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Graveside Singing: Medieval Debate Poetry and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This essay explores the distinctive value of arts and humanities collaborations in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, the author (a literary critic) worked with composer Mark Volker, performance ensemble Chatterbird, and visual artist Christine Rogers to write and perform a chamber music based on two medieval body-soul debate poems, “Als I lay in a winteris nyt” and “In a thestri stude I stod.” That creative project highlights how body-soul debate poems resonate with representations of COVID-19 deaths in contemporary popular media, exploring the psychological and social barriers to reckoning with mortality in ways that can transform community for the living.

In the months before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had just begun to envision a collaborative scholarly and creative project with composer Mark Volker, the Nashville-based music ensemble Chatterbird, and visual artist Christine Rogers.¹ The impetus for this project, a musical setting of medieval body-soul debate poetry, was to reflect on how medieval texts might speak to audiences in the present. Scholars who have written public-facing scholarship alongside traditional academic books and articles have already made powerful arguments for a medieval studies explicitly invested in a public good, not least because fantasies of the Middle Ages are so prevalent in white supremacist and misogynist visions of the present.² Creative projects like this one offer another way to position medieval texts as resources for reflecting on urgent contemporary issues. As we started work on the project in earnest, the COVID-19 pandemic came to define our present moment, and with it, our interpretation of the body-soul debate poems. The poems turned out to be more timely texts than we had imagined, framing questions pertinent to the coronavirus pandemic: How are self-understanding and social inequality manifested in representations of death? If death is a future held at arm's length and grief is a past we can no longer touch, then what representations of mortality can transform community in the present?

Mark and I, friends since we sang together in a choir more than twenty years ago, began talking about this project over card games and wine in 2018. Medieval body-soul debate poems, with their dramatic exchanges, struck me as ideal for musical setting, particularly since scholarly debate forms influenced the development of contrapuntal polyphony (Novikoff 133-71). Mark, who was already thinking about writing a piece for Chatterbird, shared this idea with them; in late 2019, Chatterbird's director Celine Thackston applied for a grant through the National Endowment for the Arts. My role would be to write a program note, give a lecture, and collaborate with Mark as part of his composition process—helping him select the medieval texts, writing a literal translation of the Middle English poems on which he would base the libretto, and consulting about the medieval texts' central motifs, poetic structure, and cultural contexts. By the time we received the news that the project had been funded, we were in quarantine.

During the months when we worked on this project, more than three million people died in the global pandemic, a number so large that it is hard to conceptualize except in so far as any single data point represents a beloved person. In January 2021, while Mark and I parsed medieval debate poems, 95,000 people died of COVID-19 in the United States (Moser). In May 2021, while Chatterbird recorded the final piece for virtual broadcast, hospitals in India ran out of oxygen amid a deadly surge of cases, and politicians and pharmaceutical companies debated vaccine patent waivers. Popular media and scholarly projects grasped for strategies that might at once communicate the scale of mass death (and the broad social inequalities it reflects), recognize the specificity of each life lost, and effect changes in policy and individual behavior. For instance, the "COVID Black" project, founded by digital humanities scholar Kim Gallon, creates a "virtual homegoing" for Black people who have died

¹ I am grateful to Mark Volker, the Chatterbird ensemble, Celine Thackston, and Christine Rogers, whose generous collaboration and artistry brought these medieval poems to life. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose insightful comments improved this essay.

² For further reading, see Vanessa Jaeger's article on the subject of Crusader ideology in the white nationalist agenda, 39-48 of this issue.

from COVID-19 “to tell empowering stories about Black life” and “address racial health disparities,” including the disproportionate deaths from COVID-19 in Black communities.³ In December 2020, news outlets measured daily loss of life against the death toll from the September 11th attacks, in part to communicate the urgency of quarantine as a common good to Americans bent on upholding their holiday traditions—even as then-President Donald J. Trump called the reports “far exaggerated” (Kornfield and Jacobs).

In this context, we approached medieval body-soul debate poems as a resource for thinking about how bearing witness to mortality might transform self-understanding and community for the living—as well as why it so often does not. As we have seen during the last year, death and disease may be universal, but they also magnify existing social inequalities and resulting vulnerabilities. Consequently, a failure to reckon with mortality often attends refusal to acknowledge privilege and to pursue a more equitable community. Mark and I decided to focus on the two Middle English poems that most evocatively dramatize this impasse: “Als I lay in a winteris nyt” and “In a thestri stude I stod.” In these texts, a body and soul freshly separated by death argue with one another, each complaining that the other bears responsibility for the once-living person’s ethical missteps. Written a century before *Yersinia pestis* would kill up to half the population in England and ultimately more than a hundred million people worldwide, “Als I Lay” and “In a Thestri” were not responses to mass death. Rather, they instruct audiences imagined to be inattentive to death’s inevitability, audiences whose actions are persistently directed to maintaining the status quo. For instance, in “Als I Lay,” Soul accuses Body of taking “what many a glutton ate and drank” from the mouths of the poor, an act that damaged the glutton’s moral integrity and materially harmed those who didn’t have enough to eat (65-66).⁴ This failure appears clear in retrospect, but it never prompted remedial action in the moment. Mark’s libretto, freely adapted from my literal translation, highlights moments like these from the medieval texts.

The body-soul debate poems point their audiences to privileged subjects’ tendency to regard death as eventual and abstract. In “Als I Lay,” Soul accuses Body of treating its own death as an “idle story,” even when it had seen “many defiled in their graves” (331-32). This moment gestures back toward the narrator, who first introduces himself as a witness at another’s graveside. After overhearing and recording Body’s and Soul’s confrontation, the narrator urges “those who are sinful.../To confess themselves and dearly repent” (621-22). Although the narrator acknowledges himself as sinful, Soul also reminds Body that standing at another’s graveside and contemplating one’s own future death does not always translate into reformed action here and now. To capture this dynamic, Mark set the Latin text of the Mass for the Dead in one movement, a creative way of translating the poems’ Christian theology (otherwise omitted from the libretto). In life, Body and Soul stood united at many gravesides and knew that death was not merely an “idle story.” Yet, now on their own, they still act as observers and continue to litigate past responsibility. Today, their debate holds up a mirror to spiraling conspiracy theories, claims that no one really dies from COVID-19, and vaccine refusal. The misdirected recriminations that structure the medieval debate implicitly diagnose this phenomenon.

³ See Gallon et al.

⁴ This is my own translation of the Middle English text, based on Conlee’s Middle English edition. Parenthetical line numbers direct readers to Middle English lines in Conlee’s edition.

The failed relationship between an individual and the larger community of which they are a part is continuous with a failed relationship between different aspects of the self, a division that allows for casting blame rather than investing in mutual care (Raskolnikov 105-38). No audience for the debate, whether the narrator or readers of the poem or auditors of the musical performance, can be confident that they have internalized the lesson as thoroughly as they might think—especially if they are inclined to locate the problem as someone else’s.

“After the Plague, Body and Soul,” like the medieval debate texts on which it is based, emphasizes the necessity of and the barriers to reinterpreting the past and anticipating the future in service of the present. Where “Als I lay” and “In a Thestri” emphasize the accusatory impasse between Body and Soul, “After the Plague, Body and Soul” frames reinterpretation and creation as a collaboration among composer, scholar, performers, and visual artist. The composition—which calls for two vocalists, eight instrumentalists, recorded Middle English text, and electronics—foregrounds reinterpretation as a motif. Music first played and sung by live performers returns electronically processed and distorted—in an evocation not only of Body and Soul’s renegotiation of their life together but also of the interplay between embodiment and digital transmission that defines present-day quarantine community. In future performances of “After the Plague, Body and Soul,” we will further emphasize communal interpretation by engaging audiences in discussions of debate texts and offering workshops in which participants will write debates of their own. As Doris Sommer argues, linking humanistic interpretation and creativity stimulate civic engagement, fostering “urgently needed change” through the shared pleasures that “enable fresh perceptions and foster new agreements” (3). Reinterpretation and creation are communal endeavors, a shared responsibility among scholars, artists, audiences, and all of us who emerge from the pandemic to remember what was before and to build a better community in the present.

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