ABSTRACT
ARGUMENT IN POETRY: (RE)DEFINING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH DEBATE POEM IN ACADEMIC, POPULAR, AND PHYSICAL CONTEXTS

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The core problem that drives my dissertation is to find a definition for what has been called Middle English “debate poetry” that accounts for the wide variety of themes, topics, and styles which poems labeled as ‘debates’ cover. The limitations of overly focused and restrictive definitions of the term ‘debate poetry’ encountered by previous scholars illustrates the initial problem of using a generic term that lacks a formal definition. The result has been that each scholar who investigated a poem linked to this tradition used a different definition suited to his or her particular text(s) of interest.

In order to address this confusion, I apply the contexts provided by a variety of intellectual, cultural, and material rhetorical practices. I examine academic disputation and commentary practices, the textbooks that present the grammatical and poetic strategies which contributed to them, medieval sermon and preaching manuals, and the mystery plays. All of these rhetorical situations are formats for presenting a persuasive interpretation of a given text that require the use of authoritative evidence and interpretive strategies. In addition to the theoretical and literary background, I also include the physical evidence preserved in the manuscripts. Codicology presents a way to analyze how the poems were viewed when recorded, as well as how that perception changed over time. Such contextual clues give insight into how authority and persuasion is assumed or manipulated within the texts.

The solution that I propose presents two possible models that take their definitive characteristics from wide-spread methods of persuasion and argument from the medieval period: the academic disputation and commentary, and the medieval sermon. Each model contains features that distinguish ‘debate’ poetry from other genres that employ dialogue and argumentation, and features that are shared. I apply the resulting models to multiple poems to illustrate how definitive traits transfer to the ‘debate poem’. In my conclusion I present some final examples of how my two-pronged system can be applied to both medieval and modern texts.