A DISPUTACIOUN BETWYX ÞE BODY AND WORMES:
A TRANSLATION

by Jenny Rebecca Rytting

The medieval reader loved an argument, judging by the popularity of poetic debates during the Middle Ages. Written first in Latin and later in vernacular languages, such debates matched up opponents as widely varied as justice and mercy, winter and spring, an owl and a nightingale, a sheep and a flax plant, a Jew and a Christian, and the body and the soul.1 This last pairing, dating in Old English back to the Exeter and Vercelli books, occurs often enough to constitute a discrete tradition within the larger genre of debate poetry. In a typical early “body and soul” poem, the soul chastises the body for sinning while it was alive and describes the body’s incipient decomposition. As the tradition develops, so does the balance within the debate: the body and the soul begin to argue about who is responsible for the sins that were committed during the pair’s mutual lifetime. Sometimes the poem ends with a hair-raising depiction of the soul being carried off to hell, meant to encourage the reader to repent and live a righteous life.2 The most famous Middle English example of the tradition is *The Desputisoun bitwen þe Bodi and þe Soule,* 3 sometimes identified by its first line, *Als I lay in a winteris nyt.*

The lesser-known Middle English poem *A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes,* while it fits within the body and soul tradition in that it shares such poems’ basic concerns with the decay of the body, the effects of sinning during mortality, and the afterlife, departs substantially from the standard pattern. Klaus Jankofsky, in his article “A View into the Grave: ‘A Disputacion betwyx þe Body and Wormes’ in British Museum MS Add. 37049,” notes four important differences between *A Disputacioun* and other body and soul debates. First, the conversation in this poem occurs not between the body and the soul but between the body and the worms that are eating it as it lies in the grave.

2Ibid. xxiv–xxvi.
Second, the body seems to be a specific person with a distinct personality, rather than an abstract representation of "the flesh." Third, the poem ends not with a vision of the terror of death and hell but rather with the promise of resurrection. Finally, Jankofsky compares the illustrations that accompany the poem in the manuscript to the double-decker tombs (with effigies of the deceased lying in state above and a rendition of their decaying bodies beneath) that were then becoming popular among the upper classes.4

The first stanzas of *A Disputacioun* provide the dream-vision framework, a popular device in medieval debate poetry, in which a narrator falls asleep or into a trance and overhears a discussion between the disputing parties. In this case, an unidentified person, who has departed on a pilgrimage in order to flee the plague, stops at a church to pray but is distracted by the newly built tomb of a lady. As he looks at the epitaph, he falls into a dreamlike vision in which he hears a debate between the recently buried body and the worms that are eating it. This carefully constructed conversation leads the body from a disgust at the worms, a resistance to their ministrations, and a futile attempt at calling living knights to her defense to a realization that worldly beauty is vain, a reliance on God's grace, and a reconciliation with the worms as she waits for Judgment Day and resurrection. The dream-vision framework resumes with the waking of the dreamer, who explains that the holy man to whom he related his experience told him to write it down for the edification of others, and the poem ends with an exhortation for all to trust in God.

*A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes* was collected with other didactic pieces and meditations for the instruction of Carthusian clerics in a monastery in northern England in the early fifteenth century.5 It appears in British Museum MS Additional 37049, which T. W. Ross calls "an odd assortment of late mediaeval writings, in English and Latin verse and prose."6 The Middle English text reprinted here comes from "Mittelenglische Todesgedichte" by Karl Brunner, in *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 167 (1935) 30–35. I have followed Brunner's transcription exactly, including his

---

4Ibid. 140.
5Conlee (n. 1 above) 50.
use of italics to represent expanded abbreviations and his stanza divisions. (There are no spaces between stanzas in the manuscript.)

*A Disputacioun* is written in rhyme royal, with the exception of one eight-line stanza early in the poem: Karl Brunner notes that six lines seem to be missing from the manuscript.\(^7\) Klaus Jankofsky explains that this probably represents a scribal error; after the lines describing the lady’s hair in stanza four, we would expect a continuation of the blazon instead of the abrupt shift to the dreamer’s nodding off. Presumably the scribe accidentally conflated two adjacent stanzas that happened to use the same rime, but because no other manuscript of the poem exists, any reconstruction of the missing lines would be entirely hypothetical.\(^8\) I have left the eight-line stanza as transcribed by Karl Brunner.

In translating the poem, I have tried to stick closely to the literal meaning of the text, while maintaining the rhyme scheme and reflecting the distinct voices of the Body and of the Worms. Often I have been able to use the same vocabulary—sometimes even the same rimes—as the Middle English original. Occasionally I have switched the order of two lines or slightly altered the sense of a half-line for poetic purposes, but only when such a change does not affect the meaning of the stanza as a whole.

Department of English  
Arizona State University  
P. O. Box 870302  
Tempe, AZ 85287-0302

---


\(^8\) Jankofsky (n. 3 above) 158–159.
A Disputacioun betwyx þe Body and Wormes

In þe ceson of huge mortalite
Of sondre diseeses with þe pestilence
Heuely reynand whilom in cuntre
To go pylgramege mefed be my conscience
And on my way went with spedily diligence
In a holy day afore me I sawe a kyrk
Wher to go I dressed my bedes to wirk

5

In a wilsom feldy standyng desolate
Vn to here a messe was my hole intent
It was done and sayd be I come þerat
Oppyn I fande þe dore and entre sone I hent
I knelyd me downe and to my prayers went
With lawe obeysaunce mekyd me downe
To ane ymage with gret deuocione

10

Bysyde me I sawe a towmbe or sepulture
Ful freschly forgyd depyte and depynte
Compassyd and made be newe coniecture
Of sondre armes þer many a prynte
Þe Epytaf to loke was I not faynte
In gylt copyr with golde schewyng þan
With a fresche fygure fyne of a woman

15

Welle atyled in þe moste newe gyse
With long lokkes of þis discyfyng
In a slomer I slept taken I was in syche wyse
Rapt and rauesched fro my selfe beynge
Betwyx þis body and wormes hyr fretynge
Strangly ilk one oþer correspyndyng
In maner of a dyaloge it wente
Perfore to þis insawmpyl þe take intente

20

Þe body spakes to þe wormes:

Wormes wormes þis body sayd
Why do 1e þus what causes 1ow me þus to ete
By 1ow my flesche is horribilly arayed
Whilk was a fygure whylom fresche and feete
Right amyabyll and odorus and swete
Beste belofed of any creature

25

30

35
Lady and soferayne cald I low ensure

Of bewte I was a lady precious
Of gentil blode descenidyng of right lyne
Of eve and of trewe begynnyng generows
Al hertes glad my plesaunce to dyuyne
Men of honour and of grete worship al dyd declyne
And nowe here in erth mortal deth come me to
Emand Iow wormes nakyd lyg I loo

Most vnkynde neibours þat ever wrught
Dynner mete and sowper al to lyte
Now fretyng and etynge Ie hafe me þorow soght
With ane insaciabyll and greddy appetyte
No rest bot alway Ie synk sowke and byte
Day tyme ne houre with how is no abstynence
Bot ay reedy agayne me with vyolence

When Ie fyrst began to drawe me to
It semes me Ie wer fed in a faynt pasture
Now fatte waxen and vgly rownde and gret also
Of curtasy and gentilnes lefe of me Iour cure
And with sum oþer dwelle and endure
Whilk may Iow rewarde with better wardone
For ner am I wasted consumed and gone.

Wormes spakes to þe body:

Nay nay we will not lít departe þe fro
While þat one of þi bones with oþer wil hange
To we hafe scowred and pollysched to
And made als clene as we can þaþ amange
For our labour we aske no manner of þing to fange
Gold syluer ryches ne no oþer mede
Bot onely vs wormes on þe to fede

Whilk may not sauour ne smell in no wyse
Pine orrybbill flesche rotyng and stynkyng
Of al creatures hated to devyse
Safe onely of vs wretchid wormes beyng
If we as bestes had smellyng and tastynge
Trows þou þat we wald towche þi caryone playne
Nay parde we wald it voyde for certayne
The body speaks to the worms:

Parde vnclert 1e be vn to me
Bus heuely to threte me and manace
And bus me lefe bot bare bones to see
Now where be 1e knyghtes cum forth in place
And 1e worshipful sçwyers both hye and base
Pat sumtyme to me offerd lour seruyse
Dayes of lour lyfes of hertes frawnchysye
Sayng permyttyng lour lyfe to myne avyse
To do me seruyys cum and defende nowe me
Fro þies gret horribil worms ugely to se
Here gnawyng my flesche þus with gret cruelte
Deuowryng and etyn nowe as 1e may se
Pat sumtyme 1e lufed so interly
Now socour and defende here my body

The worms answers to the body:

What suld þai do lat se vs vnto
Of þaim drede we noght ne of þair mone
For at þe vterauunc we hafe had to do
With alle þat wer myghty passed forth and gone
Afore þis tyme hafyng þair diuiaicone
Emproure kynge and conqwerours alle
Lords temperall and spyritualle

The neyne worthy Judas Machabeus sure
Julius Cesar. Godfray de bolayne
Alexander Dauyd Ector and Athure
Kyng Charls Duk Josue þe captayne
With al þe troiane knyghtes most souerayne
With fayr Elyn bewtyuows of vysage
Pollysene Lucrees, Dydo of Cartage

Dyes and ober war also fayr as 1e
Hit durst þai not styr n mofe in no wyse
When possession on þain taken had we
For al venomos worms to devyse
Acowmpenyd ar to þat seruyse
With vs for to halde ar þai set fully
How vnto devowre and waste vttyrly
A DISPUTACIOUN

Þe cokkatrys þe basilysk and þe dragon
Þe lyzerd þe tortoys þe coluber
Þe tode þe mowdewarp and þe scorpyon
Þe vypéra þe snake and þe eddyr
Þe crawpaude þe pyssemoure and þe canker
Þe spytterd þe mawkes þe evet of kynde
Þe watyr leyche and òper ar not behynde

Þe body spekes to þe wormes:

Remedy can I fynde none in no wyse
Socowre ne no relese in no stownde
Bot in þis case must I go after þair devyse
Porowly gnawen my flesche and sore bownde
For þai ar hateful to lyfes kynde fownde
What sal I do bot lat þai hafe þair wyll
Aventure me must abyde þof þai do me spyll

Þe wormes answers to þe body:

Þe fyrst day þow was borne o
ur mesyngers we sende
Vn to þaim we gaf in our commawndement
As in charge þai suld vs not offende
Ne not departe fro þe to deth on þe went
Þe to frete and to gnawe was oure intent
And after come with þe to our regyowne
Þi flesche here to hafe for þair warysowne
Whilk has obeyde our commaundment
Of þis may þou on no wyse say nay
Bot þat sun both þi wombe and stomak hent
Owdyr lyce or neytes in þi hede alway
Wormes in þe handes flees in þe bedde I þe say.
With òper venomosnes dyuers and sondry
To warne 1ow of vs to make 1ow redy.

Þe body spekes to þe wormes:

Now knawe I wele your mensyngers þai were
Þe whilk with me in lyfe kepyd resyndence
No langer wil I dispute þis matere
Nor debate bot suffer 1our violence
Do 1our will with me at 1our beneuolence
Bot lit in þe sawter Dauid says þat alle
Sal be obeyd vnto mans calle

þe wormes awnswers to þe body:

þat power dures whils man has lyfe
In þis wrechid warld here ar þai þe apon
Now þi lyfe is gone with vs may þou not stryfe
þou art bot as erthe and as þinge to noght gone
Lyke as I þe sayd was in þine aduencione
Of lentyn comynge þe ask wedynsday
When þe preste with assess crosses al way

And with assess blisses to hafe rememoraunce
What þou art and wher to þou sal turne agayne
For assess þou was afore þis instaunce
And assess sal þou be after for certayne
Be þou lord lady or hye sufferayne
To powder and dust in tyme to cum þou salt
Of warldly goynforth swylk is þi entyrval

þe body spekes to þe wormes:

Allas allas now knaw I ful well
þat in my lyfe was I made lewyd and vnwyse
With a reynawnde pryde so mykil for to mell
For myne abowndant bewte to so devyse
To prowde hafe I bene to wanton and to nyse
In warldly plesaunce gret deylte hafynge
To be my comper none worthy þinkyenge

And now soget to wormes I am beynge
Beryng þair preue mensyngers dayly
As loppes and lyce and open wormes right commerowsly
Vnknawyng fro whyne þai come trewly
To þis can I say no more vttyrly
Bot arme me I must with gode sufferaunce
Oure lorde will to abyde with al þe circumstaunce.

þe wormes awnswers to þe body:

By þis sufferaunce of vs no thanke gyt lée
For by lour wil lyfed hafe euer lée walde
Rememor 1e sal with will of your hert fre
In holy scripture and 1e wele behalde
Pat þe fayrnes of women talde
Is bot vayne þinge and transitory
Women drediynge god sal be praysed holy

Þe body spekes to þe wormes:

Ha now is to late tyme paste to call agayne
As now at þís stownde bot put me onely
In þe mercy of our lord god most sufferayne
Whilk is for þe best so to do sothely
And þat þos on lyfe may hafe space to be redy
To rememor in þe same wyse also
Contynewly þinkynge in þe tyme to cum þerto

What þe sal be and also what is he
Be it he or sche be þai neuer so fayr bewar
Of pryde with his felows þat noght be
Þe whilk oft men brynges in to care
As scripture mencion makes þe soth to declare
Þerfore gode is to avoyde fleschly temptacoun
By þe feende our foo both wroght and done

Dis þat I hafe complened and sayd
In no displesyng take it low unto
Lat vs be frendes at þís sodayn brayde
Neighbours and luf as before we gan do
Let vs kys and dwell to gedyr euermore
To þat god wil þat I sal agayne vpriye
At þe day of dome before þe hye justyse

With þe body glorified to be
And of þat nowmbyr þat I may be one
To cum to þat blis of heuen in fee
Porow þe mene and þe mediacione
Of our blisshed lord our verry patroner
þar in abilitie to be for his hye plesaunce
Amen Amen pour charite at þís instaunce.

Now spekes he þat sawe þe vysion:

Whit þis I woke fro slepe sompno lent
Of a slemery meditacion
To a holy man of hye excellent
Mefed I þis dreme and strange vysion
Whilk bad me put it vndir scription
Als nere as I cowde remembyr me verely
In als fayn langage as I cowde godely

Vn to þe reders þinge delectabill
And a monyscyon both to styr and to mefe
Man and woman to be acceptabill
Vn to our lord and al lustes for to lefe
Of warldly þinges whilk dos þain grefe
And þe more rather to call vn to mynde
Oure saueour and to hym vs bynde. Amen.

A Disputation Between the Body and the Worms
Translation

During a season of great mortality,
With pestilence reigning, and other disease,
I felt a great urge to change my locality—
To go as a pilgrim, my conscience to ease—
And left for the country as quick as you please. 5
Isaw there a church on a holy day
And, having made ready, I went there to pray.
The church stood in a field alone.
To hear a mass was my full intent.
Ere I came the mass was said and done,
But the church-door was open, and in I went.
I knelt to pray and humbly bent
My knees, making deep obeisance
Before an image, with great reverence.

Beside me I saw a tomb or sepulcher
That seemed to be freshly adorned and raised—
Just newly made, by my conjecture—
With sundry arms thereon emblazed.
Upon the epitaph I boldly gazed.
Gilt gold on copper gleamed each line,
With a woman’s figure, fresh and fine.
She was well attired in the newest array.
Her long locks had a golden gleam.
As I slept I was taken in such a way
I was rapt from myself into a dream.
I heard, strange to say, all manner of jawing
Between this fair corpse and the worms on her gnawing.
In the manner of a dialogue it went.
Take heed, therefore, from this event:

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“Worms, O worms,” this body mourned.
“Why do you thus? What makes you eat?
By you my flesh is foully adorned,
Which once was a figure fresh and sweet,
Right amiable, fragrant, and always neat.
Of all creatures I was loved the best,
Called lady and sovereign, I do attest.

As to beauty, I was a lady of worth,
From gentle blood descending in right line
From Eve, and of true noble birth.
All hearts were glad my presence to divine;
Men of honor and worship to me did incline;
And now here in earth death has come to me.
Among worms I lie naked—behold and see!
Most unnatural neighbors that ever were known!
You have me for lunch and for supper at night,
Now gnawing and eating me right to the bone
With a greedy, insatiable appetite.
There’s no rest, for always you suck and bite.
You won’t abstain for a single hour
But are always ready to cruelly devour!

When first you worms my body found
It seems you’d been fed but meagerly.
Now you’ve grown fat and ugly and round.
Leave me alone, out of courtesy,
And dwell with someone else besides me,
Who may reward you with better pay,
For I’m almost gone—almost eaten away!”
The Worms speak to the Body:

“No, no, we won’t depart from you
While one of your bones with another’s connected,
Till we have scoured and polished ‘em, too,
Made ‘em clean as can be, not a joint neglected.
And for our work, there’s no pay expected.
For gold, silver, or riches we have no need.
We only ask your flesh on which to feed.

For we have no way of tasting or smelling
Your horrible, rotting, stinking waste.
All creatures find you extremely repelling
Except for us worms; we’re already disgraced.
If we, as beasts, could smell or taste,
Do you think that we your corpse would touch?
Nope, we’d surely avoid it, thank you very much!”

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“My word, you are discourteous to me
To threaten me so, and my body deface,
And thus leave me only bare bones to see.
Now where are my knights? Come forth to this place!
And you worshipful squires, both high and base—
Who once offered me your whole devotion
And life-long service, with heart-felt emotion,
Comitting your lives into my charge—
To do me service, now come and defend me
From these nasty worms, so ugly and large,
That are gnawing my flesh with such cruelty,
Devouring and eating now as you see.
You who once said you loved me dear
Now save and succor my body here!”

The Worms answer the Body:

“What should they do? We want to hear.
We dread them not, nor fear their moans,
For we’ve to the uttermost made good cheer
With all that were mighty, who’ve left their thrones
Before this time, having received their bones.”
All of them: conquerors, emperors, kings,
Lords both over temporal and spiritual things.

All the nine worthy: Alexander the Great,
Judas Maccabeus, and David of old,
Caesar and Hector and Guinevere’s mate,
Godfrey and Joshua and Charlemagne bold,
With all Trojan knights, each with honor untold,
And beautiful Helen, so fair of visage,
Polyxena, Lucrece, and Dido of Carthage.

These—and more—were your equals in looks
Yet dared they not to stir or move
Once we possession of them took.
For all venomous worms it does behoove
To do this labor, as soon they’ll prove.
With us to stay they’re fully set:
They’ll waste and devour you utterly yet.

The cockatrice, the basilisk, and the dragon,
The toad and the tortoise with his shell on his back,
The newt, the mole, and the scorpion,
The crab and the ants, both red and black,
The viper, the adder, all prepped to attack,
The maggots, the leeches, the spiders (all kinds),
And the lizard—and others are not far behind.”

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“Of cure or of remedy I can find none,
Release or succor can’t be found,
I must do their bidding, when all’s said and done,
With chewed-up flesh, here underground,
For towards all the living their hate does abound.
What shall I do but let them enjoy me?
My fate awaits, although they destroy me!”

The Worms answer the Body:

“The day you were born our heralds we sent,
And charged them straitly not to fail.
We gave them a strict commandment
Not to leave you till death made you pale,
Intending them to fret and gnaw and ail,
And then to come to this region with you
To have your flesh here as their due.

They have obeyed and done as we said—
To this you certainly cannot say nay.
You’ve had worms in your hands and fleas in your bed
Or lice or nits in your hair each day,
Also stomach-worms to plague you in every way,
And venomous creatures, night and morning,
To make you ready and give you warning.

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“Now to you I can those vermin impute,
Which with me in life kept residence.
I will no longer keep up this dispute
Nor debate, but suffer your violence.
Do your will with me at your benevolence.
But yet David’s Psalter says that all
Shall be obedient unto Man’s call.”

The Worms answer the Body:

“That power lasts only while Man is alive;
Here in the grave, we have the last say.
Since your life is gone, you may no longer strive
Against us worms, for you’re nothing but clay,
As you’ll recall from that holy day
When the priest, to mark the start of Lent,
Makes a cross of ash on each penitent.

And with ash blesses you to have in mind
What you are, and to what you’ll turn again,
For ashes you were before this time,
And ashes you’ll be hereafter for certain.
Be you lord, lady, or high sovereign,
To powder and dust in time you will come,
Of your worldly sojourn such is the sum.”

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“Alas, alas, now I know full well,
That all my life I was a fool.
With a reigning pride too much to tell,
I thought of myself as a beautiful jewel
And was wanton and frivolous, as a rule,
Having great delight in worldly pleasure,
Thinking none to be my equal measure.

As for these worms who now address me,
I bore their messengers each day—
Those fleas and lice that sore oppressed me—
Not knowing how they came my way.
More truly than this I cannot say,
But I must myself with patience provide,
In all circumstances God’s will to abide.”

The Worms answer the Body:

“You get no thanks from us for this admission:
If you had your will, to life you’d hold.
But if you by your heart’s volition
Look in holy scripture, you may behold
That the fairness of women, as therein told,
Is but a vain thing, and transitory.
But God-fearing women shall be praised as holy.”

The Body speaks to the Worms:

“Yes, now it’s far too late to call
At this point in time, but put me there—
Which to do is truly the best of all—
In the mercy of our Lord’s constant care.
And that those in life may have space to prepare,
To consider in the same wise also,
They should think, in the time before they go,
Of their future states and their origins.
Whether man or woman, no matter how fair,
Beware of pride and his fellow sins
Which often bring mortals into care,
As scripture makes mention, the truth to declare.
It is good to shun temptations of flesh,
By the fiend our foe made to enmesh.”
For all that I’ve said, and you worms reviled,  
Be not displeased, I humbly implore.  
Let us be friends for a little while  
And love each other as we did before.  
Let us dwell together forevermore—  
Till I rise again at God’s command  
On Judgment Day, and before him stand.  
With this body to be glorified.  
And of that number may I be one  
With heaven’s bliss to be supplied  
Through the mercy and mediation  
Of our blessed Lord, our very patron,  
There to dwell forever for his delight:  
Amen, Amen, for his love and might.”

Now speaks he who saw the vision:  
With this I from my dream awoke—  
Or from my slumbering meditation.  
Of this dream, this vision, then I spoke  
To a holy man of high reputation.  
To write it down was his exhortation,  
As nearly as I could remember it,  
In fair language, according to my wit,  
To be to the reader a great delight,  
And an admonition to all who believe—  
Both men and women—to live upright  
Before God and all their lusts to leave  
For worldly things which their spirits grieve,  
And rather the more to call to mind  
Our Savior and to him us bind. Amen.