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ST. ERKENWALD: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Davis A. Rice

1983

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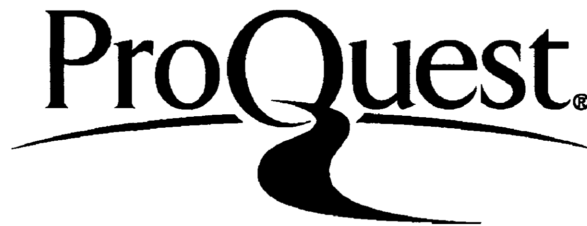

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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Davis A. Rice
Author

Approved, July 1983

John W. Conlee
John W. Conlee

Charles E. Davidson
Charles E. Davidson

David C. Jenkins
David C. Jenkins

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Abstract

St. Erkenwald is a short, tightly-structured Middle English poem which relates the discovery of a mysterious tomb during an excavation in St. Paul's Cathedral in seventh-century London. The opened coffin reveals the ornately preserved body of a man presumed to have been a king or saint. Erkenwald, Bishop of London at the time, ascertains the corpse to be that of a righteous pagan judge whose soul is imprisoned in hell because of its non-Christian status. Moved to pity by the tale of a good man doomed to eternal torment, Erkenwald utters the baptismal liturgy, and as he does so a christening tear falls on the pagan's body. Thus baptized, the now-Christian judge expresses his profound gratitude, and while his corpse disintegrates, his spirit ascends to heaven. The townspeople who have witnessed this miracle experience sadness and joy at the poem's conclusion.

Dualities, contrasts, and opposition pervade the poem in both structural and thematic designs. The areas of structural, temporal, and character dualities are utilized by the anonymous poet, as well as the often contradictory realms of religion and spirituality, justice and humanity, and description and imagery.

St. Erkenwald is a poem that celebrates life and death, the ultimate duality, in a manner that is moralistic but not dogmatic, humanistic but not sentimental, and optimistic but not utopian. The poet has managed this difficult feat by a careful and artistic balancing of a variety of opposites designed to create dramatic suspense and thematic tension.

ST. ERKENWALD: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

St. Erkenwald is a short, tightly-structured Middle English poem which relates the discovery of a mysterious tomb during an excavation in St. Paul's Cathedral in seventh-century London. The opened coffin reveals the ornately preserved body of a man presumed to have been a king or saint. Erkenwald, Bishop of London at the time, ascertains the corpse to be that of a righteous pagan judge whose soul is imprisoned in hell because of its non-Christian status. Moved to pity by the tale of a good man doomed to eternal torment, Erkenwald utters the baptismal liturgy, and as he does so a christening tear falls on the pagan's body. Thus baptized, the now-Christian judge expresses his profound gratitude, and while his corpse disintegrates, his spirit ascends to heaven. The townspeople who have witnessed this miracle experience sadness and joy at the poem's conclusion.

Commonly classified in the genre of hagiography, St. Erkenwald differs from most saints' legends in several respects: it dwells on only one incident in the saint's life as opposed to the convention of chronicling his birth, lineage, and early development; the non-decomposed body enclosed in the tomb is not that of a saint or martyr, but that of a pagan; and the elements of surprise, suspense, and mystery in the poem are not usually found in hagiography of this period.[1] In addition to these distinctions, St. Erkenwald is a medieval alliterative poem of uncommon literary merit. As Brian Stone remarks, "to Erkenwald falls the distinction of having been

the subject of the best saint's legend in English poetry."[2] Regrettably, more critical effort has been expended in the pursuit of the elusive author of the poem than in examination of the quality of the work itself. "[T]he most unfortunate effect of the attribution [of St. Erkenwald to the Gawain-poet] is that it has obscured the real literary value of the work."[3] "[B]y spending excessive amounts of time in trying to prove or disprove the authorship of Erkenwald, scholars have ignored the poem itself."[4]

In terms of literary composition, one of the most striking aspects of the poem is the use of contrast and opposition. Thought to have been composed during an era which witnesses a schism in the Church, as well as a distinct difference in the theory and practice of chivalry and clerical integrity, St. Erkenwald reflects what seems to have been rather widespread in the fourteenth century: a "mingling of opposites."[5] One critic has commented specifically upon the aspects of discontinuity and unresolved conflict in the poem, and places it in the Gothic tradition:

> The Gothic aesthetic of St. Erkenwald informs the art work which allows for holding in suspension the disparate narrative elements, attitudes, image patterns, and affective designs. . . . The flexible Gothic aesthetic endows the poem with both a solemn dignity and a narrative excitement, discontinuous elements held in unity.[6]

A.E. Davidson, as well, comments upon the dualistic nature of the poem, finding such a coherent structure in the narrative that perhaps even the "discordant elements . . . are interwoven."[7]

Dualities, contrasts, and oppositions pervade the poem in both structural and thematic designs. The areas of structural, temporal,

and character dualities will be examined here, as well as the often contradictory realms of religion, spirituality, justice, humanity, description, and imagery. This paper will attempt to survey and synthesize existing critical commentary on contrast and opposition in St. Erkenwald.

Structure

Perhaps the most obvious indication of the two-part nature of the poem lies in its formal manuscript structure. The Ms. Harley 2250 indicates a structural division in only one section of the poem, following line 176, which is the exact midpoint of the poem's 352 lines. Coming as it does immediately after Erkenwald has prepared himself for the task at hand, including personal meditation and congregational remarks, this manuscript division occurs just prior to the bishop's turning his full attention to the judge's corpse: "Then he turns to þe toumbe & talkes to þe corce."[8] At this point the congregation and matters of public and ecclesiastical concern recede into the background as Erkenwald and the judge occupy center stage for the remainder of the poem. From a preoccupation with historical background, the introduction of Erkenwald, and the discovery of the pagan corpse during the initial 176 lines, the poet shifts the focus to the two central figures of the drama for the remaining 176 lines.

Clifford Peterson remarks appropriately on this structural division as an intentional literary device:

> The only manuscript evidence of structural division in the poem is a two line capital beginning line 177. The presence of this capital (which is the same size as that which begins line 1) is almost certainly not accidental and is retained here as a mark of an intended structural division. It divides the poem precisely into halves of 176 lines and coincides with the beginning of a major portion of the poem, the dialogue between the bishop and the corpse, a dialogue which brings out the poem's main concerns [justice and salvation]. . . .[9]

The break at this particular point in the poem serves to underscore major thematic concerns. The first half of the poem surveys the broad spectrum of English history and London's Christian heritage. The second half commences as the attention is focused on the central figures of Erkenwald and the judge, who address the major considerations of the poem: justice and salvation.

Indeed, the style noticeably changes between the two structural parts of the poem. There are shifts from Part One to Part Two in the poet's method of presentation, as the omniscient stance of the narrator is replaced by the limited viewpoint of the two major characters. The characters themselves change: Erkenwald begins as an introverted sage, and becomes a vocal interlocutor. The judge is a regal mystery who develops into a wretched pagan soul. There are also changes in thematic emphasis from external description to internal spiritual debate. The interrelation between theme and structure is further evidence by the hopeful climax of Part One, as Erkenwald enters the cloistered tomb of the regally attired corpse, and the triumphant climax of Part Two, where the judge's

preserved body deteriorates and his soul ascends heavenward to the accompaniment of the pealing bells of London's churches.

Paul F. Reichardt appropriately maintains that the extraordinary combination of thought and expression in St. Erkenwald is a mark of its true poetic artistry. He notes the "bifurcated plot" which pivots on the revelation of the identity of the corpse. On the nature of the interrelated theme and structure, Reichardt states that "in the case of narrative structure, form often performs an illuminating semantic function by emphasizing important actions," and points to the imagery of the temple which underwent a conversion from paganism to Christianity in London in the first part of the poem, and the body of the pagan, which, as the temple of his soul, undergoes a similar conversion at the poem's conclusion.[10]

The structure of the poem can also be considered in terms of drama and tragedy. The interpretation of the poem in one of these two ways is important in determining who is the hero of the narrative. In a dramatic sense, injustice is righted, demons are expelled, and mercy is provided--all due to the efforts of the bishop, who becomes the hero. By the definition of tragedy, in which the protagonist undergoes a fundamental change and expires at the conclusion, the pagan judge would have to be considered the hero. Viewed as a theological argument, the inevitable hero of the poem is undoubtedly Christ, or as some critics have argued, God.[11]

The structural trend in the most recent editions of the poem is in the direction of publishing the text as a two part entity, with a break following line 176. There are arguments by various critics,

however, for a quatrain stanzaic structure. Even in light of the absence of marginal notations in the manuscript, one critic states unequivocally that "the quatrain is undoubtedly found."[12] The argument for this view is that the major transitions in the poem, the natural pauses, and the rhythm of the narrative all seem to follow a stanzaic format.[13] That the poem does not fall naturally into a four-line stanza pattern does not discourage some critics, who arbitrarily extend two quatrains to five lines in two stanzas.[14] A stronger argument can be made for a four-part structure, with the first thirty-two lines considered a prologue, and the final thirty-two lines an epilogue:

> The first thirty-two lines are devoted to the archaeological background of St. Paul's; of the remaining one hundred and forty-four, in which the excavation drama takes place, seventy-two are given to those who open tombs and books to resolve mystery, the same number to the man who for the same purpose turns to prayer and the Holy Ghost.[15]

On an even more narrowly-focused level, the bifurcated nature of the alliterative line is in effect throughout the poem. T. Turville-Petre notes that the two-part rhythms of "classical" old English have been preserved by the alliterative poets.[16] The form of alliterative poetry is ideally suited to a poet who embellishes his work with so many pairings, for each alliterative lines is divided into two parts separated by a caesura, and each half-line contains two stressed alliterative sounds.[17]

A strong argument for the purposeful dual structuring of the poem is offered by T. McAlindon, who points to the exact division between lines 176 and 177, and notes the thematic differences of

ignorance and mystery in Part One, and wisdom and revelation in Part Two. In his view, such a formation is a "meticulous and meaningful balance of opposites. . . . This kind of structuring serves to give to each aspect of the action the right degree of emphasis; but it is also a necessary element in a vigorous narrative art which effects fluent progression from one point to another, which captures attention by pointed contrasts, and generates suspense."[18]

Another significant factor supporting the two-part structure of the poem is the relative number of lines devoted to narration and dialogue. Astonishingly, 176 lines of the poem are devoted to narration, and 176 lines are related as direct dialogue, evidence of a craftsman in full control of his construction. Such structural balance, which critics have overlooked, cannot be considered coincidental in light of the other two part aspects of the poem's form. The poet is insistent that the reader acknowledge the dual nature of his composition.

II

Time

The polar axis of time upon which the narrative action turns spans some 2500 years, from the judge's mention of the founding of London ("After þat Brutus þis burghe had buggid on fyrste," l. 207) to the poet's mention of the "New Werke" (l. 38), which "is usually associated with the thirteenth century construction" of

St. Paul's.[19] In essence there are three time periods at work in the poem: the temporal existence described by the pagan judge, the time period of the action described in the poem, during which the tomb is discovered, and the poet's or narrator's present.* The artful blending of the three periods is another example of the poet's consummate skill. His juxtaposition of the distant past of Hengist and the Saxons and mention of the New Work of his own time function in a dialectical method which produces the synthesis of the seventh century A.D. and the encounter of Erkenwald and the pagan corpse. The ease with which the poet ranges over vast epochs of time, and the significance of the temporal and eternal nature of time in the poem are related to a major dualistic theme in <u>Erkenwald</u>: time and timelessness are interwoven, inextricably bound:

> . . . [W]e have an indication of the relative nature of time. The author, looking back at a certain point in the past, sees how a still earlier past is largely contained in the later one. By implication, both of these pasts should continue into his own present.[20]

The mystery/miracle nature of the poem suggests a fairy tale, beginning "Once upon a time . . ." in the distant past, and concluding with a moral or message for the poet's contemporaries and for all who follow. It is a marvelous manipulation of past, present, and future, one in which the poet "is intentionally using anachronistic details [the "New Werke"] to invoke a sense of timelessness while simultaneously anchoring the narrative in a concrete historical setting."[21] Narrative time past moves to narrative time present, which, in the poet's invocation of God, heaven, and hell, transcends

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*See Appendix.

the usual narrative time frame.[22]

The establishment of a specific date or historical time period for the judge's life has proven difficult because of the convoluted dating that the poet forces on the judge, and also because of the awkward syntax of the section of the poem that deals with the judge's past life. By his own admission, a precise calculation of the length of time spent in the tomb is speculative at best: "þe length of my lying here, þat is a lewid date/ Hit [is] to mec[h]e to any mon to make of a nommbre" (ll. 205-6).

On the basis of four lines of the poem, a tentative date for the judge's earthly existence is the fourth century B.C.:

> After þat Brutus þis burghe had buggid on fyrste
> No3t bot fife[23] hundred 3ere þer aghtene wontyd
> Before þat kynned 3our Criste by Cristen acounte—
> A þousande[24] 3ere & þritty mo & 3et threnen aght. (ll. 207-10)

A resultant calculation, following the emendations of Gollancz and Savage, establishes the death date of the pagan judge at 354 B.C. That this date is not consistent with the reign of "Ser Belyn" (Belinus) and "Ser Berynge" (Brennius), which began in 399 B.C., is explained by editors of the poem as scribal error or simple miscalculation on the part of the poet.[25] It is safe to assume, at least, that the judge lived sometime during the fourth century B.C.

The judge describes his contemporaries as angry, wrathful, and decidedly pagan. Against that background, the poet proceeds to Erkenwald's era--the late seventh century A.D. The depiction of the society of Erkenwald's time is of a world in marked contrast to pagan England. It is a society with a strong sense of community and

religious commitment. "Mony a mery mason" (l. 39) labored on the "New Werke." Once the tomb is discovered in the course of their digging the foundations (a significant time in itself for the discovery of a miracle which will ultimately strengthen the foundations of contemporary faith), a multitude of townspeople gather to ponder the mystery:

> Quen tithynges token to þe toun of þe toumbe wonder
> Mony hundrid hende men highid þider sone:
> Burgeys boghit þerto, bedels and othir,
> & mony a mesters mon of maners dyuerse;...
> þer commen þider of all kynnes so kenely mony
> þat as all þe worlde were þider walon wytin a honde quile.
> (ll. 57-60; 63-64)

In contrast with a population in the judge's fourth century B.C. that was "felonse & fals & froward" (l. 231), the concerned citizens of London in the seventh century A.D. know when to be still and listen, when to show sympathy, and when to unleash the sounds of rejoicing:

> Quil he in spelunke þus spake þer sprange in þe pepull
> In al þis world no worde, ne wakenyd no noice,
> Bot al as still as þe ston stoden & listonde
> Wyt mech wonder forwrast & wepid ful mony (ll. 217-20)
> . . . .
> þat alle wepyd for woo þe wordes þat herden (l. 310)
> . . . .
> Meche mournyng & myrthe was mellyd togeder.
> þai passyd forthe in procession & alle þe pepull folowid,
> And all þe belles in þe burghe beryd at ones. (ll. 250-2)

The poet's own temporal milieu is most obviously evoked by the mention of St. Paul's Cathedral as the "New Werke" (l. 38), a phrase most often associated with the late medieval construction. In pointed contrast to pagan temples (ll. 15-24) and Erkenwald's well-known missionary proclivities, the poet's reference to the

development of the foundation of a solid spiritual center is entirely consistent with the physical/spiritual transformation of the judge's corpse during the course of the narrative. At any rate, Erkenwald has long been strongly associated with St. Paul's. He enlarged the edifice during his lifetime, and there are records of at least two miracles concerning his shrine there, the first occurring during the destructive fire of 1087. It may have been as a result of this incident and Bishop Braybroke's order in 1386 that the two formal feast days of Saint Erkenwald were reinstituted in honor of the rebuilding of St. Paul's.[26] Such close associations between the saint and the cathedral may have been on the poet's mind at the time of his composition of the poem. It seems plausible that the poet would want to draw attention to events occurring in his own time, events which may even have renewed popular interest in Erkenwald and played a part in the creation of this poem.

The poet's manipulation of these different temporal levels is masterly, for with dual time planes he creates a thematic tension that seems to pulsate from past to present to future, including all times and excluding none:

> In the typological conception of history, persons, events or institutions of the past [i.e., Augustine, conversion of the pagan tamples, St. Paul's] prefigure and connect with persons, events or institutions of a later period [i.e., Erkenwald, the conversion of the pagan judge, the New Work], the second encompassing or fulfilling the first.[27]

The evocation of different time periods effectively lends an air of timelessness to the poem, a sense that human time is at once of little consequence, and yet enormously important as part of a

larger, divine plan. "What happened in St. Paul's has had a profound effect in time as in eternity. For a short while, this little stage has embraced 'Al heven & helle...& erthe bitwene.'"[28] The poet manages to weave a rich tapestry of complementary elements while maintaining the dramatic tension of opposites. In specific reference to time, he has effected, according to Lester L. Faigley:

> the blending of the specific historical foreground with the timeless background of providential design. The poem achieves a sense of the old being played off against the new in the initial description of the passage of England from a pagan to a Christian nation and the conversion by St. Augustine of pagan temples to Christian churches.[29]

III

Characters

The theme of conversion pervades the poem in the form of the central characters. The essence of duality in St. Erkenwald is the presence of the two protagonists, who contrast with each other while sharing similarities, each containing inner dualities as well. The corpse is that of a pagan judge, whose body has been preserved because of his good works, and who passionately desires the salvation of his soul in the afterlife. Erkenwald is Bishop of London during a time of Christian consolidation in southern England, a man destined for sainthood because of his ecclesiastical diligence. The poem, then, is a story of two good men who serve different masters well in different times.

Erkenwald may have been chosen as a protagonist in the narrative

because of the reinstitution of his feast days in 1386. Dating the poem to the late fourteenth century places its composition in the same time period as the completion of St. Paul's Cathedral. Thus Erkenwald, a well known figure connected with the enlarging of St. Paul's during the seventh century, is an attractive choice as well because of his association with the spiritual center of London. "Far from being a shadowy name out of England's Anglo-Saxon past, Erkenwald was in the late Middle Ages an historically documented figure of some considerable importance in St. Paul's."[30]

Born ca. 630 Erkenwald was the son of King Offa of the East Angles. He was appointed the fourth bishop of London in 675 at the age of forty-five, and was noted for the establishment of two monasteries. One of the monasteries was built for himself at Chertsey, and the other for his sister, St. Ethelburga, at Essex. He was also known for his missionary work and virtuous life:

> Earconwald is said to have lived so holy a life that heaven still affords proofs of his virtues. To this day, the horse-little in which he travelled when ill is preserved by his disciples, and continues to cure many folk troubled by fever and other complaints. Sick people are cured when placed under or against the litter, and even chips cut from it bring speedy relief when taken to the side.[31]

Erkenwald was also renowned for his work in London on St. Paul's. He ". . . was widely regarded as the man who had set the original ecclesiastical foundation [among the East Saxons] on a steady footing . . . and it is apparent that [he] was widely considered the founder of the cathedral."[32] Thus for the purposes of the poem, Erkenwald had the necessary credentials for association with St. Paul's (which the poem celebrates as the location of the pagan's tomb),

for a parallel with the exemplary judge, and for lending the poem a solid spiritual foundation.

As a literary entity and a poetic force, Erkenwald is essentially two different characters in the two sections of the poem. In the first part, when the stage is being set and the mysterious tomb is discovered, the bishop himself is shrouded in mystery. He is distant, "partyd fro home" (l. 107), on one of his legendary visits of good works and goodwill. When he returns to London after being told of the discovery, he "passyd unto his palais . . . & ditte þe durre after" (ll. 115-16). He is portrayed as a man above human traits of mere curiosity and gossip, as the judge will prove himself superhuman in his pursuit of the "ri3t." Erkenwald in this first part is a man "of remarkable self-restraint, resolution, and piety."[33] He is introverted, cut off from humanity as he passes the night alone in prayer, and coldly silent in contrast to the buzzing wonderment of the mass of London's populace.

In the second part of the poem, however, the bishop is a changed being. An aloof observer in the first part, he becomes an involved participant in the judge's drama in the second part. From religious seclusion he emerges warm and human in his concern for the judge's plight. From an inquisitorial stance and an unfeeling posture upon his return to London, he is moved to weep and sigh as the pagan's tale unfolds. In the course of the poem, he develops from a narrative convention into an active participant in the drama.

Although Erkenwald functions as an ecclesiastical judge in administering God's laws on earth, and although he is characterized

at one point in the poem as one who "the laghe teaches," he and the pagan judge are of separate worlds in more than the obvious sense. While Erkenwald works for the benefit of others (his monastery, his congregation, London, the pagan corpse), the judge, who has performed a similar function in his own time, works in the poem only for his own peace and salvation.[34] "[H]e [the judge] necessarily served an earthly ruler and functioned primarily as an agent of death. And here the obvious contrast is to Erkenwald, who serves a heavenly King and restores spiritual life to one long physically dead and never spiritually 'born.'"[35]

The judge is the dramatic center of the poem, and it is his dilemma that accounts for the poetic tension that raises St. Erkenwald above the ordinary saint's legend. Avoiding the usual practice in hagiography of relating the saint's life story and his miraculous performances, the author of St. Erkenwald focuses on only one event in the saint's life. This approach is so crafted that a theological conundrum is addressed, and a suspenseful and emotional drama is enacted. The reader's respect for the major religious figure of the poem is enhanced not by constant reference to his supernatural powers, but by his humility, compassion, and faith. There is indeed a double focus on character in the poem, but rather than the expected protagonist/antagonist confrontation, the poet creates a dramatic contrasting protagonist format:

> The presence of a second protagonist in the person of the judge solves the problem of how to provide a humanized and sympathetic protagonist while at the same time giving proper emphasis to the superhuman attributes of saintliness. Since the judge becomes the effective dramatic focus of the poem,

> the special nature of sanctity--the sense of mystery that relates it most closely to the life and person of Christ--is dealt with directly, instead of being shunned or under-played as in most popular hagiography. The moral and spiritual distance between the saint and ordinary men is emphasized not by the invocation of the supernatural . . . but by his innate possession of the much less dramatic qualities of faith and charity.[36]

The pathos of the judge's situation is recognized by Erkenwald who sees himself in the judge's vocation and redoubtable goodness, who sees the London crowd in the judge's reliance on reason (Londoners having sought a solution to the riddle of the corpse in books), and who sees the pagan Saxons in the judge's spiritual ignorance. The bishop is thus in a position to respond emotionally as a man and to function ritually as God's representative to the pagan who has been rewarded for his human justice and punished for his spiritual nescience.[37] The characters are held in a state of dramatic tension until Erkenwald, doing all that he can, all that is needed, utters the words of hopeful baptism and sheds a single tear of compassion. At this point, the judge experiences instantaneous salvation. It is a dramatic moment, a dramatic contrast between the living and the dead, and a memorable image: the saintly bishop, distraught, leaning over the proud but desperate corpse in a scene that depicts the epitome of divine justice and human faith. "The two principal characters form the chief image pairing; these twin loci seem to define the poem's epicenter, from which radiate the many spheres of activity--the workmen, the townspeople, the nobility, the intellectuals, and the ecclesiastics."[38] After the drama has been played out, there is the wonderful sense that all have learned from

the experience, that everyone has been included, and that life goes on: "þai passyd forthe in procession & alle þe pepull folowid" (l. 351).

IV

Pagan-Christian

A primary reason for celebration, of course, is the Christian conversion and salvation of a pagan soul. Faith in a just and merciful God is rewarded. God's grace, the poet implies, extends to all men of goodwill. One of the preeminent concerns of the poem is the problem of the righteous pagan--the Pre-Christian good man. Once the judge is given voice and begins to respond to Erkenwald's queries, he wastes little time in stating that he is "one þe vnhapnest hathel þat euer on erth ȝode" (l. 198). He held a position of judge in the fourth century B.C., "Under a prince of parage of paynymes laghe" (l. 203), a position which demanded that he administer "gentil lawe" (l. 216).[36] Even so, he is quick to point out that he administered justice honorably: "I iustifiet þis ioly toun on gentil wise/ & euer in fourme of gode faithe? (ll. 229-230).

His dispensation of justice is equitable and fair-minded to the extent that he "hent harmes ful ofte to holde hom to riȝt" (l. 232). He was never seduced from the path of fair judgment of bribery, greed, awe, threat, or personal interest. He was ever "ryȝtwys & reken & redy of þe laghe" (l. 245).

The corpse's emphasis here on his pagan status echoes the poet's earlier references to the pagan temples that dotted the countryside during the occupancy of the "hethen" (l. 7) Saxons under Hengist. The poet devotes the first thirty-two lines of the poem to the story of the conversion of England from paganism to Christianity, dwelling on the mission of Augustine on behalf of Pope Gregory. It was Augustine who:

> þen prechyd . . . þe pure faythe & plantyd þe trouthe
> & conuerted all þe communnates to Cristendame newe.
> He turnyd temples þat tyme þat temyd to þe deuell
> & clansyd hom in Cristes nome & kyrkes hom callid; (ll. 13-16)

Now the judge, in dialogue with the bishop, spiritual descendant of Augustine and God's representative on earth, confronts the problem of the Christian salvation of the pagan soul head on:

> 'Maȝty maker of men, thi myghtes are grete.
> How myȝt þi mercy to me amounte any tyme?
> Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat neuer thi plite knewe,
> Ne þi mesure of þi mercy ne þi mecul vertue,
> Bot ay a freke faitheles þat faylid þi laghes
> þat euer þou, Lord, wos louyd in? Allas, þe harde stoundes!
> I was non of þe nommbre þat þou wyt noy boghtes
> Wyt þe blode of thi body upon þe blo rode.
> Quen þou herghedes Helle hole & hentes hom þeroute
> þi loffynge oute of Limbo þou laftes me þer! (ll. 283-292)

The pagan thus confronts Christian doctrine on an important issue: Should a good man be denied eternal salvation simply because he was born too soon to receive the benefit of Christ's sacrifice? He has articulated an elemental dilemma of Christian theology: why should be be " . . . exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempne fest/ þer richely hit arne refetyd þat after right hungride" (ll. 303-4)? The contrast between the Judge's condition and his desire is obvious

and, in the manner presented, touching without descending into bathos His plea is all the more effective because of the innocence and straightforward nature of his presentation: "Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat neuer thi plite knewe" (l. 285). He was a man of Erkenwald's virtue in a time when Erkenwald's position was an impossibility. The poet's message is clear: but for the difference in eras, the moral characters of Erkenwald and the judge are interchangeable.

The poet's solution to the problem lies in his insistence on the judge's right behavior. The pagan judge attains resurrectible status as a believer because he has earned the right to be preserved until the Christian epoch. God grants grace to the good pagan because of his individual earthly good conduct and the universal immortality of the soul, criteria unconcerned with faith _per se_.[40]

Several other aspects of the poet's dealing with the pagan/ Christian opposition are of interest. One has been touched on briefly: the conversion of the pagans by Augustine. In setting the historical stage at the beginning of the poem, and later in the judge's description of the people and problems with which he labored, the poet emphasizes that the "folke was felonse & fals & frowarde to reule" (l. 231), and that the Saxons were "vnsa$_3$t," "peruertyd," "renaide," and "ronke"--unruly people who conquered and were conquered by might. This description of the pagan populace contrasts strongly with the other populace of the poem--the Christians:

> He [the poet] obviously contrasts the violent conquest perpetuated by the Saxons with the peaceful conversion subsequently effected by the Christians. . . . The savage

> pagans make their brief mark in history by shedding the blood of others. In contrast "Crist suffide on crosse and Cristendome stablyde." He shed his own blood to save others.[41]

Using the pagan/Christian dichotomy, the poet blends and weaves contrasting mythologies and beliefs throughout the narrative, notably the pagan and Christian beliefs concerning the relationship of body and soul. According to pagan belief, the soul inhabits the corporeal frame after death. Thus, a preserved body indicates a preserved soul. Medieval Christians believed just the opposite: death and the eventual decay of the body are natural for the elevation of the soul to bliss.[42] Therefore the poet skillfully maintains the mystery of Part One with pagan overtones and expectations (the temple of the body prior to conversion) and concludes the poem with the glorious Christian celebration of the instantaneous decomposition of the judge's body and the ascension of his soul.

The simultaneous putrefaction of the body and heavenward flight of the spirit is a significant example of the poet's concern with the dual nature of man's existence: the physical and the spiritual.

Physical-Spiritual

Although St. Erkenwald is essentially a spiritual treatise, the poet anchors his narrative by concrete physical detail. thereby establishing the nature of man's concern for his life on the earth and his concern for the fate of his soul. "[T]he poet explores

the ways to personal salvation and the complex interrelationship between man's life and God's law."[43] It is because of the judge's good works on earth that he is ultimately admitted to heaven. This is a central concept in the poet's confrontation of the problem of the pre-Christian good man who would normally have remained in Limbo until the "harrowing of hell." The poet's granting to the pagan unbeliever the same resurrectible status as an Old Testament believer is a "foreshadowing of the distinctly Protestant idea that one may be saved by works almost irrespective of one's faith."[44] The message is clear: life exists on two levels, the here and the hereafter, and to neglect the one is the forfeit the other.

In addition to ranging far and wide in time, the poetic landscape encompasses the earthly and heavenly kingdoms in significantly interrelated ways. "Total reality for the poet embraces extremes: one extreme is Nature, which is beautiful and noble but also, because of its mutability, physically and spiritually dangerous; the other extreme is the perfect order of heaven."[45] Nowhere in the poem is the beauty of nature more glowingly depicted than in the poet's description of the judge's preserved body:

> & als freshe hyn þe face & the fflesh nakyd
> Bi his eres & bi his hondes þat openly shewid,
> Wyt ronke rode as þe rose & two rede lippes
> As he in sounde sodanly were slipped opon slepe (ll. 89-92).

Likewise, the most graphic illustration of the effects of physical mutability is the rapid deterioration of the judge's well-preserved body, which collapses in putrefaction: "As roten as þe rottok þat rises in powder" (l. 344). The corruption of the pagan's body is

necessary for his participation in heaven's order ("'Ryȝt now to soper my soule is sette at þe table'," l. 332). The discrepancy between the transitory nature of life, which is contained in so fragile a system as covered bones, and the possibility of eternal bliss, is brought clearly into focus by the two-line summary of the body's conversion into spirit: "ffor assone as þe soule was sesyd in blisse/ Corrupt was þat oþir crafte þat couert þe bones" (ll. 345-6). This contrast is not without irony, as Petronella points out:

> We must remember . . . that the transformation here is ironic and paradoxical; for when the judge's body was like the rose, his soul was still grieving; but when the redness of his body turns to moldlike and dustlike blackness, his soul has attained the joy of salvation."[46]

Precarious as is our existence in bone-covered shells, it is an essential stage in our journey to "þat solempne fest," a hell on earth in anticipation of an eternal paradise.

One of the more obvious examples of the poet's concern with the physical/spiritual dichotomy is his treatment of the church, which is the necessary link between the two realms. St. Paul's Cathedral is a unifying element in the poem for several reasons. St. Erkenwald is thought to have been written, in part, to celebrate the recent rebuilding of the Cathedral. Erkenwald himself may be one of the central figures in the poem largely because of his close association with St. Paul's. The church is the center of conversion efforts in London by Christians ("þat ere was of Appolyn is now of Saynt Petre," l. 19), and it is in the digging of the foundations of the "New Werke" that the tomb of the mysteriously preserved corpse is discovered.

The artistry of the poet can be discerned in his smooth transitions and the meaningful connections between the ideology and imagery. His ability to manipulate contrasting concepts in the evolution of singular themes contributes to the compact tapestry of St. Erkenwald. A case in point is his initial description of the conversion of pagan temples to Christian churches, a physical as well as spiritual mission, which immediately introduces the redemption theme:

> In his [Erkenwald's] tyme in þat toun [London] þe temple
> Alder-grattyst
> Was drawen doun þat one dole to dedifie new
> ffor hit hethen had bene in Hengyst dawes. . . . (ll. 5-7)

This theme will culminate in the redemption of the judge's soul. The poet's reconstruction of the history of England's (and especially London's) conversion is laced with the detailing of the old and the new, the erstwhile pagan and the now Christian. Throughout this entire opening section (ll. 1-42), London and "New Troie" (ll. 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 25, 26, 34), St. Paul's and the "New Werke" (ll. 5, 6, 35, 36, 37, 38), and Augustine and St. Erkenwald (ll. 3, 4, 5, 12-18, 23, 24, 33-35) are interwoven and established as integral figures in the coming drama. It is the physical rebuilding of London's spiritual center that stimulates the remaining action of the narrative and involves the entire population of the city, from the "wyȝt werke men" to the "barones," the "byschop," and the "maire wyt mony maȝti men." The poet details as much of the actual work that took place on the construction of St. Paul's, of the tomb itself, and of the efforts to remove the lid, as he will later detail the spiritual odyssey of the pagan judge. It is worth examining the choice of

words in this section, for it is significant that the workers "seche" a firm "fote" for the "fundement" of the Church, for the conversion of the corpse found here will provide them with a firm foundation for the spiritual faith that will eventually fill St. Paul's:

> Mony a mery mason was made þer to wyrke,
> Harde stones for to hewe wyt eggit toles;
> Mony grubber in grete þe grounde for to seche
> þat þe fundement on fyrst shuld þe fote halde (ll. 39-42)
>
> Wy3t werke men wyt þat wenten þer-till,
> Putten prises þerto, pinchid one vnder,
> Kaghten by þe corners wyt crowes of yrne,
> And were þe lydde neuer so large þai laide hit by sone.
> (ll. 69-72)

Such physical descriptions lend to a great deal of verisimilitude to the poem and provide a realistic background for the miracle that will later transpire. "The miraculous event acquires much of its authenticity and intensity by being set in an environment which is both concrete and invested with an air of workaday reality."[47]

On a lower plane, perhaps, but still a non-physical aspect of life, is man's intellect. Closely akin to the poet's contrast of the human and the divine, man's mere physical and mental activity cannot compare with the power of faith in God. Erkenwald prays throughout the night for guidance while scholars consult their records for seven days, to no avail. London's mayor with his "ma3ti men" seems ludicrous and ineffectual when compared to the power God could "louse wyt a finger" (l. 165). Man's "my3t" and "mynde" (l. 163) may be brought to bear on any situation, but both are easily surpassed by the least of God's efforts.

The climax of the poem is the baptism of the pagan judge which allows his soul to ascend heavenward. But even this event is an interesting study in physical/spiritual contrast, for it is the spirit of the ritual rather than the literal ceremony itself which effects the judge's salvation. It is a spontaneous tear, not consecrated holy water, which cleanses the pagan's soul. Nor does Erkenwald intend to baptize the judge when the tear falls, but instead is seeking God's permission to give the corpse life only long enough for baptismal preparations to be made:

> 'Oure lord lene,' Quoth þat lede, 'þat þou lyfe hades
> By Goddis leue as longe as I myȝt lacche water
> & cast vpon þi fair cors & carpe þes wordes,
> "I folwe þe in þe Fader nome & his fre Childes
> & of þe gracious Holy Goste" & not one grue lenger,
> þen þof þou droppyd doun dede hit daungerde me lasse.'
> Wyt þat worde þat he warpyd þe wete of eghen
> & teres trillyd adoun & on þe toumbe lighten,
> & one felle on his face & þe freke syked. (ll. 315-23)

It is the spirit of baptism rather than the fundamental interpretation of the ritual here, just as the merciful application of God's law, as represented by St. Erkenwald, is preferable to the rigid administration of the Old Law, as represented by the judge. The contrast of form and content in the baptismal ritual, as in the temples (church and body), emphasizes the inevitable necessity and predominance of faith:

> The sacrament itself is structural . . . with a discontinuous relationship between form and content. It is truly holy to wish to rely on the rituals, but the essential recognition is not of the ritual but of the spiritual; it is the ideal which is recognizable in the ensemble of details.[48]

VI

Justice-Mercy

The difference between the letter and spirit of divine law is expressed as a duality of justice and mercy, between the Old Law of the patriarchs, represented by the pagan judge, and the New Law of Christ, represented by Erkenwald. The theme of justice, both secular and spiritual, is established early in the poem as Erkenwald himself is introduced as a bishop who "the laghe teche" (l. 34). God, as well, is referred to on several occasions during the course of the narrative in terms of law and judgment: "þe riche kyng of reson, þat . . ./ Loues al þe lawes lely" (ll. 267-8). God is also described as the judge of the fate of men: "Quen þou herghedes Helle hole & hentes hom þeroute/ þi loffynge oute of Limbo þou laftes me þer!" (ll. 291-2). The pagan corpse itself, after Erkenwald begins to question it, informs the gathered throng that he was a "lede of þe laghe þat þen þis londe vsit" (l. 200).

The pagan judge obviously takes pride in his performance as an administrator of earthly justice. He points out that he is arrayed in kingly attire, complete with scepter and "coron ful riche," not because of the royal blood, but because he was so diligent in his duties: "& þus to bounty my body þai buriet in golde" (l. 248). The method of his diligence is simple: he adheres very strictly to the letter of the law and does not allow his emotions to interfere

with his judgments:

> I hent harmes ful ofte to holde hom to riȝt (l. 232)
> I remewit neuer fro þe riȝt by reson myn awen (l. 235)
> Non gete me fro þe heghe gate to glent out of ryȝt
> Als ferforthe as my faith confourmyd my hert (ll. 241-242)

The word "riȝt," synonymous here with "justice" occurs frequently in the judge's description of his duty, and the implication is that he respected and enforced a value system in which one's actions were either right or wrong. There is no suggestion that he was unusually harsh in his sentencing, but there is no doubt that his standards of judgment were rigid, inflexible, and based on the concept that the law is unalterable. The judge's statement concerning his father is particularly telling of his faith in the boundaries of the duty which he has established for himself: "þaghe had bene my fader bone I bede hym no wranges/ Ne fals fauour to my fader þaghe fell hym be hongyt" (ll. 243-244). This almost inhuman attitude, in which the judge's devotion to law and right supersedes filial love and loyalty, recalls, inversely, the Old Testament story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith in God was ultimate, and he was willing to act in accordance with that faith, even though it contradicted his extreme paternal pride and love for his only son. Pertinent to an examination of the judge's motivations, desires, and actions, is the fact that Abraham was spared his sacrifice by the grace and mercy of God, who exemplified the spirit of obedience without immolating the letter of the law.

The judge refers to God throughout the poem in terms of justice

and his adherence to virtue and right, and emphasizes the rewards God grants to those on earth who are bound by the same strict code of law. The judge emphasizes the word "riȝt" as he explains to the bishop the preservation of his body and the fate of his soul:

> '...þe riche kyng of reson, þat riȝt euer alowes,
> . . . .
> & moste he menkes men for mynnyng of riȝtes,
> . . . .
> ...if renkes for riȝt þus me arayed has,
> He has lant me to last þat loues ryȝt best.'
> (ll. 267, 269, 271-2)

According to the judge, God adheres strictly to his own laws, and rewards those on earth who do the same.

With masterful and artistic elegance, the poet transfers the emphasis from law and right to mercy and grace. Led by Erkenwald's comment on God's mercy, his compassionate weeping of "lauande teres," and his baptismal words of absolution, the judge begins to beseech God's forbearance in his own case. The culmination of this theme occurs as God rescinds His earlier judgment of the pagan judge and, by means of a single tear shed in compassion, allows the salvation of a soul and its ascension to "þat solempne fest."

Immediately following the judge's explanation of the preservation of his body as a result of God's respect for his earthly diligence, Erkenwald gently suggests that one so unquestionably righteous may be judged with mercy and understanding:

> He þat rewardes vche a renke as he has *riȝt* seruyd
> Myȝt euel forgo the to gyfe of his *grace* summe brawnche.
> ffor as he says in his sothe psalmyde writtes,
> "þe *skilfulle* & þe *vnskathely* skelton ay to me."
> (ll. 275-8; emphasis added)

Thus in line 275 the word "riȝt" is emphasized as the final alliterative

"r," and the word "grace" in line 276 is similarly emphasized by its position as the final alliterative "g." The juxtaposition of the two ideas is brought even closer in the quotation from the 24th Psalm. The poet, by his choice of words, suggests that the righteous and the innocent, pure, and merciful, are allied qualities.

The judge's immediate response to the bishop's intimation of clemency is an appeal to God's mercy, the first time he has uttered the word in the poem:

> 'Maȝty maker of men, thi myghtes are grete.
> How myȝt þi *mercy* to me amounte any tyme?
> Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat neuer thi plite knewe,
> Ne þi mesure of þi *mercy* ne þi mecul vertue....
> (ll. 283-6; emphasis added)

Shortly thereafter, the judge begins to question the efficacy of his strict efforts, which seem to have "merciles"ly condemned him to the dark dungeon of hell:

> & þat han we myste alle *merciles* myself & my soule.
> Quat wan we wyt oure wele dede þat wroghtyn ay riȝt,
> Quen we are dampnyd dulfully into þe depe lake
> & exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempne fest.
> (ll. 300-3; emphasis added)

The alliterated reference to mercy has supplanted the unalliterated "riȝt" at last, and the judge's resurrection occurs only a few lines after this oblique realization on his part of the role of mercy in judgment.

The central question here perhaps concerns the role of Christian mercy in any system of justice. In juxtaposing the pagan judge and the Christian bishop, the poet has shown, by means of dramatic contrast, the superior nature of merciful judgment by effecting the salvation of the very pagan whose justice admitted of no emotional

or humane influence. Lester Faigley, basing his argument on the writings of Aquinas, notes the implications of contrasting the Old and New Testaments in St. Erkenwald.

St. Thomas Aquinas argues that there is indeed a difference in the law of the patriarchs of the Old Testament and the law of Christ of the New Testament, mercy being the critical factor. According to him, the Old Law "dicebatur lex timoris,"[49] resorting to the threat of punishment for transgressions against the moral system in order to maintain respect for authority. The Old Testament bounds in the application of punishment for disobedience (e.g., Adam, Jonah, Lot's wife, etc.). The New Law, however, operates on an entirely different principle: righteousness based simply on the love of virtue: "Illi autem qui habent virtutem, inclinantur ad virtutis opera agenda propter amorem virtutis, non propter aliquam poenam aut remunerationem extrinsecam . . . dicitur lex amoris."[50] The difference between the old law of fear and the new law of love is precisely the point of the juxtaposition of the pagan just judge and the ecclesiastic judge:

> The [pagan] judge adhered strictly to the law and his decisions were void of human emotion, issued neither with malice nor mercy, 'ne meschafe, ne routhe' (l. 240). This overriding concern for justice by the letter of the law without regard for mercy suggests the Old Law of Moses as compared to the New Law of Christ.[51]

The judge, as a representative of the Old Law, considers mercy and justice irreconcilable opposites, contrasting with the representative of the New Law, Erkenwald, who offers a connection between true justice and Christianity.[52]

The ultimate impact of these contrasts, Faigley correctly notes, is the coherence of the transformation theme of the poem, which began with the mention of the conversion of the pagan temples, and the imparting of the message of hope for the salvation of all people. This salvation is made possible through the peoples' own faith and good works, as well as the mercy and justice of God:

> The ascension of the pagan judge consummates the motif of the transformation by implying the transformation of Mosaic Law to the New Covenant which has been kept. . . . [T]hrough the mercy of the New Law, made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ, fallen man can be redeemed.[53]

VII

Human-Divine

A prerequisite to redemption, however, is man's faith in God: a distinct recognition of the differences between human and divine existence. Faith is necessary not only for eternal salvation, but also for a true understanding of life's mysteries. One of the important points of the poem is that Erkenwald's faith is as elemental a factor in the judge's salvation as is the judge's own belief. Erkenwald delivers a rather lengthy speech (ll. 159-76) on the futility of earthly endeavor without divine aid. This passage indicates his considerable spiritual power, enhanced by his night-long vigil of prayer (ll. 119-21) and manifested by his subsequent success in unraveling and bringing to a fortunate and spiritually uplifting conclusion "þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon

wondres" (l. 125).

The religious theme and theological overtones of the poem are, according to Turville-Petre, consistent with the serious and divinely-inspired nature of fourteenth century alliterative poetry:

> The [alliterative] poems share . . . a sense of their own value that is far from universal in fourteenth century poetry; a conviction sometimes openly expressed by the poet that what he communicates is important and is being treated with dignity and seriousness. Alliterative poetry is not merely for entertainment. . . . Poets are God's instrument, and it is only God who can give them the grace to write in his houour and to the edification of the people.[54]

In this context the poet assumes the function of Erkenwald in the poem and the audience that of the London populace: faith in God is the inspiration for a good life and for eternal salvation.

The human/divine contrast in St. Erkenwald is striking and effective. The working class diggers at St. Paul's stand beside the elaborately preserved regal corpse; the scholars search for days for an answer to the riddle that Erkenwald solves by one night of prayer; pagan armies and a host of pagan gods vie for control of a London that is eventually conquered by one man, God's agent, Augustine; the earthly judge pleads for mercy before divine justice; reason is found inferior to faith; the hopelessness of paganism is contrasted with the hope of Christianity; the judge's body deteriorates as his soul is granted salvation. In each individual contrast, as in the poem's ultimate message, the emphasis is placed on divine mercy and compassion, and on the necessity of earthly sacrifice to attain heavenly favor:

> Whatever the strength of the conviction that the next world will indeed bring greater bliss than can be imagined on earth, we can only really know that to attain it

> necessitates the abandonment of all earthly beauty, and ultimately the corruption of the flesh, the center and source of that beauty.[55]

The poem concerns the conflict between the attractions of this world and the bliss of the next, and the realization of man's limitations in contrast to God's infinite power.

The colorful trappings of the corpse's raiment astound the onlookers with their glittering splendor:

> So was þe glode wytin gay, al wyt golde payntyd,
> & a blisfull body opon þe bothum lyggid,
> Ariade on a riche wise in riall wedes,
> Al wyt glisnand golde his gowne was hemmyd
> Wyt mony a precious perle picchit þeron. . . . (ll. 75-9)

The wonder of the townspeople is considerable, and their curiosity demands explanation:

> þer was spedeles space to spyr vschon oþir
> Quat body hit myȝt be þat buried was ther.
> 'How long had he þer layne, his lere so vnchaungit,
> & al his wede unwemmyd,' þus ylka weghe askyd.
> 'Hit myȝt not be bot such a mon in my(n) de stode long.'
> 'He has ben kyng of þis kith as couthely hit semes.'
> 'He lyes doluen þus depe.' 'Hit is a derfe wonder.'
> Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade:
> Bot þat ilke note wos noght, for nourne none couthe,
> Noþir by title ne token ne by tale noþir
> þat euer wos breuyt in burghe ne in boke notyd
> þat euer mynnyd such a mon, more ne lasse. (ll. 93-104)

The implication of this extensive passage is clear: "nourne none couthe" regarding information concerning the "derfe wonder," neither from memory nor from written account.

As soon as word is brought to Erkenwald, however, he returns to London, enters his palace and passes the night, not in secular wonderment, but in humble and beseeching prayer. He looks to the divine for help in discerning an answer to the mystery, trusting

in God rather than in himself or historical documents:

> 'þaghe I be vnworthi,' al wepand he sayde
> Thurghe his deere debonerte, 'digne hit, my lorde,
> In confirmyng þi Cristen faith fulsen me to keene
> þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres.'
> (ll. 122-125)

A reward for his efforts is relatively swift in coming: "& so long he greete after grace þat he graunte hade/ An ansuare of þe Holy Goste, & afterwarde hit dawid . . ." (ll. 126-7). Grace has been granted to him who asked, and the poet insures that the point is not lost by including an interchange between Erkenwald and the dean of St. Paul's. The dean points out that

> þer is no lede opon lyfe of so long age
> þat mey mene in his mynde þat such a mon regnyd,
> (ll. 150-1)
> & we haue oure librarie laited þes long seuen dayes
> Bot one cronicle of þis kyng con we neuer fynde.
> He has non layne here so long, to loke hit by kynde,
> To malte so out of memorie bot meruayle hit were.'
> (ll. 155-8)

Try as he might (and he says that he and his associates have searched for seven days), a solution is not forthcoming.

Erkenwald's reply to the dean is pivotal in the poem both structurally and thematically, as it points specifically to the necessity of divine intervention in human affairs. This eighteen-line speech concludes Part One as emphatically as the judge's seventeen-line monologue concludes Part Two. Immediately following the bishop's response to the dean (ending at the midpoint of the poem, line 176), Erkenwald turns to the judge and begins the interrogation that will elicit a resolution of the mystery. Erkenwald, in lines 159-76, promises the reward of dependence on God's help,

and the reward of faith in divine justice. The judge, in the concluding section of the poem, (ll. 324-40), offers testimony to the truth of the bishop's promise. He himself is proof of the efficacy of faith, both his own and Erkenwald's: his soul is redeemed, and the bishop's teachings are proven valid.

Erkenwald's rebuke of the dean's efforts continues the conversion/redemption theme begun in the opening lines of the poem, a theme that will conclude with the successful conversion of a pagan's belief and the redemption of his soul. The bishop patiently instructs the dean and the members of his retinue in the proper direction their efforts should take. He also explains in rather blunt terms the disparity between the efforts of men and the power of God:

> 'Hit is meruaile to men þat mountes to litell
> Toward þe prouidens of þe prince þat paradis weldes
> Quen hym huste to vnlouke þe leste of his myȝtes.
> Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt & his mynde passyd
> And al his resons are to-rent & redeles he stondes,
> þen lettes hit Hym ful litell to louse wyt a fynger. .
> (ll. 160-6)

Man's might is insignicant; God's is infinite. Therefore, "to seeche þe sothe at oure selfe ȝee se þer no bote" (l. 170). "Do not despair," continues Erkenwald, "For God's help is at hand." In a continuation of the mercy/justice contrast in the poem, the poet has Erkenwald expound on the grace and mercy of God, building suspense (what will become of the corpse?) and foreshadowing the display of divine goodwill at the poem's conclusion:

> Bot glow we all opon Godde & His grace aske,
> þat careless is of counsell & comforthe to sende,
> & þat in fastynge of ȝour faith & of fyne bileue
> I shal auay ȝow so verrayly of vertues His
> þat ȝe may leue vpon long þat he is Lord myȝty
> & fayne ȝour talent to fulfille if ȝe hym frende leues.'
> (ll. 171-6)

The human/divine dichotomy can be resolved, according to Erkenwald, by humility and faith. An artistic and thematic synthesis is effected through the figure of a pagan granted salvation through his faith and God's mercy.

The judge himself is under no illusions about his worth or his need of God's grace. He honestly appraises himself as "þe kidde kynge of kene iustises" (l. 254), and evaluates his professional performance as that of a man always controlled by adherence to honesty and virtue. He was a good and just man, recognized by his contemporaries "ffor þe honour of myn honeste of heghest enprise" (l. 253). And yet his spirit dwells in the "Hell hole," in Limbo: "þer sittes my soule . . ./ Dwyande in þe derke deth" (ll. 293-4). Even a man of such virtue as this eminent judge is dependent upon the mercy and grace of God. The message, again, is clear: human efforts alone, regardless of their purity and goodness, do not insure a heavenly afterlife. Again the poet emphasizes the necessity of faith by contrasting the possible with the actual: the judge can only obtain a seat at "þat solempne fest" by faith. It is important to note that the judge fully realizes his deficiency, and, almost in illustration of Erkenwald's exhortation on the need for divine intervention, calls on God's mercy as the necessary element in his salvation:

> 'Maȝty maker of men, thi myghtes are grete.
> How myȝt þi mercy to me amounte any tyme?
> Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat neuer thi plite knewe,
> Ne þi mesure of þi mercy ne þi mecul vertue,
> Bot ay a freke faithles þat faylid þi laghes
> þat euer þou, Lord, wos louyd in? Allas þe harde stoundes!'
> (ll. 283-8)

In the end, the earthly judge is required to call on the mercy of divine justice for his own redemption, having first endured the pain that is the penalty of the faithless. Artistically the gulf between the human and the divine, and mankind's need for God's grace, is brought forcefully and dramatically to the reader's attention by a figure literally caught in the middle between the two poles. "The contradictory attitudes in the poem stem from the different natures of human justice and divine justice, of restoration and regeneration; the unresolved conflict is expressed in the paradoxical relationship between Christian joy and pain."[56] In the present case "murthe" replaces "payne" as a result of human compassion (Erkenwald's tear) and divine grace: "'Oure Sauyoure be louyd!'" (l. 324).

> Ry3t now to soper my soule is sette at þe table.
> ffor wyt þe wordes & þe water þat weshe vs of payne
> Li3tly lasshit þer a leme loghe in þe abyme
> þat spakly sprent my spyrit wyt vnsparid murthe
> Into þe canacle solemply þer soupen all trew. . .
> (ll. 332-6)

> The poem has thus maintained the superior stature of the saint, while dramatizing effectively, on the ordinary human level, the conflict which underlies the acceptance of the ascetic life and which only the saints can resolve in terms of heaven. . . . In this fashion, the poem conveys the nature of true piety.[57]

VIII

Description

Though subtle in its theological implications, the poet's use of vivid, realistic, and contrasting description is one of the more

striking aspects of St. Erkenwald. The visual details of the tomb, the judge's attire and body, the London crowd and the encounter between Erkenwald and the judge are all charged with a concrete realism which creates a vivid contrast between various elements of the poem. In this regard the poet contributes to the alliterative tradition. "All the alliterative poets show a delight in richness and profusion, in richness of vocabulary and also in richness of description."[58] The poem's compact nature, its creation of a clear visual impression, and the emphasis on the dramatic set St. Erkenwald apart from other alliterative poetry.

A sense of drama is established immediately upon the discovery of a tomb inscribed with indecipherable runes. In a marvelously descriptive passage about the sepulchre, the poet establishes a basis for suspense and mystery, and conflicts between the expected and the real, and the ordinary and the extraordinary:

> Hit was a throghe of thykke ston thryuandly hewen
> Wyt gargeles garnysht aboute alle of gray marbre;
> Thre sperl of þe spelunke þat spradde hit o lofte
> Was metely made of þe marbre & menskefully planed,
> & þe bordure enbelicit wyt bryȝt golde lettres.
> Bot roynsyhe were þe resones þat þer on row stoden;
> fful verray were þe vigures--þer auisyd hom mony--
> (ll. 47-53)

"The 'bryȝt golde lettres' are intended to indicate a pre-Christian era and to tell the baffled Londoners that they have discovered contradiction profound--a heathen saint."[59] The realization of the implications of the find occurs much later in the poem, of course, creating a tension of expectation and reality which is not finally resolved until the ascension of the judge's soul at the conclusion of the poem.

The richest visual detail, and part of the most dramatic and thematically significant contrast in the poem, is the description of the pagan judge's corpse and its subsequent deterioration:

> So was þe glode wytin gay, al wyt golde payntyd,
> & a blisfull body opon þe bothum lyggid,
> Araide on a riche wise in riall wedes,
> Al wyt glisnand golde his gowne was hemmyd
> Wyt mony a precious perle picchit þeron
> & a gurdill of golde bigripid his mydell,
> A meche mantel on lofte with menyuer furrit,
> þe clothe of camelyn ful clene with cumly bordures,
> & on his coyfe wos kest a coron ful riche
> & a semely septure sett in his honde.
> Als wemles were his wedes wyt-outen any tecche
> Oþir of moulyng oþir of motes oþir moght-freten.
> & als bryȝt of hor blee in blysnande hewes
> As þai hade ȝepely in þat ȝorde bene ȝistur-day shapen
> & als freshe hyn þe face & the fflesh nakyd
> Bi his eres & bi his hondes þat openly shewid,
> Wyt ronke rode as þe rose & two rede lippes
> As he in sounde sodanly were slippid opon slepe.

I quote at length because the poet wishes to construct a particularly vivid impression of the richness and splendor of life that will contrast dramatically with the eventual putrefaction of this same opulent and fleshly figure:

> Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid & faylid,
> And alle þe blee of his body wos blakke as þe moldes,
> As roten as þe rottok þat rises in powder.
> (ll. 342-4)

The dramatic significance of such an abrupt disintegration is obvious: life is mutable, and the earthly beauty so carefully cultivated amounts to very little indeed in the final analysis: "ffor the ay-lastande life þat lethe shall neuer/ Deuoydes vche a vayne glorie þat vayles so litelle" (ll. 347-8).

The stark descriptive contrast between the visually rewarding body in life and the rotten remains after death is more a message

than an object, for the emphasis is on change rather than disgust, and produces an emotion of awe and wonder rather than revulsion.[60] The minds of the onlookers are jolted back to Erkenwald's plea for faith and to the judge's piteous struggle for salvation. Like time-lapse photography, the spectators see the condition that their own bodies will assume in a matter of years. The precious nature of temporal existence and the desire for spiritual salvation are elicited with equal force. What has been depicted so rapidly here is an extension of the conversion process which began so long ago with the arrival of Augustine, and it is the continuity of the process which underlies the "myrthe" of the crowd in the concluding lines of the poem. Though a death has been witnessed, that death itself serves to remind the townspeople simultaneously of mutability and eternity:

> "[T]he prospect of impending timelessness brings awareness of the preciousness of those things which are mutable. . . . [T]he poet adheres to the belief that the rewards of eternity far exceed the pleasures of earth and that this conviction is responsible for the sense of harmony and reconciliation in the poem. Yet his characters, the Londoners of the poem, are made to feel a lingering, nos-taligic delight in the fruits of mutability; they rejoice for the bliss into which the soul has entered, while mourning for the decay of earthly beauty, for the passing of human experience.[61]

In addition to the general atmospheric dualities of excited confusion (ll. 57-64) and dignified order (ll. 115-6; 142-3), another chief descriptive contrast involves the judge's preoccupation with dining (exclusion and inclusion).

In the tradition of the alliterative poets' usual practice

of describing food and feasts,[62] the author of St. Erkenwald employs the contrasting situations of invitation to and exile from the heavenly feast as a metaphor for salvation and damnation. The pagan's yearning to be included among the heavenly host is expressed in terms of "þat solempne fest" to which Christ led the dwellers of Limbo after his harrowing of hell. The judge was left with the rest of the damned:

> & exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempne fest.
> þer richely hit arne refetyd þat after right hungride.
> My soule may sitte þer in sorow & sike ful colde
> Dymly in þat derke dethe--þer dawes neuer morowen,
> Hungrie in wyt Helle hole & herken after meeles,
> Longe er ho þat soper se oþir segge hyr to lathe.'
> (ll. 303-8)

It is in terms of the feast, too, that the judge expresses his unalloyed ecstasy at his baptism and salvation:

> Ry3t now to soper my soule is sette at þe table.
> . . . .
> þat spakly sprent my spyrit wyt vnsparid murthe
> Into þe cenacle solemply þer soupen all trew,
> & þer a marciall hyr mette wyt menske aldergrattest
> & wyt reuerence a rowme he ra3t hyr for euer.
> (ll. 332; 335-8)

From famine to feast, from exile to initiate, from Limbo to heaven, the judge's journey which began with "Adam . . . þat ete of þat appull," culminates in his being escorted to the place where "soupen all trew." An echo of the fourth Beatitude (Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."), the culinary contrast is consistent with the previous descriptive contrasts between the earthly and the spiritual. Both are characterized by a vivid portrayal of reality and possibility. The judge's body is beautifully preserved, but his soul is in

anguish. He has a vision of the feast of the blessed, but he is not allowed to participate. It is not until the earthly body has been sacrificed that the anguished soul is allowed at the table of the true believers. It must be remembered that the other requirement, besides the sacrifice of secular beauty, is the life of virtue. Beauty and decay, famine and feast, virtue and sacrifice: the descriptive dualities of the poem inevitably lead to a synthesis in the Christian belief in divine salvation.

IX

Imagery

Physical beauty and metaphysical virtue are expressed in the poem by a number of contrasting images:

> Through the imagery . . . a beautiful parallel is established between the triumphant climax of part II and the hopeful climax of part I, and the parallel is delicately finished in the very last stanza where we are reminded of the ringing bell and the opening doors which marked the coming of dawn and of God's grace.[63]

McAlindon's reference to the bells and doors of the poem points to the thematic and structural dualities of imagery at work, specifically the images of sound, and the "antithetical images of closing and opening, darkness and light."[64]

The climax of Part I that McAlindon mentions occurs at the point of St. Erkenwald's address to the dean and scholars of St. Paul's, who have been unable to ascertain the identity of the corpse because they have turned to books rather than to God. This is a spiritual

climax reinforced by the opposing light and sound imagery that precedes it. Erkenwald's message here is that God is the light that illuminates solutions to worldly problems, and it is to Him that man must defer in time of need. Upon his arrival in London, the bishop secludes himself in his "palais" and passes the night in prayer:

> He passyd into his palais & pes he comaundit,
> & devoydit fro þe dede & ditte þe durre after.
> þe derke nyȝt ouer drofe & day belle ronge
> And Ser Erkenwolde was vp in þe vghten ere þen,
> þat welneghe al þe nyȝt hade nattyd his houres
> To biseche his souerayne of his swete grace,
> To vouche safe to revele hym hit by a vision or elles.
> (ll. 115-21)

Afterward the day dawns and a response from God is forthcoming: "& so long he grette after grace þat he graunte hade/ An ansuare of þe Holy Goste, & Afterwarde hit dawid. . . ." (ll. 126-7). "The movement into an enclosure in the dark of night and out again into the light of day parallels nicely the opening of the coffin in the light of day, the miracle of bringing back the life of the pagan, and the entrance of the soul into light-filled heaven."[65] Similarly, the pagan judge is brought from the darkness of hell to the light of heaven because of his constant faith in God, his inherent goodness, and Erkenwald's saintly intercession:

> ffor wyt þe wordes & þe water þat weshe vs of payne
> Liȝtly lasshit þer a leme loghe in þe abyme
> þat spakly sprent my spyrit wyt vnsparid murthe
> Into þe cenacle solemply þer soupen all trew. . .
> (ll. 333-6)

Archetypal light is knowledge vouchsafed by God, a light whose source is faith. Darkness is the state of ignorance: Erkenwald

prayed during the night that God would alleviate his ignorance; the judge was condemned to Limbo because of his ignorance of Christ's birth: "Nas I a paynym vnpreste þat neuer thi plite knewe" (l. 285). Hence the day dawns with the bishop's recept of "An ansuare of þe Holy Goste," and the judge's salvation occurs simultaneously with the "leme loghe in þe abyme."

Contrasting sound imagery in the poem similarly reinforces the faith/salvation theme. The ringing of the church bells occurs at two significant points in the poem. The first reference to the ringing bell is found after Erkenwald has entered his silent room to pass the dark night in prayer, an image of darkness and silence that brings to mind the darkness and silence of the judge's tomb. A single bell, the "day belle," rings at the conclusion of Erkenwald's vigil. The image here is of a solitary sound at dawn, a modest but effective symbol of hope in the light of day.

The second mention of ringing bells occurs at the conclusion of the poem, the triumphant climax of Part II. The pagan has achieved salvation. Erkenwald has confirmed his faith in God and his claim to sainthood. The townspeople, who had gathered noisily at the discovery of the tomb (ll. 57-62), and then grew silent at the pagan's speech (ll. 217-20), now erupt in joy and merriment: "Meche mournyng & myrthe was mellyd togeder/ . . . & alle þe pepull folowid" in the triumphant procession. During the joyful celebration there is an echo of the day bell of hope, which rang at Erkenwald's emergence from his night of prayer, in the bells that ring to conclude the poem in spiritual renewal and rebirth: "And all þe

belles in þe burghe beryd at ones." The bells, the sound imagery, and the light/darkness contrasts establish a narrative unity that runs throughout the poem. In addition, the principal contrasting images of the poem serve "to fuse marvel and idea, matter and meaning."[66]

St. Erkenwald is a poem that celebrates life and death, the ultimate duality, in a manner that is moralistic but not dogmatic, humanistic but not sentimental, and optimistic but not utopian. The poet has managed this difficult feat by a careful and artistic balancing of a variety of opposites designed to create dramatic suspense and thematic tension. In the process he tells a riveting tale of two characters caught in a struggle for the destiny of a soul which must dwell in one of two places: heaven or hell. So, too, the reader is reminded, are his own choices: "ffor the ay-lastande life þat lethe shall neuer/ Deuoydes vche a vayne glorie þat vayles so litelle" (ll. 347-8).

The poem is ultimately concerned with choice: the Saxons choose to convert to Christianity; the judge chooses to maintain his faith in salvation; Erkenwald chooses to intercede on the corpse's behalf; God chooses to offer salvation to a righteous pagan; and man, by daily decisions, chooses his individual ultimate destination. Choice implies the duality that is a necessary tenet of free will and earthly existence. The poet of St. Erkenwald reminds the reader that choices are inescapable realities of life that must be confronted with faith and an eye toward the inevitable destruction of the physical body, but with the promise of eternal salvation for the soul.

NOTES

[1]Mary-Ann Stouck, "'Mournynge and Myrthe' in the Alliterative *St. Erkenwald*," *The Chaucer Review*, 10 (1976), 244. T. McAlindon, "Hagiography into Art: A Study of *St. Erkenwald*," *Studies in Philology*, 67 (1970), 475.

[2]Brian Stone, trans. and introd., *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Cleanness*, *St. Erkenwald* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

[3]Larry D. Benson, "The Authorship of *St. Erkenwald*," *Journal of English and German Philology*, LXIV (1965), 394-95. Since I am following Benson's advice to examine the poem on its literary merit ("*St. Erkenwald* should now receive from literary critics the attention it has long deserved," p. 405), speculation as to authorship of of the poem lies outside the scope of this essay. However, it is interesting to note that critical opinion is nearly evenly divided with regard to the origin of the composition. Eight scholars (Israel Gollancz, Henry Savage, Clifford Peterson, Stone, John Gardner, J.P. Oakden, Barbara Nolan, and T. McAlindon) consider the poem to have been written by the *Pearl*-poet. On the other hand, nine critics (Larry Benson, Thorlac Turville-Petre, J.R.R. Tolkien, Edward Wilson, John W. Clark, John D. Ebbs, Vincent Petronella, A.C. Baugh, and Russell Peck) are convinced that there is no basis

for assigning St. Erkenwald to the canon of the Pearl-poet.

[4]Vincent F. Petronella, "St. Erkenwald: Style as the Vehicle for Meaning," Journal of English and German Philology, LXVI (1967), 533.

[5]Friedrich Heer, The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350, translated from the German by Janet Sondheimer (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 365.

[6]Tim D.P. Lally, "The Gothic Aesthetic of the Middle English St. Erkenwald," Ball State University Forum, XX (1979), 10, 2.

[7]Arnold Davison, "Mystery, Miracle, and Meaning in St. Erkenwald," Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature, 16 (1980), 38.

[8]St. Erkenwald, ed. Ruth Morse (Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewer, Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), l. 177. Subsequent quotations are from this text, and line citations will be enclosed in parentheses.

[9]Clifford Peterson, ed., Saint Erkenwald (n.p.: Univ. of Penn Press, 1977), p. 26. Henry L. Savage, in his edition of St. Erkenwald: A Middle English Poem (New Haven: Yale Studies in English, 1926), also believes that the two-part structure of the poem is an intentional division created by the poet (p. x).

[10]Paul Frederick Reichardt, "The Art and Meaning of the Middle

English St. Erkenwald," DAI, 27 (1971), 210A-02A (Rice Univ.), pp. 100 ff.

[11]Stone, p. 25.

[12]J.P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: The Dialectical and Metrical Survey (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1930), p. 177.

[13]Henry L. Savage, ed., St. Erkenwald (New Haven, Yale Studies in English, 1926), p. xlvii.

[14]Oakden, p. 177. Two five line stanzas are ll. 117-20 and ll. 150-54.

[15]McAlindon, pp. 484-5.

[16]Thorlac Turville-Peter, The Alliterative Revival (Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewer/Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 7.

[17]Oakden has thoroughly analyzed the alliterative pattern of Erkenwald. He finds that the poem has "a tendency toward excessive ornamental alliteration," which would be the rationale for instances where the laws of stress are violated for the sake of alliteration (p. 192). His investigation of the alliterative patterns here has pointed to the concept of identical alliteration in two or more lines as a method of grouping consecutive lines. He finds sixteen examples of two line groupings and one three line grouping in

Erkenwald. Further investigation has not been attempted on the consequent thematic relations between the lines so connected.

[18]McAlindon, pp. 484-85.

[19]Peterson, p. 37.

[20]Davidson, p. 39.

[21]Lester L. Faigley, "Typology and Justice in St. Erkenwald," American Benedictine Review, 29 (1978), 382.

[22]Lally, p. 6.

[23]Emended by Gollancz and Savage to "aght," reasoning that the alliteration was defective as the line stood.

[24]Emended to "þre hundred" by Gollancz.

[25]D.C. Fowler opines that the text version, which errs early by a century from contemporary historical reckoning, ought to be left as is, "straightforward and accurate." Mr. Fowler does not explain, however, his assumption of 572 A.D. for Erkenwald's bishopric. His argument is quoted by Peterson, p. 106. Morse calculates a date of 382 for the judge's death (p. 71).

[26]Stone, p. 14.

[27]Faigley, p. 384.

[28]McAlindon, p. 482.

[29]Faigley, p. 383.

[30]St. Erkenwald, ed. with introduction and notes by Ruth Morse (Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewer, Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), p. 15.

[31]Bede, A History of the English Church and People (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 218.

[32]Peterson, p. 36.

[33]Reichardt, p. 43.

[34]Stone, pp. 26-7.

[35]Davidson, p. 42.

[36]Stouck, p. 244.

[37]Davidson, p. 42.

[38]Lally, p. 8.

[39]The translation of "gentil" here is debatable, and debated--does the poet mean "gentle" ("noble"), or "gentile" ("pagan")? Savage and Gollancz gloss the word "gentile," Peterson "noble" (without conviction by his own admission), and Morse chooses only

to state the ambiguity without declaring a preference.

[40]Stone, p. 23.

[41]Davidson, p. 40.

[42]Stone, p. 23.

[43]Davidson, p. 40.

[44]Stone, p. 23.

[45]John Gardner, trans., The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet: In a Modern English Version with a Critical Introduction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 40.

[46]Petronella, p. 536.

[47]McAlindon, p. 480.

[48]Lally, p. 8.

[49]"was called the law of fear." St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologica (I-II, q. 107, a. 1, ad. 2. Quoted in Faigley, p. 385.

[50]"Moreover, those who possess piety are inclined to doing works of virtue for the love of righteousness, not on account of some certain punishment or external reward . . this is called the law

of love." Aquinas, quoted in Faigley, p. 385.

[51]Faigley, p. 385.

[52]Faigley, p. 386.

[53]Faigley, pp. 389-90.

[54]Turville-Petre, p. 27.

[55]Stouck, p. 253.

[56]Lally, p. 10.

[57]Stouck, p. 253.

[58]Turville-Petre, p. 6.

[59]McAlindon, p. 482.

[60]Stouck, p. 251.

[61]Stouck, p. 253.

[62]Turville-Petre, p. 27.

[63]McAlindon, p. 489.

[64]McAlindon, p. 487.

[65] Petronella, p. 536.

[66] McAlindon, p. 487.

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APPENDIX

St. Erkenwald: Chronological Outline

1136 B.C.	Founding of London
753 B.C.	Founding of Rome
354 or 382 B.C.	Death of the Pagan Judge
A.D. 53-117	Trajan / St. Gregory
A.D. 314	Council of Arles attended by Bishop of London (Restitutus) --the only evidence of London Christianity under Romans
A.D. late 4th century	Temple of Mithras (pagan) lapsed into neglect
A.D. 400-800	London, under Roman influence, resists Saxons; becomes center of trade
A.D. 597	Augustine sent by Pope Gregory to London, found to be "resolutely Pagan"
A.D. 609-616	Ethelbert builds St. Paul's
A.D. 630-693	Historical life of Erkenwald
A.D. 675	Erkenwald consecrated 4th bishop of London; Son of King Offa of East Angles; 45 years old when appointed; established 2 monasteries; performed miracles; enlarged St. Paul's
A.D. late 7th century	Events described in St. Erkenwald--Christianity in S. England
A.D. 1250-1350	Rebuilding of St. Paul's--"New Werke"

A.D. 1386	Reinstitution of St. Erkenwald's Feast Days (Nov. and April); St. Paul's reconstructed
A.D. late 14th century	Assumed time of composition of St. Erkenwald
A.D. 1666	Wren rebuilt St. Paul's after Great Fire

VITA

Davis Arthur Rice

Born May 11, 1950, in Lynchburg, Virginia. Graduated from E.C. Glass High School in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1968. Attended University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, and graduated from Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1972, with a B.A. in English literature. Currently teaching English and Latin at McDonough High School, Charles County, Maryland.