Affective Reading in "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire"

Meaghan Kelly

The medieval manuscript referred to by scholars as MS Ashmole 61 is a late fifteenth century collection of various devotional, didactic, and courtesy texts whose target audience seems to have been the laity, and perhaps more specifically, those just outside the gentry circle. The function of an anthology like MS Ashmole 61 is primarily to educate the fifteenth century family on religious and secular matters. (It also provided means of entertainment with its inclusion of romances and burlesques placed throughout the text). Compiled by Rate, an amateur scribe, the manuscript includes in its first half religious material such as prayers and psalms alongside exempla and saint's lives. While the second half of MS Ashmole 61 is heavily devotional, the tone shifts to dramatic; the texts are more thematically developed and take on far more serious religious concerns. Here is where we find "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire," two independent and considerably shorter items copied by Rate and placed side by side. The coupling of these two texts is exclusive to MS Ashmole 61 and seems to have been "deliberately fused" by Rate (Shuffleton 588). Situated as they are in MS Ashmole 61, the two poems both engage an overarching debate between the body and soul over the consequences of sin while reminding the reader that the unpredictable nature of time limits the chances of confession and penance.

When set in the traditional framework of a debate poem, the dialogue between the body and soul typically offers a clear answer

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to the medieval reader regarding moral and ethical questions. This structure supposedly was an effective way of teaching the medieval audience to agree with Church doctrines and philosophies. The resolute endings of these debate poems left little room for actual questioning and participation of readers. Rather, they offered the answers and expected readers to accept them at face value. While such debate poems represented one mode of medieval dialectics, another featured open-ended debate, an irresolution that allows the reader to reach a state of contemplation which, in turn, fosters affective piety through the act of reading. Literary critics have recently begun to consider the implications of what they have termed "affective reading." This type of reading brings the reader into a state of heightened receptivity to the word of God and to the actual text itself. As a result, the reader's emotional and physical state is affectively altered by language.

Affective reading, as defined by Mark Amsler, "situates reading within a wider discipline of bodily regulation and spiritual reflection" (88). Medieval readers did not read poems such as "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" for pure entertainment, but to learn the value of penance and confession. This process works, according to Amsler, when readers become active participants in the lessons presented in the text. However, the text itself is also responsible for being an equal participant in the reader's spiritual reflection. Effective texts must leave some kind of room for an inner dialogue to occur, rather than providing answers for the reader to follow. In order to fully benefit from affective reading, readers must evaluate their own religious and physical states and contemplate their relationship with God. Both "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" emphasize the severities of lustful behavior, leading readers to evaluate their own physical urges and the repercussions of sinful acts. As a result, readers become aware that the body, in addition to the soul, must also be controlled and regulated. In effect, the text functions as a tool of religious and moral discipline. As Amsler argues, this process of reading authorizes "somatic and affective experiences" as literate technologies for the soul and heart" (Amsler 89). The reader's spiritual and bodily reactions to the text validate its affective abilities.

Traditional medieval debate poems – those commonly structured around balanced debates over religious and secular teachings, often

allegorizing love, virtues, and the body and soul – do not foster the habits of affective reading. The conflicting dialogue between two characters usually makes clear which viewpoint is the preferred one and the reader thus remains disengaged from the process of contemplative interpretation. The "wrong" answer clearly exposes itself through exaggeration, while the "right" answer is plainly obvious. "The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools," for example, a more conventional debate poem also found in MS Ashmole 61, questions the self's moral behavior in a secular setting. The poem personifies the carpenter's tools, who proceed to interpret from different perspectives the inner self of the figure who owns them. The conflict in this case is over their "master's ability and willingness to make a living" and the tools take either an optimistic or pessimistic view on their master's recovery of a strong work ethic (Shuffleton 457). These dueling positions are immediately established at the start of the narrative, making it clear for the reader which point of view is preferred by society. The Chip-Ax begins the poem by directly addressing his master's unworthiness as a laborer. With a cynical tone says, "Bot for all that ever thou kane, / Thall never be a thryfty man" (5-6). This voice is then answered by the optimistic Mallet who mandates his master's performance "[w]ith grete strokys" so his "master schall full well thene" (10-11). This antithetical dialogue goes back and forth throughout the narrative, defending the carpenter's ethics and criticizing his alcoholism and bad habits.

In his explanatory notes on this text, editor George Shuffleton states this debate "has no clearly-determined winning side, but it certainly produces a loser." (457). The preference is seen in the outcome of the reader's apprehension of affirmed morals and behaviors; presumably, the reader then chooses to live and act by these proposed expectations him or herself. According to Nicholas Jacobs, this type of argument and its "conclusive debate" presents a winning side "explicitly or implicitly" (481). Because medieval readers learn the negative outcomes of a poor work ethic and bad habits such as excess drinking, these norms are accepted as "right" without readers contesting them. Medievalist Steven F. Kruger believes the mode of these types of debates are "opened and pursued at least in part to put questions to rest rather than to elicit a variety of equally and disputable claims." (77). In dealing with secular issues, a conclusive debate poem

between an explicit right and wrong side offers a simple way to teach and model accepted behavior; if the theme of the debate poem pertains to religion, however, this sort of conclusive debate actually limits the acquisition of spiritual knowledge.

A conclusive debate, contained within the borders of a single text, highly restricts the space for inner reflection. A conclusive debate over religious concerns would only serve to enforce ideologies, rather than promote spiritual introspection. This structure limits the growth of the reader's conscience and hinders the development of individualized moral and religious philosophies – because concepts are not questioned but consented to. In order for there to be adequate room for deep contemplation, a debate poem must remain open-ended. Although the Catholic religion has its fundamentals, and challenging those fundamentals would be considered heresy, it is important for Christians to individualize these doctrines to fit their daily lives. The benefit of an open-ended debate is the liminal space necessary to develop a deep and personal connection with Christ through the process of affective reading.

In contrast to the structure of conventional debate poems, in which two voices challenge one another in a single text, "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" function differently. The poems devote themselves to illustrating the picture of sin and its consequences. The debate then occurs within the reader over who is at fault for committing sin, either the soul or the body, through the inner dialogue of the reader's conscience. The outcome of the decision of who is right or wrong is based on the readers' physical and emotional condition and how they imagine God would judge the state of their own bodies and souls. It is this placement of sympathy that decides who is at fault and how to regulate and control the body or soul in order to atone correctly for sins. While readers are in this state of deep contemplation they are able to reach a state of affective piety as they connect to God through the reading of these texts.

On the surface, neither "The Sinner's Lament" nor "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" are structured as debate poems in the traditional sense; there are no personified objects or opposing speakers as seen in "The Debate of the Carpenter's Tools." And yet both poems are in conflict over placing blame on either the body or soul. Both poems

are constructed within the conventional framework of a dream vision, a common setting in medieval debate poetry. For example, in "The Sinner's Lament," the condemned soul of Sir Wylliam Basterfeld returns to earth after experiencing Final Judgement to warn the living of the consequences of sin and to promote atonement. This scenario recalls many dream vision poems in which the soul, recently departed from the body, returns to counsel the living on the significance of penitential acts and prayer while still on earth. What is most important about this traditional structure is the "dream's ambiguous potential" notes Kruger, and the way this narrative "focus[es] on the crossings and inter-implications of the worldly and otherworldly, to navigate the middle realm of humanness...where [the] complex relations [of body and soul] can be explored" (78). What I would like to emphasize about this space – a space where it is possible to explore the relationship of body and soul – is its productive ambiguity: the dream vision asks readers to navigate through the gray areas of inconclusive debate. Both texts utilize this oneiric state as an open space for readers to enter the poem and cognitively process the religious ideologies presented. This is where inner reflection occurs, through which readers are given time to decide who they believe is at fault based on their individual moral conscience. While in this meditative state, readers are able to evaluate where they believe they stand in the eyes of God if they were in the position of this disembodied voice. Presumably, this period of rumination would end with readers applying the virtue of prudence to their lives and exercising penitential acts for their sins. A conclusive debate, with its definitive answers and balanced argument, would not provide readers who are seeking religious guidance a contemplative state in which to work out individualized solutions.

"The Sinner's Lament" is primarily concerned with warning against sin and telling of retribution served in the afterlife. Rather than focusing on a single sin, the departed's soul touches on several: "vanyte," "lechery," "glotony," "sleuth," greed, and the repercussions of his lack of penance and confession (349-350). Repeatedly, the soul admits to having had "no grace me to amend" for his repeated sins and lack of atonement on earth and in heaven, which places him a position beyond the power of prayer and God's mercy. The soul seems fully aware of the body's mistakes and of the limitations earthly time places

on the ability of the individual to properly expiate the sins of the body:

> I hade no hape whyll I was here
> For to aryse and me repent,
> Tyll that I was brought on bere;
> Than was to late, for I was schent. (20-23)

The soul here presents a self-awareness that places him in an authoritative position over the body. Michel-Andre Bossy situates body and soul debates into two distinct categories: "either the Soul argues with the Body from a position of moral superiority or it shares guilt with the Body (and often deserves more blame)," and here we see "The Sinner's Lament" fitting into both categories (145). The soul blames the body for not performing penitential acts while on earth. Despite the soul holding the body responsible for sensual indulgences, it also shares in the guilt. In a regretful and doomed tone, the soul elicits highly emotional responses by detailing the body's torment in hell. Yet, after describing hell as a place full of "todys and snakys" that "gnawyn [its] body," the soul shows that it shares in the pains of hell by crying out: "Alas, alas full wo is me!" (37-39).

This pattern of dialogue, physical descriptions recounted by the body followed by the soul's emotional outbursts, is repeated towards the conclusion of the lyric. The body suffers in hell surrounded by "many a fo" and "rente fro tope to to" (80-82). Conscious of the threat from enemies and its grotesque physical form, the soul regretfully cries, "Alas, that ever I was borne!" (83). This self-condemning exclamation begins and ends this descriptive stanza, suggesting that the soul understands that he is beyond God's mercy and laments the day his body came into being. Through these descriptions of physical and spiritual pains experienced in the afterlife, the reader is reminded of the tension between spiritual and physical agencies, just as in conventional debate poems. In this poem, however, the reader is encouraged to affectively respond to the predicament that the soul and the body find themselves in without mercy. The physical descriptions and emotional responses elicit an affective response of anxiety and fear of depravity and sin, which would, in turn, help the reader to better control the body's temptations and develop a stronger moral conscience.

"The Sinner's Lament" provides a triggering moment where medieval readers can begin to assess what penitential acts need to be performed to avoid such a harrowing afterlife and hopefully reconcile with God to restore their moral standing. Although there is no clearly defined winning or losing side to this poem and neither the soul nor the body seems to be in a position of higher authority over the other, both sides seem to be at a loss. Neither does the poem clearly blame one side or the other, so the question of who is at fault remains ambiguous, left for readers to determine. This moment of ethical contemplation and inner reflection over the reader's own body and soul provides this unconventional debate poem with a solution based on what penitential acts the reader believes best atone for the sins committed by either side, which, in turn, creates an individualized resolution to a universal debate. This individualization of such a ubiquitous teaching, I believe, is not only the greatest benefit one gains from an open-ended debate, but perhaps the goal of this type of poem.

Now that the reader has been presented with the soul's torment in hell, "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" speaks more to the body's struggles with temptation. The poem elaborates on the consequences of sin in a way meant to dramatically alter the medieval reader's concepts of prayer, indulgences, and the mercy of God. Like "The Sinner's Lament," "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" is not a conventionally conclusive debate poem. It acts, rather, by presenting a universal philosophy and affectively involves the reader in creating a resolution through its intensely visceral descriptions of the afterlife. The poem also adopts the oneiric framework of the vision in order to pull the reader into the narrative and create a metaphysical space where the relationships between the body and soul, reader and text can be explored and evaluated.

This text devotes itself to the sin of lust, the most somatic of the cardinal sins and the most fitting for the body to manifest in an exemplum constructed around the depravity and penance of the condemned. As the narrative begins, the spirit of the departed squire immediately admits to his vice of lust which, as a transgression of "[t]he fyrst sacrement that ever God made," makes his resulting adultery the most serious of moral offenses (9). Addressing his audience from hell, the squire tells the story of his adultery, his lack of penance, and

the burden of sin inherited by his son. While at his father's grave, the son is visited by an angel who takes him down to hell to better understand the serious repercussions of cardinal sin. The mystical voyage allows the reader to conceptualize these grand ideas of hell and sin. The poet graphically depicts hell in physical terms as a place where souls are suffering and "put in grete pyning," torments that the speaker admits to have been self-inflicted: "Myn awne bale there I dyde brew" (101,115). The body of the adulterous squire, hung by his genitals and torn from "lyth to leme," offers an undoubtedly disturbing image for medieval readers to visualize (105). Such a graphically painful description of the soul's and body's suffering enhances the somatic effect on the reader and evokes an emotional response of fear and anxiety over damnation. This text also emphasizes in physical terms the limitations of earthly time on the body's willingness to perform acts of penance. The condemned soul advocates "schryft of moth and penans smerte" while on earth and reminds readers that those who "die a sothen deth / Withouten schryft or repentans, / To hell thei go withouten lete" (46-50). The poem thus urges medieval readers to be proactive while still in their earthly bodies in order to obtain spiritual peace in the afterlife. If the body does not perform enough good works and penitential acts on earth, the power of prayer alone will be insufficient to cleanse it of sin. Neither the "seyntys that be in hevene" nor "angellus under the skye" would be able to lift the soul out of hell and into purgatory, where penance might be served (120-21). With this message, the text disrupts the medieval reader's current conceptions of prayer and its ability to save the damned soul from the physical and emotional pains of hell. The poet encourages the reader to be more active in this life rather than relying on penance being performed in the afterlife, which seems to have no effect on the soul's final judgment and salvation.

The poem concludes by representing the burden of sin, which seems to be carried by not only the condemned soul, but the entire family of the departed. After returning from his visit with his father in hell, the young boy approaches the Tree of Knowledge; the same tree that had once bore the forbidden fruit. Because of Adam and Eve's original sin, the tree now stands pale, without "frute and floure," and bleeds when approached by those who are ostracized from the

heavenly community (159). Although the son has not acted wrongfully on his own behalf, the tree still bleeds when he stands in front of it because he carries with him his father's "vengawnce of that cursyd syn" (174). As the young boy watches "the blode ryneth" from the tree, readers are reminded of Christ's ultimate sacrifice as he bled for the sins of all his people on the cross (175). To a medieval audience, this well-known image of the Passion of the Christ could be moving enough to elicit a visceral response that would help in reaching a level of affective piety.

The graphic images of the body and soul's suffering in hell, along with the Tree of Knowledge and its representation of religious tropes, are depicted in such a way that could enable readers to affectively perceive these pains, and perhaps even share in a sense of torment. Through this text's embodiment of sin along with religious and earthly limitations on penance, the reader hopefully comes to understand them more fully and crucially, to appreciate his or her spiritual agency.

Both texts analyzed above put into practice an affective stylistics, rendering the consequences of sin in such physical and graphic terms that they elicit a bodily response. By internalizing images of the suffering body and soul, the reader is better able to enter into a state of affective piety, sympathizing for the sufferers and praying for their own forgiveness. The rhetoric of the poems encourages readers to engage in the ongoing debate between their own bodies and souls, regulating their daily behaviors, and reflecting on the spiritual effects of both sins and good works. The sequencing of these texts, whether or not the result of the scribe's intention, suggests a relevance deeper than a continuation of the common themes of sin and penance. I believe Rate placed them side by side not only because of their shared subjects, but also for the ambiguous space each text creates for contemplation, unlike the more conventional debate poems. The unique placement of "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire," – which appear side by side only in MS Ashmole 61 – opens an extended space for inner reflection and meditation on the state of spiritual existence (Shuffleton 558). Katherine Lynch calls this extended space the "liminal experience," which is reached through the dream vision and allows for a deep spiritual connection to be formed where religious and social ideas are reconfigured and applied to daily

life. She goes on to explain that this liminal space "leads [the medieval reader] to a knowledge that transcends bodily limitations" for one "who seeks to explore the threshold between body and spirit" (64). I believe the open-ended debates about body and soul in "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" lead readers to this liminal state where the "healing power of vision," as Lynch describes it, is more easily accessible and affective reading becomes possible (52).

For medieval readers to fully benefit from affective reading, the text creates this liminal space necessary for contemplation through an appeal to the senses in a way that arouses emotional responses. Whether it is the soul's chilling lament or the disturbing image of a dismembered body in hell, these metonymical tools function to make concrete the abstractions of sin. The senses are open to receiving various stimuli, therefore, these "receptors of the world, can lead to sin or spiritual salvation" (Amsler 91). The act of reading itself involves physical stimuli. As Amsler suggests, "a reader perceives the page of devotional text and then creates and participates in an interior experience or pious contemplation" (91). Amsler's presumption leads me to believe that both "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" utilize sensory details to enhance the overall somatic and emotional experience of devotional reading. Both poems appeal to the senses to open up the liminal space needed for spiritual meditation and an "interior experience." Had their religious lessons been presented to readers as conclusive debates, an affective level of reading would have been prevented by the implied resolution rather than leaving the reader in a state of self-questioning where their own concepts and ideas are allowed the liminal space to formulate and evolve. This is the benefit of the open-ended debate about the responsibilities and failings of body and soul that occur in both "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire."

Perhaps Rate had this in mind when he placed these texts in this sequence. As they are situated, "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" continue and strengthen the themes of penance, affective piety, and confession that run through the entire manuscript. The rhetoric of the irresolution presented in both poems paradoxically produces a resolution through the inner dialogue of the reader. "*Irresolution,*" Kruger insists, "is often achieved by bringing

debate/dialogue together with the dream," the exact method of "The Sinner's Lament" and "The Adulterous Falmouth Squire" (77). This irresolution is key in the reader's liminal experience of affective reading and, without it, religious doctrines would be blindly accepted without productive reflection on the inner and complex relationship between body and soul. The affective stylistics of these poems, on the other hand, engage the body and soul in a moral debate that leads readers to question the integrity of their own lives.

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