Jorge Manrique

SAMPLER

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Jorge Manrique

Stanzas on the Death of His Father

Coplas a la muerte de su padre

translated from the Spanish by
Patrick McGuinness

with an introduction by Geraldine Hazbun

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In memory of our student, Rebecca Henderson,
scholar and medievalist, 1994–2019

G.H.
P.McG.

Coplas a la muerte de su padre

Coplas a la muerte de su padre by Jorge Manrique (c.1440–79) is one of the most celebrated poems in the Spanish language. Written shortly before the poet's death, it is a dignified elegy that speaks not just of a personal loss, that of the poet's father Rodrigo Manrique (d.1476), but of the evanescence of all things *sub specie aeternitatis*. Its popularity is aided by memorable lines, not least the two opening metaphors: man's life is a river meandering unto the sea of death (st. 3), and this world is the road to the next, the lasting dwelling place (st. 5). The poem replicates these reflections in its wending form. Its forty stanzas each comprise four tercets; each tercet is made up of two longer octosyllabic verses combined with one four-syllable half-line known as *pie quebrado*. These regular broken lines, like beats of a heart, invest the poem with a resonant quality befitting the injunction at the opening of the poem to awaken one's slumbering soul to the passage of time: 'Recuerde el alma dormida, | avive el seso e despierte' (st. 1). The poetic structure is supported by an overarching conceptual one, that of the three lives – the physical life, the life of *fama* (a posthumous reputation for remarkable deeds), and the eternal life of heaven. To this Christian Neo-Stoic view of life and death, Manrique adds his own touch. Time is entirely relative, everything is precarious and imminent: what is being said is already spoken, what is at its height is already at its point of decline. Throughout the poem we are exposed repeatedly to the conjoined nature of human experience. Manrique's masterstroke – aided by repetition, antonyms, conjunctions, parallels, and other forms of aesthetic chicanery – is to tread the borderline between life and death precisely, keeping the reader at a point where death constantly intrudes on life and life is a perpetual state of near-death. In Christian tradition this is a widely recognized crossover, not least in the presence of Christ on earth, a fact alluded to in the poem,

but also, in the thought of St Augustine, whose vision of the two cities, the City of God and the City of Man, turned human life into a living pilgrimage towards heaven.

Jorge Manrique came from an exemplary aristocratic background. The family were old Castilian nobility of the Lara dynasty and came to be closely involved in the turbulent political scene surrounding the reigns of Juan II (1406-54) and Enrique IV (1425–74). Jorge's grandfather Pedro Manrique was *adelantado* (governor) of León and married Leonor of Castile, granddaughter of Enrique II. Jorge's father Rodrigo was a towering figure of the fifteenth-century reconquest, a reputation founded on his military campaigns at the frontier. When he was twelve he was made a knight of the Order of Santiago, a military order established in 1171 for the purpose of fighting the Moors in Iberia and protecting pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. According to his biography in Fernando de Pulgar's *Claros varones de Castilla*, his name struck terror into the kingdom of Granada, last bastion of Moorish Spain. Celebrated among the Christians as a brave and brilliant knight, Rodrigo was honoured by King Juan II as Count of Paredes and elected Master of the Order of Santiago. Jorge Manrique's uncle, Gómez Manrique, was also a distinguished figure. A highly respected court poet and dramatist, he was *corregidor* (magistrate) of Toledo for fourteen years, an appointment possibly connected to his support for Isabel and Fernando, the Catholic Monarchs. As for Jorge Manrique, he too was actively involved in the political affairs of his time, often acting alongside his father for the cause of Isabel and Fernando. He became a captain of the Santa Hermandad (Holy Brotherhood) of Toledo in the later stages of his life and, as a result of military action at the castle of Garcimuñoz, died from an injury to the groin in April 1479.

The tumultuous politics of the fifteenth century provides both context and content for Manrique's *Coplas*. When he writes of the vanishing glories of the court, when he asks what has become of the jousts, the plumes, the tournaments, the flags and the horses, he does so as someone familiar with this setting, someone

for whom chivalry is not a fantasy but a way of life. What more appropriate material could there be for an elegy on a transitory life than the rise and fall of nobles and kings in a century during which Fortune's wheel was notoriously indiscriminate and the fabric of society was changing? Manrique's imagery is both literal and referential, a confluence of real people and objects and their symbolic potential, in keeping with his union of the particular and the universal in the poem more broadly. The Coplas are tripartite, beginning with general reflections on mortality (ss. 1–13), followed by a section of negative *exempla* (ss. 14-24), then culminating in praise of Rodrigo's exceptional life and achievements (ss. 25-40). Within the first section, the opening stanzas stress cognition, inviting man to awaken, to remember, to see, to think, and to judge (*recordar*, *despertar*, *ver*, *juzgar*, *pensar*) the reality of life passing and death making its stealthy approach. Verbs such as these are a staple of the literature of the Spanish Golden Age, that period famed for its obsession with the concepts of being and seeming (*ser* / *parecer*), of trickery and disillusion (*engaño* / *desengaño*). Manrique's is also a world of false appearances, although not yet tinged with the bitterness one might associate with that later period, and writers such as Quevedo. A posture of contempt for the world certainly emerges in these early stanzas: it is a treacherous 'mundo traidor' (st. 8), a world that was blind to Christ ('el mundo non conoció su deidad' [st. 4]), and a trap 'la çelada | en que caemos' (st. 13). However, it is still a hopeful road to the next life (st. 5), a world that can serve us well if we use it well, 'Este mundo bueno fue | si bien usásemos dél | como debemos' (st. 6), and a world in which the son of God lived amongst men for their salvation (st. 6). Manrique's particular brand of *desengaño* focuses more on time, and its relativity. When he invites us to consider the future as already past, 'daremos lo no venido por passado' (st. 2), he compresses past, present, and future together in such a way as to illustrate that no pleasure can endure and therein lies the rub: 'Non se engañe nadi, no' (st. 2). Do not be fooled, he warns, for life passes like a dream, 'se va la vida apriessa como sueño' (st.

12). Complementing this accelerated vision of time is the image of Fortune's wheel, an age-old motif which he makes his own by stressing the imminence of its turning; if the future is already the past, material achievements like 'estados e riqueza' are also, at one and the same time the property of Fortune: 'bienes … de Fortuna | que revuelven con su rueda' (st. 11).

In the second section of the *Coplas*, Manrique turns to more concrete examples of the transitory nature of worldly affairs, but not before introducing a couple of corporeal illustrations in section one. The first is that of the physical body, of human beauty and strength becoming old and cumbersome (st. 9). This is followed by a reference to the sullying of the 'sangre de los godos' (st. 10), the noble blood of the Visigoths. This is developed with greater specificity in the second section where Manrique lists historical examples of great men who have been brought low, warning that death is indiscriminate; that no pope, emperor, nor prelate can escape its levelling effect, a key element in the Dance of Death tradition. The Trojans, Romans, and ancient 'reyes poderosos' are dispensed with summarily in favour of more recent examples. Let us deal with yesterday, suggests Manrique, 'vengamos a lo d'ayer', since that too is forgotten, 'que también es olvidado | como aquello' (st. 15). His point here is that *olvido* is an absolute; the recent past is still essentially the past; the experience of fallen greatness is close at hand and it simply is not necessary to travel back to the classical world to find it. The ensuing list of mighty characters from recent history provides further evidence of the compression of time Manrique presents. This gives the *ubi sunt* (where are they now?) *topos* a particular inflection. Instead of dredging up memories of the ancients, we experience the unsettling reminder that those of recent political distinction have also departed, and are also subject to the vicissitudes of memory. Manrique's version of the *ubi sunt* is remarkably fluid. What could be a brittle rhetorical question becomes an exercise in simultaneously revelling in the glories and greatness of court, and establishing the court as an *exemplum* of mutability. His questions shift perspective: ¿qué se

hizo / hizieron…? (what did he/ they do?), ¿Qué fue de (what has become of?) (st. 16), ¿Qué fueron? (what were they?) (st. 19, 21), ¿dónde iremos a buscallos? (where shall we find them?) (st. 19). There is, however, an overarching interest in doing and being, *hazer* and *ser*, in keeping with Manrique's conviction that good deeds in this life secure *fama* after death. The cast of characters held up in this section as examples of the transitory nature of worldly power could be alienating for a modern day reader without a history book at hand, but for Manrique's audience this represented the fifteenth century court in all its might and intrigue. In descending order of eminence, and starting with the oldest examples, Manrique first lists kings and princes—Juan II of Castile (1406–54), the Infantes of Aragón, Enrique IV of Castile (1454–74), Prince Alfonso – then the powerful court favourites Álvaro de Luna (Constable of Castile and favourite of Juan II), Juan Pacheco and Pedro Téllez Girón (favourites of Enrique IV), then a generic group of dukes, marquises, counts, and noblemen. Finally, he alludes to troops, pennants, standards, flags, impregnable castle, walls, ramparts, and trenches. From the king's body – the true body politic – we move through a series of substitutes and versions; princes and heirs, favourites (who often operated in the king's place), and the nobility. In a form of synecdoche, or perhaps it is also bathos, we then reach the material objects that mount a futile defence of the crown in the face of death's piercing arrow, '¿qué aprovecha? | Cuando tú vienes airada, | todo lo passas de claro | con tu flecha' (st. 24). This is a conceit in death literature, that no human defence can stand up to death, but here it is also a prescient observation of a chivalric ideal that is already crumbling.

The third and final section is reserved for Rodrigo Manrique. Where all other defences fail, Rodrigo retains the status of 'abrigo', a shelter for the good (st. 25). Against the backdrop of a world of disappearing greatness, he is described in a language of light and vision. In a further example of how relevant the exemplary value of the recent past is, Rodrigo's illustrious deeds, 'hechos grandes e claros' stand for all to see, 'pues los vieron'

Coplas

a la muerte de su padre

Stanzas

On the Death of His Father

[I]

Recuerde el alma dormida,
abive el seso y despierte
contemplando
cómo se pasa la vida,
cómo se viene la muerte
tan callando;
cuánd presto se va el plazer,
cómo después de acordado
da dolor,
cómo a nuestro parescer
cualquiera tiempo pasado
fue mejor.

[1]

Let the sleeping soul remember,
let the mind awake and come alive,
by contemplating
how life passes,
how death takes us
by surprise;
how quickly pleasure fades,
how, remembering what pleasure was,
it gives us pain;
how to our eyes
the time that's passed
was best.

[II]

Y pues vemos lo presente
cómo en un punto se es ido
y acabado,
si juzgamos sabiamente,
daremos lo no venido
por pasado.
No se engañe nadie, no,
pensando que a de durar
lo que espera
más que duró lo que vio,
porque todo ha de pasar
por tal manera.

[II]

For when we see the present,
how in a moment
        it is gone,
if we judge things wisely
we will treat what is to come
        as if it were already past.
No, we are not wrong
to think that what
        we hope to see
will last no longer than what we saw,
since everything is bound to pass
        this way.

[III]

Nuestras vidas son los ríos
que van a dar en el mar
que es el morir:
allí van los señoríos
derechos a se acabar
y consumir;
allí, los ríos caudales,
allí, los otros, medianos,
y más chicos;
allegados, son iguales,
los que biven por sus manos
y los ricos.

[III]

Our lives are the rivers
that flow down to the sea
that dying is;
there flow the Lordships,
down to their ends
to be consumed;
there flow the great rivers,
and there, the others: the tributaries
and the lesser streams;
all arrive together equal,
those who live by their hands
and the rich.