

But this is followed by a sudden switch of tone and language. In the next stanza, the soldier reverts to his more moralistic, humble tone:

I wolde thou were brought to assay
 At nede, a wys counseil to rede.
 Were thou as hardy as thou art gay
 Ye were wel worthy to haue good mede.

The switch is only between these two stanzas: the language and tone of this last stanza is very close to all the preceding stanzas given to the soldier. It may be one of the reasons why Conlee hesitates to give stanza nine to the soldier. (There are, I suspect, other reasons. These will be dealt with later.)

And the final stanza of the poem, in which whoever is speaking points out that the other lives “al for mede” sits awkwardly in the mouth of the soldier. Firstly he has no need to prove that the courtier serves for material reward: the courtier has himself fully acknowledged that. And secondly, if the soldier *is* speaking it is a poor enough ending and a silly enough proof, for it suggests in fact that everyone serves “al for mede” since the acts of getting up and dressing and eating are the acts of all. Clearly there is room for wanting to question the punctuation of Kail’s version.

Kail’s version has the soldier the winner. It would appear that his final argument has silenced the courtier, and the good honesty of the soldier who demands only what he deserves has triumphed. Certainly, if Kail is right and the poem was written round 1400, and was in effect something like a propaganda poem against the self-serving flatterers in the Court (where memories of the excesses of the Court of Richard II must still have been clear enough), then the soldier’s final four stanza diatribe makes sense. Stylistically and poetically, though, it seems to make much less sense.

The courtier, “mede” of the title, is presented as more or less typical of the allegorical figure of Mede that appears, for example, in Passus II to IV of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. But here, as Simpson points out, Mede is presented in a “limited sense” (1990,44), so it is necessary to take care of making comparisons too easily. But the presence of such an allegorical figure implies a set of pre-determined images and attitudes, a set of stereotypes that writers could have depended upon as swinging into

action the moment the word was mentioned. (This is a good example of the first level of legitimation.) This kind of typification (Berger and Luckmann, 1979,53) is surely at work here: the flashy dress, “clothed in gawdy gren/ Blasande bright, embrowdid gay” (11-12); the very first comment of Mede, with its arrogant “Loo, fellow” (13), and the immediate reference to having a choice between two kinds of horses (“palfray or on stede” (14)) all quickly paint the typified Mede, rich, smug, arrogant and superior.

And yet. While there is little doubt that what the courtier says can ever be construed as worth taking seriously—at least as far as the well-running of the state is concerned—there seems to be some truth in what he says. Conlee’s version brings this out much more clearly: it is the courtier who rounds on the soldier and accuses him of wanting to wage war for profit, and if this was a reference to recent wars, then the soldier is indeed guilty of shedding Christian blood. (If Kail is correct, and this poem was written soon after the beginning of the reign of Henry IV, then war, both within the country and beyond its borders would have been against “Cristen blod.”) It is a fair retort to what was an equally vicious attack from the soldier. Accusations of being a drone, and of turning the Court into “beggar’s alley” deserve the retort it gets.

The point about Conlee’s version is that the argument seems better balanced: the soldier gets as good as he gives, and the Courtier, while for the most part little more than a standard allegorical type, nevertheless is not entirely without some sense of personality. Similarly, the accusation against the soldier of wanting war “euere-more” makes the soldier just a little more human. It also creates a consistency of tone and language for each of the arguers. The courtier’s speeches are more physical, more pictorial, full of a physical energy. They are rich with horses, courtiers, beds and boards, actions, prisons, playing, dancing, riches, men of arms, war, pillage, burning towns, getting up in the morning, dressing, eating, drinking. He is superbly materialistic, physical in his images of the world. Conlee’s version gives all those stanzas to the courtier.

The soldier's speeches tend to be more philosophical, more metaphorical. He speaks more of the abstract things: of fame, courage, prowess, deeds (in general terms, as a phenomenon), flattering and its characteristics and consequences, serving virtuous lords and getting just deserts, cowardice, being tested by real need, and so on. He uses metaphors like weather vanes and drones. In short, he comes across as bland, rather dull, and not a little self-righteous. By contrast the courtier is energetic, full of colour, and somehow, somewhere, one gets the impression that there is a smile on his face much of the time. If this were a modern text, one might suspect he was sending up the soldier, taking advantage of his dour world view to poke fun at his expense.

So the courtier has the last word: it is much more appropriate in his mouth. As an argument it is, of course, silly. But silly sits better on the courtier than on the soldier. It is more a joke than an argument; it is a leg-pull rather than the clinching point in the debate. It reveals a level of callousness in the courtier that comes as no surprise. One does not expect him to be intelligent; one does not expect sharply honed wit; and one does not get it. The fact that the courtier has the last word in no way gives him the argument. In fact, having such a last word creates a good deal of sympathy for the soldier, who clearly possesses very few goods, but at least what he does have includes a clear conscience and a rock solid character. Mede loses by ending the argument; and in Conlee's version, the soldier, too, wins the debate, but not by a diatribe against the evil of Mede, but by keeping silence.

This is forced closure at its weakest, or alternatively, at its most cunning. Status quo, strongly represented by the soldier, wins the day. Since it is almost inconceivable to imagine Mede ever winning a debate, it is not particularly important that he has the last word, particularly a last word that has him putting his foot right in it. The final comments describe *everyone* listening or reading, and that is very likely to alienate rather than impress. It is a good piece of propaganda: the courtier *appears* to win. He has all the flashiness, all the brazen honesty, all the energy to attract attention; the soldier plods along, muttering wise saws about drones and life challenges. But in the end it is his world view that is cleaner and better for the well-being of the nation.

This has been something of a rigged debate. Mede's very first words condemn him and no reader or listener could seriously have imagined that he would win. Conlee's version seems to make better sense of the whole, though: it ascribes rather more intelligence to the writer; it cleverly disguises the strong propaganda motive; and it leaves the reader justifiably indignant at the courtier's last facetious argument. One condemns the courtier, which was the point of the debate, rather than praises the soldier. Kail's version suggests a writer who did not choose to disguise the forced closure, and whose techniques of having the soldier take over the debate at the end gives to the soldier a rather self-righteous attitude, and leaves the courtier at the least in an ambivalent position. He disappears from the scene, leaving the reader with a picture of an indignant (and perfectly correct) soldier, rather than of a corrupt and callous courtier. Whatever the version, one assumes the debate was not so much to glorify soldiers as to condemn flatterers at court. The right side wins.

Conlee's version introduces more the greyness of things than does Kail's. He writes

The poem is concerned with exploring the fundamental motivations which underlie human choices and actions. It may be read on the one hand as a straightforward denunciation of do-nothing flatterers, but it may also be read as suggesting that, for all their apparent differences, the soldier and the courtier are not really so very different (1991,210).

It is possible that Conlee is rather pushing the point, for the poem as a whole is no great literary masterpiece. But it is allowing a little more sophistication into the reading of this text than does Kail's version, which in the end produces two entirely unimaginative, one-dimensional allegorical figures that arouse little interest or excitement, and who on occasion (stanzas 9 and 11) seem to be saying the wrong things. It seems unlikely that a soldier by profession would say

Thou woldest euere-more were werre
ffor profyt & pilage thou myght glene;
Cristen Blod destroyed clene
And townes brent on a glede (67-70);

or that he would appear to argue against himself by arguing that the Courtier thinks only of himself

What thou out of thy bed dost swerue[.]
 Ye clothe yow & do on youre hod
 At tyme of day they mete dost kerue (83-85).

Do soldiers not do these things?

Paradoxically, Conlee's less sharply divided polarities leave the reader with an ambiguous response: is the soldier with his pillaging and killing Christians quite as selfless as he pretends? Is he not himself a drone, destroying peace in order to make money? Despite his asserverations to the contrary, can a soldier who gets little more than thanks survive without the fruits of war? And if there are lords who accept the flattering courtier and use him well why not take the opportunity of making good for oneself? And therein seems to lie a criticism of the Court itself. Here is irresolution at its best: the conclusion brings the readers back to what is legitimised in the society, but beneath all the arguments, apparently clearly detailed for and against, there is uncertainty, a hesitancy to allow one side or other too easy a win, too obvious a defeat.

All this disappears if the poem deals with allegory and nothing else. Then it is quite clear cut and simple: doing your duty is good. If you end up killing Christians and the like, it's not your fault; it is because you are being made to do so by money-seeking power hungry people who concern themselves only with getting more than they ever deserve. These corrupt lords who accept Mede into their lives are disloyal and do not serve the king. Those who accept only the recompense they deserve serve the king with loyalty and true honesty.

It may well, as a poem, represent little more than that. But if the medieval mindset was not solely obsessed with "dualities, polarities and dichotomies" then the shifting

ambiguities of *Mede and Muche Danke* make it a text of greater interest and insight. It is at once more complex with Conlee's allocation of speeches; its forced closure is considerably weakened (which is always for the better, unless there is some deliberate satire implied); its irresolution forbids the taken-for-granted assumptions from slipping into place without at least a little nudge to push them off the straight and narrow. It is more experiential than authoritative; more recreational than didactic; more popular than official; and more spontaneous than predictable. A debate that in the end seems to suggest that courtiers and soldiers are not, in fact, too different in what they do and why, is a debate that opens up possibilities of further thought. And as such, it must rank as a successful one.

CHAPTER THREE

The Thrush and the Nightingale: *a Tyranny of Status Quo, or a Satire of Wicked Wit*

The Thrush and the Nightingale is recorded in MS Digby 86, a manuscript that contains more French than English texts, and more secular than religious poems (Conlee, 1991,238). As such, this little bird debate poem is in a most appropriate manuscript. There have been several editions of the text, but none of them presents a significantly different allocation of speeches to characters. Texts consulted for this chapter are Conlee (1991), Carleton Brown (1932), and Dickins and Wilson (1951).

The Thrush and the Nightingale has more in common with *Mede and Muche Danke* than with its more famous predecessor, *The Owl and the Nightingale*. They are both, in Davenport's term, "equal debates"; there is no connecting narrative: apart from a brief, apparently largely pointless introduction, the speeches simply alternate without comment or contextualising; they are both short; they have two very familiar "characters" who argue over a single, well established issue. They both consist of a number of stanzas, more in the genre of the ballad or the lyric than in a poetic form more appropriate to debate.

There are, however, some differences. *Mede and Muche Thanke* is not simply a surface poem: it suggests certain undercurrents of intention, certain ambiguities, and even produces two arguers who are not simply allegorical representations. In modern terms, *Mede and Muche Thanke* seems to strive for realism. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* on the other hand is very much a surface poem: it is intended to be witty rather than serious. It is a secular poem about women and about love: there is much in it that refers directly to the sexual and the physical in women. Talking birds in any culture are likely to distance any debate from even a pretence of reality (though of course what is being debated could be very real indeed). But the most significant difference comes in the way *The Thrush and the Nightingale* is debated and concluded.

Utley describes *The Thrush and the Nightingale* as “animated, dramatic, realistic and well-structured” (in Hartung, 1972, 721). Stone calls it “no more than a versified debate” (1970,70). Pearsall regards the poem as “monotonous despite its comparative brevity” (1977,98). Dickins and Wilson write

it is an excellent example of the formal debate poem, though perhaps slightly more dramatic and realistic than the majority of such poems (1951,71).

Clearly attitudes differ considerably. A poem that attracts to itself two opposing critiques is worth at least a second glance. And it is probable that such a poem lends itself to more than one interpretation. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* can certainly be interpreted in more than one way: it can be taken seriously, as another “serious” debate about the worthiness of women, presented by two tried and tested contestants: the nightingale, who stands for all that is romantic and beautiful about love and women, and who refers to them always as “leuedies”; and the thrush, general symbol for contention, who refers to them as “wimen”. Having said that, it has to be noted that the arguments of the thrush are, in many ways, the arguments of the established Church, and of many of its most respected writers and forefathers: no less a being than St

Paul, no less awesome a saint than Augustine; no less respectable a scholar than St Jerome, and such deeply revered books of the Bible as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes all attest to the danger and fickleness of women. It cannot be entirely ignored that such arguments with such respectable origins are in the mouth of the symbol of contention. This may lead to seeing *The Thrush and the Nightingale* in another light altogether: taking the poem seriously could, from that viewpoint be a mistake.

To make comparisons between this poem and *The Owl and the Nightingale* is unfair. While its creation may have been inspired by this great poem, it makes no pretence to emulate it: apart from the two bird debaters, they have nothing in common. But *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, like *The Owl and the Nightingale*, more than adequately serves the purpose for which one might assume it was written. Deep in the tradition established by French and Latin models, this *estrif* surely makes no claim to be taken seriously, despite its “strong legal colouration” (Utley in Hartung 1970,721). It is a trivial poem, but it not necessarily unimportant or bad because of that.

This debate about the goodness or otherwise of women is rigged from the start: if Medea has little chance of winning a contest, the thrush is even less likely to emerge victor, if the context is secular and sexual (as it surely must be). The poem might indeed reinforce the notion that debate poems were more about rhetoric than winning, except that rhetoric is not especially powerful in this poem either. If the poem is taken as a serious debate, given the final clinching argument, which clinches nothing at all as far as debating is concerned, the poem may be better characterised as a poem in celebration of the Virgin. Conlee, who appears to take the poem very seriously makes this point: The poet, he suspects, “probably intends to venerate the Blessed Virgin more than to praise the goodness of women in general” (1991,238).

The theme of the poem is the worth of women. Here is a summary. There are some differences among editors in the allocation of certain lines. These are referred to in the summary where appropriate. (Conlee presents the poem in sixteen stanzas rather than the more traditional 32, simply by combining every two stanzas into one.)

Stanzas 1-2 (in Conlee)

Summer's come; birds are singing; I heard two arguing about women. One praised them for their gentility; the other wanted to shame them. The nightingale wanted to protect women; the thrush dismissed them as deceivers, fickle and false. Better they had never been born. (Conlee ascribes the second half of his stanza 2 to the thrush.)

Stanza 3

N: It is shameful to attack women. They are gracious. I advise you to stop this. They gladden men's hearts when men are angry. They greet them with love games. The world wouldn't exist if it weren't for women.

Stanza 4

T: Can't praise them; they're treacherous and false of thought. King Alexander censured them.

Stanza 5

N: I could show you a thousand good ladies. They're modest, mild and a delight to embrace in our arms.

Stanza 6

T: I've had experience of women: they'll leap into bed for the slightest reward. Look at Adam: he found them wicked.

Stanza 7

N: You're wrong. It is the greatest joy when ladies entwine their men in their arms.

Stanza 8

T: You're wrong. Sir Gawain—whom Jesus Christ gave valour—is my witness.³

Stanza 9

N: I have known only kindness and graciousness from ladies. They tell me of their joys and longing. Your words will be spread abroad.

Stanza 10

T: My words are not new. I'll tell you of their law, which you do not want to acknowledge. Remember Constantine's queen—she fell in love with a cripple.

Stanza 10

N: You're wrong. Ladies are brighter in the shade than the sun when it dawns. If you come here they'll shut you into prison for your slander.

Stanza 11

T: The Bible tells of how many women brought men low, like Samson. Women were the worst thing Jesus created that is accounted precious in Paradise.

Stanza 12

³ Editors differ at this point in the poem. I am following Conlee who gives ll85-96 to the thrush, and ll97-108 to the nightingale. Others, notably Brown, and Dickins and Wilson, give the thrush ll85-93 and 109-120 and the nightingale 97-108. Conlee writes that his choice of division "is the only one which doesn't violate the correspondence of one stanza to one speech, a pattern which is consistent throughout the poem" (1991,243).

N: Ladies are lovely: they heal better than any doctor.

Stanza 13

T: You're wrong to value women so. There are not five in a hundred who are pure, and do not bring men to disgrace. You just won't see this.

Stanza 14

N: Your words have confounded you. What about the Virgin Mary? She was without sin. For your slanders I ban you from these woods.

Stanza 15

T: Oops, I've shot my mouth. I've been truly beaten. I promise I'll never say another nasty thing about women. I'm out of here.

It could be argued that a poem that sits so lightly on the intellect should not be taken too seriously. And it hardly needs pointing out that, firstly, the thrush has by far the better marshalled arguments (though the less attractive); secondly, the nightingale has no real argument at all (perhaps); thirdly, the clinching argument of the nightingale clinches absolutely nothing (at least, not intellectually); fourthly, the thrush could easily have countered this absurd response in a number of effective ways (but did not, for good reason).

If a serious perspective is taken, then the theme might be described as conventional, and nothing specifically new on the theme is introduced or discussed. It is indeed “monotonous” as Pearsall would have it. In his book *Chaucer Sources and Backgrounds*, Robert Miller points out that the antifeminist tradition is not a “medieval invention”, but that so much had come to be written on it, especially by a male dominated Church, that it had assumed “the status of ‘authority’” (1977,399). Jankyn’s book was no doubt a not uncommon text.. But if the thrush is overtly antifeminist, then it needs to be noted, at least in passing, that the nightingale is not much better: her picture of woman as being man’s plaything is hardly superior to the thrush’s attitude. Indeed, if it were not for the fact that twice in the poem (lines 14 and 49) the feminine pronoun is used to refer to the nightingale, it would not be difficult to assume the bird to be male, because the arguments she offers are so overtly masculine in the picture of woman that they create.

The thrush is well versed in the antifeminist arguments. The males damaged by women are part of the common folklore: Alexander, Adam, Gawain, Constantine, Sampson. The Bible is referred both directly (Sampson) and indirectly (the curious comment about Jesus creating woman as the worst treasure in heaven). What the thrush is doing is employing levels two and three of legitimation. There is a strong element here of generally accepted folklore: “We all know what happened to Adam, and so it happens to all”; as well as a recourse to the level of theory. It is difficult to argue against the Bible, and, one assumes, against anything Jesus was apparently responsible for. Partly because of this, his arguments are convincing; indeed, the nightingale has nothing to say against them, except “þou art wod” (73), “þou hauest wrong” (121), and in the second half of the poem, starts to issue increasingly sinister threats:

Fowel, þou sitest on hasel-bou,
 Pou lastest hem, þou hauest wou—
 Þi word shal wide springe!” (Conlee 106-108)

Come þou heuere in here londe
 Hy shulen don þe in prisoun stronge
 And þer þou shalt abide. (127-129)

ffowel, þou rewest al mi þohut;⁴
 Þou does euele, ne geineþ nohut,
 Ne do þou so nammore!” (154-156)

It is the nightingale who presents one of the best examples of forced closure. Her offering of the Virgin Mary as an example of a good woman represents an argument at the fourth level of legitimation. This involves the reference to the society’s overarching symbols, to argue against which is to invite ostracism and rejection. It would

⁴ In her anthology of medieval texts, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, Alcuin Blamires (1992) offers *þi þohut* for Conlee’s *mi þohut*, who translates this line as “Bird, you make me very sad”; with her emendation, Blamires translates as “You’ll regret your opinions.” Brown (1932) has the same reading as Conlee, which is the reading in the original MS. While I have no difficulty in accepting Conlee’s version, Blamire’s emendation certainly makes this comment of the nightingale somewhat more sinister, and better suited to my reading of the poem.

have been quite impossible to argue that the Virgin was not good (“She was pregnant before she married; her Son’s comments to and about her are hardly complimentary and loving” etc), and it would have been difficult to ask for other examples of good women: such a demand might in itself imply that the Virgin was not good enough (“Oh, so the blessed Virgin is not good enough for you? You want more?”) The thrush, wise and expedient, shuts up and gets out as quickly as he can. Thomas Reed comments

The example of one spectacularly virtuous woman proves neither that there are no shrews among a thousand nor more than four additional saints among a hundred. And since, in the course of her demonstrably hyperbolic philogyny, the Nightingale never invokes the example of Mary prior to the Thrush’s insistence that she hasn’t spoken a word of truth, it’s hard to see how she deserves the victory. In short, the Nightingale’s triumph is, even in terms of the warped logic of the poem, totally irrational (1990,207).

The victory is only “totally irrational” if it is not seen as the supreme exercise of legitimation. “My view is right because it reflects the reality that we all hold to be true.” The nightingale, well aware of the legitimation that the thrush has been offering—good arguments, also well-substantiated by the common world-view—knows that there is, in fact, no way out but by forcing closure. And that requires level four legitimation: the blessed Virgin is about as powerful as any silencing argument can be. It is not longer relevant whether there are more or other good women: the Virgin is enough. Conlee suggests that the thrush’s “about face” is “unexpected” (1991,237), but in the light of the Nightingale’s devious and inherently dangerous reference to the Virgin, it is nothing of the sort. You do not argue against the nation’s most deeply rooted beliefs, symbols and paradigms. In cases like this, nightingales never lose.

In such serious interpretation of the poem the nightingale becomes a thoroughly nasty creature. She has all the characteristics of a modern fascist: firstly, she has no real argument to offer for what she believes (“Women just *are* good, helpful, etc. We know these things.”); secondly, the assumption that if you do argue against their

world view you must be mad or stupid; thirdly, there is the increasing use of threat against the arguer when the arguments become too good; and in the end, there is the removal of the opposition (in this case, the opposition wisely removed himself). And while the thrush may mount arguments that are predictable and misogynist, the nightingale's continued insistence that women are good, loving and so on is an argument not so much about the purity of women as women, but about their goodness to and for men. In fact the nightingale's references to women are often overtly physical and sexual: "Mid gome hy cunne hem grete" (33); And swettoust þing in armes to wre/ þe mon þat holdeþ hem in gle" (57-58), "Hy liuieþ in longinge" (104). To offer the Virgin Mary as an example of a good woman in the light of some of the qualities the Nightingale attributes to women makes her argument even more questionable. There is a kind of duplicity in her arguments that is very beguiling, but badly dishonest.

But *The Thrush and the Nightingale* can be argued about from a very different perspective. Its provenance is important here: MS Digby 86 is

a trilingual miscellany which also includes such works as the *Lai du cor*, *Dame Sirith* and the Middle English debate *In a Pestri*....It contains more works in French than in English, and more secular than religious ones (Conlee 1991,238).

While the Dominican friars of Worcestershire were responsible for its survival, and thought, probably, that the poem served as a paean of praise to the Blessed Virgin, it can be argued that *The Thrush and the Nightingale* is really not to be taken seriously at all, and it is instead a witty little piece of satirical fun. The thrush, for example, produces antifeminist arguments that in more serious contexts would easily have won debates: it represents much that could be called orthodox status quo beliefs. The argument that beats him is one that hoists him on his own petard: to argue that women are trouble is to argue against the teachings of Christianity in which a woman is given pride of place. The thrush bolts—how much like a priest he may have sounded can only be speculated upon. But the winning of the argument by the nightingale is, from this perspective, amusing: firstly because it confounds an

antifeminist tradition (and presents an example that cannot ever be denied), and secondly, given the very secular comments made by the nightingale, the conclusion has an element of real absurdity about it. It was guaranteed to send the misogynist packing so that the more earthy, happy folk could get down to proving the truth of the nightingale's assertions. In this view of the poem, the nightingale appears to be laughing up its metaphorical sleeve at the thrush who hurls examples at the nightingale with increasing vehemence, while the nightingale makes only the vaguest generalisations in return. It is almost as though she knows what she is going to say at the end, and until then, well, let's see how angry we can get the thrush.

The first stanza of the poem has a conventional springtime opening, similar to a lyric in MS Harley in whose first stanza there is reference to spring, birds singing, and in particular, nightingales and thrushes:

Lenten ys come wiþ loue to toune,
 wiþ blosmen & wiþ briddes rounne,
 þat al þis blisse bryngeþ;
 dayes-eyes in þis dales,
 notes suete of nyhtegales,
 vch foul song singeþ.
 Þrestelcoc þrestelcoc him þreteþ oo;
 away is huere wynter woo,
 when woderoue springeþ (from Browne, 1932, 145).

Whether one influenced the other is here irrelevant (Harley was written after Digby, but a lyric like *Lenten ys come with love to toune* could easily have existed long before Harley saw the light); the point to make is that a particular tone is set from the beginning, and it is a very secular, happily trivial one. The debate here is probably less important than the overall tone, which is, despite or because of the anti-woman content, a very sensuous one. Women are “hende of corteisy” (26); “Hy gladieþ hem þat beþ wroþe” (31); “Mid gome hy cunne hem grete” (33); they are “feire and briht on hewe” (40), “of herte meke and milde” (54), *Þe swettoust þing in armes of wre| Þe mon þat holdeþ hem in gle*” (58-59). The thrush, no less, reports “Ich habbe wiþ hem in boure i-be| I haued al mine wille” (62-63); theirs is “þe swetteste driwerie| And

mest hoe counnen of curteisie” (76-77). The nightingale repeats the image of women in men’s arms:

De mest murþ þat mon haueþ here
 Wenne hoe is maked to his fere
 In armes for to wende (79-81).

There are no women who are not full of

...hendiness and curteysi
 And ioye hy gunnen me bringe.
 Of muchele murþe hy telleþ me (101-103).

And so on. It is impossible to say which of the two birds speaks each of the above, and it does not matter. By the end of the poem, one cannot fail to be aware of a strong, rich sensuous tone that pervades almost every stanza. The images one is left with are of beautiful women aching to give men what they desire and twining themselves in men’s arms.

The poem rejects with conviction the notion that women are “swikele,” “false of þohut,” “ountrewe,” “wycke and ille,” and that they “bringeþ men to shonde.” This rejection is not because of the example of the splendid Blessed Virgin: this was a fairly conventional counter-argument, in any case, and it is used here merely to shut the thrush up. It is rejected in almost every stanza. The poem in the end invites men and women to enjoy the pleasures of love as described and revealed consistently by the nightingale throughout the poem.. The first line makes this clear enough: “Somer is comen wiþ loue to toun,” and the poet is not referring to Christian love. At another level, the poem aims a carefully and most cunningly concealed dart at the teachings of the Church through a satirical representation of the tight, humourless narrowness of the Church’s teachings about love and sex. The thrush is a boring old curmudgeon; the nightingale a smoothly sensuous siren. The thrush represents the worst excesses of the Church’s misogyny; the nightingale urges a new sexual

freedom. And the Virgin Mary provides a good enough mask behind which to enjoy the “swettoust þing in armes to wre.”

Reed writes

In its argumentative deadlock, maintained for a fair while in spite of the thrush’s statistical advantage, it acknowledges that earthly opinions and actions are all too often founded on shaky and cripplingly biased perceptions (1990,208).

It is difficult to believe that a poem that reads more like a lyric than a debate poem can have such deeply serious themes. The only cripplingly biased perceptions, the thrush’s, are, by the thrush himself, rejected in the end.

Conlee, in a note on the last stanza suggests that the poem has no “concluding framework” (248). On the contrary, the thrush’s formal rejection of his misogyny is precisely the right conclusion for this kind of poem:

Hout of þis londe will I te
Ne rech I neuere weder I fle;
A-wai ich wille driue ((190-2).

The thrush is not simply taking himself away from “þe dale”; he is removing from the scene of summer, singing birds, new flowers and lots of love, his destructive and paradoxically prurient misogyny, so that men and women may love each other in the way their maker intended. It is a solid defeat for the antifeminists; it is a victory for lovers.

There is no irresolution here. Taken in this way, *The Thrush and the Nightingale* is quite clear from the beginning. The arguments of the thrush have the stamp of approval from the hierarchy; the nightingale’s stance has the support of men and women who delight in their natural urges. The contextual feel of lyric rather than serious debate poem removes any potential irresolution, and the forced closure here is

not symptomatic of the abuse of power, or an indication of defeat thwarted, or even “a neat if somewhat miraculous conclusion” (Reed, 1990,208). It is a twist, a clever if somewhat obvious way of shutting up someone who insists that the Bible proves the infidelity of women. It is level four in the legitimation process, and here it is used in jest. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* is a lyrical, satirical little poem.

To take it otherwise, is to turn it into something poorly structured and reflective of a tyrannical status quo that even in the framework of summery love and chirpy birds seeks to deny the right of ordinary human beings to make love. Using the Virgin Mary as the clinching argument merely diverts attention away from women as love objects (despite the nightingale’s liberal use of such images and ideas) to women as holy and, well, virginal. Taking this conclusion seriously does not prove nightingale’s standpoint true: it proves something else altogether. Something less charming, less sensuous, less fun-filled than what every aspect of this poem seems to glorify.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale: *Altercatio Interrupta—More Than Just Debate*

The Book of Cupid, God of Love or The Cuckoo and the Nightingale was written, it is assumed, by Sir John Clanvowe, close friend of Geoffrey Chaucer's, and knight in the court of Richard II (thus Conlee (1991), though Utley (1972) notes that one Sir Thomas Clanvowe, son of the aforementioned Clanvowe is more favoured. The poem as text remains profoundly unmoved by these debates). The text exists in five manuscripts: Conlee's text is based on the Tanner MS; Garbáty's (1984) on the Cambridge University Library Ff.1.6. I will be referring to these texts in this chapter. The other three MSS are in the Bodleian Library: MS Fairfax 16; MS Arch Selden B24; and MS Bodley 638. It is the University of Cambridge library MS that includes the phrase "Explicit Clanvowe" at the end of the poem. It was only in the nineteenth century that *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* was no longer regarded as being a work of Geoffrey Chaucer's. It bears similarities to Chaucer's work: its witty style; its treatment of love and lovers; its refreshing sense of irreverence to stylistic and genre conventions; and the fact that it appeared in several MSS containing some of Chaucer's early works. Now part of the Chaucer Apocrypha, the poem has an

originality and freshness that certainly make it a far closer companion to Chaucer's works than they do to the other three debates under discussion here.

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale is more than a debate poem: unlike the other two studied thus far, the poem has something that could be called plot; there is a clearly described framework surrounding the debate itself; the author/narrator intrudes into the story; and the conclusion of the poem is more concerned with the future of the writer's love life than with who won the debate. It has a complexity that takes it out of the stereotypical "debate" poem format and pushes it closer to "story". Forced closure takes on a new meaning in this poem, and the irresolution in this debate is absolutely patent. Here is a brief summary of the poem.

Stanzas 1-7

The poet muses on love and on how it can be an agent for both great good and great pain and suffering.

Stanzas 8-17

The poet speaks of his present state: he is feverish and cannot sleep. It is May and even though he is old and infirm, he cannot help feeling the urges that come when Love has fired his dart. He remembers how lovers say that it is a good sign to hear the nightingale before the cuckoo, so he goes out into a beautiful spring field, and sits down by a river. He is overwhelmed by the sounds of water and birdsong.

Stanzas 18-22

So much so that he falls asleep, and immediately hears the cuckoo's song. He is much saddened by this, especially as just after that he hears a nightingale. But as he lies there, he hears the two birds engaged in debate.

Stanzas 23-43

A debate takes place. The cuckoo contends that love brings only grief, pain, disease and unhappiness, and that the nightingale's call sounds as though it is saying "Kill, kill!" The nightingale believes that love brings joy, peace, delight and harmony, and that its shout of "Kill" is directed at those who refuse to worship the god of love.

Stanzas 44-58

The poet, so outraged at the cuckoo's argument leaps up and chases it away. The nightingale thanks him for his service, and promises him that next May he will hear the nightingale first. The poet is also warned not to believe anything the cuckoo says. The nightingale flies off and gathers all the birds together in order to call a parliament to pass judgement on the cuckoo. This parliament will meet on the morning of St Valentine's Day, by the chamber window of the Queen at Woodstock. Then the nightingale sings so loudly on a nearby tree that the poet wakes up from his dream.

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale has similarities with Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*. In both the poet, in a state of some anguish, falls asleep as is confronted with love in its contrasting manifestations. In the latter poem the dreamer enters the temple of Venus and discovers the kind of love the cuckoo decries; and then he witnesses the parliament, which reveals the kind of love the nightingale represents. However, he awakes without any promises, and without much hope: he returns to his books to see if he can learn more about love. (The silly man has missed the point of the dream entirely: love is to be found in the doing, not in the thinking of it. Chaucer wonderfully portrays the narrator as a rather slow, dour creature, who, one suspects, will never understand the meaning of love.)

And then in *Troilus and Criseyde* young Troilus visits the temple of love, and uses the kind of language to describe the effects of love that the cuckoo would have understood:

“I have herd told, pardieux, of youre lyvyng,
Ye lovers, and youre lewed observaunces,
And which a labour folk han in wynnyng
Of love, and in the kepyng which doutaunces;
And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces.
O veray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye!
Ther nys nat oon kan by other be.” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book I, 197-203; in
Benson, 1987,476).

Troilus himself is smitten by the god of love who, in all three of these poems, is presented as a god who is by no means all benevolent. The threats of death and punishment by this god of love upon those who refuse to succumb to or acknowledge him strikes one as paradoxical to say the least.

It is, of course an accurate portrayal of love. The clearly visible signs of pain and suffering in lovers who lose their loved one; are away from their loved one; or do not have a loved one create an aspect of love that directly challenges the apparent

benefits, joys and delights of actually being in love. It is a common representation of love, and few will sensibly argue that only one side and not the other is accurate.

A debate about love, then, that is divided between its apparent advantages and disadvantages can only remain unresolved at best, or forcibly closed at the end in favour of one side or the other. *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* shows the irresolution and the forced closure in debate poems more sharply than in many others. There is no winner here: there cannot be. In both *The Thrush and the Nightingale* and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* the unpopular side takes its leave ignominiously: either voluntarily, head hanging in shame; or in terror as it is chased away by the ignorant who are unable to weigh up both sides of an argument, and cannot tolerate the ambiguity of paradox.. More about this ignorant one later.

The debate itself in *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* takes up twenty-one stanzas of fifty-eight. It has no development: both the cuckoo and the nightingale repeat the same point over and over in different language. The cuckoo gets straight to the point: the nightingale, with “many a nyce queinte cry” (123 in Garbáty) says “*ocy! ocy!*” (124). And what is that supposed to mean? The nightingale’s response offers little comfort to the cuckoo, and in fact does little for the nightingale’s good thoughts about love. The cry is not denied, but the ones to be killed are made clear:

That mene I that I wolde, wonder fayn,
That alle they were shamfully y-slayn
That menen aught ayeines love amis...

For who that wol the god of love not serve,
I dar wel say, is worthy for to sterve;
And for that skil *ocy! ocy!* I grede (128-135).

This desire to see dead anyone who says anything against love, or who will not serve love is, of course, not to be taken seriously, but it is hardly loving, and it would seem to serve the cuckoo’s line of argument far better than the nightingale’s. One is

reminded of the threats of the nightingale in *The Thrush and the Nightingale* against the thrush, and one begins to sense an arrogance, an incipient tyranny in this god and his minions. “Obey or else...” is not a command of love. As the cuckoo points out, this is a “queint lawe” that “every wight shal love or be to-drawe!” (134-5). He is, of course, absolutely right. And his comment that he has no intention of dying, nor, while living, “in loves yok to drawe” (140) makes him sound like a bird of eminent sense, describing a life in which one is in full control, and the slave of no one or nothing. Conlee points out that the yoke metaphor is often used in a positive sense, as in the “blissful bondage” of marriage. He cites occurrences of this image in *The Clerk’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale* (1991,259), but it is clear that the cuckoo has taken the metaphor and given it decidedly negative connotations. Of course, people in love would argue the contrary: the cuckoo is little more than a boring killjoy. The poem, which is part of what is called the courtly tradition, is about the joy of love, not about the value of being rational and level-headed. It is a great crime being rational in the company of people in love, or of people desiring to be in love. So on the one hand there is no irresolution here: the debate is a pretence which the representative of love had won before it began because she is likely to be echoing the thoughts and feelings of most of her audience. On the other hand, the arguments against love are by no means absurd, and have in all probability been experienced by lovers at one time or another. Irresolution runs high in a debate that has no declared conclusion, and that has two debaters whose arguments are equally powerful.

The Cuckoo and the Nightingale shows the development of the debate into a more “dionysian” mode. This is not a didactic poem; nothing is being taught; nothing is presented in such a way as to make people think. And because of that, the very tone, the very style of the debate shifts away from its probably didactic origins into what seems not very far away from what in modern literature one might call dialogue. The voice of the individual speaker is heard as being more than a disembodied voice that presents the case without any sense of persona. In *Mede and Muche Thanke* the two speakers present cases; they are not, in the end, convincing as characters. In a poem like the *Parlement of Foules* the debaters seem to engage in real talking; the

interruption of the common birds; the free flow of chat and backchat gives to the debate there a vibrancy missing from many of the debate poems. *Parlement* is a very sophisticated example in the hands of an imaginative writer. But *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* is not too different. The cuckoo is not just an allegory for anti-love; the nightingale one for love. They most clearly do not like each other. They wrangle rather than debate, and the outcome, if this were a debate in a more objective context, is in no way indicated from the way the poem begins.

In fact, as the poem is structured, one may be forgiven for thinking that the debate may end up differently. The first seven stanzas are presented before the “narrator” formally introduces himself, but when he does, he makes it quite clear that this is very much his opinion, his experience. (“I speke this of feling, trewely” (36)) And after a brief nod at Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* (a story that shows love in its two opposing manifestations) the narrator presents love in a clearly polarised picture. On the one hand, love “can make of lowe hertes hie” (3), and “harden hertes he can maken free” (5). It can make “seke folk ful hole, fresshe and sounde” (7), “distroyen vyce” (14), and “proude hertes he can make agryse” (15). On the other hand, love can make high hearts “lowe, and lyke for to dye” (4), and whole hearts “he can make seke” (8), “he can binden...What he wol have bounden” (9-10); “he can make of wyse folk ful nyce” (13) In short,

...al that ever he wol he may;
 Ageines him three Dar no wight say nay.
 For he can gladde and greve whom him lyketh;
 And, who that he wol, he laugheth or he syketh;
 And most his might he sheweth ever in May (16-20).

Noticeable in this concise rendering of love’s characteristics are, firstly, that the list is presented in an entirely balanced way, with no hint of favour or support being shown to one side of its nature or another. This is statement of fact: an audience would nod its way through this introduction agreeing that such a portrayal is quite fair. It is indeed presented in a way that seems to anticipate no objection. (This is level one of

legitimation: love has two opposing sets of characteristics: love is a joyful liberation from the mundane, a time of bliss and complete happiness; love is a potentially awful and devastating lord and master. That's the way it is.) The final summary quoted above provides, within the very sentence structure, a clear sense of balance "gladde and greve", "laugheth...syketh", "joye...moringe" (24), "ese...grevaunce" (29). Clearly, you are unlikely to have one without the other. In every instance of love, there is something of the cuckoo and something of the nightingale. This is all so true it is platitudinous: such comments about love were probably on the same level as the present day sentimentalities that begin "Love is...(never having to say you're sorry; sharing the last slice of quiche, and so on, ad nauseam)".

Secondly, this tight little introduction summarises, accurately and fully, the content of the ensuing debate. The views of both the cuckoo and the nightingale are presented without favour or bias. What the narrator dreams is, at least at first, what he already thinks about love. But at the end of this section (stanzas six and seven) the image of love is one that the cuckoo would endorse, rather than the nightingale. And, worse, the context is clearly described: in May, when the fires are up, the negative side of love is paramount (one might have assumed the positive side would have been): in this "sesoun so greet" there is nevertheless a longing that brings "hevinesse" "greet seknesse,| And al for lak of that that they desyre", and "greet distresse" (25-35). And this of course is not only what the cuckoo would agree with; it is what the cuckoo represents. The narrator, despite his age, longs for love, desires to hear the nightingale (ie fall happily in love), because he himself is experiencing only the bad side of love at the beginning of the poem (and one may argue at the end: the nightingale's promise is only in a dream: it may be a good example of wish fulfilment at its best).

The narrator's relative impartiality is quickly destroyed in the dream. His unequivocal support for and obedience to the nightingale's god of love is clear from the start: the cuckoo and his voice are at once both described as "lewde" (90, 94), and he chides

the “sory bird” (90). Immediately after that, the nightingale’s voice is described as “clere” (99), and the bird itself as “goode nightingale” (101).

Perhaps the most fascinating part of this particular debate is, in fact, the role of the narrator. Relatively neutral—at least intellectually—in his waking life, he becomes a passionate supporter of the nightingale in the dream. And that is strange, given the fact that his life has shown that love does not merit such blind support—in fact, he has experiential evidence enough to show just how painful serving love can be. Spearing makes this point very well:

the aged lover who is the poem’s narrator is a violent partisan on behalf of that very God of Love of whose cruelty his own life gives evidence; and his inability to tolerate an opposite point of view, like the nightingale’s similar intolerance, only proves the truth of the cuckoo’s assertion that “Love hath no reson but his wille” (1976,179).

Bolton may describe the love being celebrated in this poem as “exquisite, refined and ennobling” (1970, 325-6), but the nightingale, as in *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, is not an especially pleasant creature, and the cuckoo, like the thrush, has a good argument (indeed a better one) despite the smooth and seductive talk of his opponent. In this poem, the opposition’s good argument is all the more clearly emphasised by the content of the introductory stanzas, and by the loveless, long-suffering life of the narrator, scarred as it is by the God of Love whose “wille” is enough to explain what he does. I used the word “fascist” in the previous chapter to describe the nightingale’s behaviour; here, the word is no less apt. And it is further reinforced by watching one of love’s blind devotees attempting violently to destroy the opposition in the service of the God:

...I sterte up anon,
And to the broke I ran, and gat a stoon,
And at the Cukkow hertely I caste;
And he, for drede, fley away ful faste;
And glad was I when that he was a-goon (216-220).

For this good noble act he gets a patronising pat on the head in the form of a vague promise of some future reward. Love is not shown at its best in this debate, nor I suspect was it ever intended to. A look at the language of the debate will clarify that further.

Clearly, the god of love is no god of peace. Reference has already been made to the violent threats the nightingale makes to anyone who dares to condemn love or refuse to serve him. In fact, despite the beautiful descriptions of love in her speeches, there is always an undertone of menace: references to those “shamfully y-slayn” and “worthy for to sterve” have already been made (see p.38). But there are similar threats: “The god of love ne let thee never y-thee!” (187); “And, *whom him liketh* joye y-nough hem sendeth” (195) (and what of those whom him liketh not?). even the lines

In that beleve I wol both live and deye
And, Cukkow, *so rede I thou do*, y-wis (162-3)

contain the veiled threat par excellence. This is the language of intolerance, as are the references to the cuckoo being mad or stupid: “thou art out of they minde” (146); “thou art wors a thousand-fold than wood” (188). The final trick of bursting into tears and talking of broken hearts is the familiar recourse to emotional blackmail, a trick well-known, one has to say, to many who serve the god of love.

What is interesting about the speeches of the cuckoo is that they are relatively free from insults against the nightingale. Apart from the accusation that her cry is “nyce, queinte” (123), the thrush attacks love, not the nightingale. He does not suggest a meaning for the nightingale’s cry “*ocy, ocy*”, but let’s the nightingale do it all herself—and not make a very good job of it. In fact, the cuckoo is scrupulously fair, at one stage he even says, “Nightingale, thou spekest wonder fayre” (166). His suggestion that if the nightingale herself were for a while far from her loved one, she

too would feel as the other forsaken ones do, is greeted by bluster and threat, and with a reply that does not in any way respond to what is, surely, a telling argument.

However, the cuckoo's perspective on love is as one-sided as that of the nightingale's, and in the end, there can be no genuine winner of this debate between equals. The result is forced closure at its most literal, and the irresolution, so clearly stated in the introductory stanzas, has not in any way been put to rest. The nightingale wins with the help of an impassioned, equally intolerant, supporter, stung into action by the pitiful tears and breaking heart of his heroine; the debate is forgotten, the cuckoo, more polite, more thoughtful, more intelligent in his arguments, has been effectively silenced. The nightingale, however, remains unsatisfied, and determines to pursue the cuckoo even further by summoning a parliament to pass judgement on the bird who dared to challenge the god of love. (It is probably going too far to suggest that behind this portrayal of the nightingale there sits a rabid antifeminist who, despite all his attempts to give the bird the right arguments, nevertheless creates a thoroughly objectionable creature. This writer has not been able to get into the mind of a woman, that much is certain. Or, as the sexist might argue, he has done it very well indeed.)

Yes, that is all too serious. Surely, *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* is nothing more than a dream vision love poem with all the trimmings: birds, St Valentine's Day, spring in May, and the victory of love. So let it rest. Perhaps Bolton is right; perhaps Garbáty's description of this poem as "a light-hearted and pleasant debate poem" (1984,620) is, after all, closer to the truth. But the subtext is irresistible, and the evidence of its presence difficult to argue against. Love as a human phenomenon is not easily defined, and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* could well be suggesting just that. There can be no dichotomy or polarity here: love is just too messy to be neatly classified. And its tyranny over even rational minds is well documented. The narrator, on awakening, is aware of the song of the nightingale, as he had been promised. But the greater promise will only be fulfilled a year hence. Another year of being without love. Some promise.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Debate of the Body and Soul: *A Descent into Meaninglessness*

A modern play exists in which two characters, throughout the entire play, stay on the stage talking, haranguing each other, mouthing platitudes and waiting, waiting for the arrival of someone or something that, it is perpetually hoped, will bring closure to their unfulfilled expectations. But by the end of the play, Godot has not arrived.

There are many different attempted explanations of the word Godot: one of them is that it is Beckett's derisive making diminutive of the word God. *En Attendant Godot*, or *Waiting for Godot* was originally termed theatre of the absurd, but after decades of modernity, in which people have watched the promises of various kinds of glorious futures collapse into dust, and the grand narratives play themselves out in desperate exhaustion, the play is no longer at all absurd; it has become painfully realistic.

Estragon and Vladimir are familiar characters: they may even echo our own disillusionment, our own pathetic belief that the promises politicians and other leaders make will one day come true. But Estragon and Vladimir are doomed, doomed to a perpetual purgatory of waiting, blaming each other, mouthing platitudes, and helpless to do anything for themselves. They are the living dead.

In a post-modern novel—one of the great novels of this decade—two men, killed in an aeroplane blown up by terrorists high over the English Channel, discover themselves not dead, but falling to earth, apparently alive, at least in some way or another:

‘To be born again,’ sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, ‘first you have to die...To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly...How to ever smile again, if first you won’t cry: How to win the darling’s love, mister, without a sigh?’ ..Just before dawn one winter’s morning, New Year’s Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky...(Rushdie, 1988,3).

The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie tells the utterly bizarre, and equally absurd story of two dead men living again and trying to survive in London. It also intermingles the story of the origin of Islam in an overtly mocking manner. It is an unrealistic novel in any traditional sense of the concept “realistic novel”, but it is read, understood and quickly accepted by its readers for being what it is: a superb novel in the post-modern mode, and it is to be seen and accepted in that light and in that light only. The fascination with life after death, with souls and bodies talking and being active, continues in the literature of English (William Golding’s *Freefall* is another novel with a similar theme). It is possible that the modern reader’s acceptance and understanding of this life after death scenario is different from the medieval reader’s; but both readers are quite capable of coming to terms with the patent surrealism of the story.

In *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* two aspects of a human being, soul and body, debate about who really is to blame for their being in mortal danger of immortal torture and punishment. It makes no realistic sense, not even, one fervently hopes, to its contemporary readers. To the modern reader, who finds Rushdie a great writer of these times, it is quite easy to get hold of the idea of a soul chatting to its body. If you can take two men falling from an aeroplane and somehow living on in London you can take most things about life after death. And it is also theatre of the absurd: as body and soul await the judgement, terrified, panic stricken, and eventually, filled

with remorse, a judgement they both know to be inevitable, and not at all in their favour, they argue over whose fault it is that the life lived by the two of them was such a disaster. It is in every sense except one a pointless debate: whoever wins makes no difference whatever to the eventual outcome of their imminent eternal damnation. Unlike Estragon and Vladimir, their waiting is not in vain: but their dialogue is no less pointless for that. There are almost nostalgic recollections about all the beautiful, pleasurable things of the past, now gone forever, but which were responsible for the very present predicament; there are accusations about the lack of control over the one by the other (since the one was immortal and the other not, it seems only fair to accept no blame for careless or selfish behaviour if one's immortal partner said nothing at any time); there are counter accusations about not doing what ought to have been done; there are earthy insults.

Meaningless in every sense except one: and that one is possibly the most difficult for the secular modern mind to get full hold of: clearly the intention behind such a text, irrespective of its tone, style, cleverness, originality or whatever, is the fact that it had an important religious and didactic message: live like a Christian (which means here live like the orthodox, all-powerful church tells you to live) or die to eternal punishment (a rather nice polarity which seems to ignore any possible existence of Purgatory). Unfortunately, the writer of this particular version of *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* created such a fascinating body who argues against the soul with such conviction and power, that in the end, all the writer can do is force closure; impose legitimation of the most powerful kind; and end the whole thing with a vision of devils and punishment that simply puts an end to any further rational or intellectual thinking, let alone debate. One must assume his contemporary readers were suitably humbled and sobered up by this conclusion of obscenely orgasmic punishments: one would like to hope that some of them roared with laughter at this *Satanic Verses* like ending; one would love to know if any contemporary reader actually dared to think that this interpretation of the Gospels was in itself more satanic than Christian. One can be certain that if anyone did think that, he kept it well to himself. And one is reminded at the very end of the poem of how the human mind, irrespective of what

time or place it may exist, can with ease hold two diametrically opposed ideas at the same time and be quite unaware of the glaring contradiction.

This version of *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* exists in a number of MSS, and there are varying degrees of similarity and difference among them. Garbáty's edition (the one being referred to in all line references in this chapter) is based on BL Addit. 37787. Conlee points out how many extant versions of *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* there are in existence, and states that this is clear evidence of the popularity of this particular theme. Ackerman agrees:

...this theme, together with the debate between Summer and Winter, was the most popular and widespread of all the debate topics exploited by medieval authors (1962,542).

That may be so, but its many surviving versions could also attest to the fact that it appealed to the people who held major control over what in the end came to be written down at all. Major power institutions—like the church in the Middle Ages—need at all times to ensure obedience by declaring that they alone, qua institutions, have what is needed for survival in whatever the appropriate form or style may be. And so only priests can offer communion (never an original gospel notion) and only the church can save you from hell (in its interpretation by the church then, and by evangelical groups now, a wholly unchristian concept). Since the latter belief especially is difficult to enforce (as difficult, one may imagine, as it is today to make people live in such a way now to ensure that the planet will be habitable in the future), the need for texts like *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* were absolutely necessary—what Ackerman describes as “doctrinal pills” and “improving literature” (1962,547,548).

Ackerman's article, “*The Debate of the Body and the Soul* and Parochial Christianity” traces the history of the theme, and shows how strong the influence of two Latin poems was. The even earlier Old English version dealing with the soul's address to the body, and which appears in the Vercelli Codex and Exeter Book, was not in any real

sense a direct influence on *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul*. But it is interesting in that it shows the pre-eminence of the soul (which is not too surprising); and the theme of the soul's lament, and its tone, is already well formed. In the Old English texts, the soul is po-faced and self-righteous, and the body is, of course, entirely to blame for its predicament. From the Exeter Book, translated by S A J Bradley:

Why have you, a foul thing of earth, afflicted me?...What did you have against me, you criminal? Lo, worms' meat!...I could not get out from you, being engrossed in flesh—and your wicked lusts oppressed me so that it very often seemed to me that it would be thirty thousand years to your death-day....If you had made up your mind then, during your lifetime here while I was constrained to occupy you in this world, that you would be strictly steered through carnality and through wicked lusts, and stabilised by me, and that I was the spirit in you sent from God, you would never have prepared for me such harsh hellish torments by the lust of your needs (1982,360).

The arguments that the soul puts forward have not changed at all significantly in the hundreds of years between this text and *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul*. But the latter poem has a sophistication about it that resides in much more than just the arrival of an articulate and vocal Body into the poem. It has a poet who has a keen ear for the common speech, for the essential humanness of things, for the flinty thrust and parry of angry debate, and perhaps a less keen desire to make all his readers into terrified, subjugated, desperately obedient Christians.

Here is a brief summary of the poem:

Stanza 1

A cold winter's night; narrator has a dream: the body of a handsome knight lies on its bier, and its soul, about to go from it, turns to the body and begins to upbraid it.

Stanzas 2-14

The soul accuses the body for its present predicament, and five times raises the ubi sunt theme: Where now are your livestock, your clothes and horses, your dwellings, your cooks and their dishes, and your entertainers? You gave nothing to the poor and favoured the rich. Now others will get all your money. You have lost everything except seven feet of earth. Tomorrow

you will be buried and the worms will inhabit you. Your goods will be wasted. Your executors will divide everything up.

Stanzas 15-22

The body replies. Why do you upbraid me so violently? I am not the first to be here: even Sampson and Caesar rotted away until nothing was left of them. I never thought about dying given my power and wealth. But death quietly stole upon me and took me away from it all. It's all your fault: you should have shielded me from this shame. God created you and gave you both knowledge and skill and I was left entirely in your keeping. I was like an animal until you taught me about good and evil. I was committed to your control, I, born a witless thing. You should have known beforehand of my folly.

Stanzas 23-27

The soul insults the body (very soul-ful). Do you think as rotting flesh in a pit you will be so lightly acquitted all your terrible deeds? Do you think you will get any peace as you rot away to nothing? Be assured on judgement day you will join me again and we will be duly recompensed. You say you were entrusted to me? No matter what I taught you you rushed to evil, doing all that I forbade. When I told you of the soul's needs you satisfied every other kind of need first. I suffered and endured you: you were the master, I the slave.

Stanzas 28-32

You are wrong to lay all the guilt on me. I was always under your eye, you saw me committing evil acts. Why didn't you make it clear to me when I was doing wrong? You could have reminded me. You knew my nature: mankind has always been like this. Why didn't you bind me when I wanted to sin? The blind has led the blind into the ditch.

Stanzas 33-36

You alone have brought this upon yourself. You betrayed me. Birds and animals now fly and run, but you are blind, deaf, dumb and smelly. No one will want to come near you now.

Stanzas 37-39

There's no point in chiding me. I respected you, and like a beast I was bound to do your will. I was always at your command. I would never dare to withstand you: you were far too powerful. I was given to you entirely; I was like your ass. You were well aware of my tricks: I would have listened to your advice. You should have done what Christ commanded and made me do penance and you should have taught me what I did not know.

Stanzas 40-43

Filthy flesh, you lied: you did not love me. You have made a fool of me. When I ordered you to confess and leave your sinful life, the devil said "Don't give up your riotous life at such a young age. Make merry there's time enough." And when I ordered you to give your pride and your wealth, the World stood by and argued against me. And when I ordered you to get up early to take care of me, you preferred to carry on sleeping. So the world the flesh and the devil led you astray.

Stanzas 44-45

When the body heard the soul making such moan he regretted what he had done, and felt sorry that he had brought the two of them to this pass.

Stanzas 46-47

Too late, retorts the soul. You cannot talk now. And I can stay no longer, for I hear the hounds of hell approaching.

Stanzas 48-59

The devils arrive, punish the soul and drag him off to hell.

Stanzas 60-62

Narrator wakes up terrified, and makes an important statement about the role of Jesus in the life of a Christian.

Once again, as in *The Thrush and the Nightingale* and in *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* it is argument of the perceived opposition that seems to carry more weight. At least the body presents arguments; the soul, like the nightingale, tends either to insult or to make broad generalising comments that seldom directly answer the body. The body's argument is clear: you are the soul; more powerful, more knowledgeable than I could ever be. You always knew the difference between good and evil, and you were continually aware of what I was doing; your responsibility was divinely given and you just let me do what I wanted without ever stopping me. And, in fairness, the body makes it clear that he accepts at least some of the guilt: "Goste, þu haste wrong, I-wyse, | *Alle þe gylte on me to leye* (218-219); "When I dude an vnryht..." (237); "For þer þe blynde ledyth þe blynde | In þe dyche þey fallyth boþe to" (247-248).

The Body does, it is true, state in places that the soul is entirely to blame for his wicked life:

For alle was hit þine owne gylte.
 Þat schewde I þe wiþ wordis lyte,
 And wiþ ryht reson if þu wylte.
 Þu arte to blame and I alle quite,
 For boþen schuldest þu fro schame haue schylte (156-161),

Ne þu scholdest not into hel depe,
 Nere þe wytte þat all was þyne (255-256).

and he makes it very clear that the soul was responsible for all the evil deeds he committed simply because it did nothing to stop the body, and after all the soul was supposed to be in the control of the body:

...in þy loking alle was I lafte
To wysen alle aftur þyne owne wyllle” (164-5),

...I was betakyn þe to yeme,
A witless þyng as I was borne...
As þu þat dedys cowþest deme
Scholdest haue be war be-forne
Of my foly as hit now seme,
And þus arte þu þi-selde I-lorne (169-176).

The image of being bound to the soul permeates the text when the body speaks: “I was euer vnder þine eye” (223); “why noldeste þu me bynde” (245); “For cliuen I moste to þi þoht| And bowen as a bounden beste” (192-292); “I was euer at þi hest” (294); “...as þine ase I þe bare| And mayster ouer me to leuen” (298-9). When the soul suggests that the body had turned it into his slave, the body is quick to point out that he cared too much for the soul to have allowed such a relationship to exist.

It has to be admitted that this is not at all a bad argument. If the landlord is continually absent, then the tenant will be tempted to do what he is not normally allowed to do. Since the body was always regarded as the weaker vessel (even to St Paul), its argument that it was not helped by the soul is not entirely facile. Without help, how could such a weak thing keep pure? The body makes it clear that the soul is far better than he: he describes it as “so worþi I-wroht” (225), and created by God “aftur hys schafte” (161). He is not a bad body at times: he is honest (he admits his shortcomings); he is reasonably fair; he does not keep insulting the soul as the soul does the body; he is forthright. As Ackerman notes,

...the Body’s case is likely to seem effective to the reader....The Body’s positive, if simplified, presentation of the nature and the obligation of the Soul is convincing as the reason for the Soul’s brusque and perhaps fearful interruption:

“Bodi, be stille!
Who has þe lerned al þis witt? (1962,554)

The soul presents a different case altogether. Firstly, its first speech (13-112) seems to belong to another poem entirely. In one hundred lines, the soul presents the ubi sunt theme in a generalised sort of way. It need not be directed at the body on the bier: it could as easily have been a homily addressed to all who were in danger of being trapped by their worldly possessions:

Where ys now alle þi grete pryde...?
Where ben now all þi worþi wedis...?
Where ben þi castelse and þyne tourus...?
Where ben now alle þese kokys snelle...?
Where be þes glemen þe to gleon...? (21, 25, 33, 41, 49)

The language of this speech and its tone are quite different from what follows. When the soul is engaged with the body in trying to defend itself, it takes on a completely different character, more direct, more emotional. The five questions, rhetorical by nature, secular in tone, paint a bright picture but not necessarily a sharply contextualising one. Only once in the ubi sunt section is the body directly accused of bringing the soul to its present predicament:

And me þe pytte and pyne of helle
Wiþ þi gloteny hast þu geten (47-48).

It does, of course provide a powerful contrast to the ever present, rotting body, and this becomes a common theme of the soul's speeches all the way throughout the debate. Ackerman makes it clear that this “abhorrence of putrefaction is...a standard element in the ancient legend of Body and Soul” (1962,562), and this element is referred to many times in *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* (lines 15, 45, 70, 94, 129, 180, 182, 186, 214, 275, 280, 313, 364).

Once the ubi sunts are out of the way, the soul loses its somewhat effete, somewhat melancholy tone and becomes positively shrewish. Insults fly and are often rich: “Bolned as a byt” (180); “carone unkynde” (258); “vnsemelyche...vnkumlyche” (285-6); “þu foule flesche vnseyte” (313) and so on. But despite the earthy bluster, the soul, rather like the body, has in fact only one simple argument: “I tried to tell you but you wouldn’t listen”:

Sor I chydde agen and faute,
And euer þu nome þyne owne rede.

For when I spake of soule nedys,
Mas, matynse or euensong,
þu moste arste done oþer dedys (199-203).

For when I bade þe schryfte take...
þe fende sayde, “Schalte þu not so (321-324).

There is no doubt that this is not a bad argument. Like the body’s argument, it is hard to deny that the soul (conscience) clearly made the body aware of what was right and wrong: the body as much as admits it. Here is another of Davenport’s equal contests: at least at the level of intellectually rating the quality of each side’s argument.

Given the context, and the didactic point about a poem like this, however, there can be no room for equality of argument. If the soul is divine and shaped in God’s image, then it cannot be expected to lose an argument with a rotting body. One suspects that the writer of this poem so enjoyed enlivening the whole debate with such real, rich, and genuinely human colouring, that in the end the only way this argument could be won was to close it forcefully. The end of the debate is reminiscent of *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*: the soul makes “swych dole and swych mone” (246) that the body repents at once, admits his guilt and wishes he had never been born. Too late, as the soul points out.

The pointlessness of the debate is here most apparent. Yes, it was a good old battle of wits, and both sides gave as good as they got (though the body was a little more polite, and the soul perhaps just a little too whingey). But in the end, one of them is to rot and eventually disappear until the day of judgement; the other, there and then, is dragged off to hell, tormented by devils.

The irresolution of this particular debate is complex, because much will depend on the level at which one reads the poem. At its most didactic, the soul may well represent Holy Church (or the parish priest, as Ackerman suggests), and the body sinful, fallen humankind. At this level, there is no irresolution, because legitimation at the fourth level comes fully into play. The church cannot be wrong; if anything is wrong, it is someone or something else's fault; if you criticise the church, you will be excommunicated, because it and it alone represents the most important overarching symbols of society. That the soul is dragged off to hell is not necessarily contradictory to this symbolism, because it could suggest either that the church *will* be condemned by God if its adherents disobey its commands and precepts; or the poem picks up at this point the other, more down to earth (so to speak) theme of the damnation of the human being who has lived a life contrary to the life the church expects its adherents to follow. When such power is in the hands of one institution, there can be no irresolution when it comes to argument or uncertainty as to what is right and as to what happens when there is disobedience.

Curiously after the narrator awakes, he gives a rather trite little homily about the point of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But it includes references to the fact that He formed us in his own image, that He redeemed us with his precious blood. There is an important sense in which redemption denies the existence of hell; in which a notion that we are made in His image makes what happens to the poor soul in this poem a blasphemous impossibility. The contemporary church would have argued that these states of grace are possible only with true repentance. The sacrament of confession had relatively recently been more stringently insisted upon, and only through a priest; and the idea of a condition attached to salvation is purely ecclesiastical. The Gospel

message is unconditional love. But then, the idea of a soul separating from a body represents a “dangerous and even unchristian dualism” (Ackerman, 1962,551) no less unscriptural than the torments of hell. Finally, one has to say—no doubt from a too modern perspective—that the sins of the “cumly knyht” were not exactly trivial, but they certainly could not have deserved the punishment they received. It is rather as though there are three possible poems here: one on the ubi sunt theme; one a debate of some immediacy, energy and not a little thoughtfulness; and another about the horror of hell.

If it were to stand on its own, the debate would be a fine example of Reed’s “aesthetic of irresolution” Clearly, neither side has the winning argument; clearly they both lack a point to make it stick. On the one hand, human beings surely cannot be expected to live a good life without good, strong leadership from the soul (whatever one may conceive it to be); equally clearly the soul cannot be expected to do its work if the body, physical, tangible and surrounded by the immediate, temporary delights of the world does not stop awhile to hear its promptings. The enforced ending, though, denies any such irresolution the opportunity of presenting itself as solution to an issue much, much more complex than the simplistic polarity of either-or. It is an eternal debate, made absurdly earthbound by the legitimating demands of ever-present, all-too-powerful Mother Church. It denies the poet, whose energy, liveliness, honesty and sense of humanness come through in the text all the time, the opportunity of writing a text that dared to leave some things unsaid.

CHAPTER SIX

Some Concluding Thoughts

Thomas Reed, it was pointed out in Chapter One, suggested that debate poems, especially the more Dionysian ones, were examples of what he called “experiential realism”, “a kind of reactionary intransigence to profound order...indulged in a controlled ludic context.” (1990, 26-7). Words like these are open to a variety of meanings, but the general idea is clear. Behind the laughter, behind the fun, there can sometimes be a message of some seriousness. Behind the experiment, behind the difference there can be concealed some sense of criticism. It is a message, a criticism, that may not be clear even to its creator: all the better that it remains so ambiguous, so hesitant, so shifting.

The four debate poems studied here are, it seems to me, good examples of “experiential realism.” In *Mede and Muche Thanke* the rather flat, lacklustre symbols of Mede, the Courtier, and Service, the Soldier are not permitted simply to say their pieces and so depart, leaving a satisfied audience untroubled, unmoved by anything that might imply that not everything is quite as it should be. The soldier does not

move on without some criticism sticking to his otherwise spotless uniform; the courtier (dare one even suggest it) is not entirely without virtue. In the “controlled context” there is no doubt that it is better to be a soldier than a courtier; there is no doubt that Mede in all its forms is debilitating to the state; there is no doubt that the loyal soldier does his duty, takes his dues and asks for no more than he deserves. That is still the case today. But the comments about pillaging villages and killing Christians; about serving in the Court because one is made welcome; about everybody in the end serving their own ends sooner or later, raise questions that may be a little less easy to dismiss simply by falling back on the old unchallenged assumptions that cluster round words like *mede* and soldier.

In *The Thrush and the Nightingale* some “orthodox” antifeminist views are challenged and convincingly defeated. Even references to biblical characters are collectively dismissed by a nightingale who cheats so outrageously by using the Blessed Virgin as an (the) example of a good woman, especially after the picture of woman he has presented has been almost entirely physical, sensual, and how well they service their men. And in *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* the real, well-authenticated pains and ills of love are dismissed as irrelevant, while a nightingale talks of the god of love in ways that sometimes make him sound like a dictator.

A Debate Between the Body and the Soul has a body and its soul tilting at some of the most important orthodoxies of the established church: the body’s criticism of the soul, at one level at least, is not innocent of criticism of a more general nature. And it is not as easy to dismiss the poor body simply as deserving of what he gets, because the intense immediacy of the poem, and the realness of the two debaters prevent them from being taken simply as symbols, as cultural artefacts that have no reverberations beyond those culturally and safely installed within them.

In all four poems, the sense of irresolution is real and clearly present. Debate is not perhaps the best word to describe what happens in poems like these. The modern word can carry with it a sense of winning, the winner usually decided by some

external person or group of people. The Middle English word, *disputisoun* or *desputeison*, might suggest something more than just collecting arguments together in order to win the point. *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath, 1959) defines the word

- (a) a formal debate or discussion before an audience
- (b) debating, arguing, discussion, controversy
- (c) reasoning, argumentation
- (d) an object of censure.

The examples quoted are interesting in that some of them at least seem to suggest more the idea of arguing about, disputing, without necessarily winning:

In scole is greet altercacioun
 In this matere and greet disputisoun
 And hath been of an hundred thousand men (Chaucer, *Nun's Priest's Tale*). (No winners there.)

As alday falleth altercacioun
 Bitwixe freendes in disputisoun (Chaucer, *Merchant's Tale*). (Maybe a winner, but maybe not.)

...a man schal justifie
 Thise wordes in disputeisoun,
 And knette upon conclusioun
 His argument in such a forme
 Which may the pleine trouthe enforme (Gower, *Confessio Amantis*). (A good idea for winning an argument, but also just for making good one's point.)

The modern word *disputation* has never been used as a categorising term for these poems, and perhaps there is no reason why it should. Debate does not have to imply that there are winners, but it does have connotations that might not be too helpful in understanding fully what happens in these poems.

It is probably not useful to look for winners and losers. It may be better to consider what is said and to leave decisions for later. However, there is the contending force of the literary text, which tends inevitably to demand some kind of closure. And while

in real life friends may not want to go for winners and losers, and a hundred thousand men may delight in keeping the debate going on forever, poems need to end, and they need more than just to end; they need to end with purpose.

The four debates here have different endings. *The Thrush and the Nightingale* comes closest to having an ending that most clearly announces a winner. And yet...the nightingale wins only because the thrush dare not contend further. Unless the poem is a religious one glorifying the Virgin one cannot help feeling that the thrush has been dealt a most unfair blow. Not that one minds: he deserves to be defeated for his misogynist views. In *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* the debate as such does not really conclude: the poor cuckoo is stoned while the nightingale dissolves into tears. One senses here that the debate as a whole seems not to be the climax of the poem at all. In *Mede and Muche Danke* there really is no winner, except in the reader's heart and mind. And in *A Debate Between the Body and the Soul* the soul wins because the body admits he was in the wrong, not because the soul's arguments have convinced him, but because the soul's outburst of grief makes him lament the day he was born. But winners here get the same as the losers do, so it is hardly an issue.

Irresolution, though, is more than just not having a declared winner. The arguments need to be "equal" so that both contenders raise issues that at least make the reader stop and think, if only for a little while. It is *not* clear that both nightingales have the better arguments; it is *not* clear that the soul makes better sense; and it is even not as clear as perhaps it could be that soldiers are that different from courtiers. In none of these four debate poems is there a clear resolution of the dispute. As has been pointed out more than once, on occasion the arguments of opposing forces are better by far than the ones offered by the side that ought to win.

But, as Reed points out, there is always a "controlled...context" within which dispute and contention must be played out. Forced closure is the means of ensuring that limits are not overshot, that the rules are not broken. The soul has to win: it would hardly have made sense if the soul had admitted that he was entirely in the wrong, and that

the body was right. (Not that it would have made much difference.) The courtier in the end cannot win; his last stanza sets him up as a really unpleasant person, despite his close-to-the-knuckle truths. And how, in the context of spring, and passion, and birds and flowers can the pain of love be victorious over the joy of love; and detestation of women win over their glorification? Obviously they cannot. But they leave something behind that does not go away, some uneasy prick that will not be salved. The good soldier has a blemish here and there; the soul, well, now that you mention it, why does it allow...; the thrush—good riddance there; except that his arguments are not unlike those of the church; and the cuckoo—oh all right, I'll admit love can be the cause of pain...

They are fascinating poems. Beneath their surfaces lurks more than may have been expected or imagined. It is not true that they reflect only the passion for dichotomies and polarities that were apparently so dear to the medieval mind. They reflect something a good deal more complex, more thoughtful, more messy than that. They are “complicated...individual”; they do critique; and they do not necessarily resolve. They reveal an important paradox about all literature, all genuine art: that even though there are limits, even though there might be restrictions, requirements, there is always a kind of freedom to explore beyond those limits while apparently remaining firmly within them. And even if the poems themselves are not necessarily great, not really among the best, the finest manifestations of literature of the period, they nevertheless make a point, raise a question, throw a shadow of a doubt. And that makes them worth at least a closer look.

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