

1-1-1977

# The alliterative revival and a suggested interpretation for The Parlement of the Thre Ages.

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THE ALLITERATIVE REVIVAL  
AND  
A SUGGESTED INTERPRETATION FOR  
THE PARLEMENT OF THE THRE AGES

by  
Judith C. G. Moran

A Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate Committee  
of Lehigh University  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
English

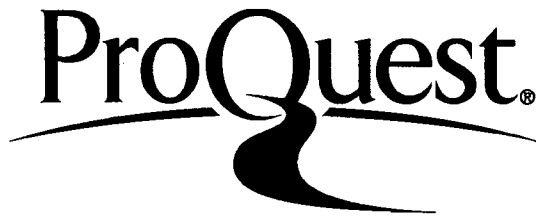
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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

September 14, 1977  
(date)

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Professor in Charge

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## ABSTRACT

It is the position of this paper that the key to understanding the Parlement of the Thre Ages lies in the continuity of the alliterative tradition from the Old English period through the Middle English. What has kept many critics from accepting this view is a three-hundred-year gap just after the Conquest for which we have no extant alliterative verse. However, the logically expected adaptation of language and verse form from Old English to Middle English seen in what is known as the Alliterative Revival indicates that continuity must have existed, even if only verbally. Working within a tradition inherited from the Old English alliterative poets, the Parlement-poet has written what, on the surface, appears to be a Christian poem, but whose attitudes and points of emphasis, when analyzed, are found to be heroic instead. This accounts for the great emphasis on the Nine Worthies and the heroic concern for the deeds of mighty warrior kings.

Also important in understanding the poem is that one cannot apply to an alliterative poem the same structural expectations that one has toward Chaucerian narrative. The alliterative structure is not linear. The Prologue of the Parlement, which to many critics seems

disproportionately long, is actually a statement of a general exemplum: death comes to all and there is no escape from it. The remainder of the poem (the dream vision) is a series of repetitions, or amplifications, of the general exemplum.

Finally, the Parlement must have been linked in one of the two extant manuscripts to Wynnere and Wastoure, a social protest poem aimed at Edward I, for a reason. Early critics tried to show common authorship and common dialect, but were unsuccessful. This paper argues that the link is one of common interest, that is, social protest. Fortunately, a study of Youthe's clothing in the Parlement has proved beyond doubt that it has to have been written later than previously thought, placing it now in the latter part of the reign of King Richard II. Central, too, to the view that Parlement is a social protest poem is the fact that alliterative poetry was fostered exclusively in the regional courts of powerful barons who had traditionally stood in opposition to the reigning king. These men disdained the French influence on court manners and verse and strove for a more English form of expression. Several critics feel that it was this sort of patriotic feeling which was the motive force behind the return to the native verse form seen in the works of the Alliterative Revival. The Parlement of the

Thre Ages appears to be a protest against the irresponsible and amoral reign of Richard II, a king for whom there could be no escape from death, whose deeds as a warrior were notably unheroic, and who made a mockery of the heroic view of leadership and kinghood.



## I

The examination and criticism of the Parlement of the Thre Ages began in 1897<sup>1</sup> and has continued through to the present; but the definitive study has yet to be written. The poem exists in only two manuscripts referred to as T and W after the Yorkshireman Robert Thornton who included one MS in a fifteenth-century English miscellany (British Museum Additional MS 31042) and the Irishman Sir John Ware (1594-1666) who similarly included the second MS in a miscellany of his own (British Museum Additional MS 33994). Unfortunately, the second manuscript is incomplete, lacking its first 225 lines. The complete poem consists of 665 lines of alliterative long line written in a North Westmidlands dialect. There are some variant readings between the two MSS, but these variations are neither numerous nor great and this paper will quote only from the T version. In the Thornton miscellany The Parlement of the Thre Ages is linked with a second alliterative poem, Wynnere and Wastoure, whose surface similarities led early critics to concentrate on proving common authorship rather than dealing with either or both

<sup>1</sup> Israel Gollancz, The Parlement of the Thre Ages, Roxburghe Club, 132, London 1897.

of the poems as literary works.

Structurally Parlement consists of a 104-line prologue in which a hunter enters a wood, "In the monethe of Maye when mirthes bene fele," (line 1), in hopes of shooting a deer, "an hert or ane hynde, happen as it myghte," (line 5). The forest's flora and fauna are described in profuse and realistic detail,

There the gryse was grene, growen with floures--  
The primrose, the pervynke, and piliolle ~~pe~~ riche--  
The dewe appon dayeses donkede full faire,  
Burgons & blossoms & braunches full swete,  
And the mery mystes full myldely gane falle;  
The cukkowe, the cowschote, kene were ~~pay~~ bothen,  
And the throstills full throly threpen in the  
bankes,  
And iche foule in that frythe faynere ~~pan~~ o~~per~~  
That the derke was done & the daye lightenede.  
Hertys and hyndes one hillys ~~pay~~ gouen,  
The foxe and the filmarte ~~pay~~ flede to ~~pe~~ erthe;  
The hare hurckles by hawes & harde thedir dryves,  
And ferkes faste to hir fourme & fatills hir to  
sitt.<sup>2</sup> (8-20)

but the hunter, a poacher we learn, has only "stalkynge" on his mind. He spots a hart with marvelous antlers:

I seghe ane hert with ane hede, ane heghe for  
the nones:  
Alle vnburneschede was ~~pe~~ beme, full borely  
~~pe~~ mydle,  
With iche feetur as thi fote, for-frayed in  
the greues,  
With auntlers one aythere syde egheliche longe.  
The ryalls full richely raughten frome the  
myddes,

<sup>2</sup>M.Y. Offord, ed., The Parlement of the Thre Ages. London: Oxford University Press, 1959. Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, this edition is the source of all quotations used in this paper.

With surryals full semely appon sydes twayne;  
And he assommet and sett of vi and of fyve,  
And þer-to borely and brode and of body grete,  
And a coloppe for a kynge, cache hym who  
myghte. (25-33)

The hart is accompanied by a "sowre", a younger deer who  
serves as lookout

That woke & warned hym when the wynde faylede,  
That none so sleghe in his slepe with sleghte  
scholde hym dere,  
And went the wayes hym by-fore when any wothe  
tyde. (35-37)

The hunter stalks his quarry

I waitted wiesly the wynde by waggyng of leues,  
Stalkede full stilly no stikkes to breke,  
And crepited to a crabtre and couered me  
ther-vndere:  
Then I bende vp my bowe and bownede me to  
schote, (40-43)

exercising infinite care

Then I moste stonde als I stode and stirre no  
fote ferrere,  
For had I my[n]tid or mouede or made any synys,  
Alle my layke hade bene loste þat I hade longe  
wayttede.  
Bot gnattes gretely me greuede and gnewen myn  
eghne. (47-50)

The description is detailed, realistic and at least one  
critic has suggested that it might even be autobio-  
graphical.<sup>3</sup> The hunter slays the hart,

<sup>3</sup>Henry L. Savage, "Notes on the Prologue of the  
Parlement of the Thre Ages," JEGP, 29 (1930), 74-82.

And happenyd that I hitt hym by-hynde þe  
lefte scholdire  
þat þe blode braste owte appon bothe the  
sydes, (54-55)

cuts up the carcass (66-93) and hides his prize, "þat no  
fostere of the fee scholde fynde it there-aftir," (94).  
Following his exertion he goes to sleep in the wood,  
"And whate I seghe in my saule the sothe I schall telle,"  
(103).

In his vision the hunter sees "thre thro men threpedn  
full erne." The men are the abstractions Youthe (109-  
135), Medill Elde (136-151) and Elde (152-165) and each  
is dressed in the color and style (and is concerned with  
those things) appropriate to his age. Youthe is courtly,  
Medill Elde is prudently watchful of his wealth, Elde  
has been both and is now "envyous and angry" (163) and  
afraid of death. Youthe and Medill Elde dispute as to  
whose lifestyle is better and their arguments end with  
each emphatically sure that his own is best. Youthe is  
dedicated to courtly pursuits (loving, hawking and feats  
of arms), while Medill Elde favors the acquisition of  
gold and property (168-264). Elde breaks in with, "sottes  
bene 3e bothe," (266), and observes that at their ages  
he felt the same way, "Bot Elde vndire-3ode me are I laste  
wiste," (283). Now he urges them:

Makes youre mirroure bi me, men bi youre  
trouthe--  
This schadowe in my schewere schunte 3e  
no while.  
And now es deth at my dore that I drede  
moste.

(290-292)

All who have passed through this life have ended in the same place--even the best of men are claimed by death. There follow nearly 300 lines devoted to the Nine Worthies: Hector (300-330), Alexander (332-404), Julius Caesar (405-421), Joshua (426-41), David (442-53), Judas Maccabeus (454-59), King Arthur (464-512), Godfrey of Bouillon (513-19) and Charlemagne (520-79), ending with the moral that, "Bot doghetynes when dede comes ne dare noghte habyde," (583).

Elde continues his examples with four wisemen<sup>4</sup> and a list of famous lovers<sup>5</sup>--all now dead (584-630). He concludes,

Sythen doughtynes when dede comes ne dare  
noghte habyde,  
Ne dethe wondes for no witt to wende where  
hym lykes

...

<sup>4</sup> Arestotle, Virgill, Salomom and Merlyn.

<sup>5</sup> Amadase and Edoyne, Sampson and Dalyda, Ypomadonn de Poelle and the Fere de Calabre, Generides and Clarionas, Eglamour of Artas and Cristabelle, Tristrem and Ysoute, Dido, Candace, Penelopie and Gaynore (Guinevere).

Me thynke þe wele of this werlde worthes to  
noghte  
Ecclesiastes the clerke declares in his booke  
Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas. (631-32,  
637-39)

Now is the time to put your house in order! The hunter, awakened by a bugle, rises and walks toward the town, moved, apparently for the good (though the poem does not explicitly say as much) by his dream experience.

The first printed edition of The Parlement of the Thre Ages was published in 1897 by Sir Israel Gollancz whose prime interest seemed to be in proving the common authorship of Parlement and Wynnere and Wastoure. This desire was based mostly upon seven points: 1. common lines in both poems, 2. "strongly reminiscent" passages in each poem, 3. the same general framework, 4. common verbal forms of nouns in -ande, 5. the feeling that both poems "show careless confusion in details," 6. the opinion that "tests of language and meter do not tell against the identity of authorship," and 7. the feeling that the "general impression conveyed by the two pieces tells strongly in favor of the view."<sup>6</sup> His arguments were weak and highly subjective, but they set the tone of critical opinion until 1920. In 1915 Sir Israel published his

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in J. R. Hulbert, "The Problems of Authorship and Date of Wynnere and Wastoure." MP, 18 (1920), 31.

second edition of the Parlement, again establishing his views of the poem in his introduction and appended material. In quoting Chaucer's definition of medieval tragedy found in the Monk's Tale, Gollancz plainly shows his interest in the Nine Worthies (and wisemen and famous lovers) material. He also appends his own subtitle for which there is no MS authority, i.e., An Alliterative Poem on the Nine Worthies and the Heroes of Romance. To further establish the ancient popularity of the Worthies, Gollancz adds an Appendix containing a collection of passages dealing with these famous men, the earliest from the eleventh century. He tells us that the MSS of Parlement "afford no direct evidence of authorship, date of composition, or the original locality of the poem." "One's first impression," he continues, "is that Parlement is a sort of summary of longer poems--an epitome reminiscent of lines and passages in the chief alliterative poems of the second half of the fourteenth century. On the other hand, no criteria gainsay the theory that would assign it to the author of Wynnere and Wastoure, which can be dated not much later than 1350; and so it may have been the prologue rather than the epilogue to the alliterative revival." Similarities in lines in Parlement, Wynnere and Wastoure, Piers Plowman, and Sir Gawain and the Green

Knight which Gollancz pointed out set off a flurry of critical speculation as to which poems came first and which were derivative. This controversy, while not completely settled, definitely leans toward Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain as the earlier works.

A year later John Edwin Wells, in his Manual, supported and continued Gollancz' practice of linking Parlement with Wynnere and extending conclusions drawn about Wynnere to Parlement:

They are ascribed to one author because of similarity in form, and because they are preserved together in MS British Museum Additional 31042 (15th century). The date of the poems is fixed at about 1350 by two allusions in Wynnere, one to the twenty-fifth year of Edward III (l. 206), the other to William de Shareshull as Chief Baron of the Exchequer (l. 317). This dating would seem to indicate indebtedness of Piers Plowman to the two poems, or at least to one of them.<sup>7</sup>

Roger Sherman Loomis rounds out the first twenty years of Parlement scholarship by extending Gollancz' list of Nine Worthies passages with eight further examples from both the literary and visual arts.<sup>8</sup>

In 1920 the age of agreement ended when J. R. Hulbert published an article in which he systematically rejected

<sup>7</sup> John Edwin Wells, A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1400. Yale Univ. Press, 1916, pp. 241-42.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, "Verses on the Nine Worthies," MP, 15 (1917-18), 211-19.



each of the reasons for the common authorship of Parlement and Wynnere set down by Gollancz in his 1897 edition.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps [he concluded] all that can be determined is whether or not the transmission of two given works is the same. If we find that two poems existing in a certain MS have not been copied from the same exemplar, or at some earlier point in the transmission have come from different sources, we learn at least that their presence together in the same MS has no significance in establishing authorship.<sup>10</sup>

After considering the dialect of the two poems, Hulbert concluded that "the original of Wynnere and Wastoure was more southern than that of Parlement,"<sup>11</sup>, thus for the first time unshackling the MS partners, but still leaving Parlement without a date of composition. Gollancz had thought the Parlement earlier than Wynnere because Wynnere seemed surer, more practised. "Such argument," says Hulbert, "hardly needs comment."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to propose his own chronology among the alliterative poems bearing marked similarities which, he asserts, "conflicts with no known facts"<sup>13</sup>:

<sup>9</sup>J. R. Hulbert, "Problems of Authorship and Date of Wynnere and Wastoure," MP, 18 (1920-21), 31-32.

<sup>10</sup>Hulbert, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>Hulbert, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup>Hulbert, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Hulbert, p. 40.

William of Palerne 1350-60  
Piers Plowman-A 1362  
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight before  
Wynnere and Wastoure  
Wynnere after Piers-A but not later than 1366  
Parlement of the Thre Ages later than Piers-A  
and SGGK, "and there is no evidence for a  
date ad quem."<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, this did not lay the matter of common authorship to rest. The final volley came from J. M. Steadman when he went beyond dialect comparison to look at Parlement and Wynnere with an idea toward testing "those characteristics of the author that are not easily imitated by other authors, and that even an author himself is often unconscious of. They constitute an author's permanent and proper characteristics, which should be found to be approximately the same in all his works."<sup>15</sup> Those characteristics considered are the "interest" of the poems (differs "strikingly"<sup>16</sup>), colors, flowers, shrubs, animals, birds, rhetorical devices ("each poet has his own favorite phrases and lines which he is fond of repeating...This repetition..., different in each poem, is more significant than the presence of stock

<sup>14</sup>Hulbert, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup>J. M. Steadman, "The Authorship of Wynnere and Wastoure and Parlement of the Thre Ages; A Study in Methods of Determining the Common Authorship of Middle English Poems," MP, 21 (1923-24), 8.

<sup>16</sup>Steadman, p. 8.

alliterative formulae"<sup>17</sup>), and types of vocabulary. Steadman felt that testing for these items is much sounder scholarship and that, "Differences in syntax, rhetoric and vocabulary, moreover, are less likely to be obscured by scribal changes."<sup>18</sup>

The Steadman article ends what might be termed the second phase of Parlement scholarship, that is, a reaction to Gollancz' position which formed the initial phase.

In 1928 and 1930 three articles by Henry L. Savage moved the trend perceptibly toward literary criticism.<sup>19</sup> The first two deal convincingly with individual lines and words which Savage felt had been wrongly glossed by Gollancz, and the third attempts to deal with the social status of the poacher. Poaching was widespread in the Middle Ages and thus need not necessarily indicate humble status or origin, Savage found. "Our author's knowledge of antiquity and his probable wide reading can

<sup>17</sup>Steadman, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup>Steadman, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup>Henry L. Savage, "A Note on Parlement of the Thre Ages, 38," MLN, 43 (1928), 177-179. Henry L. Savage, "A Note on Parlement of the Thre Ages, 220," MLN, 45 (1930), 169-170. Henry L. Savage, "Notes on the Prologue of the Parlement of the Thre Ages," JEGP, 29 (1930), 74-82.

hardly be reconciled with the ignorance and indifference to intellectual things that would certainly characterize the ordinary poacher."<sup>20</sup> He concluded, without ever considering the possibility of the poet's having assumed a persona for the occasion, that the author must have been writing autobiographically. "But," he finally asserts, "whether the author of Parlement be a poacher or not, it is almost indisputable that he is recounting his actual experiences of past May mornings...our poet's knowledge of the life and lore of the woodlands is not of one who is merely a poetic appreciator of Nature, painting for us the conventional picture of a May morning, but that of one who could, inclination and occasion permitting, carry off a deer from beneath the keeper's very nose."<sup>21</sup>

In 1937 and 1938, respectively, G. R. Coffman and C. A. Philip considered the matter of the ages assigned to Youthe, Medill Elde, and Elde.<sup>22</sup> Thirty, sixty, and one hundred, apparently, were departures from convention which sent these scholars rushing off to explore various medieval treatments of age--away from Savage's tentative

<sup>20</sup>Savage, p. 76.

<sup>21</sup>Savage, pp. 76-77.

<sup>22</sup>G. R. Coffman, "Old Age in Chaucer's Day," MLN, 52 (1937), 25-26. C. A. Philip, "A Further Note on Age in Chaucer's Day," MLN, 53 (1938), 181-182.

steps toward an explication de texte. For the next twenty years virtually nothing was published concerning the Parlement of the Thre Ages.

In 1957 and 1959 two general works treated the Parlement in the context of the alliterative revival.<sup>23</sup> For the first time we have a suggestion of unity and allegory within the poem when John Speirs says that the hunt "conveys the 'Pride of Life' experience," and that it constitutes "a cunning prelude to the debate."<sup>24</sup> Further, "It is sophisticated art indeed. There is a compelling emotional logic of events in this poem, as there is in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."<sup>25</sup> The deer is discussed as more than a poacher's prize, but as

...the way to secure a vision or dream guidance. Alfred Nutt, the folklorist, noted instances from Grail and Mabinogi legends of the hero hunting a stag, slaying it and falling under an 'illusion' in consequence; the stag was a regular messenger from the faery world and thus passed into Christian hagiology.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition. London, 1957. Dorothy H. Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature. Oxford, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> Speirs, p.289.

<sup>25</sup> Speirs, p.289.

<sup>26</sup> Speirs, p.292.

Youthe, he asserts, is "significant of life resurgent" standing with his hawk upon his wrist or sitting astride his noble steed; Medill Elde is a 'Winner', sitting contemplating his money; Elde is shown bent on his side completing the set of tableau figures.<sup>27</sup> Here, too, for the first time we find mention of the hawking scene which "seems, through the Pride of Life experience, to relate Youthe to the dreamer himself."<sup>28</sup> In an attempt at stating a moral, Speirs observes that the Parlement is "by its sharp recognition of mortality, a correction of Pride."<sup>29</sup> But, having gone this far toward integration, he will go no further, and dismisses the entire Nine Worthies episode as being "of decidedly less merit than the rest of the poem."<sup>30</sup> Two years later, Dorothy Everett, having disregarded or not read Speirs, concedes that some trouble has been taken to link the sections of the poem together, but dismisses the poet as having "little sense of fitness or proportion."<sup>31</sup> She later

<sup>27</sup>Speirs, pp. 293-94.

<sup>28</sup>Speirs, p. 296.

<sup>29</sup>Speirs, p. 301.

<sup>30</sup>Speirs, p. 300.

<sup>31</sup>Everett, p. 51.

dispatches the poem itself with the statement that it "can be taken for what it appears to be--an imitation of Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and others."<sup>32</sup>

In 1967 a book entitled The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries by Constance B. Heatt appeared which may have struck hope in the hearts of those desiring further understanding of the Parlement--and she does elucidate the genre with chapters on form and medieval dream interpretation--but her consideration of the poem's dream vision criticizes it unfavorably for its realism and the fact that the dreamer takes no active part within his vision.<sup>33</sup>

The most interesting aspect of these figures [Youthe, etc., in the vision] is the picture of the period we get from the statements of Youthe and Middle Age. The ultimate purpose of the scene seems to be simply to provide an excuse for telling stories about the Nine Worthies. The dream, therefore, does not appear to be allegory in any significant sense.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Everett, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Constance B. Heatt, The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries. The Hague and Paris, 1967, pp. 98-102.

<sup>34</sup> Heatt, p. 98.

This savours greatly of the early views of Gollancz.

Mrs. Hieatt concedes that this may be an unfair assessment, but begs off further discussion by saying that "If we could be more sure of the meaning of the prologue--that is, of its connection or lack of it, with the dream that follows--perhaps the dream would appear in a totally different light."<sup>35</sup> She goes on to summarize Savage's and Speirs' work on the hunt scene calling their observations "far from conclusive" and turns swiftly to a consideration of Wynnere and Wastoure.<sup>36</sup>

In 1968 Robert E. Lewis turned attention back to the matter of dating, but in a different and interesting way.<sup>37</sup> His focus of concern is the costume of Youthe described in the Parlement in these terms:

He was balghe in the breste and brode in  
the scholdirs,  
His axles and his armes were i-liche longe,  
And in the medill als a mayden menskfully  
schapen;  
Long legges and large, and lele for to  
schewe.  
He streghte hym in his sterapis and stode  
vp-rightes;

<sup>35</sup>Hieatt, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup>Hieatt, pp. 98-101.

<sup>37</sup>Robert E. Lewis, "The Date of the Parlement of the Thre Ages," NM 69 (1968), 380-390.



He ne hade no hode ne no hatte bot his  
 here one--  
 A chaplet one his chefe-lerre, chosen for  
 the nones,  
 Raylede all with rede rose, richeste of  
 floures,  
 With trayfoyles and trewloues of full triede  
 perles,  
 With a chefe charebocle chosen in the myddes.  
 He was gereade alle in grene, all with golde  
 by-weuede,  
 Embroddirde alle with besanttes and beralles  
 full riche;  
 His colere with calsydoynnes clustrede full  
 thikke,  
 With many dyamandes full dere dighte one  
 his sleues.  
 The semys with saphirs sett were full many,  
 With emeraudes and amatistes appon iche  
 syde,  
 With full riche rubyes raylede by the hemmes;  
 The price of that perry were worthe powndes  
 full many. (112-129)

Lewis asserts that the costume can give us a more precise  
 date than any other evidence yet produced. For instance,  
 the information that Youthe has a full chest, broad  
 shoulders, long arms and shoulders, a thin waist, and  
 the fact that his legs show, indicate that his clothing  
 was closefitting and short. "Youthe", says Lewis, "is  
 no doubt wearing a cote-hardie, an over-garment that  
 replaced the supertunic in the second quarter of the 14th  
 Century."<sup>38</sup> The cote-hardie

was worn over a gipon (a short, close-  
 fitting undergarment with tight waist and  
 sleeves sewn or buttoned from elbow to  
 wrist). The sleeves of the cote-hardie  
 were close-fitting to the elbow, but then

<sup>38</sup>Lewis, p. 386.

bell-shaped so that the tight sleeves of the gipon could be seen underneath.<sup>39</sup>

During the reign of Richard II (1377-99), known for its luxury and innovation in dress, the cote-hardie became increasingly shorter and the sleeves increasingly longer and narrower to give the impression of lengthened arms and narrowed waist. "During the same half-century, the gipon gradually acquired more padding in the bodice, which would have produced the large-chested effect under the cote hardie."<sup>40</sup> Another item for narrowing the date is the word "colere" in line 124--a word "almost unknown before the end of the 14th Century,"<sup>41</sup> when both the gipon and the cote-hardie developed high standing collars and fashion called for gold/jewelled chains to set them off. The best known of these collars is the chain of interlocking esses usually associated with Henry IV (1399-1413).<sup>42</sup> Noting the fact that Parlement is a northern poem, Lewis adds that a time lag would have intervened during which the court fashions would have migrated to

<sup>39</sup>Lewis, p. 386.

<sup>40</sup>Lewis, p. 387.

<sup>41</sup>Lewis, p. 398.

<sup>42</sup>Lewis, p. 389.

the further points of the kingdom, and concludes that Parlement must belong to the later years of the alliterative revival so that it is an imitation, rather than an inspiration, of some of the best alliterative poems.<sup>43</sup>

Early in the seventies R. A. Waldron emphasized the didactic character of Parlement suggesting that it belongs to the genre of Complaint.<sup>44</sup> He says the construction of the poem is superficially loose, containing a "pendant structure" with "each section after the first...suspended from the previous one by a seemingly tenuous, ad hoc, narrative thread."<sup>45</sup> Central in importance is the exemplary way that the Nine Worthies have normally been used in medieval literature. Here, says Waldron, they are definitely used to illustrate the theme of mutability. He continues, "In terms of its principal subject matter and treatment, the Parlement of the Thre Ages falls squarely into the genre of complaint, that peculiarly medieval genre in which the inevitability of death and

<sup>43</sup>Lewis, p. 390.

<sup>44</sup>R. A. Waldron, "The Prologue of The Parlement of the Thre Ages," NM 73 (1972), 786-794.

<sup>45</sup>Waldron, p. 786.

the frailties and imperfections of human life are made the basis of a plea for contempt for the world."<sup>46</sup>

In response to the majority of critics, who have generally neglected the prologue and its relation to the rest of the poem, Waldron proposes three possible functions for the prologue; first, a homiletic function, acting as "bait" to the reader or listener and very possibly being used as a verse sermon;<sup>47</sup> second, a psychological function where the audience "can view the dream in a psychologically realistic manner, as a reflection of the waking activity or preoccupation which precedes it;"<sup>48</sup> third, and finally, a thematic function in which the prologue sets up a series of thematic antitheses. The day of the hunt may be seen as the life of a man (a confusing point since presumably the deer also represents the life of a man, but Waldron does not elaborate). The successive stages of the hunt prefigure the three abstractions: Youthe hunts, Middle Age breaks the deer, Elde settles back to sleep. Allegorically the hunter equals death-- the subject of Elde's "warning to be ware". And the

<sup>46</sup>Waldron, pp. 787-88.

<sup>47</sup>Waldron, pp. 788-90.

<sup>48</sup>Waldron, p. 791.

goodness of life is shown contrasting with the suddenness and finality of the hart's death.<sup>49</sup>

Extending Waldron's concern with the prologue, Russell A. Peck<sup>50</sup> thinks that the hunt forms an introduction to the central concerns of the poem. "The care with which the hart protects his life provides an exemplum of the hunter's behaviour, though the hunter does not realize it until he dreams, and then only partially."<sup>51</sup> The breaking of the deer shows the development of the craft and efficiency needed to thrive in the Forest, just as we saw the craft and efficiency developed by the hart, and have witnessed what has become of him. The other foragers in the wood also provide "a panorama of mortal creatures attempting to garner food and security...the activities of the animals define the flux of nature and set the scene for the hunt which depicts the ultimate futility of finding security in the forest."<sup>52</sup> By analogy there is no security in life for death comes to all. Here there is a hint that one must

<sup>49</sup>Waldron, p. 794.

<sup>50</sup>Russell A. Peck, "The Careful Hunter in The Parlement of the Thre Ages," ELH, 39 (1972), 333-341.

<sup>51</sup>Peck, p. 335.

<sup>52</sup>Peck, p. 335.

reform one's thinking on the matter, but full development of the idea comes only when the vision is under way.

Granting the faithfulness and concern for detail, Peck says that the prologue's "abundant details are not designed for the sake of realism or autobiography; primarily they anticipate the argument of the dream."<sup>53</sup> The unifying topic of the poem is Death, "the master hunter whom none can escape"<sup>54</sup> and the fear of Death; the fact that the hunter is a poacher is vitally important because "All mortal creatures, in their desire to make their way on earth, are poachers in Death's Forest,"<sup>55</sup> a phrase which Peck does not elaborate upon. The hunter is in danger of pursuit, just as the hart is, and when he lies down and dreams after his successful kill, his is "a vision of man's inadequacy in the very moment of his success."<sup>56</sup>

The problems of allegorical coherence seen in the explanations of Waldron (i.e., the confusion of equating

<sup>53</sup>Peck, p. 334.

<sup>54</sup>Peck, p. 334.

<sup>55</sup>Peck, p. 335.

<sup>56</sup>Peck, p. 336.

both the day and the deer with the life of a man) and Peck (the lack of elaboration on the idea of man being a poacher in Death's Forest) show that there is considerable disparity in present critical opinion, but on the whole, I think, Peck's view is the preferable one. Waldron's view of the day's hunt as a representation of Youth hunting, Middle Age breaking the deer and Old Age resting and sleeping seems to lose sight of the terms "prologue" and "pendant structure". Rather, the hunt seems to be an initial, general memento mori, which the entire audience could recognize. Then, lest anyone think himself exempt, the vision, the main exemplum, would most definitely dispel the notion. The poem's three-fold structure of the hunt, the dream, and the return home, says Peck, "upholds Geoffrey of Vinsauf's maxims on ordering literary material and its multilinear unity exemplifies admirably...amplificatio."<sup>57</sup> What we have, then, is Waldron's "pendant structure" with the vision acting not as a repetition of the prologue, but as an amplification of the prologue's general statement that death will come, namely that death will come to all and can come at any time.

The two very best articles to date on the Parlement

<sup>57</sup>Peck, p. 334.

were published in 1973 and 1974.<sup>58</sup> David E. Lampe, again on the prologue, says that "aside from the problem of language, the greatest stumbling block for modern readers of alliterative verse has been the expectation that it must conform to the structural principles of Chaucerian narrative."<sup>59</sup> In a study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Larry D. Benson has shown that the structure is quite different: "Scenes and episodes in such works do not exist in the straightforward, causal order of most narratives. Each forms part of a series of variations composed of other passages similar in form and content, and the meaning of each is modified and illuminated by its variations, even though, as in the sentence, their relation is implied rather than stated explicitly."<sup>60</sup> This unfamiliar poetic strategy, says Lampe, has caused three major stumbling blocks for readers today: "the long, seemingly unnecessary introductory scene, the allegorical identities and consequent reliability of the figures of the three ages of man's life in the dream

<sup>58</sup>David E. Lampe, "The Poetic Strategy of The Parlement of the Thre Ages," ChauR, 7 (1973), 173-83. Anne Kernan, "Theme and Structure in The Parlement of the Thre Ages," NM, 75 (1974), 253-278.

<sup>59</sup>Lampe, p. 173.

<sup>60</sup>Lampe, p. 173.



vision; and the function of Elde's long 'digression' on the Nine Worthies."<sup>61</sup>

The setting described in the first sixteen lines of Parlement is, according to Lampe, an idealized pastoral scene. Discussion in the rhetorical treatises of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew de Vendome of the details presented indicate that "such a topos is not a spontaneous or romantic reaction to nature."<sup>62</sup> Nor, says Lampe, are these details merely decorative, for, "though the poetic handbooks were much concerned with amplification, they still distinguished between the poem as a verbal pattern (verba) and as an intellectual construct (res) and consequently insisted upon the utility of description on both levels."<sup>63</sup> In Lampe's words, then, "one should use setting as a means of announcing or preparing for theme under the pleasing veil of allegory."<sup>64</sup> Lampe considers the iconographic significance of the four flowers, three birds and the four animal species in the opening lines in an attempt to explore "how it subtly announces a theme

<sup>61</sup>Lampe, p. 173.

<sup>62</sup>Lampe, p. 174.

<sup>63</sup>Lampe, p. 174.

<sup>64</sup>Lampe, p. 174.

in preparation for the dream vision."<sup>65</sup> By way of example, a survey of Middle English literature shows that

1. the primrose suggests the transience of life,
2. the periwinkle is associated with death,
3. the pilliote is noted in Middle English herbals for its medicinal qualities, and
4. the daisy represented faithfulness in love and, by extension, faithfulness to Christ.

The primrose and periwinkle serve as symbols of mutability, the transience of life and finality of death. Juxtaposed against these two the pilliote and daisy represent remedies for life's transience and the coming of death. Thus, says Lampe, "the arrangement of flowers in the prologue, then, balances fleshly excess with its corrective and human mortality with divine love which overcame death. Thus the arrangement of the flowers in the initial setting serves to anticipate the long 'recit' of Elde which corrects the selfish and fleshly folly of Youthe and Medill Elde by reminding them of the careers of the Nine Worthies (whose deeds for the 'common profit' gained them true fame)."<sup>66</sup> Lampe treats the birds and animals similarly;

The birds...establish the various possible attitudes toward love, attitudes which anticipate the stances of the three figures in the dream debate. The selfish cuckoo

<sup>65</sup>Lampe, p. 175.

<sup>66</sup>Lampe, p. 176.

suggests the error of Medill Elde in scorning love completely and avariciously filling his own crow. The 'cowschote' suggests the amorous excesses of Youthe who dreams of 'my lady with pappis full swete' (176) as well as other 'ladys full louely to lappyn in myn armes,/ And clyp thaym and kysse thaym and comforts myn hert' (147-148), while the ancient 'throstill', like Elde, offers the proper corrective to both of these foolish excesses with the words of 'Ecclesiastes the clerke'. The birds, then, like the flowers, point toward themes that will be developed in the dream vision debate.<sup>67</sup>

Of the four animals present in the prologue the reputation of the fox, Reynard, needs no explanation. The 'filmarte' or skunk is less well known in medieval literature, but when he does appear he is linked with the fox and has served as a symbol of rapacity. The hare, "like the dove ...became associated with Venus and matters venereal. That all three of these animals are present in the setting then, would seem no coincidence. Instead they serve as a commentary on the nature and motives of the hunter-narrator and on the greed and lust of the figures of Medill Elde and Youthe."<sup>68</sup>

The fourth animal, the stag, has been a favorite of poets and exegetes. Here the most striking thing about

<sup>67</sup>Lampe, p. 177.

<sup>68</sup>Lampe, p. 178.

him in his training of the 'sowre'. Says Lampe, "perhaps borrowing from Augustine's commentary on Psalm 42, the medieval bestiaries explain that this mutual cooperation among the beasts should be a lesson to Christians: 'the more perfect carry along and sustain the weight of the less perfect by their example and good works.' This lesson from the moralized 'Book of Nature' is obviously lost on the poaching narrator."<sup>69</sup>

Into this idealized setting comes the hunter, a poacher, oblivious to the beauty surrounding him, intent on his stalking only. After his adventure he lies down for a nap during which he has a vision in which Youthe, lusty and full of pride, debates with Medill Elde whose heart is ruled by avarice. Here we have a set of vices just as we had symbolized in the initial flowers, birds and animals seen in the prologue. To follow the established pattern we must have a balancing remedy or corrective, which, says Lampe, is what we have in the 'recit' of Elde. Note that in line 163 the dreamer describes Elde as "Envyous and angrye," "but this portrait is given from the perspective of the still unrepentent poacher-narrator who, interestingly enough, has made no pejorative comments regarding either of the first two figures--

<sup>69</sup>Lampe, p. 178.

figures with obvious associations with vice. The fact that the narrator's own vices blind him to the real nature of the first two figures suggests also that they may blind him to the real nature of Elde."<sup>70</sup>

Looked at another way:

The dream vision presents what the medieval audience would have recognized as a quodlibet: the debate between Youthe and Medill Elde serving as the abbreviated disputatio (an improvised exchange between two students) and Elde's long response as the determinatio (the master's reprise and logical ordering of the questions and arguments raised by his students). Neither Youthe nor Medill Elde has made a very successful case in the disputatio. By attacking the opponent's particular vice, each has also documented his own idée fixe. Hence both disputants, together with the narrator, stand in need of the long corrective which Elde provides.<sup>71</sup>

Lampe thus demonstrates that all parts of the poem contribute to the whole, the poem is well integrated, well constructed allegorically and, finally, "a minor masterpiece."<sup>72</sup>

Anne Kernan, continuing Waldron's idea of pendant structure, says that "the progression of the poem is essentially thematic rather than narrative."<sup>73</sup> The

<sup>70</sup>Lampe, pp. 181-182.

<sup>71</sup>Lampe, p. 182.

<sup>72</sup>Lampe, p. 183.

<sup>73</sup>Kernan, p. 278.

prologue is realistic in tone and verifiable detail; however, what is most important is that its "movement from a kind of joy in vitality to consciousness of the inevitability of death seems...to lie at the center of the poem's structure."<sup>74</sup>

The dream, on the other hand, in its deliberate and controlled artificiality has been "elevated to the status of a kind of revelation...the general idea that the soul, partially freed from bodily functions during sleep, can acquire a superior insight into truth."<sup>75</sup> Within the vision "the conflict between celebration of life and contemplation of mortality is at the basis of the debate of the Three Ages, and the gradual movement from one pole to the other serves as the ordering framework for the set pieces with which the poem is overlaid."<sup>76</sup> These set pieces are separated and highlighted by verbal brackets formed by the introduction and conclusion of the description of the Three Ages (107-8; 166-67), the passage of the Nine Worthies (297-98; 580-81), and the men of wisdom (584; 610). The set pieces comprise variations on the

<sup>74</sup>Kernan, p. 256.

<sup>75</sup>Kernan, p. 262.

<sup>76</sup>Kernan, p. 256.

considerations of life and death set up in the prologue and the "movement advances by bracketed quantum jumps rather than a smooth flow."<sup>77</sup>

The pattern of the vision's structure begins with three bracketed portraits of the Three Ages each dressed in a characteristic color, doing a characteristic thing, posed in a characteristic posture, and each portrait is rounded out with a summarizing comment and the person's age and name.

The passage concerning the Nine Worthies is bracketed with the words

And I shall neuen 3ow the names of nyne of  
the beste  
¶at ever in this werlde wiste appon erthe (297-98)  
...  
Now hafe I neuened 3owthe names of nyne of  
pe beste  
¶at euer were in this werlde wiste appon erthe,  
And the doghtyeste of dedis in thaire dayes  
tyme;  
Bot doghetynes when dede comes ne dare noghte  
habyde. (580-83)

Though the precise purpose and relevance are stated, Kernan finds that the actual treatment of the Nine Worthies is "extremely diffuse" and that "no principle of selection is apparent,"<sup>78</sup> as some stories do not

<sup>77</sup>Kernan, p. 263.

<sup>78</sup>Kernan, p. 267.

fulfill the purpose stated and the deaths of Caesar, David and Joshua are not even mentioned. "It seems," concludes Kernan, "almost as though the poet has taken advantage of the security provided by his brackets to take an excursion into a familiar by-way, a procedure that may well have been acceptable to even cultivated and discriminating medieval tastes."<sup>79</sup> The length and abundance of biographical detail, however, may have been a deliberate choice for another reason. The passages concerning the wisemen and the lovers are dramatically briefer, showing an increasing frequency of memento mori (lines 610-11, 614, 617, 619, 621, 623, 625-30, 631-52) and the progressive abbreviation of references to past and vanished glories provides a pattern of increasing immediacy to the death motif; "in fact," says Kernan, "it is this indirectly revealed movement from carefree joie de vivre to penitence and awareness of death that forms the narrative center of the poem,"<sup>80</sup> and the bracketed set pieces are "an ordered series of variations on the theme of mortality, and the order itself repeats

<sup>79</sup>Kernan, p. 267.

<sup>80</sup>Kernan, p. 278.



the central movement."<sup>81</sup>

In 1974 Marcelle Thiébaux published the work<sup>82</sup> that Constance Heatt had cried for--background material illuminating the meaning of the hunt. The Stag of Love: The Chase In Medieval Literature is a thorough investigation of the ritual, form, and significance of the hunt. Thiébaux describes five iconographic representations of the stag: 1. the thirsting stag, 2. the serpent-slaying stag, 3. the nobly-antlered stag, 4. the harried stag, and 5. the transpierced stag.<sup>83</sup> Two, and perhaps all, of the last three representations are recognizable as pertaining to the stag in the Parlement of the Thre Ages. Lines 25-33 show the Parlement's stag to be nobly-antlered. Thiébaux says the following:

An allegorical chapter...of Les livres du roy Modus gives considerable attention to the type I have distinguished as the nobly-antlered stag. Queen Ratio provides the apprentice with the desired 'moralités et figures' of the stag. In all cases she makes its antlers analogous to some human power or virtue that glorifies God or that God has bestowed. First, just as Our Lord has given the stag the ten branches of its

<sup>81</sup>Kernan, p. 278.

<sup>82</sup>Marcelle Thiébaux, The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature. Ithaca and London, 1974.

<sup>83</sup>Thiébaux, p. 41.

antlers to defend itself against its three enemies, men, hounds and wolves, so has Christ given men the ten commandments of the law by which he may defend himself against the flesh, the devil and the world. Secondly, we are reminded how God showed himself crucified to St. Eustace...by allowing his image to be mirrored forth among these commandments, that is, amidst a stag's antlers. The antlers may be figuratively explained as the ten fingers of the priests as they elevate bread and wine before the people, substances converted through God's 'great nobility' into the body and blood of Christ. Thirdly, through the same nobility, good men, both cleric and lay, obey and keep in their own heads the ten commandments to be beheld in the antlers of the stag's head. Finally, the fallow deer and the roe deer bear horns that represent crowns; so these beasts can be compared to emperors and kings and to all those of noble rank who sustain the faith.<sup>84</sup>

Though the Parlement's stag is not actually chased by the hunter, he is stalked and abruptly and jarringly surprised, then killed. "No less doomed," says Thiébaux, "is the harried stag of the Christian tradition; its significance, however, is for everyman; its pursuers, fleshly ills, devils, vices, and Death."<sup>85</sup>

The stag and hind also have a long tradition of allegorical connection with both the soul and Christ.

<sup>84</sup>Thiébaux, pp. 42-43.

<sup>85</sup>Thiébaux, p. 44.

Lines 54-55 in Parlement point to an interpretation of this stag as the transpierced stag. Concerning this iconographic representation Thiébaux says:

The last iconographic image to be exemplified here is the transpierced stag--and hind. When Hugo of St. Victor allegorized the hind as the pure soul of mankind smitten by illicit longings, his inspiration may have been Virgil...Day by day our souls are chased by diabolical hunters who seek to ensnare us with our own nets of the five senses or shoot us from afar with their deadly arrows of evil desires.

However, the arrows of desire need not be evil always, even in a Christian context. Much earlier, in his gloss upon the Canticles, Origen had called God the archer that strikes man with his chosen arrow...opening within his soul the burning wound of love. Origen does not explain what sort of animal man is. Perhaps he is simply man. Origen's passage on the stag remains distinct from the wound of love, for there he reiterates the legend of the serpent-killing stag, suggesting thereby that the caprea, the roe of the Canticles, may be understood as the Savior. But if we think of the wound of love as a blessed, as well as a cruel stroke, our understanding of the later, medieval figure of Christ as the transpierced stag becomes enhanced. If man is the wounded beast of the devil's chase, and yet may be the recipient of the dart of divine love, then Christ shares man's part. For, made flesh, he became the transpierced victim of man's cruel pursuit, at the same time that he bore the wound of mankind. A brief image in the 13th century lyric remembers, in the midst of the virgin's tears, that Christ was made quarry:

He was to-drawe,  
so dur inslawe  
in chace.<sup>86</sup>

It is to be hoped that the latest publication on the Parlement is a digression and not a trend backward to the concerns of the past. Beryl Rowland, in a heavily foot-noted article returns to the subject of age in the poem which had been left off by Coffman and Philip in 1938. "The ages of 30, 60 and 100," says Rowland, "have little relevance to contemporary conditions, the title itself suggests an association with the Ages of Man, a theme of immense persistence in literature and art."<sup>87</sup>

The key to the numbers, 30, 60 and 100, Rowland feels, is to be found in scriptural exegesis, but her findings have revealed only that among the Church Fathers "the figures 30, 60 and 100 marked the definitive stages of Man's life,"<sup>88</sup> and that, as a result, it is obvious that "the hunt, despite the realism of its practical details, can be seen as an allegory, representing the course of human existence."<sup>89</sup> The article reinforces earlier

<sup>86</sup>Thiébaux, p. 46.

<sup>87</sup>Beryl Rowland, "The Three Ages in the Parliament of the Thre Ages," ChauR, 9 (Spring 1975), 344.

<sup>88</sup>Rowland, p. 347.

<sup>89</sup>Rowland, p. 348.

critics rather than contributing new insights.

As one can see, then, the Parlement is still an unsolved problem. Most of the scholarly and critical work done to date has concentrated on the separate sections, leaving one still seeking an integrated view of the poem that does not have the problems in consistency and coherence one finds in the articles of Peck and Waldron, the pure subjectivity of Gollancz, or the sole reliance on past ideas of Heatt and Rowland.

It is, in view of the scattered result of what has been done, time to develop new strategies of approach to the poem. The literary milieu of the Parlement is the logical point of departure. Can the poem be said to be a part of a greater tradition than the small regional school it is said to represent? Further study of the obvious allegory of the dream vision and the nearly certain allegory of the hunt may reveal a meaning beyond what has so far been explicated. This may well lead to the definition of new attitudes on the part of the reader and will enable us to make determinations about the disparate body of criticism concerning the poem.

## II

The period in which the Parlement of the Thre Ages was composed is known now as the Alliterative Revival. Too often, it seems, critics tend to speak of this period as a separate, unconnected poetic phenomenon totally self-contained; or, if they do speak of it in comparison to something else, it is Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry. This is rarely stressed, however, for in the latter case the intervention of the Norman Conquest leaves a three-hundred year period from which we have no extant alliterative verse, making the idea of continuity from Old English to Middle English alliterative verse hard for many critics to accept. This blank period has led to the idea that alliterative poetry stopped abruptly in Old English at the Conquest, then spontaneously revived in Middle English some three hundred years later. However, it is an observable fact that a literary tradition may die or evolve into something else, but none has been known to just stop and then burst forth fullblown centuries later. No matter how obscure, there has had to be some form of continuity between the two periods of activity. Charles W. Moorman, in an article on the origin of the Alliterative

Revival<sup>90</sup> tells us, "The poetic tradition which the fourteenth-century alliterative poets inherited had its roots firmly established in the themes and poetic practices of Anglo-Saxon verse."<sup>91</sup> The fact of continuity is important here, making a short discussion of Anglo-Saxon verse appropriate at this point.

Anglo-Saxon verse before the Conquest is (by present day critics) usually grouped according to theme. Varying arrangements and subcategories exist, but the general divisions are: riddles and gnomic verse, secular heroic poetry, Christian heroic poetry, historic battle poetry, elegiac poetry and Christian allegory,<sup>92</sup> all of which represent, says Moorman, "A considerable spectrum of both genre and content...Yet for all its apparent diversity, Old English poetry is singularly all of a piece."<sup>93</sup>

Despite its variety of subject matter the poetic mechanism is common to all genres. The common metrical technique is the unrhymed alliterative accentual line

<sup>90</sup>Charles W. Moorman, "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival," SQ, 7 (1969), 345-371.

<sup>91</sup>Moorman, p. 351.

<sup>92</sup>Moorman, p. 352.

<sup>93</sup>Moorman, p. 351.

which consists of two half-lines separated by a marked caesura.<sup>94</sup> Each half-line has two major stresses and the two half-lines are linked by an alliterative pattern which is indicated by the first stress of the second half-line. There are six basic alliterative accentual patterns as described by Eduard Sievers,<sup>95</sup> but the "enormous subtleties of timing and accent"<sup>96</sup> have caused widespread discussion and dissension on the various forms. The "subtleties" are not what concern us here, but what is important is that alliteration as a base for accentuation stems from the Germanic tendency to place the stress on the first or root syllable of a word and this alliterative stress made it far easier to compose orally, spontaneously, than it would have been to do in rhyme.<sup>97</sup> These two factors, alliteration and ease of oral composition, have led to certain poetic phenomena in Anglo-Saxon poetry which can be seen in

<sup>94</sup>Frederick G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, eds., Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader, New York, 1971, pp. 274-88. John C. Pope, Seven Old English Poems, New York, 1966, pp. 97-138.

<sup>95</sup>Cassidy and Ringler, pp. 278-87.

<sup>96</sup>Moorman, p. 351.

<sup>97</sup>See Francis P. Magoun, "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," Speculum, 28 (1953), 446-467.



their logically evolved form in Middle English alliterative verse which makes the fact of continuity quite probable if not absolutely certain.<sup>98</sup>

The first phenomenon is the existence and continual development of a special poetic vocabulary unique, many times, to alliterative verse, and from this vocabulary a large reservoir of common phrases or "formulae"<sup>99</sup> usually a half-line in length, adaptable within limits, which a scop could pick quickly and easily to fit his poetic needs; "a trained poet, called upon to compose extempore, could find in his stock of formulae an appropriate metrical phrase which could, by the simple substitution of noun or adjective, be made to fit both the occasion and the line. The better the poet, of course, the greater the originality and subtlety that could be employed, especially in written verse."<sup>100</sup> The prime example of this originality is, of course, Beowulf. Coincident with this interchange of formulae is the practice of a cumulative method of description in which

<sup>98</sup>R. A. Waldron, "Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry," Speculum, 32 (1957), 792-804.

<sup>99</sup>Magoun, pp. 446-67.

<sup>100</sup>Moorman, p. 353.

successive half-lines repeat or embellish upon the originally mentioned object.

Also common in Anglo-Saxon verse is the repeated use of a small number of themes and motifs. Among the "great themes of the heroic age", listed by Moorman are, "the allegiance of thegn to leader within the comitatus code, family loyalty and the vendetta, personal heroism in the face of a hostile nature and universe, the mutability of all earthly things, the hovering malevolence of fate ..., <sup>101</sup> examples of which may be seen in Widsith, Waldere, The Fight at Finnsburg and Beowulf. "Old English poetry is in the main pagan as well as heroic in spirit. The Anglo-Saxons brought with them to England not only their warlike gothic spirit and heroic songs, but their pagan religion as well"; <sup>102</sup> we know little of Germanic beliefs but "their religion was predicated upon a belief in a universe basically hostile to man and in a grim fatalism...This tragic view of life is responsible for much of the heroic attitude and tone of early Germanic literature as seen, say, in Beowulf and the Icelandic Sagas. For man's only consolation and possibility of triumph lie in his heroic resistance

<sup>101</sup>Moorman, p. 354.

<sup>102</sup>Moorman, pp. 354-55.

to his lot..."<sup>103</sup> The Anglo-Saxon viewed nature and society as polarities; life was a corporate venture with the comites the center of the warrior's life and the meadhall the center of the tribe as a whole. The greatest security lay in a structured society; all else was unknown and threatening.

There is no way of proving from existing facts that any alliterative verse was composed, or that people were at all aware of the alliterative tradition, during the three hundred blank years after the Conquest, but there are, says Moorman, "strong indications that the alliterative tradition did in fact remain operative during those years."<sup>104</sup> First, there is "the literary fact that styles of poetry do not die out completely to be reborn again... the simple fact that alliterative poems appear both in Old English and late Middle English poetry would alone indicate continuity."<sup>105</sup>

There is, of course, the obviously great difference in form between Old and Middle English (the progressive breakdown of the inflectional endings, Middle English's

<sup>103</sup>Moorman, p. 355.

<sup>104</sup>Moorman, p. 357.

<sup>105</sup>Moorman, p. 357.

simpler syntax and morphology, not to mention the changes in pronunciation), but even this fact serves to reinforce the notion of alliterative continuity because "the changes themselves become indications that alliterative verse was very much alive during those years, since it had by the mid-fourteenth century already been adapted to fit the requirements of the changed language."<sup>106</sup>

At the end of the Old English period there were two types of alliterative verse, the "classical" and the "popular". The classical verse was a continued adherence to the previously mentioned basic six types identified by Sievers. That which has evolved into Middle English alliterative verse is what Dorothy Everett calls a "natural development" of the Old English popular verse rather than the result of any contact with the French verse of the invading Normans.<sup>107</sup>

Of all the extant alliterative verse known to be written after the Conquest, only one, the Description of Durham (c. 1100) is in the classical style. The First Worcester Fragment and The Departing Soul's Address to

<sup>106</sup>Moorman, p. 358.

<sup>107</sup>For a detailed discussion see Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature, 1955; it is not the style but the continuance of thematic material that this paper is concerned with.

the Body (both c. 1180) were composed in the popular style and

...when considered alongside certain pieces done in the same manner in late Old English--The Grave and the laments of the deaths of Edgar, Alfred, and Godwin in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle--reveal the gradual emergence of this new style during the years immediately preceding and bridging the conquest...The Proverbs of Alfred, composed c. 1180, and The Bestiary of c. 1200 are even more in the popular vein...again a natural development rather than an imitation of French verse.<sup>108</sup>

The language in these poems reflects the Old English "word-hoard", and cumulative description technique. They also show continuity in regard to theme; the First Worcester Fragment is a complaint against the imposition of Norman bishops on an Anglo-Saxon populace and a yearning for the better days of the Venerable Bede. The Departing Soul's Address to the Body employs the memento mori and ubi sunt traditions and may possibly be a descendent of the Old English Speech of the Lost Soul to the Body which it occasionally echoes.

The most important and influential poem from the early period of Middle English alliterative verse is Layamon's Brut. Written late in the twelfth century "it too bears witness to the growing dominance of the

<sup>108</sup>Moorman, p. 359.

popular form."<sup>109</sup> Dorothy Everett says that the Brut is too "rough and insecure" and lacking in "variety and flexibility" to be counted a model for later Middle English alliterative poems.<sup>110</sup> But J. P. Oakden asserts "the historical importance of Layamon's verse is that it shows alliteration still stronger than rhyme" and hence "affords weighty evidence in favor of the continuance of the alliterative tradition in the west."<sup>111</sup> A detailed discussion of the Brut is not an aim of this paper; however, a summary of points made in Moorman's article, without their supporting arguments, would indeed show another step in the evolution of the alliterative tradition that begot the Parlement of the Thre Ages. The following list is extracted from pages 359-66 of "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival":

1. Layamon took King Arthur from Wace's French original and placed him in his proper setting of Saxon Britain.
2. By electing to write in alliterative long-line he automatically chose a tradition with a predetermined formulaic vocabulary and social outlook.

<sup>109</sup>Moorman, p. 359.

<sup>110</sup>Everett, p. 28.

<sup>111</sup>Moorman, p. 359.

3. Layamon's dialect is "provincial" and he "seems deliberately to avoid French derivatives".
4. "He makes considerable use of the formulas and word-stock of Old English poetry".
5. "His descriptions of natural scenery ...are in method and tone like those of Old English poems".
6. "His interest in the sea and in details of war clearly derive from his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon epics".
7. "His picture of Arthur and his court is also far more closely related to the concept of leader and thane celebrated in the early native poetry than to the life of the Norman court of his own time or to the courtly milieu of his source".
8. "The Brut is, moreover, pagan as well as heroic in spirit and so again displays its heritage from Anglo-Saxon verse."
9. "Layamon's Arthur is in every way Beowulf redivivus; brave, generous, eager for praise, he wages war exultingly, unsoftened by the courtly, and Christian, influences which had made him in Wace's book a creature of chivalry".
10. There is a "lack of expressed Christian attitudes" and the elements which he adds to his source are not Christian.
11. "More important, like Beowulf the poem advances the notion that men, far from being in charge of their own destinies through a God-given free will, are actually governed by an inexorable fate which no man may escape. The poem thus bears both in its manner and in its theme the marks of its ancestry in the heroic poems of pre-Norman days".

12. "Moreover, the Brut lies squarely in the tradition of popular rather than of classical alliterative verse and so bears witness to the endurance and popularity of that style up to the end of the twelfth century".

Dorothy Everett has done a similar analysis of the Brut and the alliterative Morte Arthure as well. She argues for a similar debt to Old English poetry in the Morte Arthure:

Its heroic theme resembles those beloved by the Old English poets. Arthur is the mighty conqueror, haughty to his enemies, generous to his knights, and undaunted in defeat; his sole occupation, and that of his men is fighting; courage and loyalty are the virtues they prize. The temper which they (and the poet) admire is well illustrated in the speech of Sir Idrus, in the last battle, Arthur bids him rescue his father, who is hard pressed:

He es my fadire in faithe, forsake  
sall I neuer,  
He has me fosterde and fedde and my  
faire bretheren...  
He commande me kyndly with knyghtly  
wordes,  
That I schulde lelely one þe lenge  
and one noo lede elles;  
I sall hys commandement holde, 3if  
Crist wil me thole.  
He es eldare than I, and ende sall  
we bothen,  
He sall ferkke before, and I sall  
come aftyre.  
3yfe him to be destaynede to dy  
todaye one þis erthe,  
Criste comly with crown take kepe  
to hys saule.

In all that concerns the relations between Arthur and his knights resemblances to Old English heroic poetry are striking. The



knights, some of them Arthur's kinsmen and all of them ready to boast of their high lineage, are councillors as well as warriors, like the picked band of tried men, the dugup, who in Beowulf support Hroþgar. Like them, they make their vaunts about the great deeds they will do in battle, and receive from their lord rewards for their valor. The speech of Sir Cader, encouraging his men to brave a great army of Romans, reads like a fourteenth-century version of one from The Battle of Maldon. 'Think', he cries, 'on the valiant prince who has ever enriched us with lands and honor...given us treasure and gold and many rewards, greyhounds and fine horses...' (1726ff.). How much of this is due to the Middle English poet we do not know, but if, as the latest opinion holds, he got his story from a French romance, or combined material from several romances, it seems likely that he developed it on lines that were traditional in English heroic poetry, as La amon had done before him.<sup>112</sup>

It is clear that there had to be continuity in the production of alliterative verse, but the question arises why should there have been such an increase in the production of verse in the century between about 1350 and 1450? Why should this literary genre which was foreign to London and London's interests, written in a dialect dissimilar to that of the royal court, have enjoyed a revival at this particular time? The best known, and probably first, attempt to find an answer came from

<sup>112</sup>Everett, pp. 61-62.

J. R. Hulbert in a 1930 article, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival."<sup>113</sup> Surveying the range of alliterative poetry Hulbert identified three conditions which seemed to be necessary to whatever group might have wished to commission or encourage such poetry and then he set out to find such a group existing in England. His three conditions were: 1. "an audience as courtly and wealthy as any in England", 2. "the deliberate choice of a form of English unlike that of London and full of archaisms", and 3. "the choice of a meter not used by the poets of the royal court".<sup>114</sup> The group which Hulbert found to fit these conditions were the barons of England, nobles who had traditionally felt it their right to rule with the king since they were as wealthy and an influential as he, and in many instances more so. Such a conviction had led to a long-standing opposition of barons and king. Before Henry II the baron's aim was "to obtain more local independence in the development of the separatist tendencies of feudalism",<sup>115</sup> but Henry II's strong central government had stopped them. Repeated attempts of barons

<sup>113</sup>J. R. Hulbert, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," MP, 28 (1930-31), 405-422.

<sup>114</sup>Hulbert, p. 406.

<sup>115</sup>Hulbert, p. 406.

and kings each to gain ascendancy led ultimately, asserts Hulbert, to the Wars of the Roses. The barons' motives were not democratic, but entirely selfish. Henry II kept them out of government, Edward II and Richard II were not strong enough to oppose the barons and were themselves deposed, Edward III seems to have successfully kept them at bay by choosing from among them for his council, a power they never really lost until the end of the Plantagenet line and the coming of Henry VII.

But since the dialect of the alliterative poems was North Westmidlands, Hulbert had to find a smaller group than the baronage in general. What he discovered was that various noble families, the Mortimers, Beauchamps and Bohuns in particular, who had great holdings in the West, had traditionally been barons of opposition and had been leaders among those opposed to both Edward II early in the fourteenth century and Richard II at the same century's end, both of whose reigns span the Alliterative Revival. These families, says Hulbert, fostered this literature "to contribute to a cultural development independent of the court and to make the barons' castles centers of social activity."<sup>116</sup> In 1966, Elizabeth Salter, while examining records of

<sup>116</sup>Hulbert, p. 412.

contents of baronial libraries, found that these and other families were indeed very interested in alliterative poetry.<sup>117</sup> Though only one concrete example of an actual literary commission could be verified--the writing of an alliterative adptation of William of Palerne for Humphry Bohun, Duke of Hereford, about the year 1351,<sup>118</sup> the fact that the barons held great numbers of books (for the times) and that a significant proportion of these contained works by alliterative poets, makes the occurrence of other acts of patronage quite likely. The extent of baronial support may never be assessed accurately, but we do know that it existed.

With the certainty of continuity in technique and, more especially, poetic themes established, and with a logical theory regarding the emergence of the Alliterative Revival and the patronage of the baronial opposition available, we can now turn to a consideration of the Parlement of the Thre Ages.

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Salter, "The Alliterative Revival, I", MP, 64 (1966-67), 146-150.

<sup>118</sup> Salter, p. 146.

### III

At first reading, the Parlement of the Thre Ages appears to be a linear descendent of the category of Old English poetry called Christian allegory. However, subsequent readings clearly reveal that, in spirit, the poem lies much closer to the social protest of Piers Plowman than to, say, the Quatrefoil of Love which most obviously is a Christian allegory. Indeed, whatever references there are to God, Mary, and Christianity in general in the Parlement are merely token elements in an otherwise pagan poem. The Parlement is, however, an allegory of another sort and within the realms of pagan poetry and social protest I believe lies the secret to understanding the poem.

To deal with the pagan realm first, it is necessary to reconsider the Old English comites and the social and religious order which sustained it. The Anglo-Saxon world view was not a happy or an optimistic one. Man was seen as being totally at the mercy of supernatural forces greater and more powerful than himself against which he could not fight and at whose whim he might be destroyed. In the military society which he inhabited the Anglo-Saxon hero's only hope of lasting renown lay in displaying

valor on the battlefield and enjoying the honor and esteem of his fellow warriors. More ideally the hero sought personal glory in solitary ventures and deeds of valor through which his memory would live on in the songs of the scop long after his own death. It is this pessimistic attitude that underlies the Parlement of the Thre Ages; the tone is Christian but the viewpoint is Teutonic.

On the literal level the poem begins with

In the monethe of May when mirthes bene  
fele  
And the sesone of somere when softe bene  
the wedres (1-2)

followed by a hunting scene in which a poacher enters a lovely wood with the intent of shooting a deer. He finds the deer, kills it with an arrow, breaks it, hides the carcass from the law and wild swine, then lies down for a nap during which he has a vision which comprises virtually the remainder of the poem. Much has been made of the descriptive realism in the hunting section as well as the large number of corresponding or highly similar lines which can be found in the rest of the extant corpus of Middle English alliterative poetry. The notes to Offord's edition fairly bristle with observed similarities; the first two lines above appear with variation in seven other poems.<sup>119</sup> If one looks at the Middle English

<sup>119</sup>Offord, p. 35.

alliterative poets as heirs of the Old English alliterative tradition, instead of wholesale copyists, it is obvious that these similarities represent the poet's legitimate use of the common fund of stock phrases from which every Anglo-Saxon scop drew. And to make exhaustive lists of correspondences among poems is to demonstrate a custom as obvious as drawing breath. The descriptive realism is also quite in keeping with the alliterative tradition from the Old English period.

In the beginning of the prologue we have an ordered, harmonious, accustomed situation into which the foreign element of the hunter is introduced. C. S. Lewis has said, "It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms."<sup>120</sup> Certainly what is presented in the Parlement's dream vision is just that--the Ages of Man set forth in picturable terms. However, the general critical emphasis on the realistic presentation of the setting and hunt in the prologue has, I think, concealed the possibility of it too being an allegorical presentation.<sup>121</sup> What some

<sup>120</sup>C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936, rpt. 1973, p. 44.

<sup>121</sup>See Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973, pp. 177-79. Pearsall and Salter recognize that the demands of alliteration often dictate

have called its disproportionate length may be the first clue to its importance. The striking realism of this long section juxtaposed against the unmistakable allegory of the dream, the movement in each section from an emphasis on life to a contemplation of death noted by Kernan, the symbolism of the flowers, birds and animals discussed by Lampe, as well as the stag's widespread and varied iconographic significance in medieval literature documented by Thiébaux in the Stag of Love lend weight to the idea that the hunt too is allegory.

On the allegorical level the hunter appears to be Chance and/or Fate capable of dealing death without warning. To use the Old English word wyrd is not appropriate here for two reasons. First, wyrd carries the mythological connotation of multiple feminine deities (a similar problem arises if we call him Fortune) and, secondly, it should not be thought that the milieu of the Parlement-poet was that of the Beowulf-poet. Our poet was working merely within an inherited poetic tradition and in actual

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the precise descriptive detail chosen in presenting a scene and that, therefore, description, while seemingly realistic, has what they call "illusory realism." This fact finally gets rid of the early speculations that Parlement was autobiographical. However, they do not make the connection of the Old English and Middle English alliterative traditions, and treat the Middle English as an isolated phenomenon.



practice probably knew little or nothing of his Old English ancestors.

The hunter (Chance) comes into the wood, "my werdes<sup>122</sup> to dreght" (3) as a poacher, an intruder into the tranquil life of the forest. His purpose is general, to shoot, "an hert or ane hynde, happen as it myghte" (5); that is, Chance comes to shoot in the forest just as he does to mankind to lay his hand on man or woman "happen as it myghte".

The hunter stands on a stream bank watching, "as Dryghtyn the day droue frome þe heuen" (6). The word droue (drives) seems an odd choice to use in speaking of the Christian God, and the word Dryghtn which most editors gloss as "God" derives from Old English dryhten which, without the capital, means simply "lord" or "noble". Thus the poem's first apparent Christian element is a pagan one in disguise.

The woodland with its variety of plants and animals, all deftly individualized, is a microcosm of the alert and anxious state of the world as it might appear under the approaching threat of Fate. At dawn the blossoms and buds are fair (11), the birds sing (13-15), and as daylight approaches the fox and the polecat flee to their

<sup>122</sup> derived from OE wyrd.

lair (18) and the hare crouches under hedges, then hurries to her nest (19-20). Almost immediately the hunter takes up his position, heedless of the activity around him, and spies a nobly antlered deer:

And he assomet and set of vi and of fyve  
And þer-to borely and brode and of body  
grete (31-32).

Of all the animals he might hunt, he chooses from the noblest, most vigorous and able to defend himself. The deer has many defenses, his own power and speed and a keen set of instincts though he chooses to rely on his sowre

þat seruet hym full erne,  
That woke & warned hym when the wynde  
faylede,  
That none so sleghe in his slepe with  
sleghts scholde him dere (34-36).

The hunter prepares himself, watching prudently, stalking silently, concealing himself and giving no warning,

For had I my[n]tid or moued or made any  
synys,  
All my layke hade bene loste þat I hade  
long wayttede (48-49),

undeterred even by a swarm of gnats biting at his eyes (50). The first shot hits the deer who reacts much as an ambushed man, "And he balkede and brayed and bruschede thurgh þe greues" (56), and his sowre deserts him as he dies, "Dede als a dore-nayle doun was he fallen" (65).

The breaking of the deer (66-99) has often been

compared with the breaking of the deer in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but such similarity in two alliterative poems might well be expected and the stark realism of the description is wholly within the tradition, as mentioned before. The point of the passage is, rather, how Chance quickly and deftly, and impersonally, can carve up a man or a nation as the hunter does the deer. The hiding of the deer is what poachers must do if they are not to take the carcass away at once, and, allegorically, it is necessary to show that even Death must be cautious, that he too has something to fear. Superficially this would appear that Death is afraid of God and everlasting life, but why, then, should he think he could hide his work from God? Death can defy God, he can successfully lure souls to hell or, having overcome the mortal body, he may lose a soul to heaven and eternal life, but surely he must know that, whatever the soul's destination, God is all-knowing. No, it is not God that Death is secreting his cache from, but from the temporal world, from Man. An earlier example of Christian veneer has been noted; here we have another. Death is not afraid of God, but Man. This is further developed in the vision when we see how successfully Death has hidden himself from Youthe and Medill Elde; only Elde can sense his presence and try to warn others. What the hunting scene provides is a

tiny morality play, a general situation for which the episodes of the dream vision provide the specifics, as has been developed in the Kernan article, "Theme and Structure in The Parlement of the Thre Ages."

In his vision the sleeping hunter sees three men, Youthe, Medill Elde and Elde. Youthe and Medill Elde argue about whose form of life is better. Elde insists that they are both foolish in the face of the inevitability of old age and death, and goes on to illustrate his contention by giving examples of warrior-kings, wise-men and famous lovers, all of whom, regardless of how they lived, came to face death in the end. Youthe, "A bolde beryn on a blonke bownne for to ryde" (110) is a lusty fellow with an excellent physique (112-15) and sumptuous attire (117-28). He is young, active and eager for arms (171) but he also laments after lovers and piteously sighs (172). He is also untried on the field of battle and vows never to wear hat or hood until he has jousted in armor and done deeds "doghety in armes" (181). He is disdainful of Medill Elde's parsimonious ways and declares:

Me were leuere on this launde lengen a  
while  
Stoken in my stele-wede one my stede bakke,  
Hard haspede in my helme and in my here-  
wedys  
With a grym grownden glayfe graythely in  
myn honde,

And see a kene knyghte come and cowpe  
with my-seluen  
þat I myghte halde þat I hafe highte and  
heghely avowede,  
And parfourme my profers and prouen my  
strengthes  
Then alle the golde and the gude that  
thoue gatt euer (199-206).

His greatest joy is in hawking (209-45) followed by an evening of dancing with ladies and perhaps the reading of a Romance

Of kempes of conquerours of kynges ful  
noble  
How they worship & weele wan in þere  
lyves (251-252).

Obviously Youthe is far from the Anglo-Saxon ideal, a court gallant who prefers to sing and revel and maneuver chessmen around a symbolic battlefield, even when he dreams of glory it is in the relatively tame form of the joust. This sumptuously clothed dandy has few ambitions beyond momentary pleasure and is therefore not a truly admirable character.

Similarly Medill Elde's efforts are all self-centered and unadmirable. His grasping, acquisitive ways can induce envy but not love:

And be thou doluen and dede thi dole  
schall be schorte--  
And he that thou leste luffes schall layke  
hym there-with,  
And spend that thou haste longe sparede,  
the deuyll spede hym ells! (258-260).

Elde has sought renown like Youthe and has mucked

and marled and acquired gold like Medill Elde and when he finally was comfortable and thought he could take his ease

Reches and renttes were ryfe to my  
seluen  
Bot Elde vndire-3ode me are I laste  
wiste (282-283).

He had lived his life as he thought best, providing always for his own enjoyment and comfort and now he has been caught unaware by the promise of old age and death. He is now near death and sees that it has all been for nothing since he is old and crippled and cannot even take his beads with him. He tries to instruct Youthe and Medill Elde with a series of illustrations:

Bot many modyere than I, men one this  
molde,  
Hafe passed the pase †at I schall  
passe sone (295-296).

The reasonable or logical expectation here is that Elde will present a series of men who have become successful in some way and just at the height of their success will be confronted by old age and death at the moment they least expect it. However, after the first two examples, this is not the case. Sir Hector (311-13) and Alexander (399-401) are treacherously killed, but the death of Caesar goes unmentioned. Joshua is carried to heaven for his holiness (427), and David is not spoken of as having died or been killed, but of having displeased the Lord by causing the death of Uriah. The death of

Judas Maccabeus is not mentioned. King Arthur is mortally wounded by the treacherous Mordred (495-96) but he is still alive as Gawain watches from the shore as Morgan la Fay carries the king off in a small boat and is never seen again (508-11). Nothing concrete is said of the death of Godfrey of Bouillon, only that he was well-renowned at the time (519) and all that is said of the passing of Charlemagne is that he died at his appointed hour (597). Since only three of the nine lives fulfill the logical expectations set up by Elde, there must be another reason for telling of the Nine Worthies other than the idea that they are examples of famous men caught unaware by death. All Nine are dead, but the emphasis is on the Worthies' actions in life rather than the inevitability of death.

Elde begins his illustration by naming nine of the best, "Thay were conquerours full kene and kiddest of oper" (299). The Nine Worthies are all experts at besieging and attacking: Sir Hector is said to have killed ninety-nine kings or more with his own hands, only to be killed by Achilles who "With wyles and no wirchipe wounded hym to dethe" (312); Sir Alexander conquered the world (332), righted wrongs and saved a friend's kingdom from the invading Indians, but at the seige of Babylon

¶are he was dede of a drynke, as dole  
 es to here,  
 That the cur-sede Cassander in a cowpe  
 him broghte (400-401).

Julius Caesar, "All yngland he aught at his owen will" (406), he built the Tower of London, devised an aqueduct, fortified Dover castle, ransomed Gaul, made conquests in Africa, Arabia, and Egypt, seized Syria and Saxony (408-20) winning great renown all the while, but inexplicably the poet omits mention of Caesar's death, the first indication that the exemplum is not fulfilling Elde's stated purpose.

These were the pagan Worthies; Elde continues with three Jews. Joshua "Was heryet for his holynes in-to heuen-riche" (427), certainly not a terrible death and an unusual example of the unexpectedness of fate. The poet continues, inexplicably mixing up the story of Joshua with the story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. He ends his description with:

And aftire Iosue ~~pe~~ Iewe gentilly hym  
bere,  
And conquerede kynges and kyngdomes  
twelue,  
And was a conqueroure full kene and  
moste kyd in his tyme (439-441).

Here we see the second breakdown in Elde's illustrations of his moral.

The next Worthy is David who won renown by slaying Goliath, and became an oft praised prophet, but then "Bot it greued he his God gretely ther-aftire" (450). He sent Uriah into peril and there Uriah, not David, died through the evil-doing of Bathsheba. Here for the third time,



Elde either doesn't make his point or does it in a round-about manner.

Judas Maccabeus was a Jew, "And there-to worthy in were, and wyse of his dedis" (455), he slew kings Antiochus, Appolinus and Nicanor, "And was a conquerour kydde, and knawen with the beste" (458). This last Jew's death is not presented but Elde's meaning of what is left unsaid here can be more clearly discerned than in the examples of Joshua and David. He finishes his discussion of the three Jews with:

That full loughe haue bene layde sythen  
gane full longe tyme:  
Of sicke doughety doers looke what es  
worthen<sup>123</sup> (460-461).

Of the three Christian Worthies Arthur is the first. He ruled all England, "His courte was at Carlele comonly holden" (467). Elde devotes thirteen lines (468-80) to describing the knights of Arthur's Round Table, then Arthur's defeat of Roystone the giant and the dragon of St. Michael's Mount. Arthur then goes abroad, "And conquered kyngdomes and countrees full fele" (492), and returns to England to fight with Mordred where he is mortally wounded. Gawain returns Excaliber to the lake and Arthur is born away in a ship with Morgan la Fay and

<sup>123</sup>The 'W' MS omits line 461.

has not been seen since. This very short section on King Arthur more than any of the others depicts the Anglo-Saxon ideal of the warrior who has won renown, both with his men and in single combat. He has reached the epitome of his powers and possessions and suddenly fate has turned against him and he is cut down. This miniature portrait of the comites is all the more poignant when Dorothy Everett's comments on the heroic nature of the alliterative Morte Arthure are born in mind.<sup>124</sup>

Sir Godfrey of Bouillon's conquests ranged from Gaul to Antioch and he ultimately won the crown of Jerusalem (513-18), "And with the wirchipe of this werlde he went to his ende" (519). No mention is made of the manner or circumstances of his death and either the poet assumes this knowledge on the part of his audience or this Worthy is another faulty example of Elde's illustration.

Sir Charlemagne was chosen chief king of France and he had, "doghty doussypers", whom the poet takes time to name (520-30). Then Sir Charles rode forth, "to prouen his strengthe" (531-42). Quickly, however, the narrative switches to Oliver who is a zealot of sorts in the matter of conquering and baptizing people, among whom Sir Balin was particularly recalcitrant,

<sup>124</sup> Everett, pp. 61-62.

And wolde hafe made Sir Balame a man of  
our faythe:  
And garte feche forthe a founte by-fore-  
with his eghne  
And he dispysede it and spitte and  
spournede it to the erthe  
And one swyftely with a swerde swapped  
by his hede (548-551).

Once Oliver sent a message to Marsile bidding him to become a Christian, "Or he scholde bette doun his borowes and brenn hym there-in" (560). Much later, following other campaigns he did actually storm Marsile's town, "And that daye he did [hym] to the dethe als he had wele seruede" (570). Only passing mention is made of Roland and Roncesvalles (562-66). Here again emphasis is put on the fighting prowess of noble knights and the manner and circumstances of Charlemagne's death are omitted.

Although there is no question that the overall theme of the Nine Worthies section is that death waits for all, the emphasis the poet provides rather concentrates on other things. Twice before elements that looked blatantly Christian turned out on closer inspection not to be--the use of the word Dryhten glossed as "God" and Death's seeming fear of God when he had more reason to hide his handiwork from Man. Here the message is not the Christian warning to repent because death may come at any time, but the more resigned Germanic view that no matter what the life, death ends it. As a group, the emphasis does not

lie where Elde has led us to expect it should. That is, they do not, aside from Hector and Alexander, seem to have been confronted unexpectedly with their own mortality. It may be argued that the poet assumed that his audience was familiar enough with the Nine Worthies to supply any unstated details, but the one inescapable fact remains that in selecting which details to include in each of his examples the poet has emphasized almost exclusively the military prowess of his heroes. Even in the account of Oliver in the Charlemagne episode in which there is a potential victory to be won for Christ it is the temporal battle which is stressed. The Nine Worthies, to one nurtured in the alliterative tradition, might well seem to have been fit companions for a warrior the likes of Beowulf.

From the Nine Worthies, Elde turns to the four wise-men, Aristotle, Virgil, Solomon and Merlin. The Middle Ages knew very little of the first three, who actually lived, but what the poet has chosen to present from this meager store portrays each as having various supernatural powers and as being either a chosen and admired adviser to his respective sovereign, or a wise sovereign himself. Aristotle was "a fyne philozophire and a fynour noble" (587). Alchemy being a major preoccupation of the Middle Ages, the poet devotes seven lines to describing

Aristotle's alleged connection with it. Virgil is said to have made a brass statue speak (595), and also was able,

To telle what be-tydde had and what be-  
tyde scholde,  
When Dioclesyane was dighte to be dere  
emperour (596-597).

Solomon wrote two books of the Bible,

And he was the wyseste in witt that euer  
wonnede in erthe,  
And his techynges will bene trowede whills  
The werlde standes  
Both with kynges and knyghtis and kaysers  
ther-inn (603-605).

Merlin of course is known for his magic, his ability to move large objects or change his bodily shape for disguise. He also was a trusted adviser of King Arthur. These wise-men, Merlin, included, may well have appeared to our alliterative poet as very similar to the Old English witan (wisemen or counsellors) who were regularly consulted in the meadhall.

From the wisemen Elde turns to six pairs of lovers. Each pair after the first is allotted a two-line, four half-line description: Half-line one, the male lover's name; half-line two, a reference to his military prowess; half-line three, the female lover's name accompanied by a noun or adjective denoting her love or beauty; half-line four, reference to the lover or lovers' demise, for example in lines 620-21:

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(620a) Generides þe gentill  
(620b) full ioly in his tyme  
(621a) And Clarionas þat was so clere  
(621b) are both now bot erthe.

Following the six pairs come four famous ladies, Dido, Candace, Penelope and Guenevere, "And others moo than I may mene, or any man elles" (630).

The great disparity in the number of lines devoted to the three topics (the Nine Worthies, the Wisemen, the Lovers) does not appear to show that the poet had great knowledge of one and scant knowledge of the others. Rather, I think, the poet has allotted his lines in proportion to the emphasis or importance with which he regards each subject. Military prowess was everything in the Anglo-Saxon warrior-society and also in the medieval chivalric society contemporary with the poet of the Parlement. This fact is seen in the poet's repeated prefacing of "Sir" to his heroes: Sir Alexander, Sir Joshua, Sir Charlemagne.

Wisemen, of course, have a place in every society, but romantic love was unknown in Alexander's time, and in Anglo-Saxon England. John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster are a stunning example of a love match in the baronial courts, but a marriage such as theirs was rare in a society where marriages among noble families were alliances of power and money, not love. We also have

said that the development of alliterative poetry in Middle English was uninfluenced by French poetry and its concept of love, so it is quite understandable why the warriors and wisemen should have all the attention and the last four lady lovers be merely listed by name.

When Elde has finished his exemplum he adds a few lines to summarize his point (631-52). These lines break noticeably into two parts, the first sounding very Anglo-Saxon,

Sythen doughtynes when dede comes ne  
dare noghte habyde,  
Ne dethe wondes for no witt to wende  
hym lykes,  
And ther-to paramours and pride puttes  
he full lowe;  
Ne there es riches ne rent may rawnsone  
3our lyues,  
Ne noghte es sekire to 3oure-selfe in  
certayne bot dethe,  
And he es so vncertayne that sodaynly  
he comes,  
Me thynke þe wele of this werlde worthes  
to noghte. (631-637)

and the second sounding like a lesson a child has learned by rote,

Ecclesiastes the clerke declares in his  
booke  
Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas,  
¶at alle [es] vayne and vanytes and  
vanyte es alle.  
For-thi amendes 3oure mysse whills 3e  
are men here,  
Quia in inferno nulla est redempcio--  
For in helle es no helpe, I hete 3ow  
for sothe;  
Als God in his gospelle graythely 3ow  
teches:

Ite ostendite vos sacerdotibus,  
 To schryue 3ow full schirle, and  
 schewe 3ow to prestis.  
 Et ecce omnia munda sunt vobis,  
 And 3e þat wronge wroghte schall  
 worthen full clene.  
 Thou man in thi medill elde, hafe  
 mynde whate I saye!  
 I am thi sire and thou my son, the  
 the sothe for to telle,  
 And he the sone of thi-selfe, þat sittis  
 one the stede,  
 For Elde es sire of Midill Elde and  
 Midill Elde of 3outhen (638-652)

containing the advice that to become pure you must be  
 shrived of your sin, a statement of Christian doctrine  
 which would have been obligatory at the time the poem  
 was written but which does not cancel out the more pessi-  
 mistic first part which, like the Anglo-Saxons, saw no  
 promise of salvation after death.

When the dreamer-narrator is awakened from his vision  
 by the sound of a bugle, he rises and hastens toward the  
 town uttering a penitential prayer. Surely here is a  
 truly Christian element one thinks; but this too is not  
 necessarily so. Ruth Crosby in "Oral Delivery in the  
 Middle Ages,"<sup>125</sup> has made a study of those poetic elements  
 which identify poems as being specifically meant for oral  
 delivery. These findings of course apply to the Parlement,  
 descended as it is from the Old English oral tradition,

<sup>125</sup>Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages,"  
Speculum, 11 (1936), 88-110.



(note also that the logical explanation for a continuity without extant poetry during the three-hundred-year gap in alliterative poetry is that the tradition survived orally during that time) and one particular element is very interesting. Crosby says that the "frequent use of religious beginnings and endings is a marked characteristic of such works as bear evidence of the intention of oral delivery."<sup>126</sup> These beginnings and endings are part of the poet's technique of approach to and withdrawal from his audience; in other words, the dreamer's penitential prayer simply signals the end of the poem.

After careful consideration, then, the Parlement of the Thre Ages is not what it appears on the surface, a Christian poem. Its tone and emphasis carry the values of the Germanic past when men and poets took a more resigned view of death which came eventually to all. Military prowess and wide renown were all that a man could hope for to keep his name alive, for no one knew what lay beyond death. The poet is clearly drawing on the alliterative spirit of the Old English poetic tradition and has placed his emphasis accordingly.

Bearing in mind the Old English, Germanic, view of life, death, the role of warrior and king in society, and the fact

<sup>126</sup>Crosby, p. 108.

that the Middle English alliterative tradition is a direct outgrowth of the Old English tradition, a clearer view of the poem can be achieved.

There is at this point another fact to bear in mind. Much has been made of the fact that in one of the two surviving manuscripts in which the Parlement is found it is coupled with another poem, Wynnere and Wastoure. Critics have tried to date the Parlement by comparing it with Wynnere and Wastoure, they have tried to prove that they have a common dialect, a common style, a common author, a common everything, except a common interest. Wynnere and Wastoure is a poem of social protest aimed at the actions of King Edward III. Could it be that the Parlement is linked in manuscript with Wynnere and Wastoure because it too speaks in opposition to a king?

It is my belief that the Parlement is a skillfully constructed protest against what the times considered the excesses of King Richard II and his greedy and amoral court. Of the many reasons to support such a belief, there are three main ones. First, baronial opposition to the king throughout English history, but primarily in the fourteenth century, is a verifiable historical fact.

Both Elizabeth Salter and J. R. Hulbert, as mentioned earlier, have discussed in their respective articles on the Alliterative Revival the fact that alliterative poetry was nurtured in the baronial courts specifically because it was not the poetry of the royal court and that the baronial households were sufficiently mobile, moving in progresses from estate to estate throughout the country, and visiting London often enough during the year, to be fully aware of the social and political situation at court.

The second reason for feeling that the Parlement deals with the court of Richard II is the evidence provided by Robert E. Lewis' 1968 article on the costume of Youthe for a later dating than was possible previously. Richard II was always a self-indulgent child, given to pageantry and excess, but for him himself to be dictating the fashions at court the Parlement must have been written sometime in the 1380's. The poem, of course, need not have been contemporary with the scene which it portrays, it could have been written later, but the fact of Youthe's costume and Richard's tender years make a date before 1380 unlikely. Richard died in 1399, according to tradition starved to death by his jailer, but there is no indication of this in the Parlement and no indication of feelings stronger than arguing or "flyting" in the poem.

For historical reasons to be discussed later I would place the writing of the poem probably not later than 1388 and certainly before 1399, since there would have been no point in protesting the personal life and conduct of a dead king.

The third reason for viewing Richard's court as the subject of the Parlement is the technique of "flyting" or debate used in the poem. Argumentation seems to have been the hallmark of Richard's reign during which he seldom listened to his advisers (all much older than he) without protest and rarely deviated from his own self-indulgent course despite the remonstrances of his counsellors. Both of these policies eventually cost him his crown. A brief look at the historical facts of Richard's reign for the relevant years will put a new light on the Parlement of the Thre Ages.

The reign of King Richard II "began in crisis, continued in conflict, and ended in utter failure."<sup>127</sup> The "utter failure", as mentioned earlier, does not figure in the Parlement, thus it is the "crisis" and the "conflict" (at least the early stages of it) which concern this paper.

<sup>127</sup> B. Wilkinson, The Later Middle Ages in England: 1216-1485. London: Longmans, Ltd., 1969, p. 157.

Richard II was born on January 6, 1367, the son of Edward Plantagenet, the Black Prince, and Joan, the Fair Maid of Kent, and was second in line to succeed his grandfather King Edward III. Richard's illustrious father pre-deceased Edward III and when his grandfather died and his own reign began of June 21, 1377, Richard was just over ten and one half years of age. The crisis which began the reign (besides the tender age of the king) was the age-old problem--baronial opposition. Richard was king by right but hardly able to rule. The barons had long dogged the heels of the Plantagenets; they had consistently opposed the strong centralized government of Henry II and the weak hand of Henry III, they had forced King John to sign the Great Charter, and had deposed and murdered Edward II. Edward III, however, with a curious combination of force and concession had established a sort of equilibrium between the throne and the barons, but this equilibrium was destroyed with the accession of a child king. Richard inherited all the problems of Edward III but could not possibly cope as his grandfather had; he did not have the character to understand the situation and, worse, as was later seen, he had not even the will to understand.

With the child king came a vacuum of power which brought forth the worst in the ambitious barons who sought

to fill it. Failures in the French wars and Richard's open admiration for all aspects of French civilization broadened the gulf. The Peasants' Revolt of June 1381 temporarily united the aristocracy against a common danger, but ultimately widened the breach between king and barons. Richard was still at this time ruled by his appointed advisers who had adopted a policy of "conciliation and deceit"<sup>128</sup> toward the rebels. Whether at their urging or by his own wish, Richard agreed to meet with the rebels at Smithfield. The meeting began but the rebel leader, Wat Tyler, was soon struck dead by a royalist infuriated at Tyler's insolent treatment of the king. Before the rebels could rally for attack, the king rode forth and faced the mob with such personal courage and determination that he convinced the rebels to disperse promising a review of all their grievances. As a result of this meeting, Richard seems never to have recovered from the heady feeling of power his actions had given him. He gained an exalted view of his importance to, and power over, his people; he also may have gained an exalted view of the usefulness of duplicity in his dealings with others, for when the rebel representatives came to claim the promised review of grievances,

<sup>128</sup>Wilkinson, p. 160.

Richard repudiated them utterly.

The grandeur of Richard's coronation, his central position in court ceremony, and finally his extraordinary success in the face of the peasant rebels had all made an indelible impression on the boy whose view of himself as omnipotent king grew to enormous proportions. Richard was also extremely generous to all who besought him, so generous in fact that he ruinously depleted the royal holdings to the extent that on one occasion the crown itself had to be used as security for the royal debts. Richard also had five principle favorites (and many others) who were only too willing to be the beneficiaries of the king's generosity: Robert de Vere (who has been compared in many ways to the young Piers Gaveston, favorite of Edward II), the Earl of Suffolk, Sir Robert Tresilian, Sir Nicholas Bembre and the Archbishop of York. But the king's self-image, the ever present barons vying for power and the social demands of the emerging Parliament were in constant conflict, and the remainder of Richard's short life was spent in trying to consolidate his personal power, pursuing the ever elusive goal of absolutism.

Before his death, Richard's father the Black Prince, had appointed three tutors to oversee the general education of his son, all trusted men who had served the Black

Prince well. Sir Guichard d'Angle "created earl of Huntington at the coronation, was merely an elderly figurehead,"<sup>129</sup> Sir Richard Abberbury "remained in the king's household after his accession and later became chamberlain to Queen Anne,"<sup>130</sup> and Sir Simon Burley,

...in 1377, was a man of about forty, had fought with the Black Prince in France and at Najera; after the prince's death, he took office in the household of his widow. His reputation in the world of chivalry was high and he had some taste for books...<sup>131</sup>

But these three men, equipped though they were to educate the king in the military and chivalric traditions of Edward III were all too old to become Richard's intimates. This place was reserved for

the hereditary chamberlain, Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, who was the king's senior only by five years. Already a royal ward, de Vere was brought into the family circle by his marriage, in 1378, to Edward III's granddaughter, Philippa de Coucy. Henceforward, he was known as 'the king's kinsman' and Richard's partiality for him found expression in numerous grants of lands and privileges. Seemingly a man of neither talent nor judgment, though not wanting in personal courage,

<sup>129</sup> May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 424.

<sup>130</sup> McKisack, p. 424

<sup>131</sup> McKisack, p. 424.



de Vere was foolish and irresponsible, rather than sinister or dangerous. But it was only to be expected that his friendship with the king should arouse jealousy and expose him to the kind of charges that had been levelled against Gaveston with whom, indeed, despite his ancient lineage, he seems to have had many characteristics in common. De Vere's folly, like Gaveston's, set his royal master's feet on the road to ruin and made his own destruction inevitable.<sup>132</sup>

Richard and his favorites consistently resisted and/or evaded the advice and instruction of the older advisers, barons and parliamentarians. Other circumstances as well saw the further deterioration of the harmony achieved by Edward III. Scandal riddled the government, Norwich's Crusade against the "French" pope Clement VII devastated the English wool trade and the Council of Regency was so unpopular that in January 1380 "the Commons showed their distrust with the regime by asking that the lords of the council be discharged and that Richard be permitted to rule with only the advice of his chief ministers."<sup>133</sup> However, in November 1380, the lords appointed Richard, Earl of Arundel and Sir Michael de la Pole "to counsel the king and govern his person."<sup>134</sup> Richard never liked

<sup>132</sup>McKisack, p. 425.

<sup>133</sup>Wilkinson, p. 164.

<sup>134</sup>Wilkinson, p. 165.

Arundel who was much older and a "typical product of the fourteenth-century chivalry"<sup>135</sup> who wanted Richard to become a soldier. "Alienated from his 'natural' advisers, Richard was committed to rule through...[Burley and de la Pole], together with Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford. He turned in upon himself and exploited his 'regality'."<sup>136</sup> Whatever the reality of the situation Richard always retreated into his 'regality', his generosity, and his resistance to his older advisers.

"No doubt his mentors tried to teach him that kingship implies responsibilities as well as privileges; but his whole environment in childhood and adolescence was such as to foster notions of himself as a unique personage; and such notions [were] strongly reinforced by the events of 1381."<sup>137</sup> But "Richard's essential misjudgment lay in his inability to refrain from excess."<sup>138</sup> He continued to flaunt his advisers and give away his resources with both hands. "The unpopularity of the courtiers is reflected in numerous parliamentary petitions for reform and economy in

<sup>135</sup>McKisack, p. 426.

<sup>136</sup>Wilkinson, p. 168.

<sup>137</sup>McKisack, p. 430.

<sup>138</sup>Wilkinson, p. 168.

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the royal household and in complaints about illicit extensions of the jurisdiction of the household courts and the increased use of the signet."<sup>139</sup> In the parliament of October 1383 it was stated that "evil councillors are said to have been the cause of grave dissensions between the king and the lords."<sup>140</sup> By 1385, "the bitter conflicts and antagonisms of Edward II's reign had been fully revived."<sup>141</sup>

The king's uncle had no qualms about telling the king of his shortcomings and urging the favorites's dismissal, a policy which Richard so disliked that he is said to have agreed to a plot to kill his uncle. Gaunt, who had married Constance the elder daughter of Pedro the Cruel of Spain, had always had his eye on the throne of Spain, and when it was clear that his views had no place at court he mounted an expedition which kept him abroad from July of 1386 until November 1389. Unfortunately it left Richard bereft of one of his most loyal adherents and "meanwhile irreparable damage was done to the relations

<sup>139</sup>McKisack, p. 437.

<sup>140</sup>McKisack, p. 437.

<sup>141</sup>Wilkinson, p. 168.

between Richard and the baronage at home."<sup>142</sup>

A further chronicle of conflict is not necessary until 1387 when three lords, the Earls of Arundel and Warwick and the Duke of Gloucester formally "appealed", or accused, the king's favorites of gross misconduct. After a brief rising by Robert de Vere, the Appellants, as the accusing lords were called, were joined by Henry, Earl of Derby (Bolingbroke), son of Gaunt, and Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham. "There is no doubt about the extremism of the opposition which now faced Richard: it was ready and eager to trample his royal pretensions in the dust. Before parliament met, the Appellants beat Richard into submission by a threat of deposition. They actually withdrew their homage for a time, and might have deposed their king altogether if they could have agreed on a successor."<sup>143</sup>

The parliament which met in February of 1388 was later known as the Merciless Parliament for the swift and merciless way in which it despatched the five favorites. With the favorites out of the way, the rest of Richard's story should not concern us here. But it is necessary

<sup>142</sup>Wilkinson, p. 168.

<sup>143</sup>Wilkinson, p. 172.

to be aware of the situation up to this point to show the extent of baronial opposition. Merchants were disenchanted with Richard, especially the wool merchants after Norwich's crusade. The people, too, after years of loyalty, gradually turned their backs on their king.

Protestation against Richard's excesses was not confined to the barons and merchants, however. John Gower "completed his first version of the Confessio Amantis during or prior to 1390, the fourteenth year of King Richard II's reign, although portions of the poem may have been written six or seven years earlier."<sup>144</sup> Gower tells how he met the king's barge on the Thames and the king urged him to write a new book which the king himself might read. Gower duly wrote the Confessio and dedicated it to Richard to offer "wisdom to the wise/And pley to hem that lust to playe (84-85), (in revision Gower omitted line 85). But by 1392 Gower was sufficiently disenchanted with his king to rewrite the beginning of his poem indicating that hope for England might better reside in the likes of Henry of Lancaster (Bolingbroke), one of the five Appelants of the Merciless Parliament. It is interesting to think, though impossible to verify, that the

<sup>144</sup> Russell A. Peck, ed., The Confessio Amantis of John Gower. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968, p. 494.

poet of the Parlement of the Thre Ages might have been known to and had some influence on the moral Gower.

Russell Peck has said of the prologue of the Parlement, its "abundant details are not designed for the sake of realism or autobiography; primarily they anticipate the argument of the dream."<sup>145</sup> The stag in medieval literature has often symbolized Christ with his set of five branched antlers representing the Ten Commandments. The stag, as it happens, was also the personal emblem of King Richard II.<sup>146</sup> In the prologue or hunting scene of the Parlement I think the poet had the lesser king in mind, though Richard thought of himself as not one step below the angels. The hart in the hunting scene appears to be an earthly king, or, perhaps, an alliterative poet's ironic portrayal of a Lancastrian's view of the noble king who, at the critical moment, allows someone else to look out for his welfare and is struck down by Chance. If, as

<sup>145</sup>Peck, p. 334.

<sup>146</sup>See Derek Brewer, Chaucer in His Time. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963, pp. 190-91 and 202-03. The double painting known as the "Wilton Diptych", more properly entitled "Richard II Presented to the Virgin and Child By His Patron Saints", shows Richard II cloaked in a robe bearing the White Hart device. The diptych is thought to have been painted at Richard's request and the fact that the White Hart did not become Richard's badge until late in his reign also argues for a later dating of the Parlement of the Thre Ages.

I believe, the poem is about Richard II, surely the poem was written before Richard's death (1399) as there is no suggestion of murder here--only the possibility of what could or might happen to a king who allows his welfare to be looked after by others, as Richard II did with his constant reliance on the irresponsible de Vere, et al. The point is emphasized by the sowre returning to his friends without even a backward look at his slain master. Death has not touched the sowre; therefore he can return to his companions as though nothing has happened. Death has successfully hidden himself from the consciousness of the young. A clue to the irony of the scene may come from the fact that the standard allegorical stag's antlers have ten branches signifying the Ten Commandments, whereas in the Parlement, "And he assommet and sett of vi and of fyve," (31), perhaps an image of Richard plus his five favorites on the one side in direct opposition to the five Appellant lords, each side giving the other commandments. Despite the fact that the hunter kills the hart, it does not appear that the poet has any conception of Richard II's death; the scene is a warning and an admonition for the reform of a corrupt and irresponsible government and personal life before the fate of the king becomes that of the hart; before the king, who has let the care of his own kingdom and welfare rest in the hands

of a lesser man (or men) whose irresponsibility or lack of vigilance could cause the destruction of his master, succumbs.

Within the dream vision we have an allegorical parody of Richard as Youthe with "A chaplet on his chef-lere) (118). His apparel (his circlet arrayed with a rose, trefoils and true-love knots of pearls with a carbuncle in the center; green attire embroidered in golden thread and coins and beryls; a collar clustered with chalcedonies; sleeves arrayed with diamonds; seams set with sapphires, emeralds and amythysts; the borders of his cote-hardie set with rubies) and his horse as gorgeously arrayed (118-28), are certainly reminiscent of Richard's tastes.

Both Richard and Youthe are untried knights, but in the comparison Richard comes off badly. Youthe is

This hathelle one this heghe horse with  
hauke on his fiste,  
He was zonge and zape and zernyng to  
armes, (170-171)

while Richard was effeminate, more given to the liberal than the military arts. We know he possessed hawks and falcons for among Simon Burley's "lesser perquisites was a shilling a day as master of the hawks and keeper of the mews for the king's falcons at 'Charryng by



Westminster'."147 But the influence of his favorites drew Richard toward idleness, leading the Westminster chronicler to call them "knights of Venus rather than Bellona"148 who "were teaching the young king effeminate habits and discouraging him from undertaking, not only military exercises, but such knightly sports as hunting and hawking; and, though this cannot have been true of either Burley or Pole, it may well be that among the younger courtiers, headed by de Vere, there was a tendency to indolence and softness."149

Youthe (174-77) sighs for his lady love most lavishly, but not nearly so greatly as Richard is said to have done. In 1382 Richard II married Anne of Bohemia, a lady of small dowry and equal beauty, but she had a certain charm for she "soon won Richard's passionate devotion and he would seldom allow her to leave his side."150

The images so far have alternated between accuracy and parody: Richard was extravagant in his dress, he was not one to engage in knightly sport, and he was extravagant

147 McKisack, p. 429.

148 McKisack, p. 438.

149 McKisack, p. 439.

150 McKisack, p. 427.

in his passion for his lady love. In Lines 178-81 we turn again to parody:

I by-hete the a heste and heghely I  
a-vowe,  
There schall no hode ne no hatt on my  
hede sitt,  
Till ~~pat~~ I ioyntly with a gesserante  
iustede hafe [with] onere,  
And done dedis for thi loue, doghety  
in armes. (178-181)

Not only was Richard given to "indolence and softness" but he avoided anything military whenever he could and was extremely shocked at his uncle Gaunt when he suggested that Richard go on the Norwich Crusade to drive out the "French" pope.

At a happier period of English history such weaknesses might have passed as the harmless foibles of youth; but the country had suffered two major disasters in the Rising of 1381 and the fiasco of the Norwich crusade and there had been many minor set-backs, both military and diplomatic. The more responsible among the magnates, the parliamentary knights, and the substantial merchants were keenly alive to the national humiliation, the damage to England's credit abroad and their own helplessness in the face of Richard's apparent indifference to public opinion and reliance on a closed circle at court. The only remedy seemed to be to encourage him to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and learn the art of war; and it was with this end in view that the autumn parliament of 1384, 'considering that the lord king intends to fight his enemies in person' (a point which had been stressed by Pole) 'and that this is his first expedition', made a generous grant of two fifteenths. An expedition to France was

what the estates envisaged; but, instead, Richard found himself forced to lead an army to Scotland.<sup>151</sup>

The king at first was delighted with, "The size and splendour of his host, which included every magnate of consequence",<sup>152</sup> but splendor did not guarantee victory and misfortune plagued the expedition. There were personal quarrels, and a murder committed by the king's half-brother at York. Once across the border Richard thought it preferable to grant titles and gifts than to wage war. After burning two abbeys on the pretext that they were filled with Clementists, the host entered Edinburgh only to find the Scots "had slipped down the western road to Carlisle."<sup>153</sup> Though Gaunt urged him on "Richard had wearied of the whole business and, goaded by de Vere, he turned on his uncle with rude reminders of his own military failures and announced that for himself, he was going home."<sup>154</sup> The expedition inside Scotland lasted less than two weeks and the enemy was never met. Nothing was gained in the venture and the king's reputation was

<sup>151</sup>McKisack, p. 438.

<sup>152</sup>McKisack, p. 439.

<sup>153</sup>McKisack, p. 440.

<sup>154</sup>McKisack, p. 440.

greatly tarnished in the eyes of the people who highly prized military prowess. In the end Richard II remained as untried a knight as Youthe.

At this point in the poem Youthe is interrupted by Medill Elde who, in his argument with Youthe, is the equivalent of all those older advisers whose counsel the king had consistently refused to accept. His modest dress contrasts markedly with Youthe's extravagant costume, his frugality is at the opposite pole to Youthe's lack of it. Medill Elde and Richard's advisers are concerned with acquiring money because everyone in the kingdom was concerned with money except Richard. Medill Elde is a composite of the barons and advisers who tried to curb Richard's excess power, the Commons who tried to curb his spending, the merchants who suffered from his foreign policy, and the people who just suffered. One can almost imagine John of Gaunt mouthing Medill Elde's first words:

...Felow<sup>e</sup> by my faythe þou fonnes full  
zerne,  
For all [es] fantome and doly that thou  
with faris. (183-184)

Where are the lands and vassals that Richard/Youthe is lord over (185)?--given away to favorites. Parliament constantly protested the king's household economy in words similar to:

For alle thy ryalle araye renttis hase  
 þou none,  
 Ne for thi pompe and thi pride, penyes  
 bot fewe;  
 For alle thi gold and thi gude gloes one  
 thi clothes,  
 And þou hafe caughte thi kaple þou cares  
 for no fothire.  
 By the stirkes with thi stede and stalles  
 thaym make:  
 Thi brydell of brent gold wolde bollokes  
 the gete;  
 The pryce of thi perrye wold purches the  
 londes;  
 And wonne, wy, in thi witt, for wele-  
 neghe þou spilles. (186-193)

Youthe (and Richard alike) answers

Sir, be my soule, thi consell es feble; (195)

he cares nothing for money, he would rather "one this  
 launde lengen a while" (199). The rest of Youthe's speech  
 up to the hawking scene is ironic in view of what we know  
 about Richard II:

Me were leuere one this launde lengen  
 a while,  
 Stoken in my stele-wede on my stede  
 bakke,  
 Harde haspede in my helme and in my  
 here-wedys,  
 With a grym grownden glayfe graythely  
 in myn honde,  
 And see a kene knyghte come and cowpe  
 with my-seluen,  
 þat I myghte halde þat I hafe highte  
 and heghly avowede,  
 And parfourme my profers and prouen my  
 strengthes:  
 Than alle the golde and the gude that  
 thoue gatt euer,  
 Than alle the londe and the lythe that  
 thoue arte lorde ouer;  
 And ryde to a reuere redily there-aftir

With haukes full hawtayne that heght  
willen flye;  
And when þe fewlis bene founden, fawkoneres  
hyenn  
To lache oute thaire lessches and lowsen  
thaym sone,  
And keppyn of thaire caprons, and casten  
fro honde;  
And than the hawteste in haste hyghes to  
the towre,  
With their bellys so brighte blethely  
thay ryngen,  
And there they houen appon heghte as it  
were heuen angelles. (199-215)

We know that King Richard's favorites dissuaded him from the knightly sports of hunting and hawking, but they did not dissuade him from hunting of another sort. If a property owner died without issue or if an estate was inherited by a minor child, the king had the right to use the property to his own purpose as he saw fit until the child came of age. Often there was nothing left when the child reached majority;

Edmund Mortimer, earl of March, had died... leaving a seven-year-old child as his heir; [and the] complaint that the profits of this great wardship, which might have been used to reduce the king's debts, were being dissipated in grants to his servants, finds some support in the records of gifts of lands and offices appertaining to it to knights and esquires of the household, like Burley's nephew Baldwin Raddington, Adam Ransey and Richard Hampton, and to yeomen of the chamber, like Matthew Swettenham, John Horowode, and John Wimbush. Many of the lands of William Ufford, earl of Suffolk, who died without issue in February, 1382, went to Pole. Burley himself was given a castle in Wales as a reward

for his services in escorting the queen  
from Germany.<sup>155</sup>

The hawking scene, in this light, then becomes a rather unpleasant view of Richard allowing his favorites to prey upon the people much as the king's hawks preyed upon lesser birds. Among them are the "hawteste" who fly high "to the towre" (213) who, "With their bellys so brighte blethely they ryngen" (214), providing a most ironic image as "There they houen appon heghte as it were heuen angelles" (215). In the parliament of November 1381 there were "Complaints about the outrageous numbers preying on the resources of the royal household (with special reference to the king's confessor, Thomas Rushook)."<sup>156</sup> Richard, of course, refused to dismiss Rushook and in 1382 made him archdeacon of Llandaff,<sup>157</sup> and one of the king's five closest favorites attacked by the Merciless Parliament was none other than the Archbishop of York; "angelles" indeed.

Lines 210-12,

And when ~~pe~~ fewlis bene founded,  
fawkoneres hyenn  
To lache out thaire lessches and lowsen  
thaym sone,

<sup>155</sup>McKisack, pp. 428-29.

<sup>156</sup>McKisack, p. 426.

<sup>157</sup>McKisack, p. 429.

And kappyn of thaire caprons, and casten  
fro honde

are grimly reminiscent of the hunter's preparations to shoot the hart in the prologue to the poem. King Richard was in the process of becoming to his people that impersonal supernatural force of Chance which might cast down destruction at any time without warning that the Anglo-Saxons feared and knew so well. The hawking scene is not a pretty or a noble one when viewed in terms of the king's actual reign. When the hunt is over the king calls back his courtiers, then, "Lowppes in thaire lesses thorowe vertwells of siluere" (238).

After his sport Youthe/Richard returns to his court to dance with the ladies, to hear a Romance,

...to rede and rekken the sothe  
Of kempes and of conquerours, of kinges  
full noblee  
How tha[y] wirchipe and welthe wanne  
in thaire lyues. (250-252)

Richard has to read about what he cannot be; he is more suited, "With renkes in ryotte to reuelle in haulle" (253), and play an occasional game of chess (255) as his only military exercise.

The argument between Youthe and Medill Elde comes to a close when Elde intervenes:

He sayde, 'Thryfte and thou haue threpid  
this thirtene wynter;



I seghe wele samples bene sothe that  
sayde bene [full] 3ore:  
Fole es that with foles delys; flyte  
we no lengare!'

(262-264)

If Richard II and his many opponents had been arguing for thirteen years from the coronation, that would place the date of the poem in 1390, after the Merciless Parliament, but still nearly contemporary with Gower's revised dedication and well within the range of Richard's lifetime.

Unfortunately, the number thirteen might well be a matter simply of alliterative necessity, so a final answer is not possible.

Elde continues:

And sayde, 'Sirres, by my soule, sottes  
bene 3e bothe.  
Bot will 3e hendely me herken ane hande-  
while,  
And I schalle stynte 3oure stryffe (and  
stillen 3our threpe  
I sett ensample by my-selfe and sekis  
it no forthire.

(266-269)

Elde is the voice of experience, or more precisely, the spirit or personification of each of the reigns of the Plantagenet kings, the spirit who has seen each reign repeat the mistakes of its predecessor and nurture the seeds of the destruction of the next reign within itself. Elde has seen them all, King John who was forced by his barons to sign Magna Carta, Henry III who preferred to build great monuments than tend to his realm, Edward I; now he sees the reign of Richard II as a repetition of

the reign of Edward II and a negation of that of Edward III. Elde's message is not the superficially Christian admonition to get your house in order before the advent of death, but a more immediately pressing warning to Richard II to refrain from the repetition of past royal mistakes lest he continue sowing the seeds of his own destruction thereby endangering the kings to follow. It should be noted that the warnings to Youthe/Richard by Medill Elde and Elde are genuine, even if the poem was written as late as 1390 after all the recriminations of the Merciless Parliament. Though the Appellants took over the actual running of the government for a period in 1388, it was never doubted that Richard was king by right. He had a great personal charm, when he chose to use it, despite his shortcomings as a national leader, and it must be said that the English nation displayed infinite patience and incredible optimism in feeling that if the king were only instructed properly he could be turned from his extravagant ways to become a worthy king. "In June 1388 many must have hoped, and some may even have believed, that the worst troubles of the reign were over."<sup>158</sup>

<sup>158</sup> McKisack, p. 461.

In summary, the alliterative Parlement of the Three Ages is a social protest poem written by a partisan of the baronial faction which had long felt itself opposed to a pro-French, non-military stance on the part of any king since the first Plantagenet, but most especially to the foppish young Richard II. As the barons had become more and more conscious of the foreign sympathies of the royal court, the baronial faction had fostered in baronial courts the revival of a poetic tradition that was native to Britain before the Conquest and which was felt to be more English, more nationalistic in spirit, than the French poetics imported with the Normans. In the eyes of the reviving native poetic tradition Richard was a travesty of a king, a non-hero, a non-warrior who surrounded himself with a few like himself, a king who cared nothing for his country's welfare and honor among nations. The early years of Richard's reign, their extravagance and irresponsibility, were a perfect subject to protest in the native meters.

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