EPISODE 1: GERALDINE HAZBUN

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:02
Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:15
Hi, Geraldine. Can you hear me?

Geraldine Hazbun 0:17
Yeah, yeah, I can hear you, hi.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:19
Hi, how are you doing?

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Geraldine Hazbun 0:20
My name's Geraldine Hazbun. I'm a Professor of Medieval Spanish Literature.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:25
And so what's the name of the text that we're going to be speaking about today and who wrote it?

Geraldine Hazbun 0:31
So the text that I've chosen is by an author called Jorge Manrique and the text is called *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:39
Great. And so tell me a little bit about the form of the text? Is it prose or poetry, for example?

Geraldine Hazbun 0:46
It's a poem and it's forty stanzas long and it's notionally about the death of the poet's father, Rodrigo Manrique, but he doesn't actually appear until over halfway through. So the vast part of it is actually a more general reflection on life and death and the relationship between those two things.

Christy Callaway-Gale 1:05
And so why was it that you wanted to speak about this text in particular?

Geraldine Hazbun 1:09
Well, it's actually a poem that I studied as an undergraduate and I came back to it many years later and discovered that I never grow tired of it, I never grow tired of reading it, and I never grow tired of thinking about it. So I think it does what all great literature does, which is to keep asking you questions and getting you to find your own answers.

Christy Callaway-Gale 1:29
Brilliant. So maybe let's speak a bit about the historical and literary context around the poem. So, when and where was the poem written and published?

Geraldine Hazbun 1:40
So it was actually written between 1476 and 1479 and lots of people would put that at 1477. And actually the poet died in 1479, so it was written shortly before his own death. There isn't actually a primary text, we don't know what the master text was because of the loss of materials in the manuscript tradition, but the first printed edition was probably from 1483 and it was probably published in Zaragoza.

Christy Callaway-Gale 2:08
And what was happening in Spain at the time?

Geraldine Hazbun 2:12
Well it was a really interesting time actually because there was a very volatile political climate in the 15th century and particularly during the reign of one king, in particular, Enrique IV and he reigned from 1425-74. And the author, Manrique, came from an exemplary aristocratic background, he was old Castilian nobility. His father, who's the subject of the poem, Rodrigo Manrique, was a Master of one of the Military Orders, the Order of Santiago. And actually the author, Jorque Manrique, fought in civil wars against the king, against Enrique, in 1464. And then, when Enrique died, Jorge allied himself in the war of succession with the cause of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel I and Fernando of Aragon and he allied himself with them against Juana of Castile, who was actually the daughter of Enrique IV and his second wife Juana of Portugal, although she was rumoured to be illegitimate. And Jorge actually was a Captain of the Holy Brotherhood of Toledo in the later stages of his life, and was involved in action at the frontier, directly so. And actually his death came about as a result of military action at the Castle of Garcimuñoz. He died from an injury to the groin. So he's a figure who's heavily bound up in the volatility and the political clashes of his day, very immediately so.

Christy Callaway-Gale 3:38
And did he write other poems or other texts?

Geraldine Hazbun 3:41
Well, like many courtiers at the time, he was a warrior and he was a writer and, particularly, he was a poet, so the life of a courtier and the life of a poet really do go hand in hand in the 15th century. Lots of poetry from this period was in the mode of courtly love songs, and *cancionero* poetry and Manrique did write love songs, and he also wrote burlesque poetry as well, but actually the *Coplas por la muerte* have come to be the masterpiece for which he's widely recognised.

Christy Callaway-Gale 4:13
And you just touched on then about the other literature that was being written at the time. Do you want to expand on that just a little in terms of what might have characterised literature being written around the same time as this poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 4:26
Yes, well, 15th century literature in Iberia is very diverse. I mean, it includes chronicles, balladry, sentimental romances, so in a sense it's hard to generalise. But I would say that a lot of it is closely connected to the social and political context. So it does have quite an important relationship with the historical environment from which it comes.

Christy Callaway-Gale 4:49
And are there any other texts that we should be aware of that came before this poem that might have influenced the writing of it?

Geraldine Hazbun 4:58

Well, there isn't a direct precursor from which Manrique draws his material, really with the *Coplas* he draws more on classical archetypes and examples, like eulogy and elergy, but there's probably a close connection with an important text known as the Dance of Death, the *Danza de la muerte*. It's not known that this was a direct connection, it might just be a case that this text also is part of common conventions about death in the 15th century. But really, in general terms, I suppose the *Coplas* belongs to the 15th century trend for producing poetry at court.

Christy Callaway-Gale 5:34
Great. So I think now let's speak a bit about the text itself, in some more detail. So who is the speaker of the poem and who are they addressing?

Geraldine Hazbun 5:44
Well the speaker's identity raises interesting questions about the crossover between the historical figure who was Jorge Manrique and the implied author and the narrator of the poem. They're not the same, but the membrane between them can, at times, be very fine, especially towards the end of the poem when Manrique speaks about his own father. Interestingly, he talks about his father dying and being 'cercado de sus hijos', ‘surrounded by his sons’, which is as if he were commentating almost from the outside. But the speaking voice also involves the first person plural a lot, the 'we' form, so it's very inclusive. It addresses the reader, but it addresses the reader as part of a wider collective.

Christy Callaway-Gale 6:30
So could you give us some examples of when these different voices are heard in the poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 6:35
Well, there's one clear example I could think of which is a difference perhaps between a rhetorical voice, which is...an example of which would be in the fourth stanza of the poem where he says, 'dexo las invocaciones', he almost stands on a pedestal and directs the poem in the sense of a, kind of, orator. But actually, at the end of the poem, that voice seems to be taken over by, actually, direct dialogue between the figure of death and Rodrigo. So actually there are parts of the poem where the speaking voice, the narrator's voice, is actually taken over by a representation of a dialogue between death and Rodrigo Manrique and then Rodrigo Manrique also addressing Jesus. And then the very final stanzas come back to the speaker's voice describing how Rodrigo has a good death. But actually, within those gradations of historical author, implied author and narrator, sometimes there are sliding perspectives that are quite difficult to judge. And actually, the historical author, the person who, you know, for the historical record wrote the poem, is not the same as the implied author, the person who's almost directing the substance of the work and how we understand it. The implied author and the narrator are often quite difficult to disentangle and especially in this poem where the speaking voice is so rhetorical at times. But probably the biggest difference then is actually between the appearance of that voice and actually its disappearance and the fact that the poem allows death to have a voice and allows Rodrigo to speak directly in dialogue within that encounter.

Christy Callaway-Gale 8:15
And what are some of the main themes of the poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 8:19
Well the obvious theme is death. But readers who are expecting, having looked at the title, to find a kind of outpouring of grief about a dead father will be quite surprised to discover that the approach to death is much more universal, it's more contemplative. And actually, a lot of the poem is about what remains as much as about what disappears. I suppose when you're talking about process like he is you're talking about life as a pathway or as a river; you're also thinking about time and one of the things that occurs to me in the *Coplas* is how time is

relative for Manrique. Everything seems to be precarious and imminent. It's as if what's already being said, and spoken, is reaching a point of decline. There's something about the way he presents human life that goes beyond the idea of the pathway or the process and almost invites us to think about human experience as being quite conjoined, as if the boundary between life and death isn't very clear.

Christy Callaway-Gale 9:21
And is there any variation in the way that the author approaches these themes throughout the poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 9:28
Yes, very obviously so, in the sense that the *Coplas* move from a general reflection about death to a more particular concrete example of that, which is his father actually dying. And within that structure, the *Coplas* are tripartite. So the first part of them is a general section, reflecting on mortality. And then the middle part is a series of negative exemplar, examples of behaviour, of actual practical behaviours, that are deemed to be improper. And then it ends with a praise of Rodrigo and his exceptional life and achievement, so it moves through those phases from the general to the particular. And actually we draw closer and closer to death, to the extent that actually death appears in person right at the end of the poem.

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:16
So can we say anything about the verse structure? And maybe here you might want to say something about metre or rhyme, for example, as well?

Geraldine Hazbun 10:23
Yeah, so there are, as I said, there are forty stanzas, and each stanza involves four tercets. A tercet is a term for a three-line verse. And actually, within each tercet, there are two octosyllabic verses, there are two lines that are eight syllables long. And then there's a third line, which is only four syllables long and it's a half line, and we call that *pie quebrado*, which means 'broken foot'. So what happens is, within each stanza in those twelve lines, every third line is a half line. And this really involves the poem in a kind of resonant quality, it almost feels like a kind of heartbeat or a kind of...a way of measuring the pace of the poem which is quite slow. And it's very distinctive and visually on the page it stands out but also when you read it the same effect applies. The octosyllabic verse is one that's fairly common in medieval literature. The eight-syllable line is found, for example, in ballads, and, and also in epic poetry. But actually combining that with those four-syllable lines is something that shows a high degree of poetic skill.

Christy Callaway-Gale 11:30
I find that really interesting the way you describe the metre as a sort of heartbeat because of what you've said about the themes of the poem revolving around death, for example. Is there any relationship between the metre or the structure of the poem and the themes that are addressed within it?

Geraldine Hazbun 11:50
I think there is and I think that's where some of Manrique's skill really comes to the fore. In the sense that, the structure is very ordered and it's very predictable. And in that sense, what it's doing is, is putting a kind of order on death, which is something that seems potentially problematic for a modern reader in particular—because we might associate that moment with more darkness, more chaos—but there's a kind of dignity about the *Coplas*, in general. The measured pace of the poem means that certain key concepts and ideas have room to breathe almost. It's as if the lines are given just a little bit of a drawing back from the full octosyllabic line, in order that the meaning of certain words is really evident and the sound of those words carries that. It's almost as if he gives certain key concepts and ideas a bit of breathing space and allows them to develop a little bit more slowly.

Christy Callaway-Gale 12:43
And so when he's developing these ideas and key concepts, what sorts of language is he using?

Geraldine Hazbun 12:51
Well he uses language that is unencumbered and it lacks ornament for the sake of it. This isn't someone who clutters his poetry with devices and techniques just for the sake of it. He chooses his words very carefully and, at first glance, maybe some of these words can be quite off-putting, they can seem consciously erudite, belonging to older traditions, often quite classical traditions. But really, the meaning of them is very clear in their context. And actually, what he does is make them available, make them clear, rather than dressing them up in a kind of context where they might be deliberately obscure or complicated. He's not a wordsmith who tries to make things tricky. He's someone who allows language to speak for itself.

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:34
And do you feel like there's a particular message that the author wants us to take away from this poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 13:41
Well, I think there is in the sense that there might be an uncontroversial message in one sense, in that Manrique's taking a lot of traditional commonplaces and ideas that already existed about life and death and he's giving them his own poetic version. For example, the idea about making the most of your life, the idea of leaving a legacy, of rejecting material things for higher aims, like bravery and virtue. These ideas exist in many other contexts and many other literary forms preceding Manrique. But what he seems to do, I think, and maybe what a modern audience might see slightly differently is, the absolute faith that he has in the next life and in the difference between the three lives. So Manrique sets out a schema by which there's a physical life on Earth, there's a life of fame (a life of legacy, by which you leave something of yourself behind), and then there's a third life, an eternal life which is guaranteed for eternity, and he talks about that as a 'morada sin pesar', a kind of dwelling place without sorrow, and he has utter faith in that, that's where his father ends up in the poem. And it's often the case that texts of a Christian, of a religious persuasion like this, voice concepts like that, but there are texts from this time that are slightly more skeptical about that idea too, such as Fernando de Rojas' *La celestina*, which is a text that lacks that feeling of consolation. So, in that sense, his message is very hopeful, I think. But I think there are other things in the *Coplas* that are perhaps not so conventional, in the sense that he's offering a vision of the court and he's offering a vision of the chivalric life, which in some respects you could see him as criticising. He involves things like tournaments and jousts and the trappings of the medieval knight, as part of an example of the vanities of the world, the things that pass away. But yet, I think there's part of Manrique that still clings to that world, that still is almost at a point of enjoying that, of feeling a kind of melancholy for something that might already in his own time be fading. So the way I see the text is in terms of its time, maybe kind of standing on a precipice of a chivalric ideal that might already be crumbling, and he's almost poised between enjoying that and celebrating that and seeing that as something that might be also construed as part of a world that needs to be rejected.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:16
So do you see the poem belonging to the end of a specific Castilian worldview?

Geraldine Hazbun 16:22
Well, Manrique sided with the Catholic Monarchs and they went on to unify Spain and they expelled the Muslims from Spain and founded the Spanish Empire. And, of course, Manrique had been involved in events connected with these outcomes: he fought in the frontier wars

against the Sultanate of Granada, but he died before any of those major outcomes happened. And actually his father is described in the *Coplas* as winning eternal life through the spilling of blood in 'trabajos e aflicciones / contra moros'. To a modern reader, the idea of killing Muslims would seem to be a very uncomfortable sort of triumph, but it's important to remember that Rodrigo was engaged in the work of a 15th century Castilian knight, recovering land from the Muslims and fighting at the frontier. There's no escaping that difficult point. But I think maybe it's important to temper that with the fact that the poem also has a melancholy note here as well. I think this is less a kind of rallying call to arms and maybe more of a wistful reflection on proven military triumph and family achievements, at a time when these old orders were starting to break down, where there were rifts between aristocracy and Crown and near constant civil strife in 15th century Castile. So I think it's important just to look at it in its own historical context.

Christy Callaway-Gale 17:46
And so I'm thinking about you approaching this text for the first time as a student. Do you think there are some challenges maybe for students when they first approach this text? And maybe you could give some advice as to how those can be overcome.

Geraldine Hazbun 18:00
Well I think the problem that usually occurs is one that is common to students of, of older literature, which is a feeling of under confidence about looking at older material and an older version of Castilian, and I would say to them that you don't need expert knowledge to be able to do that. You need to look at a good critical edition of the poem and use footnotes and obviously we help with that with our lectures and classes in Oxford. So the first thing I would say would be to not be daunted and not be afraid of looking at older material. The second thing I would say is that often when people look at the Middle Ages, they have certain expectations about it and maybe expectations that come from more popular contexts about, you know, what it was like, and you know, what the historical record might have told us. My advice with this, as with any canonical work, is to look at it with fresh eyes, to let it speak for itself, to let the imagery in particular speak for itself. The other thing I suppose is that, in a text like this about death, it's important to realise that death and decay and bodies were lived realities in this period, they're not poetic abstractions. This was a time in which people were very accustomed to the immediacy of death and I would say with the *Coplas* that it's important to look out for that close contact with reality, even in what is a very erudite and lofty poetic setting. There's something in it that's really visceral, it's really in contact with human reality and human life and that's what makes it so brilliant, I think. It's not detached from the things that it's talking about, it's absolutely immersed in them.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:43
A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking Geraldine to pick out a quotation from the poem so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:56
What's the quotation we're going to be speaking about and do you have a rough translation of it for us?

Geraldine Hazbun 20:01
Yes, so the quotation is 'nuestras vidas son los ríos/ que van a dar en la mar/ que es el morir', which means 'our lives are the rivers that empty into the sea of our dying'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:13
Ok, and so is this one line in the poem, or is this a quotation that spans over several lines?

Geraldine Hazbun 20:19
So the quotation stretches over a tercet, over three lines, and it includes two octosyllabic lines and one half line, one line of the *pie quebrado*, of four syllables, which is the line 'que es el morir'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:34
And whereabouts does this quotation come in the poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 20:38
So this is the third of forty stanzas, so it comes right at the beginning of the poem and within that first section of the poem that stresses cognition. The opening section invites humans to awaken, to remember, to see, to think, to judge, lots of verbs like *recordar*, *despertar*, *juzgar*, *pensar*, and it's really getting us to think about the reality of life passing and death making its stealthy approach. So it has a very reflective tendency in general, this first section.

Christy Callaway-Gale 21:09
And why did you want to hone in on this particular quotation from the poem?

Geraldine Hazbun 21:14
Well, it caught my attention because this is an image which is almost so readily understandable and commonplace that it could actually just pass you by, but it's vitally important to think about that and to think about why that is. So it's biblical in origin. But the very idea that our lives might be rivers that empty into the sea gets us to think a lot about what he's trying to say in terms of the life as a river and death as a sea. Are they the same thing? Are they different? Is he talking about a kind of annihilation, or a different version of a kind of life? So there's lots to think about there and actually, when you read it, it just, it almost washes over you as a beautiful image, and it's so familiar, but actually there's lots of depth to it.

Christy Callaway-Gale 21:58
And you mentioned the number of syllables in each of these lines, is there anything that you want to pull out about that, that helps us to form a deeper understanding of the quotation?

Geraldine Hazbun 22:10
Well, I think what happens is that, because the sounds at the ends of the lines are very strong, so you've got 'ríos', 'mar', and 'morir', what happens in the next tercet of that stanza is that they're rhymed with other words that are similar, so 'señoríos' 'acabar' and 'consumir'. So the stanza in general, of which this tercet is part, reflects exactly what it's describing which is a kind of gradual change. And actually the line 'que es el morir' is given a half line to itself, this *pie quebrado*, and what that means is that dying essentially has a line to itself, it becomes the focus, it becomes more easily remembered. And we have to think in this context about the possibility of people reading a text privately, but also reading aloud. Orality and textuality are closely intertwined still, at this point in time, so sound effects remain incredibly important.

Christy Callaway-Gale 23:08
And that feeds into my next question, which is about the very beginning of the quotation. So the quotation starts with 'our lives'. And, because it starts like this, it groups the reader in with the speaker of the poem. What effect does that have grouping us all together like that?

Geraldine Hazbun 23:26
Well, the effect is clearly inclusive, in the sense that he's speaking for all of us when he says that our lives flow like this, nobody can escape this process. So in one sense, it's about death

as a leveller. In the rest of the stanza, for example, he goes on to talk about how great rivers and smaller streams all arrive at the sea. They all arrive as equals and he's talking about that in order to level people who might be Lords with people who might be poor and have no money. Death is the outcome for all of us. But I think that the 'we' form is also a way of gently inviting us to take responsibility, without pointing a kind of finger. He doesn't want to involve himself in a kind of didacticism that might be actually off-putting. There's a level of gentleness, almost a level of euphemism, about that approach.

Christy Callaway-Gale 24:14
And are there any other poetic devices from the quotation, or even from the verse that this quotation comes from, that are worth commenting on?

Geraldine Hazbun 24:22
I think only really that it's a metaphor and it's an extended metaphor, in the sense that it continues throughout the stanza and the water imagery develops throughout. And I suppose what that does is invite us to think about why you would be using metaphors to talk about life and death. It's a way of talking about something without talking about it directly. And it's very image-based. And it's partly again to do with that need to teach but also to entertain and inspire. You know good literature tried to square those two things, 'enseñar' and 'deleitar', 'to teach' and 'to entertain or to delight' but I also think, in terms of the metaphor, this is also a context in which people use their memories a lot and their memories are very visual and producing an image of a *camino*, or a *vida* like a *río*, as he does in the first part of the poem, is also a way of registering key concepts in a way that's more likely to have a lasting impact on one's mind and memory.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:20
And so would it be fair to say that this quotation helps us to maybe think about the way death, for example, is talked about in the poem as a whole, but at the same time, is not broad enough to cover all of the other, sort of, themes and tangents that the poem might explore?

Geraldine Hazbun 25:39
I think so. And I think because the first section is so easily identifiable as more reflective and more thoughtful. The middle section of the poem deals with a lot of very specific historical examples, including figures from his own and recent time, and who he sets up as examples of the *ubi sunt*, he asks the question: where have they gone, which was a rhetorical question, which is almost inviting us to remember these characters at the same time as inviting us to forget them. And what he's doing, as the poem goes on, is gathering a kind of specificity about death and leading to his father, Rodrigo, as being a supreme example of someone whose life is so good and so impressive that he can never be forgotten. So there is a kind of crescendo as it becomes more and more particular, in terms of how we lead up to his own father, and what his own father's death means. So, in the beginning, we are thinking about death as a general concept and we have those things in mind as we read the more particular examples as the poem goes on, so that when we come to his father, we have a huge amount of information and reflection about death, with which to weigh up how his father died which is in exemplary fashion because he was an exemplary individual.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 26:58
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[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 27:10
You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 27:17
This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

[MUSIC ENDS]