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THE ART AND MEANING OF THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ST. ERKENWALD

by

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

Thesis Director's signature:

[Signature]

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(August, 1970)
This work is dedicated to all those who, by precept and example, taught me to value literature; to my parents, sisters, and mother-in-law, all of whom exhibited an unwavering belief in my abilities which was in turn an inspiration to me; and most of all to my wife, whose calm acceptance of weal and woe for the last four years has helped me to carry on despite real obstacles and those which I myself created.

Ad gloriæ Dei omnipotentis
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INTRODUCTION

It is surprising that St. Erkenwald has received so little critical attention in the more than forty years which have passed since the appearance of H. L. Savage's edition of the poem. For while the poem itself has slipped into a kind of literary limbo, critics have consistently spoken of it as an accomplished work. Savage says of its author: "As a literary artist, the poet of Erkenwald must hold high rank,"¹ and a much more recent discussion calls the piece "the beautiful alliterative poem, St. Erkenwald."²

These evaluative comments seem empty, however, since they are not supported by an analysis of the form, techniques, and concepts which are the components of the poem's art and meaning. If the poem is as good as the critics suggest, analysis would not only substantiate their a priori judgements of its worth, but also explain why they have been so favorably impressed.

The aim of the present study of St. Erkenwald is to return the poem to the arena of literary criticism. The first step in this process of reviviscence will be to examine the poem within the proper context of its literary traditions, since for all its apparent novelty, St. Erkenwald is a species of a generic kind of literature, hagiography. By comparing what we find in St. Erkenwald with the patterns offered by other hagiographic works, it becomes possible to determine what the poet has chosen to do with his story and to speculate on why he has so chosen. This is the province of Chapter One. Having determined the
narrative elements which are most prominent in this particular hagiographic narrative and the general arrangement of those elements, we next turn our attention to the methods which have been employed to establish and maintain the prominence of these elements and to unify our impression of the design which has been imposed of the poem's constituent parts. Chapter Two, for instance, considers the way in which word patterns and stylistic effects reinforce and at times even create the significant contrasts and correspondences which are the distinctive features of the poem's characters and action. Chapter Three attempts to describe how the esthetically indifferent elements of the plot have been unified into a single poetic whole through conceptual correspondence and dramatic tone. And finally, in understanding how the poem has been composed, we have furnished ourselves with an important clue to its meaning, for the actions, statements, and concepts which are emphasized in patterns of language and tone constitute the true themes of St. Erkenwald, and the relation of these several themes is equal to the meaning of the work.

As the format of this study suggests, our critical method will be to analyze the form of St. Erkenwald, its distinctive "art," in order to arrive at its meaning. Hopefully this procedure will allow us in the end to view St. Erkenwald as a literary whole, rather than as a simple didactic statement or an unsubstantial tour de force of poetic technique and generic conventions. For only when we see that the poem is both a carefully wrought piece of literary art and a vehicle for moral truth as the poet and his contemporaries saw it will
its place in the literature of medieval England be settled and its true worth appreciated.
NOTES


CHAPTER ONE: FORM AND COMPOSITION

In several senses, St. Erkenwald is a conservative and traditional poem. Its plot and characters, for example, often closely resemble the plots and characters of earlier hagiographic literature. Yet, paradoxically, the poem’s reliance on tradition is also the source of its originality, because the treatment of inherited materials in St. Erkenwald involves the modification and adaptation of these materials into a narrative whose overall tone and significance is not quite the same as that exhibited by its analogues.

The principal concern of this chapter will be to define in general terms the relation between St. Erkenwald and hagiographic tradition. By seeing the poem in relief against its literary backgrounds, it may be possible to form a clear idea of the methods which shape our narrative and to suggest what purposes are served by its distinctive form.

1. Generic Antecedents

Once enlarged to mean nothing more precise than "a piece of hagiographical literature," the term "saint’s legend" communicates very little, especially when it is applied with the aim of defining the generic characteristics of a specific text.

H. L. Savage, in the Introduction to his edition, makes these comments on the form of the poem:
While Erkenwald is to be classed as a saint's legend, it is quite free from many of the conventional characteristics of that literary type. It is concerned with the performance of a single miracle, and makes no attempt to recount the whole course of the saint's life and his numerous miracles. It gives no catalogue of cures wrought by his relics. It has no final invocation or address, as many of the legends have, nor any conventional benediction. The interest of the author seems rather to be centered on the theological problem raised in the poem, than on the excellences and merits of St. Erkenwald.¹

Savage's generic expectations have been conditioned by one possible meaning of the term legend, the sense listed first in The New English Dictionary: "The story of the life of a saint."² Having read the poem and realized that its plot does not recount the "life" of the saint, that is, the sequence of experiences and actions which make up his earthly existence, Savage has concluded that the poem eschews traditional form in order to concentrate more completely on its thematic message.

Savage's apparent indifference to defining more clearly the generic form of St. Erkenwald may be partially explained by semantic history, since even a fourteenth-century author like Chaucer freely applied the term "legend" to several different kinds of literary works with very little regard for the distinctive qualities of subject matter or form which set them apart. In the Prologue to the Second Nun's Tale, for instance, Chaucer's Nun says that the source of her tale is a "legende":

And for to putte us fro swich ydelinesse,  
That cause is of so great confusioun,  
I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse  
After the legende, in traslacioun  
Right of the glorious lif and passioun,
Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie,—
Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecile.

By her description of her subject matter ("lif and passioun") and the fact that she later refers to her source as a "lif" (1.120) we can be sure that she is using the term legend in NED sense 1.

The utility of this term as a description of generic subject matter and form, however, is jeopardized by its application to the tale of the Miller (CT, Fragment I (A), 1.3141):

For I wol telle a legende and a lyf
Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,
How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe.

Unfortunately, this discrepancy cannot merely be attributed to the Miller's drunkenness, for the NED lists one sense in which legend can mean any "story, history, account" (sense 3). It is probably in this sense that the Miller is using the term, with similar applications of legend appearing in the Shipman's Tale (VII (B²), 145) and the Wife of Bath's Prologue (III (D), 742).

Our problem of course is that neither the Miller's nor the Second Nun's use of the term satisfactorily describes the form and content of St. Erkenwald. In contrast to the Miller's Tale, our poem has a saint for its main character, so that it is not simply "a story," but "a story about a particular saint." Unlike the Second Nun's Tale, our poem is not about "the life of a saint," but about "one incident in the life of a saint." These distinctions are important ones, since when we, as critics, label a work with one or another term we are often making an implicit statement about the area of meaning which is involved in the work and about the techniques with which this meaning is
conveyed. Therefore calling the Miller's Tale, the Second Nun's Tale, and St. Erkenwald all by the generic term legend, while it might have worked for Chaucer, will not work for us.

Of course by referring to St. Erkenwald as a "saint's legend" rather than simply a "legend," modern critics have been able to obviate any confusion which might have arisen from the use of this common term to describe both the Miller's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale. It does not take any great power of discernment to notice that one of these is indebted to the conventions of the fabliaux while the other is a piece of hagiography. But these same critics have failed to address themselves to the problematic relationship between works such as St. Erkenwald and the Second Nun's Tale. In particular, what are we to make of the formal and structural differences between such works?

As more than one scholar has reminded us, the purpose of hagiography is to edify. But there are many moral lessons to be taught and many ways to teach them. One possible means of edification in hagiographic form is to present a model for imitation. This is the method of the classic vita or "life," that form of hagiography which intends to portray "the story of a life of a saint" (legend, NED sense 1). As Jean Leclercq has pointed out, there is little correspondence between biography as it was understood by the ancients, which consisted in "relating the existence--virtuous or otherwise--of an individual," and the principles which governed the composition of the lives of the Christian saints. In this latter species of literature, "no interest is taken in the individual as such, in the memory he has left behind
him and which history will record. Not the things he did, only the ideal he illustrated will be remembered. The form and structure of the saint's life reflect these theoretical principles.

In Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale, for example, the good nun presents a clue to the nature of the ideal which St. Cecilia illustrates when she addresses her in the Prologue to the tale as "mayde and martyr" (CT, VIII (G), no. 28). The Tale, then, is framed by allusions to the origins of the saint:

This mayden bright Cecilie, as hir lif seith,  
Was comen of Romayns, and of noble kynde,  
And from hir cradel up fostred in the faith  
Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde  
(CT, VIII G, 120-123)

and to her death and interment:

Seint Urban, with his deknes, prively  
The body fette, and buryed it by nyghte  
Among his othere seintes honestly.  
(CT, VIII G, 547-549)

The round outline of the "lif," then is ab origine ad exitum, from birth to death. Within these framing references to birth and death, various experiences and acts of the saint are related.

The incidents chosen for inclusion in the saint's life depend upon the kind of model which the author wishes to illustrate. Chaucer's Nun, as we have suggested, is concerned with portraying an exemplary "mayde and martyr." To do so, she has broken her narrative into two parts, the first (11.124-357) focusing on the saint's resolve to maintain her virginity and the various events which are the consequence of that resolve, and the second (11.358-553) dealing with the generally perilous situation of Christians at Rome in Cecilia's time and with the
gruesome details of her own martyrdom. The two sections of the poem are linked by a short transitional passage:

It were ful hard by ordre for to seyn
How manye wondres Jhesus for hem wroghte;
But atte laste, to telden short and pleyn,
The sergeantz of the toun of Rome hem soghte
And hem biforn Almache, the prefect, broghte.
(11.358-362)

The narrative continuity of the Second Nun's Tale as one might guess from the crudity of such a transition, is quite superficially conceived, if not entirely absent. Contributing to the episodic nature of the narrative is the tendency of individual incidents to retain a certain autonomy. The first half of the poem, for example, contains four episodes: Cecilia's wedding-night warning to her husband, Valerian; Valerian's conversion; the encounter with an angel carrying symbolic wreaths of roses and lilies; and the conversion of Valerian's brother Tiburce. Each of these episodes is a dramatic vignette in its own right, and Chaucer's Nun has provided them with only the most mechanical kind of unity by having all of these incidents take place on the same night, Cecilia's wedding night. In a similar manner, the handling of time in the Second Nun's Tale tends to dispel the impression of dramatic continuity, for while the several significant episodes of a single night take up some 230 lines of narrative, the events of months or years are condensed into the space of the three-line transition quoted previously. The Nun's thematic purpose is uppermost in her mind, and thus she moves swiftly from a portrayal of her saint as model of chastity and virginity ("mayde") to a portrait of her as the perfect "martyr," as steadfast and faithful under torment as she was resolute in the preservation of her "maydenhede" (1.126).
The tendency of the Second Nun's Tale to sacrifice narrative continuity and overall dramatic effect in favor of the presentation of a holy personage as the exemplar of certain virtues which are being promoted has led some critics to "the uneasy feeling that Chaucer is not his usual self" in this poem. It should be quickly pointed out that the lack of what we might call "plot development" in this tale, that is, the establishment and maintenance of narrative continuity and a certain dramatic intensity, is no lapse in Chaucer's skill, but rather evidence of his acceptance of the requirements of the genre in which he was working.

The Second Nun's Tale edifies by painting a diptych of St. Cecilia as the ideal "mayde and martyr," exemplifying in both of her attributes the value and power of unswerving faith and devotion to God and His providence. Just as the ideal transcends the real, so in the saint's life an abstract conception of Christian perfection takes precedence over the exemplary incidents in the work which are designed to substantiate this perfection. Thus it is that in these lives we will most often find an accumulation of separate episodes rather than a single and continuous line of action, and a unity of themes and ideals rather than an overall unifying pattern of dramatic suspense, climax, and denouement.

The ancient Christian vitae exhibit a similar concern with the portrayal of an ideal and indifference to the principles of narrative continuity and dramatic effect in the work as a whole. In Athanasius' Life of St. Anthony, for example, we find the same loose structural
frame of *ab origine ad exitum*:

Antony was an Egyptian by birth. His parents were of good stock and well-to-do; and because they were Christians he himself was brought up a Christian....

Having said this and having been kissed by them, he drew up his feet; and with a look as though friends had come to him and he was overjoyed at sight of them—for, as he lay there, his face had a cheerful look—he passed away and was gathered to his fathers.'

Within this frame exemplary incidents are for the most part grouped according to their relation to common themes rather than according to their ability to sustain a single line of action through the work as a whole or to produce a unifying pattern of dramatic suspense. Anthony's reputation as a visionary, for example, is verified by the episodes in chapters 65-66; accounts of his ability to cure physical maladies and cases of demonic possession are related in chapters 56-64, and his confrontations with the deceptions and harassments of the demons may be found in chapters 5-10. The author's method seems to be the portrayal of a paradigm of ascetic perfection by emphasizing now one and now another facet of the ideal which the saint represents.

The distribution of narrative episodes in the *Life of St. Anthony* according to thematic categories gives the work a distinctly episodic quality, a characteristic which we also noted in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*. The impression of loose narrative continuity is increased by the manner in which individual episodes in these lives are often juxtaposed with little attempt at sustaining a single line of action or even of providing sufficient transitional material to coordinate the material being presented. To illustrate, let us examine the way in
which the author of the *Life of St. Anthony* has attempted to coordinate one section of his work, that dealing with the saint's powers of healing (chapters 56-64). The following phrases are used as transitional material between the individual episodes:

There was, for example, a man named Fronto, hailing from Palatium. He had a dreadful disease, for he was continually biting his tongue. . . . (Chapter 57)

A girl from Busiris in Tripoli had a dreadful and very loathsome disease—a discharge from her eyes, nose, and ears immediately became worms when it fell to the ground. (Chapter 58)

Again, on another occasion as he was sitting on the mountain and looking up, he saw in the air someone borne aloft amid great rejoicing of others who met him. . . . (Chapter 60)

He was well-known, for he came there often and many miracles had taken place through him. The following is an example. . . . (Chapter 60)

Again, the count Archelaus once met him in the Outer Mountain and asked him only to pray for Polycratia, the admirable Christ-bearing virgin of Laodicea. (Chapter 61)

On another occasion he had again come down to visit the outer cells. (Chapter 63)

And another, a man of rank, came to him possessed by a demon. (Chapter 64)

This whole section of the work is, as these transitional phrases attest, a virtual catalogue of miracles which have been strung together by these introductory refrains. Similarly, the structure of the whole work is enumerative, with simply categorized exemplary episodes and statements of the attribute to be emphasized or lesson to be taught set forth at the beginning or the end of those chapters which make up a particular category:
With those who suffered he united in sympathy and prayer; and often and in a great variety of cases the Lord heard his prayer. But he neither boasted when he was heard, nor did he complain when not heard. He always gave thanks to the Lord, and urged the sufferers to bear up and realize that healing was not his prerogative nor indeed any man's, but God's who performs it when He will and for whom He will. (Chapter 56)

The *Life of St. Anthony* is by no means an unusual example of the structure of the saint's life as a literary type. The same technique of enumerating exemplary incidents with little attempt at narrative coordination or dramatic continuity may be found in almost any of the hagiographical legends which recount the story of the life of a saint. Sulpicius Severus' *Life of St. Martin* often categorizes the various incidents it recounts by their relation to some significant event in the saint's life (for example his renunciation of soldiering) and thus is able to begin a number of episodes with an introductory formula such as "not long after this" or "it was somewhere about this time." And the *Life of St. Ambrose*, a work of the fifth century, uses the phrase "during this period" again and again to provide some impression of narrative coordination between the various situations and anecdotal tales which contribute to this portrait of an exemplary bishop and an ideal Christian. Whatever the means of narrative coordination, however, the result is always a notable lack of true continuity. The structure of the saint's life is determined by its purpose of accumulating evidence for the portrayal of exemplary sanctity.

The aims and methods of this form of hagiography are quite different from those which are apparent in *St. Erkenwald*. The "tight narrative structure" of the latter, along with its "careful ordering of the several
parts of the story, that a dramatic outcome may be secured" mark it as a different type of hagiographical composition than those we have been examining. Where are we to look for the literary origins of a hagiographical work which recounts a single miracle attributed to a particular saint, and which has chosen to present this incident in dramatic fashion?

Interestingly enough, within the saint's life form of hagiography there appear certain short narratives which do resemble the structure and techniques of St. Erkenwald. These are the episodes which are so loosely strung together in the saint's lives to contribute to the cumulative impression of exemplary virtue which resides in the saint who is being portrayed. Many of these episodes, besides their single line of action, exhibit a rudimentary form of dramatic suspense, an element which is absent from the larger literary structures in which they are embedded.

As an example, let us examine an incident found in Sulpicius Severus' Life of St. Martin (Chapter 7). Its subject, the raising of a dead man to life by a saint, is part of a series of incidents recounted in order to show how the fame of Martin's piety and miraculous powers led to his being chosen as bishop of Tours. The single episode of the raising of a dead man, however, possesses a unity and integrity of its own.

It was during this period that a certain catechumen joined him, who wished to be trained by this most holy man. After a few days he fell ill and lay racked by a high fever. Martin happened to be away at the time and when he returned on the third day he found a corpse; death had come so suddenly that he had departed this life without baptism.
The body had been laid out and was surrounded by sorrowing brethren, who were performing the sad rites, when Martin came hurrying up, weeping and uttering lamentations. But, with his whole soul possessed by the Holy Spirit, he ordered the others out of the cell where the body lay, fastened the door, and stretched himself out over the lifeless limbs of the dead brother. For some time he gave his whole self to prayer. Then, made aware by the Spirit of God that divine power was present, he raised himself a little, fixed his eyes on the dead man, and awaited without misgiving the outcome of his prayer and of the Lord's mercy. Hardly two hours had gone by before he saw the dead man stir slightly in all his limbs, then blink, as his eyes opened again to see. Then indeed he turned to the Lord with shouts of gratitude and filled the cell with the sound of them. The brethren standing outside the door heard and at once ran in. And what a marvellous sight! The man they had left dead, they saw alive.11

This episode begins with a conventional sort of introduction ("during this period"), suggesting that the tale which follows is mechanically, not organically, integrated into the larger context of the *ab origine ad exitum* plan of the saint's life. It has been inserted at this point in the life because it serves to illumine Martin's miraculous powers which are proof of his sanctity and evidence of God's favor.

The literary value of the tale itself, however, is more important for our purposes. The initial situation is conceived in visual terms, with the corpse of the catechumen occupying the center of the narrative portrait, the "brethren" surrounding this central object, and the saint moving toward this group of figures. The emotional atmosphere of the tale is effectively rendered by the repeated references not only to feelings of grief but to specific actions which are pregnant with emotion. The administration of the last rites becomes a performance of "the sad
rites," and Martin's approach is punctuated by his "weeping and lamentations." Contributing to this general atmosphere is the crucial detail of the man's having died before baptism: hovering over the dramatic situation is the threatened loss of the soul of the catechumen.

This emotional atmosphere is then subsumed into a larger pattern of dramatic suspense. Martin orders the room cleared, and the actions of the saint are carefully described, although their exact significance is not made clear: the stretching out of the saint's body over the corpse, the prayer, the saint's lifting of his body, and the fixing of his eyes on the corpse. The handling of these acts and gestures is designed to contrast the life-force and power which the saint represents with the inertia of the corpse. Gesture and movement in fact become the very signs of life which signal the resuscitation of the dead catechumen: his limbs stir, he blinks, his eyes begin to focus, and finally he fills the room with his praise of God. Thus movement and gesture are not simply realistic details which make the scene more lifelike, they actually are functional in the drama.

In addition, the tale's symmetry contributes to its dramatic effectiveness. It begins with a group of sorrowing people, moves next to an empty room in which the resuscitation is performed, and ends with another tableau of a group of people, this time rejoicing. The description of sound of grief, moves through the silence which objectifies the corpse's state of non-being, and ends with a new sound, that of the praises rendered by the man who has been raised to life.
The similarity in form between this episode in the *Life of St. Martin* and *St. Erkenwald* is instructive. In each a single event in the life of a saint is made into a self-contained story through such unifying devices as emotional atmosphere, suspense, and a continuous line of action. It must be admitted that most of the episodes found in saint's lives do not exhibit such a fully-developed sense of drama as the one which we have taken as an example, and yet nearly all of them contain a single line of action and a rudimentary dramatic situation. And although, as we shall see, *St. Erkenwald* contains a more complicated plot and a more developed sense of drama and suspense than the story of St. Martin's resuscitation of the dead catechumen, it is nevertheless more closely related to this example of hagiographical literature than to those loosely-structured works which recount the entire life of a particular saint.

The ultimate origins of the short, dramatically-conceived incident which has as its central character a saint are to be found in the oral and written accounts of the acts of the saints. As Leclercq has pointed out, these self-contained narratives antedate the composition of the saint's lives, these latter works being compiled by combining the earlier narratives of single events in order to substantiate a claim to sainthood or to provide material for an office.12

With this in mind, we might consider the genesis of *St. Erkenwald* to be similar to that of the growth of these early accounts, the author having received the story of Erkenwald's confrontation with a mysterious corpse in a form which had already become more complex by accretion of detail. The poet of *St. Erkenwald* no doubt exercised his privilege to
add further details and to shape the story to fit his own message and to hold the attention of his audience. At any rate, his handling of traditional and original detail alike is influenced by the generic form of the received hagiographic tale.

There is evidence that the genre of the short narrative dealing with a single event in the life of a saint was a consistently popular literary form in the middle ages, and that it exhibited aims and methods somewhat different from those of the saint's lives. In surviving medieval collections of tales, many of the hagiographic stories are substantially inferior in style and substance to St. Erkenwald, being rather dry prose outlines of an unusual or even miraculous happening in the life of a particular holy man, but they represent nevertheless a generic tradition which in the hands of a competent poet could give birth to a truly admirable work.

In the Alphabet of Tales, for example, an English translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum of Etienne de Besancon, hagiographic tales are combined with stories from medieval chronicles, Roman mythology, Aesop, Macrobius, and many others in order to form a work that contains both entertainment and edification. The entertainment is provided by the recounting of an extraordinary event such as the following:

We rede in ye "Legend of Saynt Ambros" how on a tyme as saynt Ambros went to Rome-ward and was herberd at a riche man howse in a town in Tussie, he emang odar carpyngis askid hym of his astate. And he asswered agayn & sayd; "Sur, my state was evur happie & glorious, ffor I hafe at will grete riches, many servandis, many childer, & many cussyns, and all þis I hafe ever had at my liste. And I had nevur none adversitie." And when Saynt Ambros hard þis, he had mekull mervell & sayd unto his felowe; "Ryse, go we hyne, for God is not in þis place; and þerfor haste us hyne at þe vengeange of God tak us not here."
So in þe mornynge þai gatt þaim faste up & wente þer wayes;
and when þai war passid a little, þai lukid behynd þaim,
and sodanly þe erth oppynd and swold þis man & all þat
longid unto hym, at þer was nothyng left above erde. And
when Saynt Ambros saw þis, he sayd unto his felaschup; "Lo!
brother, how mercyfull at God is! For He sparis þaim at He
sendis adversitie & truble in þis werld, & how felly He is
grevud unto þaim at He sendis prosperite and no dissesse."
And in witnes here-of yit unto þis day in þat place þer is a
passand depe dyke, callid þe riche man pitt of Tuscan.13

The interesting quality of the event itself is enhanced by the short
dialogue between the saint and the rich man and the unaccountable
haste with which Ambrose and his followers decide to leave the house.
This rudimentary dramatic preparation then culminates in the destruc-
tion of the rich man and his property and the tale ends with a moraliz-
ing speech from the saint. In addition to this closing statement, the
edifying message is clearly labeled in the text: *Prosperitas est*
*aliquando signum adversitatis future.*

The fact that these hagiographic tales are the source of many of
the *exempla* used in medieval sermons reinforces the idea that such
stories were suited to the portrayal of a simple moral thesis, much like
the one quoted above in connection with the tale of St. Ambrose and the
rich man.14 Thus their portrayal of a single event presented an oppor-
tunity not only for amplification of its basic situation along dramatic
lines through the use of dialogue, gesture, and suspense, but also for
the advancement of a simple lesson in Christian morality. These tradi-
tional literary qualities of the hagiographic tale will help us to
determine the form and meaning of St. Erkenwald.

Let us return now to our point of departure. We have distinguished
two possible forms which hagiographic writing may assume. The evidence
for such a distinction is the obvious contrast of the episodic structure of the saint's life with the cultivation of a single line of continuous action in the tales we have examined. In addition, the purposes of these two forms of hagiography may be contrasted. In the saint's life, the aim is to portray a model of Christian virtue and human perfection which may be imitated; the method is to accumulate exemplary incidents and actions. The hagiographic tale, on the other hand, is designed to present a single action or event in the life of a saint, and its aim is to extract a particular moral lesson from this one event. Thus while each of these forms seeks to edify, the precise goal and the techniques employed to achieve it are rather different.

Perhaps a precise generic term for St. Erkenwald lies somewhere in between legend, NED sense 1 ("the story of the life of a saint") and sense 3 ("a story, history, account"). Hopefully, the source of Savage's confusion about the generic background of the poem is now clear. Savage rightly sensed the discrepancy between its form and that of the classic hagiographic "legend," the saint's life. But he failed to establish a new conception of the poem's form and the origins of that form. It would appear that the general label "saint's legend" is of little use as a generic concept unless it is made to conform to one or another of the traditions of hagiographic literature which may be identified. It is certainly possible to achieve a greater accuracy in our terminology than we have done. For the purposes of this study, St. Erkenwald will be designated as a "hagiographic tale."
St. Erkenwald is no ugly duckling. It is part of an identifiable literary tradition, and seeing the poem in the context of this tradition helps us to grasp its form and significance more easily. It is a poem in which a particular event in the life of a saint is presented as a single line of action which possesses an inherent dramatic potential; we must notice how the poet has handled this potential. These hagiographic tales seem by convention to become vehicles for simple moral theses. We know this because they are narrative components which are used to exhibit the paradigmatic virtues in the saint's life form of hagiography. Further, when these tales are found in medieval collections of short narratives, they are often accompanied by specific morals, and, even more revealing, they are often employed as exempla in sermons.\textsuperscript{15a} We must be able then to determine how the poet has handled the dramatic possibilities of his narrative situation and to identify the simple (perhaps even reductive) statement of moral truth which the poem is likely to advance.

ii. The Plot and Its Analogues

No direct written source for the plot of St. Erkenwald has survived. There is no evidence that the miracle ascribed to Erkenwald in the poem was a current oral tradition in fourteenth-century England, although the existence of such a tradition cannot be entirely discounted.\textsuperscript{15} In light of this evidence, we can only theorize about the genesis of St. Erkenwald's plot. The following discussion of this plot begins with an assumption: the poet of this alliterative poem did not receive and merely transmit a fully developed tale. The skill of the whole composition, the dramatic development of the narrative situation, its use of complex techniques of
narration and description, and its careful use of significant detail all argue that even if the poet had access to an earlier version of the story of Erkenwald's confrontation of a mysterious corpse, he has surely added his own touches and shaped the story to make it fit his moral thesis.

We shall deal later with certain aspects of the poem's art which may with good reason be attributed to the skill of the poet rather than to his inherited materials. Chapter Two will show how modes of narration and description have been effectively combined. In Chapter Three the component elements of the poem's dramatic development are examined. Therefore the present discussion will be limited to an examination of the way in which conventional motifs found in hagiographic plots have been combined in St. Erkenwald to produce an interesting and perhaps even unique narrative design.

If we were to ask someone who had recently finished reading St. Erkenwald what the poem is about, his answer would probably be that it is about the posthumous salvation of a righteous pagan. At least, this is how it may appear, for the events which are related near the end of the poem are so dramatic and miraculous that the happenings of the first part of the plot seem to pale by comparison. And yet, it takes almost 200 of the poem's 352 lines for us to discover the identity of the marvelous corpse which amazes the populace of London. Thus although the narrative motif of posthumous salvation is a striking (perhaps the most striking,) element of the plot, it is not the only element on which the poet has expended his energies.
One of the most important elements of the first half of St. Erkenwald’s plot is the finding of the tomb and corpse. This event occupies some fifty lines of narrative (vv. 41-92), but interestingly the same event receives little emphasis in analogous tales. For example, in the Alphabet of Tales there is a story about St. Marcarius' discovery of a dead man's head which the saint resuscitates in order to establish its identity:

We rede in "Vitis Patrum" how on a tyme as Macharius went in wylderness he fand a dead mans head, and he had grete mervayll whose it was. And he commandid it to spek & tell hym, & so it did, and sayd it was a prestes head pat was a gentyle, pat was uncristend.16

Here we pass quickly from the act of finding the head ("he fand a dead mans head") to the question of its significance ("he had grete mervayll whose it was"). The plan of this brief tale is obviously to get to the heart of the matter, the moral as soon as possible. The discovery of the skull is used as an occasion for the teaching of a moral thesis, for in Macarius' subsequent questioning of the head, the audience is reminded not only that the "uncristend" suffer in the infernal regions, but also that "fals cristen men" also make their abode there. The narrator has paused only briefly over the preliminary details and focused his attention instead on the information which the corpse presents.

A similar strategy is evident in the following tale of posthumous salvation associated with St. Patrick:

Then Patrick and Conall went to the grave wherin the dead pregnant woman (namely, Fedilm) was biding, along the lower path to Cell Alaid. Oengus, however, went along the upper path. They reach the grave. Patrick raises the woman to life, and the boy in her womb. And both were baptized in the well of Oenadarc ("one-horn").17
This presentation is remarkably undramatic compared to the scene of the
discovery of the tomb and corpse in St. Erkenwald. Part of this less
dramatic tone may be attributed to the fact that the identity of the
pregnant woman is known before her resuscitation, so that there is little
for the audience to anticipate. By comparing this tale with the former
one in which St. Macarius played a central role, it is possible to see
how the theme of identity can contribute to the suspense and drama of a
story which deals with the resuscitation of a dead person by a saint.
Curiosity about the identity of a dead body or part of a body leads nat-
urally to a saint’s attempt at resuscitating the body in order to dis-
cover its true identity. With the resuscitation, however, the story
normally assumes more profound dimensions, with the now-loquacious body
or skull presenting a warning about either the perils which await the
unbaptized or the faithless in the life hereafter or lamenting its own
eternal condition.

In another of the analogues of St. Erkenwald, one quoted by Savage
in the introduction to his edition of the poem, we may see how the theme
of identity leads to matters of greater significance:

Circa annum domini ut puto M.C.C. in Vienna repertum
fuit caput cujusdam defuncti, lingua adhuc integra cum
labiis, et loquebatur recte. Episcopo autem interrogante
qualis fuisse in vita, respondit: Ego eram paganus et
judex in hoc loco, nec unquam lingua mea protulit iniquam
sententiam, quare etiam mori non possum, donec aqua
baptismi renatur, ad coelum evolem, quare propter hoc
hanc gratiam apud Deum merui. Baptizato igitur capite,
statim lingua in favillam corrut et spiritus ad
Dominum evolavit.
Here the initial query about the head's identity in life leads to the revelation that since he has not been baptized, the pagan judge cannot enter into the presence of God. This information having been given and the problem defined, there remains only the actual administration of the sacrament and the alleviation of the woes of the judge's soul.

Thus the pattern of curiosity about identity, resuscitation, revelation of a spiritual problem, and finally alleviation of that problem through the agency of saint and sacrament is one which the poet of St. Erkenwald might have found in other hagiographical works and then put to his own uses. Perhaps he may have even received the tale in this general narrative pattern. At any rate, it is clear that the theme of identity is important to the plot of the poem. The people of London are quite interested in finding out the identity of the corpse:

Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe;
He has ben kynge of þis kithe, as couthely hit semes
He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sens hade (vv. 97-100)

They fail to turn up any evidence of the corpse's identity:

þer is no lede opon lyfe of so longe age
þat may mane in his mynde þat suche a mon regnyd,
Ne nober his nome ne his note nourne of one speche.

(vv. 150-152)

The first question addressed to the corpse by Bishop Erkenwald is designed to clear up this mystery:

Sithen we wot not qwo þou art, witere us þiselwen,
In worlde quat weghe þou was... ...

(vv. 185-186)

Thus in St. Erkenwald, as well as in two of the analogues of its action which we have examined, an initial curiosity about the identity
of discovered human remains leads to the revelation of the distress of the soul which reveals its indentity.

Apart from this common movement from the theme of identity to the revelation of a soul's distress, however, St. Erkenwald's handling of the discovery of remains motif is appreciably more complex than those in the analogues, the result of its fusion with two other conventional motifs of hagiographic literature. The first is the crowd which appears when the tomb is discovered. The purpose of this motif in the narrative structure is clear: it allows the poet to establish certain crucial ideas and attitudes toward the tomb and corpse; for example, as we have already noted, it is the crowd which first introduces the theme of identity into the poem when they decide they will search for some record of his name and title in the histories and chronicles which constitute the collective memory of mankind. Similarly, the very way in which the crowd reacts to the tomb and corpse, by rushing toward it and marveling at its outward appearance, is used to throw Bishop Erkenwald's very different reaction in relief. We shall take up the matter of the crowd's function again in the last section of this chapter, in relation to the conventional types of crowds which are found in hagiographic literature, and in Chapter Two as part of an attempt to determine the stylistic means used to reinforce the contrast between saint and crowd in the first half of the plot.

The second motif added to that of the discovery of remains is the corpse magically saved from corruption. As Savage has pointed out, the
story is usually employed to testify to the sanctity of the individual so preserved. In Paulinus's *Life of St. Ambrose*, for example, the following account is given of the state of the body of a certain martyr:

It was during this period that the Bishop exhumed the body of the holy martyr Nazarius, which had been buried in a garden outside the city, and had it moved to the Basilica of the Apostles, by the Roman Gate. In the grave in which the martyr's body was lying we saw the martyr's blood as fresh as if it had been shed that day (and when he actually suffered we have not even yet been able to learn). His head, moreover, which had been cut off by the impious men, was so complete and uncorrupted, with its hair and beard, that it had the appearance of having been washed and laid in the grave at the very hour it was taken out.19

Compare this account with the description of the corpse in our poem:

Als wemles were his wedes, withouten any tecche,  
Ofer of moulynge, ofer of motes, ofir moght-freten,  
And als bryct of hor blee in blysnde hewes,  
As paie hade 3epely in pat 3orde bene 3isturday shapen;

And als freshe hym be face and the fleshe nakyde,  
Bi his eres and bi his hondes pat openly shewid  
With ronke rode as be rose, and two rede lippes,  
As he in sounde sodanly were slippide opon slepe.  
(vv. 85-92)

In addition to providing a means of expanding the narrative, of making it more detailed and descriptive, the presence of the uncorrupted corpse motif contributes to the suspense which is generated by the theme of identity. Such magical preservation, it should be pointed out, was universally regarded as a sign. Paulinus in his remarks on the finding of the corpse of the martyr Nazarius says that the lack of decay was evidence of the divine protection accorded those who are faithful to God until the end, citing Luke 21.18 as his authority.20 In *St. Erkenwald*, then, the lack of corruption in the corpse may also be seen as a sign.
which points toward the moral thesis which the narrative is designed to advance, although as we shall see, there is more than one direction to which this evidence can point.

The effect of these two additions is to complicate our initial impressions of the discovery of the tomb and body. The poem begins with what seems to be a simple tale of finding a body in a tomb. If we are familiar with similar stories in hagiographic literature, we may recognize that the first goal of such tales is to establish the identity of the remains, and then perhaps to move on to more weighty matters, such as the condition of the soul which once resided in these remains. Moreover, as our analogues have suggested, the transition from the theme of identity to more serious spiritual matters is usually made posthaste, with the actual scene of discovery occupying no more than a sentence or two at the most. But in *St. Erkenwald* this is not the case. The simple act of establishing the identity of the corpse is delayed through nearly half the plot, and in the meantime, we are given even more to think about: how are we to react to the statements of the crowd (the "pepul") concerning the corpse and to their failure to discover its identity? And why has this corpse been assigned a description conventionally reserved for tales about the opening of the tombs of saints and martyrs?

The expansion of this portion of the narrative corresponds to its heightened importance in the poem's thematic structure. The delay of the discovery of identity and the resuscitation of the corpse until midway in the plot invites us to turn our attention toward participants in the action. The attitudes and values which are revealed through the figures
of the Bishop and the "pepul" are as important as the miraculous events which take place in the latter half of the poem. Better yet, the events which surround the discovery of remains in the first half of the plot complement and reinforce the message of the resuscitation and posthumous salvation. The lesson taught in the discovery of remains portion of the plot is on the level of mundane human experience and deals with man's image of himself. Thus events and ideas of a more spiritual nature are held in abeyance, and details of outward appearance and social identity are emphasized. The lesson taught in the resuscitation and posthumous salvation portion of the plot has to do with spiritual realities, of man's soul and its eternal destiny. For in this latter portion there is much less emphasis on the "blee of his body" and more on a "soule...hungrie in-with helle-hole" (v. 305, 307), until by a final reversal the flesh is unequivocally rejected in favor of the spirit:

    Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid and saylid,
    And alle the blee of his body was blakke as þe moldes,
    As roten as þe rottok þat rises in powdere.

    For as sone as þe soule was sesyd in blisse,
    Corrupt was þat oþer crafte þat covert þe bones.
    (vv. 341-346)

The typically medieval attitude of these lines is prepared for in part by the several narrative motifs which are combined in the second half of the poem's plot. As has been shown earlier, the outline of this portion of the plot could have been suggested by any of the analogous hagiographic tales which combine the discovery of remains motif with that of resuscitation and posthumous salvation, by a progression which leads
us naturally and logically away from the material circumstances of this life to the spiritual realities of the next. In the more developed versions of the discovery-resuscitation-revelation narrative, those which are closest to the plot of St. Erkenwald, such as the Latin tale of the discovery of a judge's head in Vienna, yet another motif is added. In these tales, the revelation of the soul's condition does not end the narrative, as is the case with the story of St. Macarius and the skull, but leads to an attempt to alleviate that condition.

Before we pass on to a consideration of the total effect of the narrative complex in the second part of the plot of St. Erkenwald, we should properly consider the independent contribution of each of its major components. The scene of resuscitation, for example, has a profound effect upon the form of this section of the plot.

Posthumous salvation without resuscitation motif is likely to be undramatic, as the following version of the story of the salvation of Trajan demonstrates:

We rede in "Gestis Beati Gregorij" how on a tyme as Saynt Gregor walkid befor þe palace of Trajan and unthoght hym of his mekenes, he began to fall opon a sore wepyng. And he prayed hym so long for hym at Saynt Petur altar, wepyng & makyng sorow, unto a voyce spak unto hym & sayd, þat Traiayyn þurgh his prayers was delyverd out of the payn of hell; bod it bad hym at fro thems furth he sulde bewar, & not presume hym to pray for none uncristend man þat was damned.21

Since there is no narrative contact between the world of the living in which Gregory prays and the abode of the dead where Trajan dwells, there is no possibility for dialogue, and the fruit of Gregory's fervent prayers
must be presented by "a voyce" which advises the saint and the reader what the outcome has been, while throwing in a solemn but gratuitous warning. This intrusion of the voice constitutes a breach of narrative continuity, and while it may adequately communicate the lesson of the tale, it is defective on artistic grounds.

The attractiveness of the resuscitation lies in its ability to close the breach between the world of the living and the world of the dead by allowing the departed to give a dramatic first-hand account of his present misery and his subsequent transportation to a realm of eternal bliss. Furthermore, the addition of a second major character to the action makes it possible to present events and ideas in the form of dialogue rather than simply through descriptive and expository statements of the narrator interspersed with direct quotations attributed to the saintly hero. To be sure, many hagiographic tales never realize the full dramatic potential which is offered by the resuscitation motif. In the story of St. Macarius and the skull the dialogue between saint and resuscitated gentile is implicit rather than explicit, since Macarius' queries and the skull's answers are paraphrased by the narrator.

Whether he himself is responsible for the introduction of the resuscitation motif into the tale of Erkenwald's confrontation with the mysterious corpse or whether his received tale already contained it, we may be certain that the poet of St. Erkenwald found it congenial to his aims and methods. In the latter half of the plot, dialogue rather than narrative statement moves the action. Out of some 175 lines, there are
some 143 lines of conversation and only 32 lines which may be attributed to the narrator. Thus we may say that St. Erkenwald makes full use of the corpse's identity and the condition of its soul revealed by the dramatic dialogue between Erkenwald and the corpse, but the very act of redemption is rendered in dramatic terms by having the corpse give a first person account of his soul's passage from the infernal regions to heaven:

"For with ðe wordes and ðe water ðat weshe us ofayne
Liȝtly lasshit þer a leme loghe in þe abyme,
þat spakly spreit my spreit with unsparid murthe
Into þe cenacle solemnly þer soupen alle trew;

And þer a marcialle hyr mette with menske aldergrattest,
And with reverence a rowme he raȝt hyr for ever.  

(vv. 333-338)

Another significant feature of St. Erkenwald's handling of the subject of posthumous salvation is its use of baptism as the means by which that salvation is accomplished. The combination of resuscitation and baptism in a framework of posthumous salvation is most likely not an original element of St. Erkenwald. The same complex of motifs may be found in the Latin tale cited by Savage and quoted earlier in this study, in which the discovery of a skull containing an undecayed tongue leads to a resuscitation and then finally to posthumous salvation through the administration of baptism. Although this continental tale of resuscitation and baptism is clearly the closest analogue to the plot of St. Erkenwald, it is also possible that Celtic hagiographic tradition may have some influence on the form of this tale. The following story about St. Patrick, for instance, combines the narrative motifs of the discovery
of remains, resuscitation, and baptism:

Once, as Patrick was travelling in the plains of the son of Erch, namely in Dichuill and Erchuil, he beheld therein a huge grave, to wit, a hundred and twenty feet in length. The brethren asking ut suscitaretur, Patrick then brought to life the dead man who was biding in the grave, and asked tidings of him, namely, when and how he got there, and of what race and of what name he was. He answered Patrick, saying: "I am Cas, son of Glass; and I was the swineherd of Lugar, king of Iruata, and Macc Con's soldiery slew me in the reign of Coirpre Niafer. A hundred years have I been here to-day." Patrick baptized him, and he went again into his grave.24

Missing from this version of the tale is the specific statement that baptism has saved the soul of this ancient Celt, a detail which is present in the Latin story of the talking skull discovered at Vienna. At the same time however this Irish tale is closer to St. Erkenwald in that it is apparently an entire body which is raised to life, and not simply a speaking head.

Analogues such as these reveal that the poet of St. Erkenwald could have found combined, in various forms, the same sequence of motifs which are fused in his poem. It is likely then either that he was heavily influenced by such narratives himself or that his received version of this miracle was already influenced by the form of earlier hagiographic pieces. In either case, the poet found that this combination of motifs suited his purpose so well that he needed to make only a few modifications.

The most striking of these modifications is the handling of the act of baptism itself. In each of the close analogues which we have cited, the baptism seems perfectly regular: "Baptizato igitur capite" and "Patrick baptized him." In fact the act seems so conventional that neither
of these tales bothers to describe it in any detail. In St. Erkenwald however the description of the baptism is expanded and its details are carefully traced:

Til he toke hym a tome, and to be toumbe lokyd,
To be liche þer hit lay, with lavande teres:
"Oure Lord lene," quoþ þat lede, "þat þou lyfe hades,
By Goddes leve, as longe as I myȝt lacche water,

And cast upon þi faire cors, and carpe þes wordes:
"I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and his fre Childes
And of þe gracious Holy Goste";--and not one grue lenger.
þen pof þou droppyd doun dede, hit daungerde me lasse."

With þat worde þat he warpyd, þe wete of his eghen
And teres trillyd adoun, and on þe toumbe lighten;
And one felle on his face, and þe freke syked.
þen sayd he with a sadde soun: "Oure Savyoure be lovyd!"
(vv. 313-324)

None of the poem's surviving analogues contains this unusual detail of baptism by tears. Apparently the convention of the weeping saint has here been put to a new purpose. We are often told in the saints' lives that weeping is a sign of virtue and compassion; Sulpicius Severus for example says that St. Martin "was constantly weeping. . . .for the sins of those whom he believed to be his calumniators,"25 and tears even enter into stories of posthumous salvation, such as that of St. Gregory and Trajan:

We rede in "Gestis Beati Gregoriij" how on a tyme as Saynt Gregor walkid befor þe palace of Traian and umthoght hym of his mekenes, he began to fall opon a sore wepyng.
And he prayed hym so long for hym at Saynt Petur altar, wepyng & makyng sorow, unto a voyce spak unto hym & sayd, þat Traiayn purgh his prayers was delyverd out of the payn of hell. . . .26

But employing the tears themselves as the water of baptism seems quite unique.
What are the effects of these modifications of conventional motif patterns in St. Erkenwald? First, there is a general expansion of the motifs which appear in the latter half of the plot: speeches are considerably longer than those in the analogues, the scene of baptism is presented in more detail, and the corpse's description of his soul's ascent into heaven is longer than such curt statements as "spiritus ad Dominum evolavit" this expansion lends a more dramatic tone to the narrative by delaying the revelation of crucial information and by charging this information with the emotions of the characters who are involved in the action. For example, it is more dramatic to allow the corpse to reveal the misery of its soul through an extended speech (vv. 281-308) which is punctuated with exclamatory phrases ("'Ma3ty Maker of men, thi myghtes are grete!'" and "'Allas, þe harde stoundes!'") than to simply say: "And he askid it war þe saule þer-of was in payn. And it ansswerd agayn & sayd þat it was in hell, als depe as is fro hevyn unto erthe. . . ." Similarly, the scene of baptism is given a new sense of urgency by the poet's detailed description of Erkenwald's compassion ("with lavande teres") and the corresponding emotional joy of the corpse ("Oure Savyoure be lovyd!). This potential for dramatic development through additional descriptive details and direct discourse is an inherent feature of the hagiographic tales found in saints' legends and in medieval collections such as An Alphabet of Tales. An accomplished poet, one who realized the power of ideas conveyed through dramatic presentation, would see in the story of St. Martin's raising of the catechumen, St. Macarius'
dialogue with a resuscitated skull, or the posthumous baptism and salvation of a "paganus...judex" by a Viennese bishop the outline for a full length, compelling narrative poem. No doubt St. Erkenwald is the work of such a poet.

But not only is this poem more dramatic than any of its analogues, it also tends to be more miraculous. By using tears instead of water for the baptism and by having Bishop Erkenwald almost unwittingly accomplish this sacramental act (in the text Erkenwald merely states his desire to "lache water/And cast upon þi faire cors, and carpe þes wordes," (v. 316f)), we are presented with the distinct impression that there are powers at work which far transcend human capability and volition. The baptism in St. Erkenwald is a miracle in the most precise sense of the word: an event which, because of its extraordinary nature, cannot be explained as a natural phenomenon and therefore causes wonder or amazement among those who witness it.27

In comparison with its analogues, then, St. Erkenwald represents a considerably expanded version of the discovery of remains/resuscitation/posthumous baptism and salvation complex of motifs. The expansion of these motifs lends the whole tale a more dramatic tone, and in certain instances (the baptism by tears and the first-hand account of the pagan judge's soul's ascent to the heavenly "cenacle...þer soupen alle trew") to make it seem even more miraculous. The expansion which is evident in the plot of St. Erkenwald, as well as its heightened drama and cultivation of the miraculous, is surely related to the development
of the poem's particular moral thesis. In a sense, then, the primary concern of the remainder of this study is to define more clearly that thesis and the methods employed to convey it. We shall begin by examining the ways in which the poem's characters, like its plot, are indebted to convention and yet carefully adapted to the dominant themes of the work.

iii. Characterization and Convention

Roughly the first half of St. Erkenwald is controlled by the conventional theme of the identity of discovered remains. As we have seen, the proportional relationship of this element to the whole plot represents a considerable expansion, if the proportions of its analogues are taken as the standard of comparison. Expansion of the first part of the plot allows the poet to heighten the air of mystery which hovers over the tomb and corpse by delaying the revelation of its true identity and to develop the portraits of the other major figures in the poem, Bishop Erkenwald and the crowd of "pepul" who witness the discovery of the corpse and Erkenwald's confrontation with it.

These portraits are built largely on conventional features of characterization found in hagiographic literature, and our initial understanding of these characters must be based on a recognition of prior conventions. In the process of describing the conventions to which they are indebted, the characters in St. Erkenwald emerge as more complex than conventional characters, and thus analysis of the changes involved becomes necessary.
Let us begin with the most complex of these characters, the marvelous corpse which is found beneath the foundation of St. Paul's Cathedral in London:

Bot þen wos wonder to wale on wehes þat stoden,
That myȝt not come to knowe a quontyse strange;
So was þe glode within gay, al with golde payntyde,
And a blisfulle body opon þe bothum lyggid,

Alside on a riche wise in rialle wedes:
Al with glisnande golde his gowne wos hemmyd,
With mony a precious perle picchet þeron,
And a gurdille of golde bigripide his mydelle;

A meche mantel on lofte with menyver furrit,
þe clothe of camlyn ful clene, with cumly bordures;
And on his coyfe wos kest a coron ful riche,
And a semely septure sett in his honde.

Als wemles were his wedes, withouten any tecche,
Oþer of moulynge, oþer of motes, oþir moght-freten,
And als bryȝt of hor bles in blysnande hewes,
As þai hade ȝepely in þat þorde bene ȝisturday shapen;

And als freshe hym þe face and the fleshe nakyde,
Biş his eres and bi his hondes þat openly shewid
With ronke rode as þe rose, and two rede lippes,
As he in sounde sodanly were slippide opon slepe.

(vv. 73-92)

This description of the corpse seems so marvelous that the modern reader might overlook the fact that some of the details suggest potential identities for this figure. For example, the clothes in which the corpse is dressed suggest that this is the body of an emperor or king. The clothes themselves are described as "rialle wedes" (v. 77); their predominant color is gold (vv. 75, 78, 80); and included among the accouterment of the corpse is a fur-trimmed mantle (v. 81), a crown (v. 83), and a scepter (v. 84), each of which is associated with temporal
authority. Interestingly, the people of London actually assume that the body of a king has been discovered:

'Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe;  
He has ben kynge of bis kithe, as couthely hit semes  
He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder  
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade.'

(vv. 97-100)

'And we have oure librarie laitid þes longe seven dayes,  
Bot one cronicle of bis kynge con we never fynde.  
He has not layn heere so longe, to loke hit by kynde,  
To malte so out of memorie, bot mervayle hit were.'

(vv. 155-158)

But this is not the only identity for the corpse which is suggested by this initial description. As our examination of the plot has shown, the simple discovery of remains motif has been combined with the motif of a corpse magically saved from corruption, and the grafting of this second motif onto the first half of the plot involves the evocation of another identity for the mysterious corpse. As Savage has pointed out, the motif of the uncorrupted body is a conventional feature of the miracles associated with saints, and is normally taken as a sign of God's favor. For example, the description of the translation of the remains of the martyr Nazarius from the Life of St. Ambrose ends with the comment that "Our Lord promised in the Gospel that 'not a hair of their heads shall perish,'" and thus suggested that the presence of an uncorrupted body signifies the remains of a saint. Savage provides further evidence of the conventional nature of this presentation motif when he quotes the following tale concerning the translation of the remains of St. Edmund of Canterbury:
Sciendumque est, imo toti mundo praedicandum, quod totum corpus ejus integrum inventum est et incorruptum et odoriferum, et quod mirabilius est in mortuo, cum omnibus membris flexibile, et solit esse in dormiente; capilli ejus et vestimentum inviolatum colore et substantia.  

An associated idea that such preservation is a visible sign of God's protection becomes even more clear when saints' bodies can resist even the most voracious natural means of decomposition, as in the following tale which describes the remains of St. Bustace as being unscathed by a raging fire:

Þo þis fuyr hadde longue i-barnd a-boute þe brasene tonne,  
And þat bras was muche i-molte and to-gadere i-ronne,  
huy eoden ner, and þis holie men wel faire liggen huy founde,  
So 3wijht schininde so eni milk þe bodies hole and sounde  
And þe soulene ore loverd bi-taiþt--for þare nas of clope ne of her.  
Ne of no stude of alle heore bodies pat of þe fuyre iweommede were.  

Thus by introducing undecayed clothing and flesh into St. Erkenwald, a recognizably hagiographic convention has been evoked, and in the initial description of the mysterious corpse, then, two possible identities are hinted at: king and saint. These conflicting suggestions contribute to the overall sense of ambiguity which hovers over the figure in the first half of the poem and purposely delays the revelation of its true identity. All this is part of the poet's plan to expand the discovery of remains motif and to make its attendant theme, identity, suit the requirements of his poem's meaning. That meaning will involve the identity of the corpse, for the inability of the human mind to discover the true identity of the corpse leads to a statement about the limitation of human ability in general:
'Hit is mervale to men, bat mountes to litelle
Towarde þe providens of þe Prince þat Paradis weldes,
Quen hym luste to unlouke þe leste of his myȝtes.

Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt, and his mynde passyde,
And al his resons are torent, and redeles he stondes,
þen lettes hit hym ful litelle to louse wyt a fynger
þat alle þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never.'

(vv. 160-166)

It seems then that the ambiguous and conflicting details contained in the initial description of the corpse in St. Erkenwald are designed to overpower man's mind and to teach him a lesson about his own place in the universe. The poem's audience, like the "peopul" in the context of the action, may also be mistaken about the identity of the corpse if they have reasoned that the mysterious body is that of a king or a saint. In a sense, the minds of the audience are similarly matyed during the first half of the plot. For while they may be astute enough to expect that a story of the discovery of remains will lead to a resuscitation and to the subsequent revelation of the condition of the soul which once inhabited the remains, the poet has taken care that they do not correctly anticipate the true identity of the corpse, the true reason for its incorruption, and the cause of its soul's condition.

In addition to veiling the true identity of the corpse throughout the first half of the plot, it seems the poet has also made an effort to disguise the nature of the plot itself. Having introduced the mysterious and ambiguous figure of the corpse, the "hero," Bishop Erkenwald, is brought on the scene:
be bodeworde to be byschop was broght on a quile, 
Of pat burieide body al be bolde wonder; 
be primate with his prelacie was partyd fro home; 
In Essex was Ser Erkenwolde, an abbay to visite.

Tulkes tolden hym be tale with troubulle in be pepul; 
And such a cry aboute a cors crakit evermore, 
The buschop sende hit to blynne by bedels and lettres, 
And buskyd þiderward bytyme on his blonke after.

(vv. 105-112)

Even at this early juncture it is not difficult to see that the poet intends to bring his two central characters together. But as we know, the actual confrontation is delayed until the plot is half over. During the interval between the audience's expectation of a confrontation and the actual confrontation, certain hints are given as to the nature of that meeting of saint and corpse.

The type of confrontation which many of these hints suggest is one which is fairly conventional in hagiographic literature, but which is also very unlike the scene which finally occurs in St. Erkenwald. The scene which is hinted at in the narrative involves a kind of "duel" between a saint and a representative of the devil. An identifying feature of demonic representatives is often deceptive outward appearance, and their goal is always to either convince the saint to follow his advice or, failing that, to publicly defeat and humiliate the saint and show that God is less powerful than the demon himself. Quite often the confrontation includes an extended debate or a challenge to match the saint's powers against those of the satanic figure.30

The versions of this confrontation which are most instructive for us are those in which the satanic representative assumes an attractive
outward appearance, for the corpse in St. Erkenwald seems very close to such conventional figures. In a Middle English version of the life of St. Martin there appears the following episode in which the devil assumes a pleasing appearance in order to delude the saint:

\[
\text{\'p\'e de\'evl hadde to \'p\'is holi\'e man gret onde with-alle, he cum in a time him to bi\'raye in riche clo\'opus of palle, with hosen and schon of bri\'\'te golde swy\'pe far he was of face. "Martyn," he seide, "wel \'p\'e beo i-founde \'p\'ou hast mine grace: Ich am \'b\'ilke \'p\'at \'p\'ou servest vel ichulle me schewi to \'p; \'pou most some chaungi \'p\'i lif and bi-time come to me." \'p\'is guode Man sat in gret \'p\'ough no word he ne sede. "Martyn," he seide. "ich am \'p\'i freond ywar-of hast \'p\'ou drede, 3wane \'p\'in owene god spekez with \'p\'e here mouth with mou\'\'e. Evere \'p\'ou hast of guode bi-leve i-beo ne lat it nou\'\'t faili \'p\'e nou\'\'e! For ich blessi alle \'p\'at on me bilevez \'p\'ei huy me nou\'\'t ne se, And er \'p\'is \'p\'ei \'p\'ou ne seie\'\'e me nou\'\'t in pulekkes blissinge \'p\'ou woldest be."}
\]

In another version of this motif, the devil appears in the form of a maiden:

We rede how on a tyme \'p\'e devull apparid unto a certayn bishopp \'p\'at had grete devocion unto Saynt Andrew, in form and lyknes of a fayr maiden, & said unto hym on \'p\'is maner of wise: "Sur, I wulde be shreven at you & at no noder." & \'p\'is bishopp grauntid, not-withstondyng it was agayns his will.

In still another tale, the devil is described as having the power to assume even the likeness of a saint:

Hugo de Sancto Victore tellis how on a tyme \'p\'e devull apparid, in liknes of Saynt Jamys, unto a pylgram \'p\'at was bown to Saynt Jamys, & said \'p\'at he sulde be passand happie & so wern he wolde, for honor of hym, sla hym selve.

By recognizing that there is a tradition in which demonic figures assume appealing outward appearances, even to the extent of presenting themselves as a saint or God Himself, it is not difficult to see how the mysterious corpse might be taken for an apparition of the devil. In fact,
this possibility seems even less unlikely when we analyze some of the
details and actions which surround this figure. First, we must recall
that, according to a tradition cited in St. Erkenwald, in olden times
St. Paul's Cathedral was dedicated to and inhabited by demonic forces:

Now þat London is nevenyd hatte þe New Troie;
þe metropol and þe mayster-toun hit evermore has bene.
þe mecul mynster þerinne a maghty devel aght,
And þe title of þe temple bitan was his name;

For he was dryghtyn derrest of ydols praysid,
And þsolempnest of his sacrifices in Saxon londes.

(vv. 25-30)

Thus the strange tomb and its contents might easily be taken as a
vestige of the demonic forces which once possessed this "mecul mynster"
which has become a Christian church.

Second, the actions of Bishop Erkenwald in the first half of the
poem suggest that he has certain misgivings about the marvelous corpse.
In a manner reminiscent of the cautious reaction of St. Martin to a
demonic apparition in the episode cited above, Erkenwald refuses to view
the corpse when he first returns to London, secluding himself instead
in his "palais," where he observes a vigil which lasts through most of
the night (vv. 113-121). These actions suggest the gravity of the situa-
tion. Similarly, Erkenwald specifically states that mystery of the tomb
and corpse has to do with the strengthening of the Christian faith itself:

"þaghe I be unworthy," al wepande he sayde,
Thurghe his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my Lorde,
In confermynge þi Cristen faiTHE, fulsen me to kenne
þe mysterie of þis mervailþat men opon wondres."

(vv. 122-125)
The poet's silence about the true significance of the tomb and corpse and the audience's familiarity with the convention of the confrontation between a saint and a demonic representative, hint that the tomb and corpse may represent a threat to the Christian faith and that Bishop Erkenwald is to be engaged in a struggle against forces which are bent on subverting the religious faith of the populace of London.

The fact that the confrontation between Erkenwald and the corpse turns out not to be such a struggle, but rather a harmonious dialogue which culminates in the salvation of the soul which once inhabited the corpse, is further evidence that the strategy involved in the portrayal of the mysterious corpse in the first half of *St. Erkenwald's* plot is one of the evocation of patterns of anticipation in the audience which are then frustrated by the introduction of new or more clearly defined character traits in the latter part of the plot. Only when the minds of the audience, like those of the men in the poem, have been passyde by the essential ambiguity of the figure of the corpse, is its true identity revealed. Having been resuscitated, the corpse discloses that he was:

Never kynge ne cayser ne ȝet no knyȝt nothyre,  
Bot a lede of þe laghe þat þen þis londe usit.  

(y. 199f)

There is no conflict between a saint and a henchman of Satan, nor are the remains those of a saint or king: instead, the second half of the poem presents a convergence of two complementary figures, one whose soul is suffering the punishment of the unbaptized, and the other who can provide
a remedy.

The figure of Bishop Erkenwald is also subtly altered in the second half of the plot, although in a much less drastic way than the figure of the corpse. We are given only two aspects of Erkenwald's character, and there is scarcely any ambiguity to be found in either phase of presentation. In the first half of the plot, he is for the most part aloof and commanding, almost superhuman in his resolution and demeanor: while the people of London send up a "cry about a cors . . . evermore" (v. 110), the Bishop commands "pes" (v. 115), and instead of rushing to see the marvel, he delays his confrontation with the corpse until he has prayed for divine guidance (vv. 117-127), said Mass (vv. 128-137), and delivered a short sermon on man's abilities and the significance of the mysterious tomb and corpse (vv. 159-176). He displays almost no human emotion throughout this first half of the plot and continually tries to moderate the exuberance of the populace: when he is told of the "cry" which the "pepul" have raised over the corpse, he attempts "hit to blynne by bedels and lettres" (v. 111). The one time that he does show emotion is during his private vigil, when he humbly asks God for guidance in the matter of the corpse:

'paghe I be unworthy,' al wepande he sayde,
Thurghe his deere debonerte, 'digne hit, my Lorde,
In confirmynge þi Cristen faithe, fulsen me to kenne
þe mysterie of þis mervaile þat men opon wondres.'

(vv. 122-125)

Our general impression of Erkenwald in the first half of the plot is as a man of remarkable self-restraint, resolution, and piety. The
portrait of the man whose calm assurance places him above the strife and variance of this life is in fact a traditional feature of hagiographic literature. St. Anthony, we are told, was strikingly different from other men:

His face, too, had a great and indescribable charm in it. And he had this added gift from the Savior: if he was present in a gathering of monks and someone who had no previous acquaintance with him wished to see him, as soon as he arrived he would pass over the others and run to Anthony as if drawn by his eyes. It was not his stature of figure that made him stand out from the rest, but his settled character and the purity of his soul. For his soul was unperturbed, and so his outward appearance was calm.  

And again, in the Life of St. Martin we are given this description:

No one ever saw him angered, no one saw him excited, none saw him grieving, none saw him laughing. He was always just the same, with a kind of celestial joy shining in his face, so that he seemed more than human.

This last phrase, "he seemed more than human," accurately describes the actions and attitudes of Bishop Erkenwald in the first part of our poem, for an effort seems to have been made to separate him from the characterizing features of common humanity, the "pepul" of the poem. This separateness is established not by the mere outward appearance of the saint (note that only the mysterious corpse is described in detail), but by his defining actions and their contrast with those of the other figures in the poem.

In the second half of St. Erkenwald however, after the true identity of the corpse has been revealed, the emphasis on the hero's "more than human" qualities is perceptibly diminished. The Erkenwald of the second half of the plot is more involved and emotional than aloof and serene.
A new emotional intensity is conveyed through the saint's public actions: he sighs (v. 189), sheds tears of compassion (v. 314), and questions the corpse "with bale at his hert" (v. 257).

Our general impression of Erkenwald as a human figure rather than a superhuman one in the second half of the plot is also reinforced by the poem's shift from a narrative to a dramatic mode of presentation. No longer are we given terse narrative statements such as "pes he comaundit," (v. 115) or "he grette after grace" (v. 126), for now the words are placed in the character's own mouth. Instead of a narrative statement like "pe Bischop his nome asked" in the latter half of the plot, we are given the precise words which the Bishop used:

Sithen we wot not quow pou art, witerus pisel wen,  
In worlde quart wege pou was, and quy pou pus ligges,  
How longe pou has layne here, and quit laghe pou usyt,  
Queper are pou joyned to joy ober juggid to pyne.  

(vv. 185-188)

As a result of direct discourse, Bishop Erkenwald assumes the dimensions of a living man, one who is emotional, compassionate, and speaks with a mortal voice.

The increase in direct discourse attributed to the poem's hero is likely the contribution of the poet of St. Erkenwald. It is improbable that the dialogue which appears in the second half of the plot is lifted verbatim from some earlier account of a confrontation between St. Erkenwald and a mysterious corpse. The compassion and emotion of the saint, however, are most certainly part of hagiographic tradition, another facet of the perfection which is sainthood. Saints, although they often appear removed
from mundane concerns, are capable of being moved. In the Life of St. Martin, for example, the same work from which we quoted the portrait of the "more than mortal" saint earlier, we are also told, in the episode concerning the resuscitation of the dead catechumen, that when Martin learned of this death, he rushed to the scene of the funeral, "weeping and uttering lamentations." 36

What is instructive about the combination of the portrait of the calmness and authority of the "more than human" saint with that of the emotional involvement of the compassionate saint is that they are combined within the scope of a single short narrative, thereby producing in the Bishop's character a curious bifurcated effect. Significantly, this effect parallels the impression left by the character of the mysterious corpse, for it too seemingly begins as one thing and ends, rather surprisingly, as something quite different.

Moreover, this shift in the basis of characterization is evident even in the crowd of "peul" who seem to be almost continually present during the course of the action. Briefly, there are two kinds of crowds which the heroes of hagiographic literature usually confront. One kind is composed of the large numbers of people who flock to a saint out of reverence, asking him for instruction in holy living or importuning miracles. At the very worst, this type of crowd can become something of an annoyance to a saint by interrupting his normal course of life or interfering with his ascetical practices. In the Life of St. Anthony, for example, the holy man is upset by the large number of disciples who have gathered around him, for because of them he was "not permitted to
withdraw as he had proposed to himself and wished," and therefore he justifies his retreat to a more remote part of the Egyptian desert in this manner:

"Since the crowds do not permit me to be alone, therefore I want to go to the Upper Thebaid because of the many annoyances I am subjected to here and especially because they ask me things beyond my power." [37]

For the most part, however, this crowd is in complete accord with its master and imitates his every action. Such is apparently the case with Erkenwald's "prelacie," those clerics who accompany the saint on his journey into Essex (v. 107f) and who later make up "pe hegte gynge" (v. 137) which follows Erkenwald to his confrontation with the corpse. This group seems to assume the very character of the Bishop, though it is never sketched in detail by the narrator.

But there is another kind of crowd in St. Erkenwald: the "pepul" who flock to see the tomb and corpse when they are first discovered and whose clamoring the Bishop tries to stop:

Tulkes tolden hym pe tale with troubulle in pe pepul;  
And suche a cry aboute a cors crakit evermore,  
The bishop sende hit to blynne by bedels and lettres  
(vv. 109-111)

By þat he come to þe kyrye kydde of Saynt Paule,  
Mony hym metten on þat meere, þe mervayle to telle;  
He passyd into his palais and þes he comaundit,  
And devoydit fro þe dede and ditte þe durre after.  
(vv. 113-116)

The actions of "pe pepul" are for the most part antithetical to those of Erkenwald. They rush to see the tomb (v. 61f), while the saint chooses to avoid it when he arrives at London (v. 115f). They turn to the
"librarie" to discover the identity of the corpse (v. 155), while the saint asks for divine assistance (vv. 117-125). And in the end, Erkenwald must deliver a sermon to them on the limitation of human ability:

\[ Hit \ is \ mervaile \ to \ men, \ pat \ mounts \ to \ litelle \\
Towarde \ þe \ providens \ of \ þe \ Prince \ þat \ Paradis \ weldes, \\
Quen \ hym \ luste \ to \ unlouke \ þe \ leste \ of \ his \ mys\texte. \]

(vv. 160-162)

The rather forward crowd which appears in the earlier part of St. Erkenwald is related to other crowds in hagiographic literature which are either openly antagonistic toward the holy man or are mistaken about some matter of importance and thus in need of correction. In its most malevolent form, this crowd can be a threat to the very life of the saint:

I will also relate what happened in the country of the Aedui. He was demolishing a temple there also, when a frenzied mob of rustic pagans made a rush at him and one of them, more audacious than the rest, drew his sword and went for him. Throwing back his cloak, Martin offered his bare neck to the stroke. Nor was the pagan slow to strike but, when his hand was well above his head, he fell flat on his back. Stricken with the fear of God, he asked for pardon. 38

Often, however, the saint merely needs to set "pe pepul" straight about some matter which pertains to the Christian faith. For example, again in the Life of St. Martin there is an episode in which the saint summons up the spirit of certain remains which were venerated by the populace of the place in order to show that an evil practice, rather than true veneration, is being perpetuated:
Standing on the grave itself, he prayed to Our Lord to make it known who was buried there and what his character had been. Then, turning to the left, he saw a ghost standing close by, foul and grim. He ordered him to give his name and character. He gave his name and confessed to a guilty past. He had been a robber, and had been executed for his crimes, but had become an object of devotion through a mistake of the common people. In reality he had nothing in common with martyrs; glory was their portion, punishment his.

The others who were present had heard a voice speaking in an inexplicable manner but had seen no one. Martin now described what he had seen and gave orders for the altar which had stood there to be removed. Thus he rid the population of a false and superstitious belief. 39

The faulty judgment which sometimes characterizes the "common people" who make up many of the crowds which are found in hagiographic literature is also demonstrated by the following episode from the Life of St. Germanus, in which the Pelagianism of the Britons is corrected by the arguments of the saint and his party:

And indeed there was assembled at the meeting-place a crowd of vast proportions, wives and children amongst them, drawn by the occasion. The people were present both as spectators and as jury-men. The two parties faced each other, ill-matched and on unequal terms. On the one side was divine authority, on the other human presumption; on this side, faith, on that side, bad faith; those owned allegiance to Pelagius, these to Christ. 40

By the end of the debate, "pe pepul" are set aright and the proper faith restored.

Like many of the malevolent crowds, the crowd in St. Erkenwald is unruly and clamorous, and like many of the crowds of common people, its ideas and values are in need of correction. This is the reason Erkenwald prays to God that the solution to the corpse's mystery be revealed to him, so that this information can be used in "confirmynge
"pi Cristen faithe" (v. 124). And again just before he speaks to the corpse, Erkenwald tells the crowd assembled that what they will witness is of value as a religious lesson:

(Anande) hat, in fastynge of your faithe and of fyne bileve,
I shal asay 3ow so verrayly of vertues his,
hat 3e may leve upon longe hat he is lord my3ty,
And fayne 3our talent to fullillle, if 3e hym frende leves.

(vv. 173-176)

Finally, like the malevolent or misinformed crowds of hagiographic tradition, the crowd in St. Erkenwald is set aright during the course of the narrative.

This process of correction is presented through the actions of the crowd of "pe pul" in the poem. After the revelation of the corpse's true identity, however, the crowd becomes perceptibly more docile and orderly. After the first speech of the resuscitated corpse, for example, we are told:

Quil he in spelunde *peu* spake, *per* sprange in the pepulle
In al *pis* worlde no worde, ne wakenyd no noice,
Bot al as still as pe ston stoden and listonde,
With meche wonder forwrast, and wepid ful mony.

(vv. 217-220)

This is quite a change from "pe pepul" who earlier had raised "suche a cry abouete a cors" that the Bishop felt compelled to silence them. And by the end of the poem, the same group which had earlier "ronnen radly in route" (v. 62) to get to the tomb now are said to leave the scene of the confrontation and miracle in a quite orderly fashion:

*pe* was lovyngoure Lorde with loves uphelden;
Meche mournynge and myrthe was mellyd togeder;
*pe* passyd forthe in procession, and alle *pe pepulle* folowid,
And alle *pe belles* in *pe burghe beryd at ones.

(vv. 337-340)
This shift in characterization parallels the shift already noted in the portraits of the mysterious corpse and Bishop Erkenwald. In each case, the initial characterization is altered or modified so that the figure who appears in the latter half of the plot is noticeably different from its counterpart in the first half. Also, each of these shifts is keyed by the revelation of the true identity of the corpse. Not only do we encounter a more human and sympathetic figure in the corpse than earlier descriptions had let us see, but we also meet a more human (that is, more involved and emotional) saintly hero and a seemingly reformed populace who listen to the dialogue between the resuscitated corpse and the saint.

This pattern of character alteration produces a conformity among the figures in the poem. In the second half of the poem, the mysterious corpse, as well as Erkenwald and "Þe pepul," are "human" in the sense that they now communicate and are capable of feeling emotion:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þen humyd he þat þer lay, and his hedde waggyd,} \\
\text{And geff a gronynge ful grete, and to Godde sayde:} \\
\text{`Mæstye Maker of men, thy myghtes are grete!} \\
\text{How myȝt þi mercy to me amounte any tyme?'}
\end{align*}
\]

(vv. 281-284)

Similarly, Erkenwald's new-found emotional involvement in the plight of the corpse:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And þe bysshop balefully bere doun his eghen,} \\
\text{þat hade no space to speke, so apakly he þoskyd,} \\
\text{Til he toke hym a tôme, and to þe toumbe lokyd,} \\
\text{To þe liche þer hit lay, with lavande teres,}
\end{align*}
\]

(vv. 311-314)
is echoed by the emotional response of the once-rowdy populace:

\[ \text{þus dulfull þis deede body devisyt hit sorowe,} \]
\[ \text{þat alle wepyd for woo, þe wordes þat herden.} \]
\[ (v. 309f) \]

What might be called the common humanity of these figures is interesting in that these characters, especially Erkenwald and the corpse, had earlier been presented as uncommon figures, one a "more than human" saint and the other a kind of subhuman phenomenon to be wondered at. The importance of the convergence of these figures on a common level of human emotion and compassion should not be overlooked, and one of our main purposes in the chapters which follow will be to determine how this pattern of character alteration which we have described is related to the major themes of the poem.

To sum up, the plot of St. Erkenwald is meant to recount a single event in the life of a saint and to present that event in a dramatic and engaging form. The plot is shaped in the general pattern of other (and more primitive) tales which combine the motifs of the discovery of remains, resuscitation, and salvation by posthumous baptism, with one important qualification: the motif of the discovery of remains and its attendant theme of the establishment of the identity of the remains have been expanded to the extent that they comprise approximately one half of the entire plot, occupying as much space as the rest of the motifs combined. This expansion produces a bifurcated plot, one in which characters and action pivot on the revelation of the true identity of the corpse. The characters in the poem are then molded to this bifurcated
plot, assuming an altered appearance after the revelation of the corpse's identity.

Our task now is to show how this expansion of the discovery of remains motif and the pattern of alteration in the characters have been accomplished. To do this, it is necessary to examine next the ways in which vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, and narrative technique contribute to Erkenwald's significant form and help to define the import of its action and characters.
NOTES

1St. Erkenwald, p. lxxxiii n. 53. Savage's text is used for all quotations from St. Erkenwald.

2This is the first sense of legend listed in the NED. The other senses recorded are: "2. A collection of saints' lives or of stories of a similar character (earliest recorded usage, c. 1340); 3. A story, history, account (earliest usage, 1377); 4. A roll, list, record (1377); 5. Ecl. A book of readings or 'lessons' for use at divine service, containing passages from Scripture and the lives of the saints (c. 1440); 6. An unauthentic or non-historical story, especially one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical (1613); 7. A writing, inscription, or motto; chiefly specified in Numismatics, the words or letters impressed upon a coin or medal."


5Leclercq, p. 200.

6This phrase is quoted from Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison, Wisconsin, 1967), p. 240. Ruggiers uses the phrase to conceptualize a general impression which is left by several of the Canterbury Tales: the Prioress's Tale, Second Nun's Tale, Man of Law's Tale, and Clerk's Tale, each of which projects a strong element of Christian belief, and thus to the modern reader may seem somewhat heavyhanded.


9Hoare, pp. 152, 155, 159, 161, 164, and passim.

10Savage, p. lxiv.

11Hoare, p. 20f.

12p. 201f.


14G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, 2nd ed. (New York, 1961), p. 154: "Let us begin our survey with a contemporary reminder of the three great types of original sources upon which the medieval homilist could draw at pleasure. Excerpts 'de sanctorum patrum ac doctorum legendis et scriptis' represent, in the first place the great majority of such exempla in common use."

15"All search for the direct source of this miracle of St. Erkenwald has hitherto proved fruitless. Four separate Latin Vitae of the saint exist, but none mentions any miracle performed by him that resembles in the slightest degree the one here ascribed to him" (Savage, p. xiii).

16See, for example, Middle English Sermons, ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS, o. s., 209 (London, 1940), No. 5 (p. 20), No. 9 (p. 58), No. 14 (p. 78), and No. 31 (p. 160).

17An Alphabet of Tales, p. 265f.


19Savage, p. xxi.

20Savage, p. xxii. It is also listed as a separate motif in Stith Thompson, Motif Index of Folk Literature (Bloomington, 1955), D2167. Additional information on the motif of the corpse magically saved from corruption and its association with the cult of the saints may be found in "Saintyres de l'incorruption des corps saints," Bulletin et Memorandum de la Societe d'Anthropologie des Paris, 7th series, IV (1923), 84-100.

21Hoare, p. 173f.

22This verse has special relevance to persecution and martyrdom: "But you will be delivered up by your parents and brothers and relatives and friends; and some of you they will put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake; yet not a hair of your head shall perish"
(Luke 21. 16-18). The belief expressed here concerning a symbolically significant preservation of the martyr's body seems to grow out of the ambiguity of this passage: Christ speaks of his followers being killed and at the same time protected. Hence the idea that the protection was subsequent to the martyrdom and symbolized God's favor on those who were steadfast in the faith.

23An Alphabet of Tales, p. 393.
24Supra, p. 24.
26Hoare, p. 43.
27An Alphabet of Tales, p. 393.
28The Latin noun miraculum, from which the English word is derived, means simply "wonder," "surprise," or "amazement."
29Savage, p. xxiiif.
31A more detailed description of this hagiographic motif, its purposes and literary origins may be found in T. McAlindon, "Magic, Fate, and Providence in Medieval Narrative and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," RES, n. s., XVI (1965), 124-132. An older discussion of confrontations with demonic figures in literature other than hagiography is John M. Kemble, ed., The Dialogue of Salmon and Saturnus (London, 1848), pp. 1-131.
32The Early South English Legendary, p. 455.
33An Alphabet of Tales, p. 49.
34An Alphabet of Tales, p. 257f.
35The Life of Saint Anthony, p. 77.
36Hoare, p. 43.
37Hoare, p. 21.
38The Life of Saint Anthony, p. 61.
39Hoare, p. 29.
40Hoare, p. 25.
41Hoare, p. 298.
CHAPTER TWO: THE EVIDENCE OF STYLE

Correspondence between thought and expression is a mark of true poetic artistry. An accomplished poet will invariably choose those words and rhetorical patterns which express the fine shades of significance which he has built into his work.

Thus by analyzing how something is said in a poem we quite often learn as much as by attending to what is being said. In St. Erkenwald, for example, action and character tend to be defined as well as simply described by the poem's language. On a larger scale, the shape of the plot is related to the habitual patterns of syntax which help to create the dominant tone and atmosphere of the poem as a whole. And finally, narrative point of view must be considered, for along with the poem's diction and syntax it helps to determine the direction which the audience's approbation and sympathies should take.

The purpose of this chapter then is to investigate the ways in which thought and expression have been correlated in St. Erkenwald. As was the case with our examination of the literary backgrounds of the poem in the previous chapter, the discovery of significant stylistic features will help us formulate a valid concept of the poem's prevailing themes.
1. Patterns of Vocabulary

Surely the most distinctive feature of style in alliterative poetry is the persistent use of variation in both poetic vocabulary and syntax:

The redesignation of objects, concepts, and characters by varied synonyms is part of the technique of composition that was originally developed to meet the needs of oral poets, and a certain amount of variation is characteristic of all oral poetry; but in the English tradition variation became the dominant stylistic feature, "the soul of Old English poetry," as Klaeber called it, and it remained so even after the tradition had become literate, providing the poets not only with an easy means of ornamentation but with a subtle and analytical method of defining concepts and making statements. We are apt to recognize only the ornamental function of the technique, dismissing the varied synonyms as merely "elegant variation," a stylistic fault in our view, but this is only because variation and its related traits are so foreign to the styles to which we are accustomed in modern fiction and non-alliterative verse.¹

As our study of the literary backgrounds of the characters in St. Erkenwald has suggested, the identifying qualities of the two central characters tend to shift during the course of the plot. This shift is mirrored in the vocabulary which is used to designate and describe the actions of Bishop Erkenwald and the mysterious corpse. The modes of designation employed in the poem reinforce the importance of the theme of identity, a theme which has gained new prominence as a result of St. Erkenwald's expansion of the discovery of remains motif.

One of the epithets which elevates the figure of Bishop Erkenwald is the title "Ser" (vv. 108, 118, 225). This designation derives its quality of stylistic elevation from its conventional use as a form of
address for the heroes of romances, the chevaliers, and its application here to a bishop is an instance of the power of conventional vocabulary to lend an aura of dignity to a character outside its normal genre. In fact, when we are told that the Bishop "buskyd piderwarde bytyme on his blonke" (v. 112), we cannot help but connect him with a noble knight such as Gawain:

Gawayn on blonk ful bene
To þe kyngez burȝ buskez bolde.²

Although it may be argued that the epithets of knighthood are less enhancing than those of sainthood, it would be a serious misreading of the text to say that such epithets do anything other than lend dignity to the figure of Erkenwald. The poet's purpose in importing this touch of romance vocabulary, as we shall see, is related to his attempt to portray Erkenwald as "more than human," a man whose composure and decorous action under even the most unusual circumstances sets him apart from ordinary men. Like the knights of romance, who are known for both their courage and their gentilesse, Erkenwald's status as the poem's hero involves, throughout much of the poem, the complementary qualities of sanctity and gentility.

The first time the appellation "Ser" appears it contributes to the author's obvious attempt to establish the distinctive role of the Bishop in the poem:
be bodeworde to be byschop was broght on a quyle,
Of pat buriede body al be bolde wonder;
be primate with his prelacie was parteid fro home;
In Essex was Ser Erkenwolde, an abbat to visite.

Tulkes tolden hym pe tale with troublle in pe pepul;
And suche a cry aboute a cors crakit evermore,
The bishop sene hit to blynne by bedels and lettres,
Ande buskyd piderwarde bytyme on his blonke after.

( vv. 105-112)

In this passage, Erkenwald's rank and status is established by the
accumulative effect of the nouns which have been used to designate him.
He is identified twice by the substantive "bishop," once by the noun
"primate," and of course by the title "Ser." In contrast to the mundane
pronoun "he," which might have been employed in the passage, or one of the
common alliterative synonyms for "man" which the poet had at his disposal,
these words emphasize the Bishop's superior station in life, his authority,
and his worth.

Significantly, the poet has used almost all of his diminutive or
colorless designations for the other figures described in this passage.
Those who carry the news of the strange tomb and corpse to the bishop,
for example, are merely "tulkes," a general alliterative synonym for
man which carries little particularizing significance.3 The mysterious
corpse itself, which of course is to become one of the central figures
in the poem, is in this passage designated simply as "pat buriede
body" and "a cors." Neither term gives any particular prominence to
the figure so designated or so much as suggests the significant role
this figure will eventually assume. The diction of the passage, then,
is designed to focus the audience's attention on the figure of Bishop
Erkenwald, the distinctive features of his identity, and his prominent
role in the plot. Accordingly, the substantive vocabulary used to
designate the other figures who appear or are alluded to in this passage is modulated so as to imply their inconsequence beside the figure of the Bishop. It is as if, in modern cinematographic terms, the Bishop were being emphasized with a close-up perspective while the figures around him had been deliberately blurred into an indistinguishable mass of background "tulkes" and "pepul."

However, at four points in the action Erkenwald is designated by a conventional alliterative synonym which in this poem is normally used only to refer to members of the human race in general or to figures who by their social station or narrative function are not considered important enough to warrant a distinctive identity.4

The first of the common alliterative synonyms for "man" assigned to Erkenwald occurs near the beginning of the poem:

Ther was a byschop in þat burghe, blessyd and sacryd:
Saynt Erkenwalde, as I hope, þat holy mon hatte.
(v. 3f)

In this passage, however, the generalizing and potentially diminishing implications of Erkenwald's designation as a mere "mon" are neutralized by the addition of the adjective "holy," which once again asserts an aspect of the Bishop's character which sets him apart from common humanity. The second occurrence of a common alliterative synonym used to designate Erkenwald operates in much the same fashion, with a modifying phrase neutralizing potential diminution:

"þou says soþe," quoþ þe segge þat sacrid was byschop
(v. 159)
"Segge" is a synonym which throughout the poem is used to designate a common man, usually an anonymous or hypothetical figure:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder} \\
\text{Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade.} \\
\text{(v. 99f)} \\
\text{þis cite I ȝemyd,} \\
\text{Under a prince of parage of paynymes laghe,} \\
\text{And uche segge þat him sewide þe same faythe trowid.} \\
\text{(vv. 202-204)} \\
\text{Hungrie inwith helle-hole, and herken after meelees,} \\
\text{Longe er ho þat soper se, oper segge hyr to lathe.} \\
\text{(v. 307f)}
\end{align*}
\]

The application of the synonym "segge" to Erkenwald, however, is qualified by the relative construction which modifies it ("þat sacrid was byschop"). The force of this modifying phrase is to extrapolate the hero's identification with common humanity into a distinct statement of those particularizing qualities (his character and social rank) which set him apart from other men. Thus the first two designations of Erkenwald with a common alliterative synonym for "man" actually sustain the impression of the Bishop's distinctive identity and superior status through the implications of modifying syntactic elements which surround them.

The final two common designations are another matter. First of all, it should be pointed out that the two examples discussed thus far occur in the first half of the plot (vv. 33-176), while the last two appear in the final section of narrative action. In the previous chapter, we found that the character of Erkenwald is subtly altered in the second half of the poem: he becomes more emotionally involved than he was in the
first half of the poem. That is, he shifts from a "more than human"
saint to a figure of compassion and concern and in so doing he assumes a
stance closer to that of common humanity. Thus the very first substantive
applied to the Bishop in the second half of the plot (v. 177ff) is
"segge," but this time that designation is used without the qualifying
phrase which had neutralized its commonness in verse 159. Instead, the
starkness of this substantive goes unmitigated:

Quen þe segge hade þus sayde, and syked þerafter
þe bryȝt body in þe burynes brayed a litelle,
And with a drery dreme he dryves owte wordes

(vv. 189-191)

In this passage, Erkenwald is actually defined by his common humanity
alone, and not by his particularizing virtues or status in life. This
unprecedented designation of the hero signals the shift in Erkenwald's
character from the powerful figure of authority encountered in the first
half of the plot to an involved and emotionally concerned figure of the
second half. By reminding the audience that Erkenwald is basically a
"segge" like the rest of the figures in the poem, the narrator has pre-
pared the way for a gradual reduction of his stature during the remain-
der of the poem. To be sure, Erkenwald is still designated by such
substantives as "bischop" (vv. 193, 221, 257, 273, etc.), but the impli-
cation of his designation with certain alliterative synonyms which connect
him with common humanity must not be ignored, for they suggest that the
poem's hero is being viewed through a new and significant perspective.

Particularly important is the synonym employed in the following
passage:
"Oure Lorde lene," quoth pat lede, "pat þou lyfe hades, By Goddes leve, as longe as I myȝt lacche water,
And cast upon þi cors, and carpe þes wordes:
"I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and his fre Childes
And of þe gracious Holy Goste";--and not one grue lenger
þen þof þou droppyd doun dede, hit daungerde me lasse."

(vv. 315-320)

Here Erkenwald's designation as a "lede" associates him once more with common humanity, for this particular alliterative synonym for "man" is used consistently in St. Erkenwald to designate minor figures in the poem or to refer indiscriminately to unidentified persons. For example, the "dene" of St. Paul's, an anonymous figure in the poem, is called a "lede" (v. 146), and in his speech to Erkenwald uses this same word to express the fact that no man ("lede") then alive, no matter what his age, could remember a time when such a man ("mon") as the corpse in the tomb ruled London (v. 150f). Similarly, the corpse defines its own identity by saying that when he was alive he was "never kynge ne cayser ne ȝet no knyȝt nothyre," but merely a "lede of þe laghe" (v. 199f).

Erkenwald's status as a "lede" is particularly significant at this point, for he is about to administer the sacrament of baptism, which will issue in the salvation of the pagan judge's soul, and one which the reader might expect would be used to extol, in true hagiographic fashion, the marvelous powers of the poem's saintly hero. But instead, the hero's association with common humanity is emphasized by the use of the synonym "lede."

It is not difficult to see that the designation of Erkenwald as a "lede" at the moment of the baptism of the corpse is designed to reinforce
the idea that a miraculous power, one which far transcends human abilities, is at work. It is of course the power of God which operates through the sacrament and effects the pagan judge's redemption. In the face of this miraculous demonstration of divine power, Erkenwald's status seems humble by comparison, for though he is "sacryd" and "holy" to men, he is yet a mere "lede" when viewed in the perspective of God's transcendent power.

Thus both in terms of his hagiographic image (from "more than human" to a compassionate weeper) and in terms of the vocabulary used to designate him, Erkenwald may be said to move from the level of the superhuman to the status of a member of common humanity. This subtle diminution of his stature, as we shall see later, is part of the poem's attempt to establish human identity within the context of a universe controlled by a transcendent deity.

The system of alliterative synonyms used to designate the pagan judge is a good deal less complex. The most frequently employed nouns are those which emphasize the inanimate quality of the judge's present state, including the terms "body" (vv. 76, 106, 190, 193, 221, etc.), "cors" (vv. 110, 177), and the more archaic-sounding designations "lyche" or "lykham" (vv. 147, 179, 314). Each of these words can be fitted with modifiers which imply a specific aspect of the corpse. For example, when the narrator begins to describe the impressive outward appearance of the corpse in the tomb, he uses the phrase "a blisfulle body opon pe bothum lyggid" (v. 76), the adjective "blisfulle" coloring
our view of the corpse by suggesting that all is well with this body because of its resplendent surroundings.

In the latter half of the plot, however, after the pagan judge has been resuscitated, we begin to feel more of the life and the essential humanness of the corpse than was before possible. And although the corpse is still called "be dede body" (vv. 225 and 309), at the moment of its baptism the impression of life and humanity which hover about the body emerges in the form of an alliterative synonym for "man":

> With þat worde þat he warpyd, þe wete of eghen<br>And teres trillyd adoun, and on þe toumbe lighten;<br>And one felle on his face, and be freke syked.<br>Þen sayd he with a sadde soun: "Oure Savyoure be lovyd!"

(vv. 321-324)

Thus, interestingly, later in the same passage which defines Erkenwald as a mere "leda," the corpse ascends to the level of a "freke." We may conclude then, that while the hero of the poem descends from the level of the superhuman to the level of common humanity, the corpse moves from the level of an inanimate "lykham" upward to the status of a living person, a "freke." This vocabulary indication of the convergence of the hero and corpse on a level of common humanity is yet another indication that the poem's message has to do with the status of mankind in general and in particular with man's relationship with the transcendent God whose power is described in the same passage.

The figure of God is likewise defined by the various wrods and phrases which are used to designate Him. Although Larry D. Benson has
contended that the designations for the Godhead in this poem "emphasize almost exclusively God's role as Judge of man" and that this emphasis seems to be part of the "major theme of the poem, God's justice," 5 the validity of his conclusions is suspect because he considers only the poem's four periphrastic constructions which refer to the Deity, while ignoring the non-periphrastic designations altogether. When taken together, these designations emphasize most strongly God's transcendent, His absolute superiority to man, and not merely His role as man's Judge.

The regular emphasis of those designations which identify the Godhead by evoking one or more of the divine attributes is either on God's infinite and absolute authority over man and the universe or his specific quality of omnipotence. Thus one of the first designations of God in St. Erkenwald is "Soverayn" (v. 120), followed closely by the epithet "Lorde" (v. 123). The context of these designations is suggestive in that these terms in effect evoke an image of a power and authority beyond that of the poem's hero, who is of course himself a figure of great authority and power in the first half of the poem's plot:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{\textit{Þe derke nyg\textt{t} overdrofe, and day-belle ronge;}} \\
\text{And Ser Erkenwolde was up in Þe ughten ere Þen,} \\
\text{\textit{Þat weindeghe al Þe nyg\textt{t} hade na(i)tyd his houres,}} \\
\text{To biseche his Soverayn, of his swete grace,} \\
\text{To vouche-safe to revele hym hit by avis(i)on or elles:}} \\
\text{\textit{"Þaghe I be unworthy," al wepande he sayde,}} \\
\text{Thurghe his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my Lorde,} \\
\text{In confirmynge Þi Cristen faiithe, fulsen me to kenne} \\
\text{Þe mysterie of Þi mervaila Þat men opon wondres."} \\
\text{(vv. 117-125)}
\end{align*}\]
The designations "Soverayn" and "Lorde" imply a hierarchical structure of wisdom and power which extends beyond the figure of Erkenwald. And yet this "holy man," "saynt" and "ser" to the "wehes" and "tulkes" recognizes and thus tacitly assents to the superiority of a heavenly Lord, thus witnessing to God's transcendance.

Despite Benson's contention that the God of the Cotton Nero poems, a "majestic figure, sitting 'on high,'" is absent from St. Erkenwald, the infinite distance which separates God from his earthly creation, man, is emphasized in this poem, and often in very explicit terms, such as the pagan judge's unmistakable references to a majestic God: "Now herid be þou, hege God" (v. 325) and "I heere þerof my hege God" (v. 339). Similarly, a phrase such as "pe riche Kynge of reson, þat riȝt ever alowes" (v. 267) contains an implicit reference to God's cosmic superiority by the designation of Him as a King.

Certainly the periphrases "pe Prince þat Paradis weldes" (v. 161) and "Hym þat al redes" (l.192) are also designed to emphasize God's unlimited power and authority. The first of these phrases occurs as part of Erkenwald's speech to the crowd which has assembled to see him confront the mysterious corpse (vv. 159-176), and therefore constitutes another example of the poem's most powerful human figure admitting his limitations in comparison to God's omnipotence. The second of these two periphrases, "Hym þat al redes," is particularly suited to its context:

"Now, lykhame, þat þ (us) lies, layne þou no lenger!
Sythen Jhesus has juggit today his joy to be schewyde,

Be þou bone to his bode, I bydde in his behalve;
As he was bende on a beme, quen he his blode schedde,
As thou hit wost wyterly, and we hit wele leven,
Ansuarne here to my sawe councel no trouthe!"

* * * * * * *

Quen þe segge hade þus sayde, and syked þerafter,
þe bryȝt body in þe burynes brayd a litelle,
And with a drery dreme he dryves owte wordes
þurghe sum lant goste lyfe of hym þat al redes
(vv. 179-184 and 189-192)

Only an omnipotent God, one who "al redes," could grant the Bishop's request that a corpse which has been dead for hundreds of years be resuscitated, and only a phrase which stressed divine omnipotence could be wholly appropriate in the description of such a miraculous event.

Two other designations, "lord myȝty" (v. 175) and "Mȝty Maker of men" (v. 283), also clearly underscore the divine attribute of omnipotence. The first of these phrases is found in Erkenwald's speech to the crowd immediately before his confrontation with the mysterious corpse, the second is part of the corpse's supplication to God in its misery over the status of its soul in Limbo (vv. 283-296). Perhaps the significance of this second designation, apart from its reinforcement of the general theme of God's omnipotence, is the corpse's identification of that specific aspect of the divine character which is its soul's hope: God, being all-powerful, can reverse even the fate of a soul in misery if He so chooses.

These several synonyms and phrases strongly suggest that the most important attribute of God in St. Erkenwald is His absolute authority over mankind and His unlimited might. Only one phrase, "He þat rewardes uche a renke" (v. 275), clearly stresses God's status as the Judge of mankind, and yet even it contains an implicit reference to God's absolute
authority over man and thus His unlimited might in comparison to the restricted powers of man. The basic contrast between God's omnipotence and man's limitations is thus sustained by the designations of God in St. Erkenwald, so that once more thought goes hand-in-glove with expression.

The selective diction of St. Erkenwald, particularly its substantive modes of designation and its descriptive language, admirably demonstrates the complexity and intricacy of the poem's narrative art and provides a basis for evaluating the significance of particular characters and events in the plot. To summarize briefly, we have found thus far that the common alliterative synonyms for "man" and the more particularizing designations sometimes employed form a pattern which tends to elevate the figure of Erkenwald early in the poem by never referring to him with an unqualified alliterative synonym such as "weghe" or "segge." Later in the poem, however, as Erkenwald's role in the poem is modulated, he is linked with common humanity through the synonyms "segge" and "lede" which are used to designate him. A corresponding movement is observable in the vocabulary applied to the corpse, with its status being shifted from an inanimate "dede body" to a human "freke" during the course of the action. It can also be said that the single substantives and phrases which designate the Godhead in the poem emphasize strongly His infinite superiority to His creation, man, and His unlimited power and authority.

As is the case with its substantive modes of designation, the predicative vocabulary of the poem defines the elevated status of the Bishop and sustains his contrast with the crowd of "pepul". When, for example,
we are told that Erkenwald "syttes semely in pe sege of Saynt Paule
myster" (v. 35), an air of decorum is added to the saintly figure being
described: he not only holds the episcopal chair at St. Paul's, but he
does so in a "semely" manner. This air of decorum is sustained elsewhere
in the poem, as when the Bishop's preparations for performing high mass
are described in these terms: "be byschop hym shope solemnly to synge
be heghe masse" (1.129). He is described not simply as preparing himself,
but as doing so in a decorously solemn manner. A subsequent passage which
describes the Bishop's actual performance of the mass rites conveys a
similar tone of decorum: "Manerly with his ministres be masse he begynnes"
(v. 131).

The vocabulary's emphasis on the Bishop's decorum establishes a con-
trast between him and the crowds of people who come to see the tomb and
corpse. The stylistic distinctions between the Bishop and the crowd are
related to the hagiographic convention of the antagonistic or misguided
crowd, which we have discussed in the previous chapter. Thus it is that
Erkenwald's actions and conduct are most often described with a vocabulary
which is free from implications of unmannerly and hence churlish violence
or rashness.

Although Erkenwald does hurry to London when he is told about the
discovery of a mysterious corpse and the reaction of the populace
("buskyd," v. 112), he does so as a knight (like Gawain) might resolutely
set out on a quest, and not impetuously. And when he arrives in London,
his movements are characteristically defined by the rather elegant French
verb passel:
He passyd into his palais and pes he commaundit
(v. 115)

be prelate passide on be playn--ber plied to hym lordes
(v. 138)

Thus the poem's hero seems to always move in a dignified fashion from
one point in the poem's landscape to another, as this reserved progression
externalizes his status as a "more than human" figure.

In contrast, the description of the movement of the crowd of "pepul"
toward the mysterious tomb contains a vocabulary with quite different
implications:

Quen titynges token to be toun of be toumbe-wonder,
Mony hundrid hende men highide pider sone.
Burgeys boghit berto, bedels ande othire,
And mony a mesters-mon of maners dyverse.

Laddes laften hor werke and lepen piderwardes,
Ronnen radly in route with ryngande noyce;
ber commen pider of alle-kynnes so kely mony,
bat as alle be worlde were pider walon within a hondequile.
(vv. 57-64)

The opening lines of this passage describe how as the news of the discovery
of the tomb spread, this strange marvel began to attract the people of
London. The narrator's use of the phrase "hende men" in this passage at
first suggests a favorable view of the crowd which gathers to see the
tomb, but the ameliorative qualities of the adjective "hende" may simply
represent a specific reference to those highest on the social scale among
the crowd, the "burgeys" and "bedels" of line 59, rather than suggesting
moral approbation of the actions of these men. In a poem where social
gradation and rank are carefully acknowledged, diction often functions as
a means of presenting the realities of communal standards as well as
implying the criteria for ethical evaluation. It is also possible to see the ameliorative connotations of the adjective "hende" as being ironically undercut by the pejorative implications of the diction used to describe the actions of the other members of the crowd, with whom the "hende men" are linked by a common curiosity about the tomb and its contents. In fact, the verb "highe," which is used to designate the movement of the "hende men" toward the tomb, carries a connotation of haste and speed which is somewhat at odds with the ideal of measured and controlled motion which is characteristic of the "passing" of Erkenwald and his "heghe gynge."

The verbs which follow "highe" in the passage above accentuate the stylistic divergence between Erkenwald and the crowd and point toward a more significant conceptual contrast between the "holy mon" and the common people in the poem. The second verb in the passage, "boghit" (v. 59), is fairly neutral in connotation, perhaps again because the narrator wishes to retain a certain air of dignity in the presentation of the more prominent secular figures in the crowd, the burgesses and beadles. From this point on, however, the depreciatory implications of the diction tend to accelerate. The movement of the "laddes" is described with the verb "lepen," and the turbulent implications of this word set up an interesting contrast between the actions of these figures and those of Erkenwald. While "bouen" or "rayke" have little connotative value, "lepen" suggests a violence and haste in movement which is quite at odds with the characteristic dignified movement of Erkenwald. The diction of the next line
tends to reinforce this impression of deprecation by describing the crowd's advance on the tomb thus: "ronnen radly in route with ryngande noyce" (v. 62). The hasty violence implied by the phrase "ronnen radly" (radly="hastily") is fairly clear, once again reinforcing the suggestion of disorder and impropriety which is first hinted at in the verb "highide." The "route" which flocks to the tomb is then described as coming with a "ryngande noyce," and this detail of the clamor which is raised over the tomb is picked up later in the narrative when the "tulkes" who bring the news to Erkenwald mention that "suche a cry aboute a cors crakit evermore" (v. 110). The Bishop's reaction to this clamor and noise provides a clue to its meaning. Twice in the poem the audience is explicitly told that Erkenwald tries to stop the din which the people of London have raised, once by sending "bedels and lettres" back to the city from Essex (v. 111) and then later when he arrives in London, by commanding the people to "pes" (v. 115). Stylistically, the perjorative implications of this "cry aboute a cors" are increased by the appearance of the verb "crakit" to describe the people's clamoring. The Middle English verb craken, although originally suggesting only the act of uttering, speaking, or saying, seems by the fourteenth century to have taken on a perjorative quality which implied that to "crake" was to speak loudly or sharply or to boast. Thus to say that the people "crakit" about the tomb and its contents is to reinforce the general deprecatory tone of the passage and thereby to imply a negative judgment of the actions and attitudes which are being described.
Admittedly, most of the words with slightly deprecatory implications which are found in the passage quoted above are aimed directly at figures on the lower levels of the social scale, the "mesters-mon" and "ladders." And yet the deprecatory tone of these words is most certainly more than simple satire at the expense of the proletariat, for the vocabulary used to describe the actions of those highest on the social scale is not free from hints of disorderly haste (e.g. "highide," v. 58). Also, the last two lines of the passage lump together all the classes of people who come to the tomb, saying that it seemed that "alle be worlde were bider walon," and thus all these people are linked by a common curiosity and desire to see the marvelous tomb for themselves. It is this common attitude toward the tomb and its contents which is being undercut by the undignified implications of the vocabulary and by the fact that each movement of the crowd seems at odds with the actions of the holy man Erkenwald. The exact significance of this contrast on the level of vocabulary and action is not wholly clear until certain concepts have been revealed later in the plot, and yet the force of this in the style of their behavior is perceptible and prepares us for the more weighty contrast of ideas and attitudes which gradually emerges from the poem's action and statements.

We may note in conclusion that the predicative vocabulary which defines the actions of Erkenwald and the crowd not only provides the basis of a contrast between these two characters in the first part of the poem, but also defines their harmony at the end of the work, since the crowd
adopts Erkenwald's dignified manner of movement:

*pai passyd forthe in procession, and alle þe pepulle folowid,  
And alle þe belles in þe burghe beryd at ones.*

(v. 351f)

In this passage both saint and people are "in procession," suggesting a reserved and orderly movement. The fact that "þe pepul" now are described as orderly implies that their status in the poem has been significantly altered.

ii. The Function of Syntax

In his study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Larry D. Benson has defined for us the salient features of alliterative syntax. A typical sentence, he writes, consists of

a short statement extended from a single half-line throughout a series of verses by amplification (the dilatatio of the rhetoricians), the sense thus "variously drawn out from line to line," as in Mordred's lament for Gawain in the *Morte Arthure*:

>This was Sir Gawayne the gude, the gladdeste of othire, 
And the gracieuseste gome that undire God lyffede, 
Mane hardyste of bande, happyeste in armes, 
And the hendeste in hawle undire hevene rich...  

(vv. 3876-79)

The period begins with a complete clause in the first half-line—"This was Sir Gawayne the gude"—to which the poet adds a long series of coordinate appositives that define the good qualities of Gawain and extend the original clause from a single half-line to eleven full lines (I have quoted only the beginning of the period). Although this amplified method of constructing syntactic units may seem mere ornamentation to the modern reader, Benson assures us it performed a far more subtle function to the alliterative poet:
The potential disadvantages of this alliterative syntax—its tendencies toward mere repetition of form and content—are far outweighed by its advantages. Like the varied synonyms, this syntax is less an ornament than a tool of analysis, a method of defining concepts at the same time it presents them, and it leads to a style that depends upon particulars and implies rather than states the generalizations. This is apparent even in the traditional formulas, for most of them are analytical, formulized enumerations and progressions that provide a ready means of defining a concept by the parallel juxtaposition of its parts. For example, the common full-line formula for expressing the general idea that a city has been destroyed is that which appears in the Destruction of Troy: "Belyn and brent doun unto bare askes" (v. 5007). The formula is naturally analytical; it defines the destruction by the events—first the city broken down (by siege engines) and then the burning—and by their result—unto bare askes." The Gawain-poet extends the analysis even further when he writes "be borg britten and brent to bronj3 and aske3" (v. 2). The substitution of "brondez" for a modifier of "askez" extends the analysis to the result, and by coupling this with the preceding line, which is based on the formula used to report an attack on a town—"sithen be sege and be assault wat3 sessed at Troye"—the analysis is extended to a brief narrative: first there was the siege (the necessary bombardment of the walls) and then, when a breach was made, the assault itself, after which the city is first reduced to rubble and then put to the torch, leaving flaming brands and finally ashes.

Benson concludes that "such a style, in which the parts of an action, object, or concept are juxtaposed with a minimum of explicit explanation, leads at once to a multiplication of specific detail and to a structure that renders the details meaningful."

Since St. Erkenwald belongs to the same alliterative tradition as the poems which Benson is analyzing, we should be able to find the same syntactic features at work, and to suggest how these features direct our attention to larger habits of poetic construction, such as the organization of the poem's plot.

In these lines, for example,
we find the same amplification of a single concept through an enumeration of its parts. The first subject of this clause, Adam, is mentioned once by name and also defined by the two appositives which bracket his name, "oure fader" and "oure alder." These epithets both establish and emphasize (because we are told twice) that Adam is the progenitor of the human race. Then the first of the relative "bat"-phrases, "bat ete of bat appulle," identifies Adam yet again, this time by associating him with a particular act, eating the apple. Then the final bat-phrase, which is expanded to the length of a whole line, is placed in apposition with the last noun of the previous phrase, "appulle," thereby further defining the nature of Adam's act.

These verses give us a series of specific details, and, although the relation between these details is never explicitly stated, we know that the constituent parts of this clause define the general concept of man's first disobedience and its result, original sin. In fact, there is even a sequence implied in these verses: first we met Adam, then we hear of his deed, and then we are given the result of that deed, all of which hinges on the fact that what Adam did affects us all, since he was "oure fader."

The same technique, with specific elements being juxtaposed in order to imply a general process, may be found in the following line:
In cloutes, me thynkes,
Hom burde have rotid and bene rent in rattes longe sythen
(v. 2559f)

This sentence defines a particular object ("rattes"=rags) by the process which produces rags out of good cloth. That process is defined by the alliterating verbs "rotid and. . .rent," since the first means "to rot, decay," and the second describes tearing or shredding. Together, they imply a process which renders cloth into tattered and decomposed "rattes."

Another example of the way in which single verses of alliterative poetry can define a particular event by its constituent parts is provided by line 37 of St. Erkenwald:

þen was hit abatyd and beten doun, and buggyd efte new.

Here again we have a sequence of verbs coordinated by the simple conjunction "and" and linked by alliteration. The first verb in the sequence, "abatyd," has the general meaning "to demolish, destroy," and it is this general idea which is then developed in a more particular and concrete fashion in the second verb of the sequence, "beten doun," which implies the specific action required to demolish an old building. And finally, the third verb, "buggyd," indicates an action which could take place only after an older building had been demolished.

Although we have concentrated on the potential for analysis which is built into the poem's syntax, it is of course also possible to employ paratactic juxtaposition in such a way that a contrast or antithesis results. For example, verse 22 of St. Erkenwald contains in miniature a
significant conceptual contrast which is developed at length in the prologue:

Jupiter and Jono to Jhesu ober to James

The balance of the syntactic pattern noun-coordinating conjunction-noun at either end of the verse produces a clash of perspectives within the line between heathen deities and the Christian God and saint which parallels the theme of the competition of paganism and Christianity in England which is so prominent in the prologue.

In a similar fashion verse 188 establishes a contrast in eternal destinies:

Queþer art þou joyned to joy ober juggid to pyne.

Here the alliterative phrase "joyned to joy" is coordinated with its antithesis, "juggid to pyne," and the parallelism and balance of these two phrases implies a tension which is most explicitly developed on the level of the poem's plot, where man's eternal destiny is defined as balancing between the pain of hell which is the lot of the pagan judge's soul before his body is baptized and the joy of heaven which the judge experiences after the sacrament is administered.

Our final example of the way in which syntactic relations can define significant concepts by juxtaposing their constituent parts is perhaps the most artful use of analytic syntax to be found in St. Erkenwald:

3e were entouchid with his tethe, and take in pe glotte,
Bot mendoyd with a medecyn, 3e are made for to lyvye:
þat is fulloght in fonte, with faitheful bileve;
And þat han we myste alle merciles, myselfe and my soule.

(vv. 297-300)
The syntax of this entire verse-sentence offers several examples of the analytic method of defining actions and concepts, including the presentation of a sequential process ("entouchid with his tethe, and take in be glotte") and amplification by variation ("medecyn"="bat is fulloght in fonte" and "mendyde=made for to lyye"), but the most intriguing instance of this trait is contained in verse 299, where an alliterative phrase ("fullough in fonte") and an adjective-noun collocation have been juxtaposed, with the result that three distinct qualities of a particular concept, the sacrament of baptism, are presented.

The verb in the line, "fulloughed," implies the physical action involved in administering the sacrament, the pouring or sprinkling of water and the saying of prayers; the second element in the phrase, the substantive "font," represents a concrete physical object by means of which the visible species of the sacrament are administered; and finally, the appended phrase "faitheful bileve" implies an intangible state of mind which is a prerequisite for reception of the fruits of the sacrament. Thus within the boundaries of a single verse we find implied, though not explicitly stated, a theological analysis of the sacrament of baptism which is of course a central feature of the action.

The technique of analytic enumeration is used in St. Erkenwald to describe an act as mundane as the razing of an old building and the construction of a new one and to present a concept as serious as original sin. Since, as Benson's study has shown, this feature of alliterative style is meant to avert the tendency toward dull repetition to which its
syntax is heir, we should not be surprised to find it used for such divergent purposes. It is also possible that the alliterative poet's habit of juxtaposing specific details or acts in order to imply general concepts or results is carried over into the way in which dramatic events are organized and expressed.

As we have seen, sentences and single verses in the poem can define concepts and actions at the same time as it presents them by juxtaposing constituent elements so that the relation between these elements is implied and their total meaning can be construed. It is the deliberate casting of these varied elements into parallel syntactic constructions (e.g. noun-coordinating conjunction-noun) or accumulative juxtapositions (e.g. noun-appositive-modifying phrase) which reveals their semantic relation.

Perhaps, then, we should begin to look for such parallel arrangements in the narrative structure of the whole poem in order to understand the relation between its prologue and plot and among the various incidents which make up its single, continuous action.

Moreover, at the risk of overleaping ourselves, we might venture a comparison between the syntactic habit of analyzing through the enumeration of constituent parts and the general relationship between art and meaning in *St. Erkenwald*. The effect of analytic syntax is to render simple ideas, objects, and events more complex by dividing them into their several integral elements. For example, by dividing the sacrament of baptism into the integral elements of a particular action, a particular
object, and a specific volitional state, as the syntax of verse 299 in fact does, the idea of baptism in the poem has become a more complicated idea than it was before the analysis was performed. If then we stop to recall that hagiographic tales such as St. Erkenwald conventionally present a simple didactic message, and we make this simple message the equivalent of a single concept like baptism, we can see how a message, like a concept, could undergo a process of analysis on the level of the poem's plot structure which breaks general meaning into its constituent parts and then juxtaposes them with a minimum of explicit explanation. The structure of the typical alliterative sentence or verse (as defined by Benson) is a model for the narrative as a whole; incidents and actions in the plot exist as part of a series of variations of the poem's dominant theme and its meaning. The meaning itself is modified and progressively elucidated by these variations, and the relation between these individual variations is defined by a correspondence in form and content rather than by the overt statements of the narrator.

The effect of constructing a narrative through the parallel juxtaposition of its parts has been well defined by Benson:

In Sir Gawain the juxtapositions are used not only for their local, sometimes crass effects but also as the principal method of communicating meaning. This is what distinguishes structural variation from the use of parallels and contrasts that is essential to any work of art and from apparently similar narrative techniques, such as the entrelacement of French romance. In alliterative narratives form has an immediate semantic function that enables a poet to imply his generalizations and allow his narrative to communicate its meaning without the explicit comments that Chaucer employs.
iii. Narrative and Descriptive Techniques

Although medieval rhetoricians like Geoffrey of Vinsauf assembled and codified the various tropes and ornaments of style into rulebooks for poetic composition, no poem should be judged by these rules alone. Every medieval poem has its own individual rhetoric, a blend of conventional techniques recommended by the rhetoricians and methods which the author found suitable for accomplishing his desired aim.

One of these variable elements which influence the individual rhetoric of a poem is the stance which the author, as narrator, assumes in order to present his tale. His role may vary from that of a participant in the action to a figure who deliberately distances himself from the events he narrates, serving merely as a commentator. In one way or another, however, it is the narrator who determines the progress of the tale, its tone, its statement of theme, and thereby the total effect of the presentation.

In *St. Erkenwald*, the initial stance of the narrator is that of an omniscient authority:

At London in Englonde noȝt fulle longe sythen  
Sythen Crist suffrde on crosse, and Cristendome stablyde,  
Ther was a byschop in þat burghe, blessyd and sacryd:  
Saynt Erkenwolde, as I hope, þat holy mon hatte.  

(vv. 1-4)

He is unrestricted by temporal limitations, for he can move at will from the immediate present of his own and his audience's age back into the past, including the time of the Crucifixion (v. 2), the days when the heathen Hengist plunged England into paganism:
For hit hethen had bene in Hengyst dawes,
pat pê Saxones usaȝt haden sende hyder.

þbai bete oute þe Bretons, and broȝt hom into Wales,
And perversyd alle þe pepullþat in þat place dwellide,
(vv. 7-10)

and the mission of St. Augustine of Canterbury to restore England to
Christendom:

þen wos this reame renaide mony ronke þeres,
Til Saynt Austyn into Sandewiche was sende fro þe pope.

þen prechyd he here þe pure faythe and plantyd þe trouthe,
And convertyd alle þe communnates to Cristendame neve.
(vv. 11-14)

Having established his familiarity with the distant past, the
narrator then adopts the somewhat less remote time of Erkenwald's
bishopric in London as the imaginative present of the events which are
to be narrated, with himself serving as an authoritative intermediary
between this historical period and his own.

The authoritative omniscience of the narrator which is established
in the prologue is correlated with an amplified style, so that he at
first seems both an authority who may be believed and a rather loquacious
figure. The whole of the prologue is what the rhetoricians would call a
digressio, which is itself a method of dilatatio (amplification):

If it is desirable to amplify the treatise yet more fully,
go outside the bounds of the subject and withdraw from it a
little; let the pen digress, but not so widely that it will be
difficult to find the way back. . . . A kind of digression is
made when I turn aside from the material at hand, bringing in
first what is actually remote and altering the natural order.14

This dilatatio is achieved by such techniques as an extended analysis
of the general process of conversion which took place when Augustine of
Canterbury came to return Christianity to England:

\begin{quote}
ben prechyd he here þþe pure Máythe and plantyd þþe trouge,
And convertyd alle þþe communnates to Cristendame neve;
He turnyd temples þþat tyme þþat temyd to þþe develle,
And clansyd hom in Cristes nome, and kyrkes hom callid.
\end{quote}

He hurlyd owt hor ydols, and hade hym in sayntes,
And chaungit chevely hor nomes, and chargit hom better.
\hspace{1cm} (vv. 13-18)

Here parallel syntactic constructions are employed in order to specify the particular actions which are involved in the conversion. The first half-lines of verses 13, 15, and 17 contain a main clause which includes a pronoun which governs the verbs in the succeeding half-lines and even to the following lines. The result of this cumulative method of constructing verse sentences is that the narrator breaks the concept of conversion into a series of separate acts: preaching the faith, "planting" the truth, then converting the people on the basis of this preaching and planting.

The amplification is further extended by an enumeration of the old and new names of the temples:

\begin{quote}
thþt ere was of Appolyn is now of Saynt Petre;
Mahon to Saynt Margrete oper to Maudelayne.

þþe Synagoge of þþe Sonne was sett to oure Lady;
Jubiter and Jono to Jhesu oper to James.
\hspace{1cm} (vv. 19-22)
\end{quote}

Through this rhetorical screen of variation, parallelism, and cataloguing the figure of the narrator is visible: he is full of information and is fond of displaying it. This is a traditional role for the narrator of alliterative poems to assume. The narrator of Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight, for instance, feels compelled to begin and end his story about Arthur's Britain with an allusion to a still more distant past, the events surrounding the fall of Troy and the subsequent emigration of Aeneas to Rome and Brutus to Britain:

Sipen þe sege and þe assault watz sesed at Troye, þe borȝ brittened and brench to brandez and askez, þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:
Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
þat sipen depreded provinces, and patrounes bicone
Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles.
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
With gret bobbsunce þat burȝe he biges upon fyrst,
And nevenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
Tirius to Tuskan and telde bigynnes,
Langaberde in Lumbarde lyftes up homes,
And fer over þe French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
wyth wynne 15

The digressive nature of this alliterative prologue and its use of many of the same ornaments of style (variation, repetition) which we have discovered in the prologue to St. Erkenwald teaches us that the narrator of our hagiographic tale is adopting a conventional role of authoritative omniscience and elegant prolixity.

The narrator of St. Erkenwald has chosen to exercise his omniscience somewhat less conventionally. Outside the prologue, the narrator uses his omniscience only four times. The first of these occasions is his ironic comment on the people's opinion that the identity of the mysterious corpse can be discovered by searching in the collective memory of man:

"Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe;
He has ben kynge of þis kithe, as couthe lyt semes
He lyes dolven bus depe; hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade"

(vv. 97-100)
In this case the narrator interrupts the narrative to give us the information that this attempt at identifying the corpse will end in failure:

Bot þat ilke note wos noght, for nourne none couthe,
Noper by title, ne token, ne by tale noper,
þat ever wos brevyt in burghe, ne in bok(e) notyde,
þat ever mynnyd suche a mo(n), more ne lasse.

(vv. 101-104)

This intrusion, by the way, lends additional credence to our earlier contention that the crowd of "peupul" in St. Erkenwald are to be seen as misguided during the first half of the poem's plot. It is significant that our earlier indications of this lack of approbation for the crowd came from the connotations of the vocabulary applied to them, while in this passage the narrator molds our impressions explicitly. Throughout the poem in fact the reader must make do with a minimum of explicit commentary by the narrator, relying instead on perhaps one short statement of his which keys our response to subtler forms of evaluation, such as the vocabulary used to designate and describe the poem's characters and their actions.

To return to our subject, the second display of the narrator's omniscience is his narration of events taking place in two separate geographical locations. Immediately after we are told that men will fail in their attempt to identify the corpse, the narrator shifts his attention away from London, where the populace is in an uproar, to Essex, where Erkenwald is receiving news of the discovery of the corpse and the people's reaction:
be bodeworde to be byschop was broght on a quile,
Of pat buriede body al be bolde wonder;
be primate with his preliac was partyd fro home;
In Essex was Ser Erkenwolde, an abbay to visite.

Tulkes tolden hym be tale with troubulle in be pepul;
And suche a cry aboute a cors crakit evermore,
The bispoch sende hit to blynne by bedels and lettres,
And buskyd riderwarde bytyme on his blonke after.

(vv. 105-112)

The hurried ride of the Bishop to London makes it unnecessary for this
dual narration to continue, however, and from here on the narrator con-
centrates his attention on spaces within London: Erkenwald's palace, the
church where the Bishop says Mass, and finally the site of the discovered
tomb and its mysterious contents.

The third indication of the narrator's omniscience occurs during
the description of Erkenwald's tearful prayer to God for enlightenment
concerning the significance of the tomb and corpse:

"Paghe I be unworthy," al wepande he sayde,
Thurghe his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my Lorde,
In confirmynge bi Cristen faiithe, fulsen me to kenne
be mysterie of bis mervaille pat men opon wontres."

And so long he grette after grace, pat he graunte hade,
An ansuare of be Holy Goste, and afterwarde hit dawid.

(vv. 122-127)

Two significant details are here given which could only have been known
by an omniscient narrator, since we can assume the Bishop is alone at
prayer. The first is that Erkenwald's tears are motivated by "deere
debonerte," and the second is the information that an answer to that
prayer was granted by a specific person of the Trinity, "be Holy
Goste."
The last omniscient statement which we receive from the narrator is that the corpse's ability to speak is the result of the intervention of God Himself:

Quen þe segge hade þus sayde, and syked þerafter, þe bryȝt body in þe burynes brayed a litelle, And with a drery dreme he dryves owte wordes þurghe sum lant goste lyfe of hym þat al redes.

Taken together, these four instances of authorial omniscience are somewhat less than what we might expect from a narrator who in the prologue so thoroughly exhibited his capacity for omniscience and loquacity. This marked limitation of potential omniscience seems to be part of a strategy to evoke and sustain a tone of suspense. We may be sure of this because in such cases as the description of Erkenwald's supplication, we are told that an answer came from a specific person of the Trinity, and yet the narrator, who is privy to the workings of the Godhead Itself, does not give us the content of the message which the Bishop received from heaven. He presents only a bare minimum of information, and then withholds the rest for a dramatic revelation later.

The same conscious limitation on authorial omniscience in an attempt to gain a dramatic effect is evidenced in the way in which the tomb and its contents are presented.

For as þai dyȝt and dalfe so depe into þe erthe, þai founden fourmyt on a flore a ferly faire toumbe;

Hit was a throghe of thykke ston, thrivyndly hewen, With gargeles garnysht aboute, alle of gray marbre.

Thre sperle(s) of þe spelunke þat sparde hit olofte Was metely made of þe marbre and menskefully planede,
And þe bordure enbelicit with bryȝt golde lettres;
Bot roynyshe were þe resones þat þer on row stoden.

(vv. 45-54)

We are told first about the thick gray marble from which the sarcophagus, the gargoyles which adorn its outer surface, and the graceful manner in which the bolts which hold the tomb closed are integrated with the total design. And then, at the very end of the description, we are told about the mysterious gold letters which are carved into the border which runs around the outside of this marble structure. They are withheld until the end because they are designed to pique our curiosity more than the other details. Significantly, the narrator refuses to tell us the meaning of these letters, saying only that they are very strange ("roynyshe") and difficult to decipher:

Ful verray were þe vigures, þer avisyde hom mony;
Bot alle muset hit to mouthe; and quat hit mene shulde,
Mony clerke(s) in þat clos, with crownes ful brode,
þer besiȝt hom aboute noȝt, to brynge hom in wordes.

(vv. 53-56)

The tendency to suppress what is most mysterious or striking in the narrative until the last possible moment in order to generate the maximum dramatic effect and to refuse to clear up its mysterious quality is also apparent in the description of the corpse inside the tomb:

Bot þen wos wonder to wale on wehes þat stoden,
That myȝt not come to knowe a quontyse strange;
So was þe glode within gay, al with golde payntyde,
And a þlisfulle body opon þe bothum lyggid,

Araide on a riche wise in rialle wedes:
Al with glissande golde his gowne wos hemmyd,
With mony a precious perle picchit þeron,
And a gurdille of golde begripide his mydelle;
A meche mantel on lofte with manyver furrit,
be clothe of camelyn ful clen, with cumly bordures;
And on his coyfe was kest a coron ful riche,
And a semely septure sett in his honde.

Al wemles were his wedes, withouten any tecche,
Ober of moulynge, ober of motes, ober moght-freten,
And als bryȝt of hor blee in blysnande hewes,
As þai hade ȝepley in þat ȝorde bene ȝisturday shapen;

And als freshe hym þe face and the fleshe nakyde,
Bিদ his eres and þi his hondes þat openly shewid
With ronke rode as the rose, and two rede lippes,
As he in sounde sodanly were slippide opon slepe.

(vv. 73-92)

The perspective and focus of this passage are carefully controlled to move the attention of the audience from the outside of the tomb inward to the body, and from the external apparel of the corpse to its skin. This movement is purposive, since the last detail to be described, the flesh of the corpse, is the most striking. Thus we see first the inside surface of the sarcophagus ("þe glode," v. 75), then an overall view of the "blisfulle body" which lies on the bottom of the structure, then we are given an analytic description of the specific articles of apparel which clothe the corpse, with the surprising information that "als wemles were his wedes, withouten any tecche" (v. 85) being reserved until after the enumeration of these articles. Then at last the narrator presents us with the most striking feature of the entire description, the undecayed state of the corpse's flesh: "And als freshe hym þe face and the fleshe nakyde," without any explicit explanation.

The ordering of details in these, the two longest descriptive passages in the poem, corresponds to the narrator's habit of withholding crucial information or keeping silent when we most wish he would exercize
his omniscience during the action. Just as the reader must wait to find out about the undecayed state of the corpse's flesh until the end of the passage which introduces this figure, he must also wait until the latter part of the poem to find out what Erkenwald had been told about the significance of the corpse by the Holy Ghost. Thus we may say that the initial omniscience of the narrator is soon replaced by a more limited and objective viewpoint in which events and detail are rendered with scarcely a hint of explicit explanation.

As a result of the narrator's cultivation of a dramatic stance, the reader must draw his own conclusions about the relationship between events and their total significance. Because of the increasingly objective point of view, it is possible for the reader to mistake the relations between specific incidents and details, as in the case with the identity of the corpse. As we pointed out in Chapter One, the external features of the corpse alone suggest that it is the body of either a king or a saint. As the reader discovers later in the poem, the corpse is neither, and the narrator's silence during the description of the corpse and his refusal to tell us the message which was given to Erkenwald by the Holy Ghost assure a dramatic revelation of the true identity and significance of the corpse later in the plot.

Corresponding to the narrator's movement away from omniscience and toward objectivity, is a movement away from large inclusive concerns to smaller, more restricted perspectives. In the prologue for example, the references to Christ's death and the establishment of Christianity imply a cosmic scope which is then reduced to the more restricted scope of the
waning and waxing of Christianity in England. Until finally we arrive at the even more limited perspective, the London of Erkenwald's day. Similarly, the plot of the poem focuses first on a crowd of people which swells in almost surrealistic fashion to what is described as "alle þe worlde" (v. 64), then diminishes in scope until only two human figures, the saint and the corpse, are left in the reader's field of vision, the remainder of the cast becoming no more than a chorus which echoes the sentiments of these central figures.

The movement of the narrator away from omniscience and the progressive narrowing of the poem's narrative perspectives issues finally in a total shift in the mode of presentation from narration to dramatization. The narrator is almost totally absent from the action by midway in the plot (v. 177). Events and ideas are developed almost completely through the dialogue between Erkenwald and the corpse. In fact, only 34 of the final 175 verses are spoken by the narrator, and it is the corpse itself which describes the journey of its soul from Limbo to heaven:

For with þe wordes and þe water þat weshe us of payne
Līghtly lasshit þer a lene loghe in þe abyme,
þat spakly sprent my spryit with unsparid murthe
Into þe cenacle solemplþ þer soupen alle trew,
(vv. 333-336)

although we might have expected this sort of information to be given by the omniscient voice who earlier reported the arrival of an "ansuare of þe Holy Goste."

The general purpose of the narrowing of the plot's narrative perspectives, the eclipse of its authoritative narrator, and its increasingly
dramatic mode of presentation is to allow the reader to respond directly
to specific actions and events without having his attitudes predetermined.
The statements to which he must respond are made for the most part from
within the context of the action by characters, and it is left up to
the reader to discover the precise relation between the ideas expressed
by these characters and the events in which they are involved. In a
sense, then, the plot of St. Erkenwald, like its vocabulary and syntax,
is organized in such a manner that its central concerns are defined by a
juxtaposition of particulars with a minimum of explicit explanation.
Its generalized message, though stated at one point of the action, is
continually being defined by the specific events and details, since the
style of alliterative poetry dictates that conceptual wholes be implied
rather than stated.

In its designation of characters and events, its construction of
sentences and verses, and its techniques of narration and description,
St. Erkenwald continually demonstrates the intricacy with which meaning
can be implied as well as stated. If, as we suspect, important clues to
the design and significance of the whole work may be discovered in any
of its constituent parts, it may be possible to transfer what we have
learned about the microcosmic organization of the poem to the problem of
order and unity among its larger narrative parts. For, just as it would
have been difficult for us to grasp the full implication of many of
the sentences and verses unless we recognized the analytical mode of
construction which operates in them, so we will find it hard to define
the total meaning of the poem as a whole until we have discovered the
principles by which its plot has been constructed.

From the smaller patterns of vocabulary and syntax in St. Erkenwald we learned that the juxtaposition of parallel elements without an explicit explanation of their relation is a key principle of the poem's style. When we add to this our hypothesis that this principle of unelucidated juxtaposition makes it possible for an author to imply his generalized meaning by abandoning omniscience and allowing his narrative to communicate its own significance through the parallel relations of its constituent scenes and events, we are ready to examine the organization of the poem's plot.
NOTES

1 Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J., 1965), p. 126f. I am indebted to this study for my basic assumptions about the way in which alliterative synonyms operate.


3 According to Marie Borroff, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, 1962), p. 58f, the Middle English alliterative synonym tulk is derived ultimately from the Old Norse word tulkr, meaning "interpreter, spokesman, middle-man (in commerce)." Thus there is a chance that the appearance of tulk in St. Erkenwald to designate the messengers who bring the Bishop word of the discovery of a mysterious tomb and body signals a trace of a residual specialized meaning. And yet, even if the tulkes referred to in verse 109 are designated with a word which defines their specialized function in the poem, the word tulk is still of a sufficiently unparticularized nature that it should not be taken as possessing the potential stylistic elevation of bishop or primate. Indeed, it must be kept in mind that tulk is used quite frequently in alliterative poems to designate simply a "man," a member of the human species, and that the alliterative poets no doubt saw it as "an additional word which could be used to refer to persons, one whose initial consonant made possible a new range of alliterating combinations" (Borroff, p. 58).

4 It is true of course that in the alliterative poems of manuscript Cotton Nero A.x., even God is designated by common alliterative synonyms, such as wy3 (e.g. Cleanness, v. 5: "For wonder wroth is the wy3 that wrogt alle things"). However, the vocabulary of St. Erkenwald is more restricted and controlled than the vocabularies of these longer poems, so that common alliterative synonyms are only rarely used to designate the hero of the poem and are never employed to designate God. They are reserved instead almost exclusively for the minor anonymous figures in the poem. This tightly organized vocabulary pattern allows the stylistic values of particular designatory terms to be determined with considerable accuracy.


7. *Lepen*: "to run; to go hastily or with violence; to rush, to 'throw oneself'" (NED).

8. *Craken*: "to utter (words, speech, etc.) say, speak, talk; esp. speak loudly or sharply; boast" (*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor, 1952-date)).

9. Savage's glossary suggests that highe be rendered "hasten, speed" (p. 64).


CHAPTER THREE: STRUCTURAL PRINCIPLES AND THEIR FUNCTION

H. L. Savage's division of St. Erkenwald into three parts, a prologue (vv. 1-33), a middle (vv. 33-176), and a conclusion (vv. 177-352), accurately conceptualizes our impression of the poem's larger structure,¹ but tells us nothing about the relation these sections of the poem bear to each other or about how they have been unified.

The discovery of these relations and methods of unification will do more than refine our understanding of the poem's art, since in the case of narrative structure form often performs an illuminating semantic function by emphasizing important action. Thus our purpose in this chapter will be to determine both the means which have been used to give the action of St. Erkenwald its distinctive form and the ways in which this form directs our attention to the poem's major concerns.

1. The Significance of the Prologue

The relation between prologue and plot exemplifies the principle of structural variation. Verses 1-36, which treat many subjects, including the decline of Christianity as a result of the Saxon invasion and its resurgence under Augustine of Canterbury, are juxtaposed to a subsequent tale about the posthumous salvation of a pagan judge through baptism.² The juxtaposition of these narrative units is carried out without the slightest explanation of their correspondence, and thus the reader is
left with the job of analyzing their form and content in order to discover
the basis of their correspondence.

At first, we may even feel that the author has played us a trick;
that, as in the case of the conflicting descriptive details which have
been assigned to the introduction of the mysterious corpse into the
poem, we have been deliberately put off the track so that we may be
surprised later. This is not quite so. As we reread the poem, we begin
to discover general correspondences between prologue and plot which
before we had not noticed. We see, for instance, that the conversion of
England from paganism to Christianity which the prologue describes is
analogous to the conversion of the corpse from a righteous heathen to a
Christian through baptism.

The general concept of change or conversion is of course reinforced
by a series of verbs which appear in the prologue, "pervertyd...convert-
ertyd...turnyd...chaungit," and we are also given an account of
a process of change and alteration which the temples of England undergo
as part of England's conversion from paganism to Christianity:

He turnyd temples þat tyme þat temyd to þe develle,
And clansyd hom in Cristes nome, and kyrkes hom callid.

He hurlyd owt hor ydols, and hade hym in sayntes,
And chaungit chevely hor nomes, and chargit hom better:
þat ere was of Appolyn is now of Saynt Petre;
Maihon to Saynt Margrete ober to Maudelayne

þe Synagoge of þe Sonne was sett to oure Lady;
Jubiter and Jono to Jhesu ober to James;
So he hom dediﬁet, and dyght alle to dere halowes,
þat ere wos sett of Sathanas in Saxones tyme.

(vv. 15-24)
The image of the temple in fact performs an important function in the digressive prologue: it unifies the diverse strands of the narrator's wide-ranging comments. The poem begins in what is to be the time-present of the plot, the London of St. Erkenwald's episcopate, and it is in these very first lines that the temple image is introduced:

In his tyme in þat toun þe temple aldergrattyst
Was drawnen doun þat one dole to dedifie now.
(v. 5f)

The allusion to this "temple aldergrattyst" initiates the long digression which follows, because this same temple had originally been erected and used by the heathen Saxons ("For hit heten had bene in Hengyst dawes," v. 7), and thus underwent, as did many other such temples, the process of ritual cleansing which was part of the reconversion of England to Christianity (vv. 15-24). Next we are told about one particular temple which during the heathen period of English history had been the dwelling-place of a demon:

Now þat London is nevenyd hatte þe New Troie;
þe metropol and þe mayster-toun hit evermore has bene.
þe mecul mynster þerinne a maghty deval aght,
And þe title of þe temple bitan was his name;

For he was dryghtyn derrest of ydols praysid,
And þe solempnest of his sacrificis in Saxon londes;
þe thrid temple hit was tolde of Triapolitanes;
By alle Bretaynes bonkes were bot othire twayne.
(vv. 25-32)

Thus the temple image appears in each of the points-of-reference within the complex time continuum of the prologue: the episcopate of Erkenwald, the rule of the heathen Hengyst, and the time of St. Augustine of Canterbury's mission. In fact, this image is the only thing these
periods have in common. We may conclude then that the temple image provides an elemental degree of unity to the otherwise digressive narrative threads of the prologue and therefore receives considerable thematic emphasis.

If we are to make some sense of the relation between the prologue and plot, we should begin with an attempt to define how the two dominant motifs in the opening lines, the concept of change or conversion and the temple image, correspond to the concerns of the subsequent narrative action. While the general analogy is fairly clear, between the historical changes and conversions alluded to in the prologue and the conversion undergone by the corpse, the relevance of the temple image is something of a problem to a modern reader.

And yet, if we recall that biblical and religious imagery was a part of the literary heritage of the poem's audience, the problem can be solved, since a "temple" carries figural significance within the Christian tradition, beginning with the words of Christ Himself:

Jesus answered, and said to them: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said: Six and forty years was this temple in building; and wilt thou raise it up in three days? But he spoke of the temple of his body.3

The pervasive influence of the body as temple metaphor in both patristic and popular religious literature can be briefly documented by first noting how the metaphor from this Gospel passage crops up again in the Pauline epistles:
Know you not, that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?  

Fly fornication. Every sin that a man doth, is without the body, but he that committed fornication, sinneth against his own body. Or know you not, that your members are the temple of the Holy Ghost, who is in you, whom you have from God; and you are not your own?

These scriptural passages were authoritative enough to solidify the metaphor into an exegetical axiom which could be and indeed was applied to almost any appearance of the word *templum* in Holy Writ. In Rabanus Maurus (9th century), for example, the following symbolic meanings are listed under the entry *templum*:


The diligence with which this axiom of exegesis was applied is demonstrated by a passage from the *glossa ordinaria*, in which the Gospel account of Christ's cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem (John 2.13ff) becomes an allegory of the purification of the human body from sin:

Ac helpe nu all dat du miht, dat din saule hadde a litel rest, and dat dis hail temple (be) arared on 3ic, dat godd, 3inker sceppend, mihte darinne wunien, danne bie 3it iwiss isali.

These examples from scripture, exegesis and an English religious manual ought to be sufficient to suggest that the body as temple metaphor was a "live" metaphor to the audience of St. Erkenwald, and that the correspondence between the temples of masonry emphasized in the prologue and the "temple" of the pagan judge's body which is the focal
point of the poem's plot could be easily recognized by anyone who was familiar with traditional Christian imagery. Thus it may be said that the pagan judge of the plot not only shares with the temples of the prologue a common process of conversion, but also shares with them a mode of identity, for he too is a "temple" which is altered from heathenism to Christianity through the sacrament of baptism.

The implied correspondence between the corpse of the plot and the temples of the prologue would seem to receive additional reinforcement from the narrator's description of the "mascul mynster" of the heathen Saxons which was inhabited by a "magnific devil" and which eventually was converted from a pagan temple to St. Paul's Cathedral. According to traditional Christian doctrine, the temple of the human body is possessed by demonic forces until the sacrament of baptism cleanses it and makes it the dwelling-place of God instead:

... sic aqua ista in sua vile substantia pretiosam contegens gratiam Spiritus sancti, et sanguinis Christi daemonum culturam destruxit, templum daemonum in templum Christi, cultores et filios diaboli in veros adoratores et filios Dei convertit.9

Therefore, in symbolic terms, the events of the plot imply the same movement from demonic possession to consecration to God which is explicit in the case of the single edifice which was both "he temple Triapolitian," the greatest of the heathen temples, and "Saynt Paule mynster" after the conversion of England.

When we recognize that the temples in the prologue are meant to establish significant figural relations with the experience of the corpse
in the plot, it is possible to account for what both Savage and Gollancz have declared a glaring anachronism in the excursus on the history of St. Paul's Cathedral:

Our poet associates the miracle which is the subject of the poem with St. Erkenwald's rebuilding of one part of the old minster, called specifically "New Work." He is evidently using a term well known in his time. According to Stow, "the new work of Paul's (so called) at the east end above the choir was begun in the year 1251," and elsewhere he notes "also the new work of Paul's, to wit, the cross aisles, were begun to be new builded in the year 1256." The poet is obviously transferring to the time of Erkenwald the structural additions belonging to the middle of the thirteenth century. ¹⁰

Neither Savage nor Gollancz offers an explanation for this transference. If, however, we recognize that the allusion to the "New Werke" provides the author with yet another chance to imply the relation between a temple and the corpse of the plot, we may be able to understand why he has admitted the anachronism.

The act of destroying an old edifice and the building of a "New Werke" can assume a figural meaning which implies another relation between a masonry temple and the human body. That potential figural significance finds its origin in such scriptural passages as I Peter 2.5, where the individual Christian is described with an architectural simile:

Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 2.6f, this basic architectural idea is used to describe Christian growth:
As therefore you have received Jesus Christ the Lord, walk ye in him; rooted and built up in him, and confirmed in the faith, as also you have learned, abounding in him in thanksgiving.

In both these passages, the Latin verb *aedificare* is employed, and, significantly, this very word has both a literal sense of "to build, construct, establish," and a figurative sense of "to edify." Thus it may be said that while the prologue employs the concept of building in a literal sense, it also implies a correspondence with the edification of the fleshly "temple" which is brought to the true faith and baptized in the poem's plot.

The phrase "New Werke" itself implies a further relation between the prologue and the action of the plot, since it is analogous in form to the scriptural image of the "new man" or "new creation" which is the product of conversion to Christianity:

> If then any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the former things have passed away; behold, they are made new. (II Corinthians 5.17)

> For surely you have heard of him and have been taught in him (as truth is in Jesus) that as regards your former manner of life you are to put off the old man, which is being corrupted through its deceptive lusts. But be renewed in the spirit of your mind and put on the new man, which has been created according to God in justice and holiness of truth. (Ephesians 4.21-24)

> Put off the old man with his works and put on the new, one that is being renewed unto perfect knowledge according to the image of his Creator. (Colossians 3.9f)

The concept of renewal and of a new creation of man which is spoken of in these passages is in medieval theology associated with the effects of
the sacrament of baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit through that sacrament. Bede, for example, in a homily for the octave of Pentecost, states:

Quod ergo natum est ex spiritu spiritus est quia qui ex aqua et spiritu regeneratur invisibiliter in novum mutatur hominem et de carnali efficitur spiritualis.12

This association of newness of life with baptism surely is derived from Titus 3.4-6:

But when the goodness and kindness of God our Savior appeared, then not by reason of good works that we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us through the bath of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he has abundantly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.

It is significant that the conversion and spiritual renewal of the pagan judge in St. Erkenwald is accomplished through this same sacrament; in fact, it gives us good reason to believe that the whole poem is designed to make a doctrinal statement on the subject of human salvation and particularly on the role of baptism in that process. What is more, by seeing in the prologue's anachronistic reference to the "New Werke" a subtle hint at the newness of life which the pagan judge experiences through the power of the sacrament of baptism, we are given our first insight into the poem's doctrinal message and our conception of the relation between the introductory lines and the plot is made more definite. That conception began with our initial impression of the apparent discontinuity of the prologue and plot. The subject matter and perspectives of the opening lines seemed to clash violently with the serious drama which followed them. Even the stance of the narrator was noticeably different from the limited and objective role he was to play in the subsequent action.
But this initial appearance of discontinuity may be calculated to
direct our attention away from the literal significance of the events
of the prologue and toward their figural implications. When this shift
is made, the clash of perspectives is redefined in terms of a subtle
correspondence between the history of England and its temples and the
experience of the corpse whose soul is redeemed through baptism.

The narrator's initial digressiveness establishes certain images
whose full significance becomes evident only when they are understood
as implying a religious, even doctrinal, perspective which not only
unifies the concerns of the poem's prologue and plot, but also affords
a more comprehensive view of the true meaning of the poem's central
miraculous event.

Finally, we must pause to consider how alliterative style may have
influenced the structure of St. Erkenwald. The relation between prologue
and plot can in fact be described in the same terms which were employed
in Chapter Two to discuss the poem's vocabulary and syntax, for that
relation is essentially appositional, two structural units containing
common figural implications having been juxtaposed with no attempt at
conceptual coordination or explicit explanation of their correspondence.
But like the constituent units in the following example of syntactic
variation:

    Oure fader,
    Adam, oure alder, þat ete of þat appulle,
these structural units share a common area of meaning (in this case
figural) and tend to define that meaning by allowing us to view it from
two divergent yet complementary angles.
ii. The Plot: Discovery of Remains Motif

Our study of the narrative and descriptive techniques has revealed that the plot of *St. Erkenwald* is dramatically presented with the narrator contributing very little overt commentary. The drama of the first half of the plot derives, as we discovered in Chapter One, from its use of the conventional motif of the discovery of remains. Such a discovery, the poem's analogues show, leads naturally to an interest in establishing the identity of the remains, and the search for the true identity has about it a kind of elemental suspense which may be put to dramatic use.

The author of *St. Erkenwald* has unified nearly half of his poem by simply delaying the revelation of the corpse's true identity while he develops the attitudes and opinions of the crowd of "pepul" and Erkenwald toward this mystery. Immediately following the seventeen-verse description of the corpse, the reaction of the crowd is noted:

> þur was spedeles space to spyr uch on ober
Quat body hit myȝt be þat buried wes ther;
How longe had he þur layne, his lere so unchaugit,
And al his wede unwemmed;--þus ylks wege þeryd:

"Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe;
He has ben kynge of þis kithe, as couthely hit sames
He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade."

(vv. 93-100)

The function of the crowd in this portion of the scene is to express exactly what the reader himself is probably wondering: who was this man?

Even if some of the poem's readers or hearers were familiar with the conventional motif of the discovery of remains, and thus have some
expectations about what sort of story normally follows such a discovery, it seems certain that the introduction of an undecayed body into the narrative would provide an additional motive for curiosity about the identity of these particular remains. We must recall that even in the closest analogue to our poem, the Latin tale about the discovery of the remains of a "paganus & judex" in Vienna, only the lips and tongue of the corpse are undecayed. The corpse in St. Erkenwald is considerably more mysterious.

The mystery which surrounds the discovery of this undecayed body is compounded by the narrator's remark that men will not be able to learn its identity:

> Bot þat ilke note wos noght, for nounge none couthe, Noþer by title, ne token, ne by tale noþer, Þat ever wos brevyt in burghe, ne in bok(e) notyde, Þat ever mynnyyd suche a mo(n), more ne lasse.  
> (vv. 101-104)

The reader must now not only await the revelation of the corpse's identity, but he must attempt to make some sense out of the deliberate under-cutting of the crowd and then await the dramatic revelation of the defeat of their expectations. The fact that the narrator does not tell the reader why men will fail in their attempt to discover the identity of the corpse or what significance this failure has in the larger context of the poem is again part of the author's technique of withholding information in order to let the reader make his own assumptions and then test them against later events in the poem.

On the whole, then, the dramatic suspense of the first half of the plot results from an implicit tension between what is said and what is not
said about the events which take place. We are told that the clothes and the flesh of the body are uncorrupted and yet we are not told why. Similarly, we are told that the identity of the corpse will not be found by asking men or consulting chronicles, but we are given no indication why this method is futile.

By þat he come to þe kyrke kydde of Saynt Paule,  
Mony hym metten on þat meere, þe mervayle to telle;  
He passyd into his palais and þes he comaundit,  
And devoydit fro þe dede and ditte þe durre after.

þer derke nyȝt overdrofe, and day-belle ronge;  
And ser Erkenwolde was up in þe ȝghten ere þen,  
þat weleghe al þe nyȝt hade na(i)tyd his houres,  
To biseche his Soverayn, of his swete grace,  
To vouche-safe to revele hym hit by avis(i)on or elles:

"þaghe I be unworthy," al wepande he sayde,  
Thurghe his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my Lorde,  
In confirmynge þi Cristen faihte, fulsen me to kenne  
þe mysterie of þis mervail þat men opon wondres."

And so longe he grette after grace, þat he graunte hade,  
An ansuare of þe Holy Goste, and afterwarde hit dawid.  
(vv. 113-127)

First, we are surprised that Erkenwald, upon entering the city, does exactly the opposite of what we expect him to do, that is, to proceed directly to the site of the discovered remains and settle the matter of the corpse's identity without further delay. Instead, he deliberately avoids the tomb and corpse. This unexpected act has two effects. Initially it simply delays the revelation of the corpse's identity and prolongs the suspense, but the Bishop's surprising conduct requires explanation. None is forthcoming however, so the reader must draw his own tentative conclusions and await the true answer.
The seriousness with which Erkenwald regards the mystery of the tomb and corpse also contributes to the suspense of the plot. The "pepopul" are rather confident that they can determine the significance of the mystery, but the Bishop believes it is a problem of great difficulty, requiring divine assistance. Thus he prays throughout the night, and the words of his prayer ("in confirmynge þi Cristen faihte") and its urgency suggest that the question of the identity of the corpse is even more serious than we had imagined before, even to the point of testing man's faith in God.

Then comes the message for which Erkenwald has been praying, an "ansuare of þe Holy Goste," and we are sure if we could learn the contents of that message we would discover the true identity of the corpse and moreover understand why the Bishop sees in it a means of strengthening Christian faith. But the contents of that message are withheld and we must wait in suspense to discover the answer to our questions about the corpse.

The scene at Mass (vv. 128-133) contributes to the dramatic tension by further delaying the long-awaited confrontation between saint and corpse, and by implying once more the seriousness of the approaching confrontation, since we are told that this Mass is said for the Bishop's "spede" (that is, his success in the confrontation with the corpse).

The speech by the "dene" to Erkenwald disposes of any remaining hope that the identity and significance of the corpse can be determined except by confrontation between the saint and the body. The "dene" reports the complete failure of man's search for the answer to the mystery:
Thus only the long-awaited encounter between the poem's two major characters can solve the mystery which becomes more enigmatic as the plot progresses.

Each of the scenes which leads up to the climactic confrontation thus heightens the suspense which hovers over the undecayed corpse. The result is a pattern of rising action and accumulative dramatic tension which reaches its peak immediately before the Bishop actually addresses the corpse in verses 177ff. It would seem then that this is the point in the action when the greatest dramatic emphasis may be lent to thematic material, since if there were ever a time when the reader would be intent and ready to listen, it would be at that moment when the figure of the Bishop stands over the tomb, ready at last to face the mysterious corpse. Add to this the fact that the reader, throughout the first half of the plot, has time and again had important information withheld from him and we have the perfect dramatic atmosphere for the presentation of the poem's didactic message.

It is the Bishop himself who speaks the lines, so that the message becomes part of the total drama. The tableau is set: the bishop stands before the tomb, his "heghe gyng" of prelates stands close by, many a
"grete lorde" (v. 134) has arrived on the scene to witness the confrontation, and finally, a "grete prece" (v. 141) of common people pushes its way toward the tomb as the Bishop listens to the "dene" explain that the most learned men in the parish have been unable to discover the identity of this undecayed body. Then the Bishop himself speaks:

"pou says sope," quop þe segge þat sacrid was byschop,
"Hit is mervail to men, þat mountes to litelle
Toward þe providens of þe Prince þat Paradis weldes,
Quen hym luste to unlouke þe leste of his myȝtes.

Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt, and his mynde passyde,
And all his resons are torent, and redeles he stodes,
þen lettes hit hym ful littelle to louse wyt a fynger
þat alle þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never.
(vv. 159-166)

iii. The Plot: The Posthumous Salvation

In the manuscript, verse 177 of St. Erkenwald begins with a large rubricated letter "T."13 This manuscript division, signalled by the ornamental capital, is one of only two distinctive markings in the text, the other being the large rubricated "A" which begins the poem.14 The division at verse 177 provides strong evidence of the two-part structure of the plot and further suggests that the author of the poem, its scribe, or a whole scribal tradition also recognized this structure.

This part of the plot begins with Erkenwald's address to the corpse:

Then he turnes to þe toumbe and talkes to þe corce;
Lyftande up his eghe-lyddes, he loused suche wordes:
"Now, lykham, þat þ(us) lies, layne þou no lenger!
Sythen Jhesus has juggit today his joy to be schewyde,
Be þou bone to his bode, I bydde in his behalve;
As he was bende on a bema, quen he his blode schedde,
As þou hit wost wysterly, and we hit wele leven,
Ansuerare here to my sawe, councelle no trouthe!"

(vv. 177-184)

By invoking the name of Jesus, the Bishop resuscitates the corpse,
and its reply solves the mystery which sustained the drama of the first
half of the plot:

"Bisshop," quod þis ilke body, "þi bode is me dere,
I may not bot boghe to þi bone for bothe myn eghen;
þe name þat þou nevenyd has and nournet me after
Al heven and helle heldes to, and erthe bitwene.

Fyrst to say the þe sothe quo myselfe were:
One þe unhapnest hathel þat ever on erthe 3ode,
Never kynge ne cayser ne 3et no knyjt nothyre,
Bot a lede of þe laghe þat þen þis londe usit."

(vv. 193-200)

With the solution of the mystery of the corpse's identity, we are
able to move on to more serious matters, such as the condition of the
corpse's soul. Meanwhile, of course, the author is faced with an
artistic problem: how to evoke and sustain a new dramatic tone which
will support the significant events of the last half of the plot. The
solution may have been suggested by the resuscitation itself: since the
corpse can now speak, why not dramatize the action and ideas of the plot
by coloring them with the emotions and gestures of this figure and its
interlocutor, Erkenwald?

Thus the drama of the second half of the plot arises from the in-
creasingly distraught tone of the corpse as it hints at and finally
reveals its soul's misery and from the emotion this distress evokes from
Erkenwald and the crowd. Although much of this emotional tension is presented through the tone of the major characters' speeches (exclamatory phrases and conventional expressions of sadness or grief are part of the rhetoric), some of it has been objectified in the form of gestures or sounds which accompany these speeches.

This shift in the basis of the poem's dramatic suspense is striking because such emotional expression and significant gesturing is almost entirely absent from the first half of the plot. The resuscitation of the corpse forces certain changes upon the author's technique of characterization. It would hardly do to have the corpse be unmoved by the misery of its own soul; hence, it must become generally more human so that it can express human emotions. Therefore the corpse must not be called "lykmhe" or "be dede body" each time it is designated, and as we have seen in Chapter Two, it is not. Also, the corpse is always careful to designate itself with a common alliterative synonym for "man": e.g., "be unhapnest hathel" (v. 198) and "lede of the laghe" (v. 200) during his first speech. And since it would be tasteless to have Erkenwald remain aloof and unfeeling while the corpse describes the misery of its soul, the hero too must be slightly changed to fit his new role as an interlocutor and a priest who must be concerned about the destiny of an immortal soul. As a result, the Bishop weeps and gestures more effusively here than in the first half of the plot.

These adjustments in character having been made, dramatic suspense can be evoked and sustained through the emotional intensity which questions
and admissions in the dialogue, as well as certain actions, require. The first indication of the new intensity comes in the second verse after the rubricated initial in the description of Erkenwald's address to the corpse:

Lyftande up his eghe-lyddes, he louse such wordes  
(v. 178)

This slight distortion of the hero's features is quite unlike anything we have met previously in the poem, and suggests physical vitality which defines a common man who is involved in his affairs rather than one who is "more than mortal" and aloof.

The next hint of increased emotional intensity appears in the description of the resuscitation:

Quen þe segge hade þus syde, and syked þerafter,  
þe bryȝt body in þe burynes brayed a litelle, 
And with a drery dreme he dryves owte wordes  
þurghe sum lant goste lyfe of hym þat al redes. . . .  
(vv. 189-192)

In this passage, Erkenwald sighs after his initial address to the corpse, a gesture which itself implies emotion, and the coming to life of the corpse is accompanied by two specific signs: a stirring movement ("brayed") and the emission of a doleful sound ("drery dreme"). As in the case of the episode of St. Martin and the dead catechumen, gesture has been here used to objectify life itself, for when the resuscitation takes place the corpse throws off the inanimateness of death with a tremble and breaks the silence of the dead with a groan. That it is a groan and not something less ominous gives us an indication of the general
tone of the events which follow.

At the conclusion of the corpse's initial speech, our attention is directed to the crowd which has been observing the encounter:

Quil he in spelunke þus spake, þer sprange in þe pepulle
In al þis world no worde, ne wakenyd no noice,
Bot al as stille as þe ston stoden and listonde,
With meche wonder forwrast, and wepid ful mony.
(vv. 217-220)

The revelation that the corpse belonged to a "juge... in gentil law" (v. 216) has no doubt brought on the emotion of the people in the crowd, who begin to realize why the corpse had referred to himself as "þe unhapnest hathel þat ever on erthe 3ode" (v. 198): he had no share in God's grace and thus his soul has been lost. Even if we attribute too much to the mind of the crowd with this explanation, their weeping foreshadows the tears shed later by Erkenwald for the lamentable fate of the corpse's soul.

The Bishop, we may note, also senses the distress of the corpse's soul, since as he questions it about its undecayed clothes he is described as having "bale at his hert" (v. 257). The culmination of this emotional concern over the state of the corpse's soul comes when Erkenwald asks the question outright:

"3ea, bot say þou of þi saule," þen sayd þe bishopp.
Quere is ho stablid and stadde, if þou so streȝt wroghtes?"

* * * * * * * * * *

þen hummyd he þat þer lay, and his hedde waggyd,
And gefe a gronymge ful grete, and to Godde sayde:
"Mȝty Maker of men, thi myghtes are grete!"

(vv. 273f and 281-283)
Here the objectification of emotion through sound and gesture is quite evident. The corpse first makes a strange humming sound, then shakes his head in grief, and finally emits a long groan. These sounds and gestures clearly reinforce the tone in which the corpse's words are delivered, for he can only express himself with an impassioned exclamation. The same exclamatory rhetoric is repeated after the full revelation of his soul's misery:

Nas I a paynym unpreste, þat never thi plite knewe,  
Ne þ(e) mesure of þi mercy, ne þi mecul vertue,  
Bot ay a freke faiteles þat faylid þi laghes,  
þat ever þou, Lord, wes lovyd in? Alias, þe harde stoundes!  
(vv. 285-288)

It is this emotion which emphasizes the ideas which are conveyed in the corpse's speeches. Simply stated, the corpse is telling us that good works alone are not enough to save man's soul:

Quat wan we with oure wele-dede þat wroghtyn ay ríȝt,  
Quen we are dampnyd dulfully into þe depe lake,  
And exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempe fest,  
þer richely hit arne refetyd þat after right hungride?  
(vv. 301-304)

This statement, however, derives its full force from the emotional context in which it is placed:

þus dulfully þis dede body devisyt hit sorowe,  
þat alle wepyd for woo, þe wordes þat herden;  
And þe bysshop balefully bere doun his eghen,  
þat hade no space to speke, so spakely he 3oþkyd.  
(vv. 309-312)

At this very moment, with the corpse groaning and the Bishop and crowd reduced to tears, the drama of the second half of the plot reaches its climax. It is therefore significant that the baptism now occurs,
and that the fruit of Erkenwald's emotion, his tears, are the elements of that baptism:

...he toke hym a tome, and to þe toumbe lokyd,
To þe liche þer hit lay, with lavande teres:
"Oure Lord lene," quop þat lede, þat þou lyfe hades,
By Goddes leve, as longe as I myȝt lacche water,
And cast upon þi faire cors, and carpe þes wordes:
I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and his fre Childes
And of þe gracious Holy Goste";--and not one greue lenger,
þen pof þou dropyde doun dede, hit daungerde me lasse."

With þat worde þat he warpyd, þe wete of eghen
And teres trillyd adoun, and on þe toumbe lighten;
And one felle on his face, and þe freke syked.
þen sayd he with a sadde soun: "Oure Savyoure be lovyd!"

Now heried be þou, hegre God, and þi hende Moder,
And blissid be þat blissful houre þat ho the bere in!
(vv. 313-326)

It is this event, the miraculous baptism, which receives the cumulative force of the rising emotions of the second half of the plot. The act itself is bracketed between the description of the general weeping for woe (vv. 309-312) and the emotional, exclamatory rhetoric of the corpse after he has been baptized (vv. 324-328). Thus we may say again that the author of *St. Erkenwald* has utilized the inherent drama of his story to prepare for and emphasize significant themes. In the first part of the plot, Erkenwald's sermon on God's omnipotence (vv. 159-176) is placed at the climax of a rising pattern of dramatic suspense which derives from the interest in the identity of the mysterious corpse, while in the second half of the plot the baptism falls at the most emotional moment of the long dialogue between the saint and corpse. It is from these two specific scenes our understanding of the meaning of *St. Erkenwald* will emerge.
The two-part dramatic structure of *St. Erkenwald* helps to clarify alterations in the techniques and subject matter of the poem. It defines, for example, the shift in character traits and in modes of presentation which we have touched on in Chapters One and Two. But further, it reveals a shift in the thematic emphasis from external, physical realities to interior, spiritual realities. In the first half of the plot we are given only the facts of the tomb and corpse's outward appearance, an enumeration of the materials used to make the casket and the clothes which are found on the body, an account of the condition of the corpse's flesh, and perhaps most significant of all, we observe an attempt by "pe pepul" to "externalize" the problem of the corpse's identity, to reduce it to a matter to be established and verified by the objective authority of human chronicles, records, or oral traditions. The failure of this "externalized," objective mode of dealing with the mysterious corpse is signalled by the speech of the "dene" (vv. 150-158), which establishes man's inability to cope with this situation. Then in the second half of the plot we are given piece by piece the interior spiritual realities which are implicit in the mystery of the corpse. In contrast to the accumulation of objective evidence and detail in the first half of the plot, this latter part is ultimately concerned with evidence which reveals the plight of the corpse's soul. In retrospect, we begin to feel that these spiritual realities have been the concern of Erkenwald all along. He rejects the crowd's tendency to react only to the external features of the tomb and corpse, and instead seems to realize
instinctively that the true significance of this mystery is spiritual. Operating on this assumption, he refuses to be caught up in the furor over the wondrous external appearance of the corpse, relying instead upon the transcendent wisdom of God to reveal to him the deeper significance of the mystery. And in the end, we too discover this deeper significance.

It remains to apply what we have learned about the scenes which receive dramatic emphasis to answer the final problem, what the poem means. Our study of the poem's structure should remind us once again of the principle of variation which is so deeply ingrained in the alliterative style, for in *St. Erkenwald* we have an example of defining and redefining meaning through the import of three parallel parts: the prologue and the two sections of the plot. We have already determined that the relation between prologue and plot is figural and that they present divergent yet complementary statements of the same general theme. In Chapter Four we shall find that the meaning of the poem, though one, is subtly varied and redefined by the two halves of the plot.
NOTES

1St. Erkenwald, p. lxiv.

2According to Savage, the prologue extends from vv. 1-32 in the text, but since there is no apparent manuscript evidence to support this count, it is equally possible that the prologue continues through line 36, which seems to the point at which the narrator's thoughts come full circle.

3John 2.19f. All biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

4I Corinthians 3.16.

5I Corinthians 6.18f.


7PL, CXIV, 356. The tendency to allegorize any biblical edifice as the body or soul of man gives further evidence of the influence of these biblical metaphors. See, for example, Hugh of St. Victor's *De arca Noe moralis*, PL, CLXXVI, 619-680 and *De arca Noe mystica*, PL, CLXXVI, 681-704, and Bede's *De tabernaculo et vasis ejus*, PL, XCI, 393-498 and *De templo Salomonis liber*, PL, XCI, 737-808. A convenient summary of major exegetical treatises on biblical edifices may be found in Henri de Lubac, *Exegese Medievale: Les Quatre Sens de l' Ecriture* (Paris, 1959-1964), seconde partie, I, 317-328 and 403-418; seconde partie, II, 41-60.


9Rupert of Deutz, *De Trinitate et operibus ejus*, PL, CLXVII, 1653.

10Gollancz, *St. Erkenwald*, p. xxvii; see also Savage, p. 27.

11Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1955), aedifico, sense 3: "to build up, establish... and (ecd.) in a religious sense, to build up, instruct, edify."

12*Homelia II, 18, Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, CXXII, 308.

13See Savage's note to verse 177 of the poem (p. 11).

14See Savage's note to verse 1 of the poem (p. 3).
CHAPTER FOUR: THE THEMES AND THEIR MEANING

St. Erkenwald, despite its brevity, contains several important themes. In order to interpret the poem, we must determine which of these themes is dominant and whether it unifies the subsidiary themes.

Although only two critics have attempted to define the dominant theme of the poem, they have presented us, predictably, with two different interpretations. It has been suggested that the theme of "transformation" is dominant, and thus the poem is "about the triumph of a soul over death following a miraculous transformation."¹ For another critic, the major theme is "God's justice."² That these critics can agree that the poem is skillfully composed and yet disagree over its main theme suggests that they have not taken its formal artistry seriously enough. For when the poem is interpreted in the light of its patterns of structural and dramatic emphasis, the dominant theme and general meaning become clear.

1. Erkenwald's Sermon and Human Identity

Located as it is near the exact center of the poem, the seventeen-line speech which the Bishop delivers immediately before he confronts the corpse is able to make references both backward and forward in the poem's action.

Its retrospective function is to provide an authoritative commentary on the events which are part of the general expansion of the discovery of remains motif. In this portion of the plot, while our attention is
being held by the air of suspense which hovers over the mysterious corpse, the poem's descriptive vocabulary establishes the "more than human" identity of Erkenwald and the basic churlishness of "pe pepul." We are also given an implicit definition of mankind, and the first half of Erkenwald's sermon is designed to make certain that this concept of human identity has gotten through to us:

"pou says sope," quoq pe segge þat sacrid was byschop, "Hit is mervail to men þat mountes to litelle Towarde þe providens þe Prince þat Paradis weldes, Quen hym luste to unlouke þe leste of his myȝtes.

Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt, and his mynde passyde, And al his reasons are torent, and redeles he stondes, þen lettes hit hym ful litelle to louse wyt a fynger þat alle þat hondes under heven halde myȝt never. þere as creatures crafte of counsell eute swarves, þe comforthe of þe creatore byhoves þe cure take.

(vv. 159-168)

According to these verses, man may be defined by his circumscribed "myȝt"; in other words, he falls far short of God's omnipotent authority and defines His identity. Within the dramatic context of the plot, when Erkenwald delivers his sermon, "monnes myȝt" has been "matyd" and "his mynde passyde." This demonstration of the absolute limits which are set on human ability and power is provided by the attempt of men to discover on their own the identity of the mysterious corpse.

When the corpse, with its undecayed clothes and flesh, is first revealed, "pe pepul" confidently rely on their own resources to provide the key to its identity and significance:

"Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe; He has ben kyng of þis kithe, as couthely hit semes He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade."

(vv. 97-100)
But since these expectations do not materialize, we may say that the action of the first half of the plot is designed to defeat this confidence and to demonstrate man's limited "myȝt."

To portray this defeat, the author first presents a series of images which imply man's physical and mental powers. For example, human physical strength is implied in the description of the building of the "New Werke":

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{þen was hit abatyd and beten doun, and buggyd eftennew,} \\
\text{A noble note for þe nones, and New Werke hit hatte.} \\
\text{Mony a mery mason was made þer to wyrke,} \\
\text{Hard stones for to hewe with eggit toles. . . .} \\
\text{(vv. 37-40)}
\end{align*} \]

A similar comment on human physical might is found in the description of removing the lid of the corpse's sarcophagus:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Wyȝt werkemen with þat wenten pertille;} \\
\text{Putten prises þerto; pinchid one-under;} \\
\text{Kaghten by þe corners with crowes of yrne;} \\
\text{And were þe lydde never so large, þai laide hit by sone.} \\
\text{(vv. 69-72)}
\end{align*} \]

To complement these allusions to physical power, we are given a curious image of the power of the human mind in the description of the parish clerks who try to decipher the letters chiseled on the mysterious tomb and thus learn the identity of the corpse:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Fulle verryre were þe vigures, þer avisyde hom mony;} \\
\text{Bot alle muset hit to mouthe: and quat hit mene shulde,} \\
\text{Mony clerke(s) in þat clos, with crownes ful brode,} \\
\text{þer besiet hom aboute noȝt, to brynge hom in wordes.} \\
\text{(vv. 53-56)}
\end{align*} \]

The reference to "crownes ful brode," although it may describe a type of clerical tonsure, also evokes a rather comic image of these learned
humans as having large heads in order to accomodate the wealth of knowledge which they have accumulated.

This is the "myȝt" in which the people put their trust, and by the end of the first half of the plot, when Erkenwald makes his speech, this trust has been brought to naught, and man's might is placed in its proper perspective. The final admission of human defeat is made by the dean:

þer is no lede opon lyfe of so longe age
þat may mene in his mynde þat suche a mon regnyd,
Ne noþer his nome ne his note nournne of one speche;
Queþer mony porer in þis place is putt into grave,
þat merkid is in oure martilage his mynde for ever.

And we have oure librarie laitid þes longe seven dayes
Bot one cronicle of þis kynge con we never fynde.
He has non layne here so longe, to loke hit by kynde,
To malte so out of memorie, bot mervayle hit were."

(vv. 150-158)

This statement of human limitation is then juxtaposed with the Bishop's comments on the power of God which follow immediately. In contrast to man's failure, God can do more with one "fynger" than "alle þe hondes under heven" (v. 165f), and this striking metaphor puts human might in its proper perspective.

The purpose of Erkenwald's sermon, then, is to state explicitly what events up to this point have implied: man is a finite creature whose powers are infinitely less than those of his Creator.

But this is not the end of the Bishop's message, for God does not leave his creature at the mercy of power and circumstance. In addition to defining man's identity as a finite creature with limited powers, the Bishop offers a solution to the problems raised by man's limitations, namely, the humble recognition of his own place in the universe and his
need for divine grace. To those who are willing to acknowledge God's superiority and ask for His assistance, the Lord is always willing to send his grace:

And so do we now our deede, devyne we no fyrre;
To seche þe sothe at oureselpe, þee se þer no bote;
Bot glowe we alle opon Godde, and his grace asken,
þat is careles is of counsellle and conforthe to sende.
(vv. 169-172)

In this case again, the words of Erkenwald's sermon are designed to reflect back on the preceding dramatic events. The Bishop's own actions during the first half of the plot exemplify humility and the need for divine grace, since instead of relying on his own intellect or on the power of other human minds, Erkenwald, upon reaching London, immediately secludes himself so that he may "biseche his Soverayn" (v. 120) for assistance in discovering the true identity and significance of the mysterious corpse. And because of his attitudes and actions, God grants him the favor he requests, while the other figures in the poem who rely on human resources are kept in the dark:

And so longe he grette after grace, þat he graunte hade,
An ansuare of þe Holy Goste, and afterwaið hit dawid.
(v. 126f)

Thus one purpose of Erkenwald's sermon at the first dramatic climax of the plot is to chide the misguided populace for their reliance on man's "myȝt" and reveal to them the proper way of dealing with things which are beyond their capabilities. The measure of success with which this message is presented is found in the new docility of the crowd which listens so intently to the dialogue between the saint and corpse in the
second part. Their silence and emotional involvement in the plight of the corpse's soul implies a new, more humble view of themselves as men and of the grave significance which is really involved in the discovery of the marvelous tomb and its mysterious corpse.

Erkenwald's sermon also has an anticipatory as well as a retrospec-tive function. According to Erkenwald, subsequent events will strengthen and purify the religious faith of those who sithe them, teach them God's power (vertue) and His authority, and reinforce the lesson that God is willing to help ease man's burden of finitude:

"(Anande) bat, in fastynge of 3our faithe and of fyne bileve, I shal ayyaw 3ow so verrayly of vertues his, 
bat 3e may leveupon longest bat he is lord my3ty, 
And fayne 3our talent to fulfille, if 3e hym frende leves."
(vv. 173-176)

In short, we are told that the second half of the plot will demonstrate the didactic message which was also implied in the first half: man's abilities are circumscribed, therefore he must first acknowledge God's superior might and rely on His grace if he is to overcome the problems which his nature makes it impossible for him to solve. If indeed this is the significance of the subsequent events, then we may be sure that the contrast between the limited might of man and the omnipotence of God is the dominant theme of the poem, since it will have informed the entire pattern of dramatic action.

ii. The Import of the Posthumous Baptism

The resuscitated corpse, in answer to Erkenwald's question, gives an emotional account of why his soul has been consigned to the infernal
regions:

And per sittes my soule þat se may no fyrre,
Dwynande in þe derke dethe, þat dyȝt us our fader,
Adam, oure alder, þat ete of þat appulle
þat mony a plyȝtles pepul has poysned for ever.

3e were entoughid with his tethe, and take in þe glotte,
Bot mendiȝd with a medecyn, 3e are made to to lyȝve:
þat is fulloght in fonte, with faiȝful bileve;
And þat han we myste alle merciles, myselfe and my soule.

Quat wan we with oure wele-dede þat wroghtyn ay riȝt,
Quen we are dampyd dulfully into þe deep lake,
And exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempne fest,
þer richely hit aren refatyd þat after right hungride.
(ww. 293-304)

According to this passage the corpse's soul is in hell because it had no remedy for the poison of original sin which all men have inherited as a result of Adam's disobedience. The remedy for this "poison of the apple" is baptism, a sacrament which did not exist when the pagan judge was alive. Thus only a miraculous posthumous baptism can save his soul.

This corpse who was once a pagan judge represents the full extent of man's ability to live according to rational law and codes of moral conduct. We are told that during his lifetime he was a paragon of virtue, always measuring his thought and action by the absolute criteria of truth and justice:

þe folke was felonse and fals, and frowarde to reule;
I hent harmes ful ofte to holde hom to riȝt.

Bot for wothe, ne wele, ne wrathe, ne drede,
Ne for maystrie, ne for mede, ne for no monnes aghe,
I remewit never fro þe riȝt, by reson myn awen,
For to dresse a wrange dome, no day of my lyve.
Decylnet never my consciens, for covetise on erthe,
In no gynful jugement no japes to make,
Were a renke never so riche, for reverens sake,
Ne for no monnes manos, ne meschefe, ne routh.

Non gete me fro þe heghe gate to glent out of ryȝt,
Als ferforthe as my faithe confourmyd my hert;
þaghe had bene my fader bone, I bede hym no wranges,
Ne fals favour to my fader þaghe felle hym be hongyt.
(vv. 231-244)

It is also made clear that such a righteous life is pleasing to God:

... be riche Kynge of reson, þat riȝt ever alowes,
And loves al þe lawes lely þat longen to trouthe;
And moste he menskes men for mynnynge of riȝtes,
þen for al þe meritorie medes þat men on molde usen;
And if renkes for riȝt þus me arayed has,
He has lant me to last þat loves riȝt best.
(vv. 267-272)

In fact, as the corpse points out, it is because of his righteous life
that God has suspended the normal processes of decay. And yet this
"reward" which is given to the judge's body is of no value to its soul,
which sits "dwynande in þe derke dethe" of Limbo.

The theological significance of the fate of the pagan judge's soul
is crucial to the meaning of the poem. It is the pagan judge himself
who states that his righteousness and good works were not able to save
his soul from the infernal regions:

Quat wan we with oure wele-dede þat wroghtyn ay riȝt,
Quen we are damnyd dulfully into þe depe lake,
And exilid fro þat soper so, þat solemne fest,
þer richely hit are refetyd þat after right hungride?
(vv. 301-304)

Placed in a theological perspective, the destiny of the pagan judge's
soul may be interpreted as a comment on the efficacy of man's "myȝt" in
achieving eternal salvation. Left to himself, without benefit of divine grace, man can at best accumulate "wele-dedes," which are enough to gain honor and reverence from men (note that the inhabitants of New Troy expressed their admiration for the pagan judge by burying his body in gold and fur, crowning him, and placing a scepter in his hand) and to obtain a certain amount of approbation from God Himself. But, as the fate of the judge's soul makes clear, good deeds alone are not enough to admit a soul to heaven. Implicit in this poetic handling of the complex theological subject of redemption is the idea that God's grace (which may be seen as a mode of his "my3t") is the sole efficient cause of man's eternal salvation, a doctrine whose scriptural locus classicus is Ephesians 2.8f:

For by grace you are saved through faith, and then not of yourselves, for it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man may glory.

To the extent that St. Erkenwald tends to minimize the role of human merit in effecting human salvation, it may be said to present an essentially Augustinian view of divine grace. For Augustine (and, in general, for the orthodox medieval theologians who came after him), grace is a gift of God, completely separate from human nature and man's natural perfections. Further, divine grace is absolutely necessary for man's salvation, human merit alone being conceived as wholly insufficient to accomplish the redemption of the human soul.

Augustine's theological position on grace was formulated by his opposition to the heretical Pelagian view of the relationship between divine
grace and human merit. Pelagius and his followers had held that God's grace is granted as a result of meritorious human deeds, and in effect, comes to crown those efforts. Thus man can effect his own salvation by properly using his free will and holding to those values he knows to be true and pleasing to God. One of the more interesting features of Pelagian thought was that righteous men who lived before the time of Christ could be saved through their own merit without the benefit of Christian grace.³

The parallel between this particular tenet of Pelagianism and the narrative situation of St. Erkenwald is illuminating. The virtuous pagan judge in this poem raises the theological question of whether natural merit alone is sufficient to save the human soul. The poem answers this question exactly as Augustine and Ephesians 2.8f answer it: grace alone is sufficient to save the human soul, and grace is a gratuitous gift bestowed by God on men irrespective of their merit, since in His eyes, according to St. Paul, "all have sinned and do need the glory of God" (Romans 3.23). God's grace enables man to overcome the inherent corruption of his own nature, since this grace is a form of supernatural assistance. Quite simply, then, without this grace, man cannot escape God's wrath:

Haec autem Christi gratia, sine qua nec infantes, nec aetate grandes salvi fieri possunt, non meritis redditur, sed gratis datur; propter quod et gratia nominatur.⁴

According to orthodox medieval theology, God's grace is normally distributed to men through the sacraments of the Church, a point made clear by two of the classic medieval definitions of the term "sacrament,"
one by Hugh of St. Victor:

Si quis autem plenius et perfectius quid sit sacramentum
diffinire voluerit, diffinire potest quod "sacramentum est
corporale vel materiale elementum foris sensibiliter pro-
positum ex similitudine repraesentans, et ex institutione
significans, et ex sanctificatione continens aliquam invisibilem et spiritalem gratiam."

and the other by Peter Lombard:

Sacramentum enim proprie dicitur quod ita signum est
gratiae Dei, et invisibilis gratiae forma, ut ipsius
imaginem gerat et causa existat.

Thus when the corpse is baptized, we are given another demonstration of
the superiority of God's might (grace, as administered through the
sacraments) over the limited might of men (meritorious deeds), so that
the import of the entire plot is controlled by the contrast which is
explicitly stated in Erkenwald's sermon.

The meaning of the poem as a whole, however, must be stated in more
specific doctrinal terms, since it counsels reliance on the grace of God,
attainable through the sacraments, as the only sure means of salvation.
"Wele-dede," without divine grace, is an element of human resource which,
though praiseworthy, still contains the stigma of the imperfection of
human nature itself and thus cannot ensure eternal bliss for the soul.

Let there be no confusion about the meaning of the redemption of the
judge's righteous soul in St. Erkenwald. The pagan judge is saved not
because he lived a virtuous life, but because he was allowed through the
"my3t" of God to experience a posthumous infusion of divine grace
through the administration of baptism. Indeed the merit of the pagan
judge is significant not because it was able to effect his redemption, but
rather because it could not do so. The figure of this virtuous pagan
judge no doubt appealed to the author because it could best convey his
lesson about the insufficiency of human merit and the divine power
resident in the sacraments.

As we have seen in Chapter Three, the plot of St. Erkenwald is
organized to emphasize the administration of the sacrament of baptism.
At the moment when the baptismal aspersion (Erkenwald's tears) falls on
the corpse and the trinitarian formula is recited by the Bishop, dramatic
suspense reaches its zenith and the poem's human figures, through the
careful handling of descriptive and narrative technique, assume a diminished
stature in the face of this sacred act:

bes dulfually þis dede body devisyt hit sorowe,
þat alle wepyd for woo, þe wordes þat herden;
And þe bysshopp balefully bere doun his eghen,
þat hade no space to speke, so spakly he 3oskyd,

Til he toke hym a tome, and to þe tounbe lokyd,
To þe liche þer hit lay, with lavande teres:
"Oure Lord lene," quop þat lede, "þat pou lyfe hades,
By Goddes leve, as longe as I myt lacche water,

And cast upon þi faire cors, and carpe þes wordeþ:
"I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and his fre Childes
And of þe gracious Holy Goste";--and not one grue lenger.
þen þof þou droppyd doun dede, hit daungerde me lasse."

With þat worde þat he warpyd, þe wete of eghen
And teres trillyd adoun, and on þe tounbe lighten;
And one felle on his face, and þe freke syked.
þen sayd he with a sadde soun: "Oure Savyoure be løyyd!"
(vv. 309-324)

As previously noted in our discussion of the style of this crucial passage,
the word used to designate Erkenwald as he begins to baptize the corpse,
"lede," represents a slight diminution of his status in the poem. This
designation implies that the hero is simply a member of the human species, akin to those anonymous "ledes," "segges," and "weghes" who constitute collectively the "pepul" whose attitudes and values seem to differ sharply from those of the Bishop. What is the reason for this change in the mode of designation used to describe Erkenwald, and, for that matter, what is behind the shift in characterization which changes Erkenwald from a figure of aloofness and power in the first half of the plot to an emotionally-involved "lede" who, like the rest of the humans who witness the divine miracle, simply stands in awe?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that the second half of the plot raises the poem's dominant theme, the contrast between God's omnipotence and man's limited might, to the level of a general doctrinal statement on the solemn subject of man's redemption. This meaning had been outlined by the figural implications of the events in the prologue, but its full presentation is reserved for the second half of the plot, after the basic schema of an omnipotent God who is willing to assist his finite creation, man, has been presented in the first half. The miraculous tone of the events in the second half dictates a subtle diminution of the portrait of human might, since Erkenwald's sermon establishes its absolute inferiority to the power of a transcendent Deity. Therefore we might well expect that the pretensions of human might would be defeated in the narrative action and correspondingly de-emphasized. This de-emphasis has two effects. The first is related to a principle of sacramental theology.
The phrase *ex opere operata* means literally "by the work worked" or "by force of the action itself," and when applied to a particular event, stresses the primacy of action over agent. Applied to the sacraments, the phrase defines the power of divine grace as residing in the sacrament itself rather than in the ministers who perform the rite. The principle was established by St. Augustine, who in refuting the Donatist heresy, concluded that the sacrament of baptism, of itself, contains such power that it cannot be substantially affected by human instruments or circumstances:

>Potærat jam fortasse sufficere, quod toties repetitis rationibus, et multipliciter disputando versatis atque tractatis, adjunctis etiam divinum scripturarum documentis, et ipsius Cypriani tot testimonii suffragantibus, jam etiam corde tardiores, quantum existimo, intelligunt Baptismum Christi nulla perversitate hominis, sive dantis, sive accipientis, posse violari.

In addition, Augustine consistently maintained that it is the Holy Spirit which directly infuses grace through the sacrament and that Christ, not the human agent; is the real minister of these rites:

>Et enim dictum est de Domino antequam pateretur, quia baptizabat plures quam Joannes: deinde adjunctum est, "Quamvis ipse non baptizaret, sed discipuli ejus" (Joan. iv, 1, 2). Ipse, et non ipse: ipse potestate, illi ministerio; servitutem ad baptizandum illi admovebant, potestas baptizandi in Christo permanebat. Ergo baptizabant discipuli ejus, et ibi adhuc erat Judas inter discipulos ejus: quos ergo baptizavit Judas, non sunt iterum baptizati; et quos baptizavit Joannes, iterum baptizati sunt? Plane iterum, sed non iterato baptismo. Quos enim baptizavit Joannes, Ioannes baptizavit; quos autem baptizavit Judas, Christus baptizavit. Sic ergo quos baptizavit ebriosus, quos baptizavit homicida, quos baptizavit adulter, si baptismus Christi erat, Christus baptizavit. Non timente adulterum, non ebriosum, non homicidam; quia columbam attendo, per quam mihi dicitur, "Hic est qui baptizat."

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8. The text continues with further elaboration on the principle of *ex opere operata* and its implications for the validity of sacraments.
In the perspective of traditional sacramental theology, then, Bishop Erkenwald is exactly what he is designated in the scene of the miraculous baptism of the corpse, a "lede," a mere human agent who plays no properly causal role in the infusion of divine grace which saves the soul of the pagan judge. The Bishop, like the "pepul" around him, possesses only a limited, human measure of might, and, like them, his presence is insignificant compared with the presence of the power of the omnipotent God Himself in the form of the sacrament.

The dramatic portrayal of the ex opere operata efficacy of the sacrament of baptism (and by implication all sacraments) is the fulfillment of Erkenwald's promise that his confrontation with the mysterious corpse would strengthen and purify the faith of the people, demonstrate God's omnipotence, and reveal His willingness to grant his assistance to those who respect Him (vv. 173-176). The faith which is strengthened involves a sincere belief in and reverence toward a "lord my3ty" and the sacraments which He has chosen as the channels of his spiritual aid to men. Through these sacramental channels of grace, God is willing to supply certain benefits and effects which human nature cannot provide for itself.

iii. The Design for Irony

Another indication of the plot's tendency to de-emphasize human might is the subtle irony which hovers over many of the allusions to human ability in the poem. Our first hint is to be found in the narrator's interpolated statement that men will not, despite their expectations, be
able to find a clue to the corpse's identity by searching in the collective memory of oral tradition and written chronicle:

"Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in my(n)de stode longe;
He has ben kynge of þis kithe, as couthely hit semes
He lyes dolven þus depe; hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade."

Bot þat ȝlke note wos noght, for nourne none couthe,
Noper by title, ne token, ne by tale noþer
þat ever wos brevyt in burghe, ne in bok(e) notyde,
þat ever mynnyd suche a mo(n), more ne lasse.

(vv. 97-104)

The juxtaposition of these two views, that of the "pepul" and that of the omniscient narrator, produces a clear dramatic irony since we are given advance information which is withheld from the characters in the plot. The ironic distance between the thoughts and deeds of men and the views of the narrator which is so explicit in this passage may give us a key to a potential irony in other passages.

Let us take, for example, the curious image of the "crownes ful brode" of the clerks. As we have noted previously, this description is part of a chain of allusions to human power, in this case intellectual power. And yet the latent humor of these inflated craniums clashes with the serious tone of the context. Our suspicions about the ironic humor of this passage are substantiated when the dean later tells us that all of this work in the library turned up not one clue to the identity of the corpse:

And we have oure librarie laitid þes longe seven dayes,
Bot one cronicle of þis kynge con we never fynde.

(v. 155f)
Thus the incongruity between the actual result and the expected result of this searching tends to tarnish the image of man's intelligence. Similarly, the eventual revelation of the corpse's true identity makes the people's assurance that this is the body of a "kynge of þis kythe" (vv. 97 and 156) seem rather like overconfidence.

Even such an inconspicuous description as that of the choir which sings at Erkenwald's Mass (vv. 128-136) may be colored by a deft irony which makes a comment on man's supposed "myȝt":

With queme questis of þe quere, with ful quaynt notes... (v. 133)

As Savage points out in his note to this verse, the choice of the word *quest* is rather odd considering the context: "*Quest* is the word used to describe the cry of hounds who are hunting for, or have found the scent, or who have sighted the game. The different voices of the choir suggest the different tongues of a pack of hounds." This is hardly a flattering way to describe the pleasing ("queme") melody of human voices! In truth it is reminiscent of the "ryngande noycr" (v. 62) and the "cry aboute a cors" (v. 110) which typically defines common humanity in the first half of the plot.

It is also ironic that although human "myȝt" can "unlouke þe lidde" (v. 68) of the corpse's sarcophagus, it cannot "unlouke þe leste of his (God's) myȝtes" (v. 162), the identity of the undecayed body. The basis of this sustained irony at the expense of human "myȝt" is the essential incongruity involved in the contrast of man's power and the omnipotence
of God: comparison of an infinite mode of being with a finite mode, viewed in one way, results in the humorous undercutting of the perspectives of the inferior mode.

This undercutting of human "my3t" is so convincingly implied by the absolute transcendence of God that it is difficult to deny that there is a faint touch of irony in the portrait of Bishop Erkenwald. This irony results from the fact that we see the Bishop in two different perspectives during the poem. In the first half of the plot, his stature is defined as if we were meant to see him from the level of common humanity. In the eyes of these "pepul," Erkenwald assumes the form of a superhuman figure, standing aloof and removed from the ordinary concerns of men. Throughout this part of the plot, we share this perspective of the Bishop's status. In the latter part of the plot, however, the perspective has been reversed. We see things from a cosmic point of view, with individual events becoming signs of universal truth. Seen in this new perspective, from above, Erkenwald looks as much like a "segge" or "lede" as any of the figures in the crowd around him. The incongruity between his stature in the perspectives of this world and those of the next is however not calculated to belittle the saint, but rather to assert man's limitations. Man's angle of vision, like his abilities, is limited, and if he wishes to rise above his limitations, he must ask for the wisdom to see things in eternal perspective. And what is finally significant about St. Erkenwald is not its saintly hero, although of course he is important, but rather its portrayal of a paradigmatic movement from sorrow to eternal bliss.
through the grace of God and the acquisition of a new point of view.

The final irony in the poem is to be found in the description of the fate of the undecayed corpse:

Wyt this cessyld his sowne, sayd he no more;  
Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid and faylde,  
And alle the blee of his body vos blakke as þe moldes,  
As rotten as þe rottok þat rises in powdere.  

For as sone as þe soule was sesyd in blisse,  
Corrupt was þat oþer crafte þat covert þe bones;  
For þe ay-lastname life, þat leithe schalle never,  
Devoydes urch þa vayneglorie, þat vayles so litelle.  

(vv. 341-348)

Here the irony functions dramatically in the sense that events in the plot, rather than overt statements, are responsible for a significant incongruity. When the corpse's body disintegrates, we witness a reversal of values, with the things which earlier seemed most permanent and real suddenly demonstrating their essential ephemerality. This incongruous shift is of course designed to dramatize the lesson that only spiritual realities are eternal.

iv. The Significance of Erkenwald's Virtue

Having now seen how a contrast between divine omnipotence and human limitation organizes the subsidiary concerns of the poem and is in turn raised to the level of a general doctrinal statement on the subject of salvation, it is not difficult to understand how the pointed allusion to "vayneglorie" (v. 348) is an integral part of the meaning of St. Erkenwald.

The allusion to the sin of vainglory is aimed directly at "þat crafte þat covert þe bones" (v. 346), the flesh of the pagan judge and probably also the clothing which adorns his body, all of which, after the
pagan judge's soul has taken up its abode in heaven, instantly decays. The judge's undecayed flesh and preserved clothing are a sign of the "wele-dede" which he performed during his life on earth, because they have been miraculously preserved from decay by God as a token of His love for righteous conduct:

"Nay, bisshop," quo[phat] body, "enbawmyd wos I never, Ne no mannes counselle my clothe has kepyd unwemmyd; Bot þe riche Kynge of reson, þat rijhte ever alowes, And loves al þe lawes lely þat longen to trouthe; And moste he menskes men for mynnynge of rijhte, þen for al þe meritorie medes þat men on molde usen; And if renkes for rijhte þus me arayed has, He has lant me to last þat loves rijht best." (vv. 265-272)

Given their significance, it is important to note that by having these tokens of human merit destroyed immediately after the full fruits of divine grace have been received by the judge, we have been given a striking condemnation of human merit, the narrator calling it mere "vayneglorie, þat vayles so litelle" in the perspective of eternal realities. The authoritative voice of the narrator, which has been absent during the long dialogue which constitutes the second half of the plot, re-emerges to imply a theme which, if we have paid close attention to the dramatic events and details of the plot, should be apparent.

Vainglory is usually that branch of pride whose effect is to deny God what is due Him as the source of all human benefits and the "lord myȝty" who rules over all creation:

þe fifpe braunch of pride is veyn glorie, þat is fool likynge in vayn preisynges, whan a man feeleþ in his herte a gladnesse of a þyng þat he is, or wilneþ to be praised
fore of any þyng þat he feeleþ in hymself or wenþe to have or hapþ, and wilneþ to be preised of þyng þat he scholde þank God of. And þerfore veynglorie hymnþeþ God þat is his. For of alle our goedes he scholde have þe þänke and þe worshipe, and we þe auaunþage and profite.10

The vainglorious man foolishly believes that he himself is the source of his own virtues, goods, and powers. This self-centered view leads, says Aquinas, to presumption and an unwarranted confidence in one's own capabilities:

There are two kinds of presumption. There is the presumption which trusts in one's own power, and which attempts what transcends one's power as if it were possible for oneself to attain it. Such presumption is obviously due to vainglory. For it is because a man has a great desire for glory that he attempts things beyond his power. . . .11

In our poem, then, vainglorious presumption is defined as a trait of human nature, the confidence of "þe pepul" that human intellectual power is sufficient to solve mysteries. The same point is made in theological terms in the second half, where reliance on human merit for salvation is implicitly defined as presumptuous. In whatever form this presumption appears, however, it represents an affront to the majesty and omnipotence of God, for He is always ready to aid those who are not blinded to their own limitations and needs by the sin of vainglory.

In St. Erkenwald, the one figure who fully recognizes the limitations of human might and the largess of God is the Bishop himself. Sensing the inability of the unaided human mind to deal with the tomb and corpse,

þe derke nyȝt overdrofþ, and day-belle ronge;
And Ser Erkenwolde was up in þe ughten ere þen,
þat wilnþeþe al þe nyȝt hade na(i)tyd his houres,
To biseche his Soverayn, of his swete grace,
To vouche-safe to revele hym hit by avis(i)on or elles:
"Þaghe I be unworthy," al wepande he sayde, 
Thurgh his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my Lorde, 
In confirmynge þi Cristen faihte, fulsen me to kenne 
þe mysterie of þis mervaille þat men opon wondres."
(vv. 117-125)

His tearful prayers, the narrator informs us, are the token of Erkenwald's "deere debonerte," and while the noun debonaire in Middle English can and often does indicate the polish and grace of courtly behavior, it can also be employed in a more patently religious sense, designating one who is "humble" or "meek." That debonaire can be used to designate the Christian virtue of humility or meekness is proven by its use as the English equivalent of the Latin mitis in the second Beatitude: "Beati mites, quoniam ipsi possidebunt terram": Blessed be þe debonere, for þei schulle be lordes of þe erþe.12

Erkenwald's quality of "debonerte" or meekness stands in direct thematic opposition to the sin of vainglory which at first controls the thoughts of the crowd and to the Pelagian doctrine that human merit effects salvation. A meek man, according to The Book of Vices and Virtues, for example, fully acknowledges his own faults, wishes to be known for what he is and to be held as nought by his fellow men.13 This enumeration reveals that the qualities associated with the virtue of meekness align themselves in opposition to the characteristic features of the vice of vainglory: rejoicing over the good deeds one has done, wishing to be praised for one's good deeds one has done, wishing to be praised for one's good deeds, and hating to be told of one's faults.14 Therefore we may conclude that the allusions to "debonerte" and "veyneglorie" in St. Erkenwald
have been purposely introduced in order to imply a two-part ethical statement based on the poem's dominant theme: first, a warning that it is vainglory for man to ignore his limited might and think he is more powerful than he really is and, concomitantly, a suggestion that recognition of God's omnipotence induces a proper respect, evidenced by human meekness, for this divine might.

v. Symbolic Imagery

While several of the images and details in *St. Erkenwald*, as we have shown, are meant to evoke an ironic perspective on the values and expectations of the characters in the poem, still other images contain a symbolic significance which contributes to the overall doctrinal meaning. These images offer an index to the complexity with which the poem's simple didactic themes and meaning have been presented and provide further evidence of the validity of our interpretation of its actions and events.

The first of these images is contained in the potential figural significance of the poem's allusions to the cross and Crucifixion:

> Sythen Crist suffrige on crosse, and Cristendome stablyde (v. 2)
>
> As he was bende on a beme, quen he his blode schedde (v. 182)

The relation between these allusions and the climactic event of the baptism of the corpse may be defined by recalling that according to St. Paul and the Church Fathers, the sacrament of baptism symbolized the recipient's participation in Christ's own suffering and death. The source
of this figural correspondence is Romans 6.3-6:

Do you not know that all we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? For we were buried with him by means of Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ has arisen from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be so in the likeness of his resurrection also. For we know that our old self has been crucified with him, in order that the body of sin may be destroyed, that we may no longer be slaves to sin.

This association of baptism and the Cross is developed in many patristic texts, one of the more famous examples being Augustine's discussion of St. John Chrysostom's views on this sacrament:

Post haec in eodem cum de Baptismo ageret, interposuit verba Apostoli dicentis: "An ignoratia," inquit, "fratres, quoniam quicumque in Christo baptizati sumus, in morte ipsius baptizati sumus? Consepti ergo sumus illi per Baptismum in morte." Quid est, "in morte illius baptizati sumus?" Ut et ipsi moriamur sicut et ille. Crux enim est Baptisma. Quod ergo crux Christo et sepolcrum, hoc nobis Baptisma factum est.15

On the basis of this evidence, it may be said that the baptism of the pagan judge in St. Erkenwald is itself a symbolic "crucifixion" by which the judge dies to the original sin which had condemned him and then is raised to eternal life in heaven.

The presence and function of the third person of the Trinity in the action of St. Erkenwald is part of the poem's message on grace, since it is the Holy Spirit who is credited with the actual infusion of divine grace through the sacraments.16 Therefore the Holy Spirit has been made the most active person of the Trinity in the poem. The Spirit brings Erkenwald the information for which he had prayed ("an ansuare of pe Holy
Goste," v. 127) and the Mass which the Bishop says (vv. 130-133) is associated with the third person of the Trinity, for it is "pe masse. . . . of Spiritus Domini" (v. 132). But certainly the most interesting allusion to the Holy Spirit may be found in the imagery of Erkenwald's sermon:

Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt, and his mynde passyde,
And al his resons are torent, and redeles he stondes,
þen lettes hit hym ful litelle to louse wyt a fynger
pat alle þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never.

(vv. 163-166)

This image of God's "fynger" is, in medieval hermeneutics, a traditional symbol for the Holy Spirit itself, which seems to have originated in the exegesis of certain scriptural passages, one of the most important being Luke 11.20:

But if I cast out devils by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

In medieval commentaries, this verse is consistently glossed as a reference to the power of the Holy Ghost, so that the identification of the image of God's finger with this person of the Trinity becomes an axiom of allegorical interpretation. In our poem, the use of this image is meant to imply that divine "myȝt" (grace) is administered through the agency of the Spirit of God, and thus that this Spirit causes the infusion of grace through the sacrament of baptism which remits the pagan judge's original sin and allows his soul to ascend to heaven.

Another interesting symbolic allusion is contained in the speech made by the dean of St. Paul's:

þer is no lede opon lyfe of so longe age
þat may mene in his mynde þat suche a mon regnyd,
Ne noþer his nome ne his note nourne of one speche;
Queber mony porer in his place is putte into grave,  
bat merkid is inoure martilge his mynde for ever.  
And we have ourer librarie laitid hes longe seven dayes,  
Bot one cronicle of his kyng con we never fynde.  
He has non layne here so longe, to loke hit by kynde,  
To malte so out of memorie, bot mervaye hit were.  
(vv. 150-158)

It is significant that this character mentions the specific length of time which men have labored to uncover the secret of the undecayed body, for the number seven in medieval symbolic interpretations of eschatological time is the number of man and of this present life. The week spent looking for the identity of the corpse suggests deeds done while in the flesh, man's "wele-dede," which are futile in the perspective of the life to come:

Seven denotes this present life which runs through seven days; eight, which comes after seven signifies eternal life.18

The symbolism of the eighth day, the day on which the corpse is baptized in our poem, is derived from the figural associations of the number eight:

The number 8 was, for ancient Christianity, the symbol of the Resurrection, for it was on the day after the Sabbath, and so on the eighth day, that Christ rose from the tomb. Furthermore, the seven days of the week are the image of the time of this world, and the eighth day of life everlasting. Sunday is the liturgical commemoration of this day, and so at the same time a memorial of the Resurrection and a prophecy of the world to come. Into this eighth day, inaugurated by Christ, the Christian enters by his Baptism.19

Thus both the length of time spent by the clerks to solve the mystery of the corpse and the day on which the posthumous baptism of the pagan judge is performed cast these particular events into a larger cosmic perspective of meaning which involves the eternal destiny of all mankind. These
symbolic images, along with the figural implications of the prologue, help to establish the generalized, doctrinal meaning of the poem, as well as to suggest the textural complexity with which this essentially uncomplicated meaning has been presented.

Upon analysis, the plot of our poem reveals a two-part structure composed of parallel variations on the same theme: the absolute inferiority of human "myȝt" to divine omnipotence. In the first half of this plot, human might, in the form of the expectations of "be pepul," is defeated by the mystery of the corpse's identity, a mystery which Erkenwald calls "be leste of his (God's) myȝte" (v. 162). In the second half, human might, this time in the form of a man's admirable good works and merits, is defeated by the fact that such merit is insufficient to gain eternal salvation for the human soul. In both parts of the plot, it is God's grace which solves a dramatic problem. Erkenwald, because he humbly asked for the "grace" of "his Soverayn" (v. 120), receives an "ansuare of be Holy Goste" which reveals the true significance of the mysterious corpse. Similarly, the pagan judge receives God's grace through the sacrament of baptism and as a result his soul is rescued from the infernal regions and allowed to dwell in heaven.

The plot, then, and its dominant theme, are resolved in the form of a general statement on the necessity of divine grace and the insufficiency of human merit in the crucial matter of eternal salvation. This is the final meaning of the poem, and it is a meaning which is wholly traditional, having
been simply borrowed from the theology of the author's Christian milieu. The way in which that meaning is presented is surely not borrowed, however, for the parallel relation of events, the unique pattern of dramatic emphasis, and the coordinated effects of imagery and symbolism can be found in none of the earlier analogous hagiographic tales.
NOTES


3 A good primer on the important features of Pelagianism, some of which I have touched on here, is J. Ferguson, Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study (Cambridge, 1956).


5 De sacramentis, I, 9, 2. PL, CLXXVI, 517.

6 Sententiarum libri quattuor, Bk. IV, Distinctio Prima. PL, CXCII, 839.


8 In Joannis Evangelium, V, 18. PL, 35, 1423f.

9 St. Erkenwald, p. 37.


11 Treatise on Grace, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London, 1921), Prima Secundae, Questio 21: Of Presumption, Article 4.
The Book of Vices and Virtues, p. 94. The MED lists the following primary meanings for debonnaire: "mild, gentle, kind; courteous, gracious; humble, meek." Among the passages cited as evidence for the sense "humble, meek" are the earlier version of the Wycliffite Bible (c. 1382) in the translation of Ps. 24.9 and Ecclus. 5.13.

p. 19f.

Jacob's Well, p. 71.

Contra Julianum Pelagianum, I, 6, 27. Opera Omnia, X, 659f.

Rupert of Deutz, for example, says:
Sic aqua ista in sua vili substantia pretiosam contegens
gratiam Spiritus sancti, et sanguinis Christi daemonum
culturam destruxit, templvm daemonum in templvm Christi,
cultores et filios diaboli in veros adoratores et
filios Dei convertit.
(De Trinitate et operibus ejus, PL, CLXVII, 1653)

Rabanus Maurus, Allegoriarne in Sacram Scripturam, PL, 112, 309:
"Digitus est Spiritus sanctus, ut in Evangelio: 'Si in digito Dei,' id
est, si in Spiritu Dei, 'ejicio daemonia.'" Also, Glossa ordinaria, PL,
CXIV, 290: Filius dicitur manus vel brachium Patris: Spiritus Sanctus
dicitur digitus propter differentiam variorum donorum, quae per Spiritum
sanctum hominibus dantur, sicut digitii inter se discreti sunt; nec nocet
inaequalitas membrorum. Licet enim brachium majus sit digito, tamen
brachium cum digito unum est corpus.

Hugh of St. Victor, Selected Spiritual Writings, trans. A Religious
of CSHV (New York, 1962), p. 120. This passage is from De arca Noe morali,
III, 16.

CONCLUSION

It is wholly appropriate that *St. Erkenwald* ends on a note of renunciation of the flesh and its works, since the poem emphasizes man's need for divine grace and the means to secure it. The poem throughout works toward this final dramatic renunciation, and gradually shifts our perspectives from external physical appearances to matters which concern the eternal destiny of the human soul.

The poet's problem, of course, was how to make this meaning poetically credible. His solution to this problem involved two techniques. The first was to prepare for his doctrinal message by foreshadowing it in rather mundane terms. He first presents mankind's inability to discover the identity of the mysterious corpse through its own powers. This simple dramatization of man's limited "myʒт" then is used as an analogue for man's inability to achieve salvation through his own works. Thus the message is presented twice: once in the practical terms of achievement in this world and then finally in terms attaining an eternal reward. The poet's second technique for making his meaning credible was to lend his plot a dramatic tone which engages the reader in the actions which convey his ideas. Thus the reader himself is kept in the dark about the corpse's identity in the first half of the plot so that attention is maintained until the mystery is unravelled. Then in the second half of the plot the reader is given an emotional revelation of the true mystery of the poem: the destiny of a
human soul and the workings of divine grace. The poet's meaning emerges from the experiences of the pagan judge who moves from damnation to salvation through a series of miracles which demonstrate God's grace and power (resuscitation, baptism with human tears, posthumous remission of original sin and its penalty). This movement, of course, is a paradigm of the proper course of each human soul: born into original sin, forgiven by baptism, nourished by the power of all the sacraments which dispense God's grace, and finally rewarded in heaven. It is the dramatic experience of one soul, however, which urges us to make this the paradigm of our own soul's progress, for when abstract truth is clothed in the flesh of human experience poetry assumes its most immediate power to move us.

We have tried to show how St. Erkenwald has been influenced by its two lines of descent, the one generic and the other stylistic. Because it is a hagiographic tale, its main character is a saint and it is a continuous narrative of one event in the life of that saint. Also, like the rest of its generic antecedents, its meaning is simple and didactic. But its simple meaning has been defined and redefined through the principles of structural variation which characteristically operate in the poems of alliterative tradition. A digressive prologue, for example, has been juxtaposed with the narrative action, and the relation between these structural units has been implied through figural correspondence rather than explicitly stated. Similarly, the two parts of the plot are defined and illumined by their correspondence in dramatic form and thematic content as much as by the hints in Erkenwald's sermon. In fact, if the Bishop's remarks were
taken as the final word on the poem's meaning, its message about God's grace and the sacraments would be obscured. Thus we must go beyond that one authoritative statement if we are to discover the true meaning of the poem; we must perform our own analysis of the "semantic function" of the form itself in order to perceive the implied relations between incidents and actions which establish the overall meaning of the text. By performing this analysis we are able to determine the way in which the art of St. Erkenwald influences and creates its meaning.
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