A STUDY OF AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS AND GENRE
IN ST. ERKENWALD

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Abstract

St. Erkenwald is an alliterative Middle English poem thought to have been composed toward the end of the fourteenth century. Among modern critics of Middle English literature the poem has been generally regarded as an inferior work or has been relegated to relative obscurity as a second-rate work of the Gawain-poet. One possible reason for the indifferent reception St. Erkenwald has received from scholars may be due to the seeming difficulties which beset the poem, of which the most important is the lack of an appropriate generic context. If the poem lacks a suitable generic identity, part of the problem may lie in the way in which genre has been previously defined by modern critics. The solution proposed in this study is to redefine the concept of genre in terms of the reception-aesthetics of Hans Robert Jauss, that is, in terms of the expectations of the medieval audience.

Chapter One of this study examines the problems facing the modern reader of St. Erkenwald as they have been identified by Erkenwald scholars. The aim of Chapter Two is to redefine the concept of genre and explore the theories of Jauss's Rezeptionsästhetik which can then be applied to the poem. The types of possible expectations are reconstructed in Chapter Three by examining roughly
contemporaneous works which the audience could reasonably be expected to know. In Chapter Four St. Erkenwald is re-evaluated in terms of the reconstructed expectations in order to determine in what ways these expectations are fulfilled, changed, or subverted, thereby providing the means to evaluate the generic identity of the poem.
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Introduction

Very little is known about the circumstances of the production and reception of *St. Erkenwald*. The poem survives in only one manuscript, BL Harley 2250, and was copied afresh in 1477. The contents of the manuscript are primarily didactic, consisting of such pieces as the *Speculum Christiani*, a set of instructions for leading a Christian life, the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, portions of Mirk's *Festial* and the *South English Legendary*. Private use may be indicated by the inclusion of a cure for fever, a note on the distance from the earth to heaven, and a note on the units of time.¹

As for the original conditions under which *St. Erkenwald* was written, it can only be hypothesized that the poem might have been commissioned for the reinstatement of Erkenwald's feast, which led Gollancz to assign the date of composition as 1386.² Critics generally agree on the period of the late fourteenth century to the early fifteenth century as the date of composition. The poem is written

¹ For a description of the manuscript contents see *Saint Erkenwald*, ed. Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P. 1977) 1-11. This edition is used for all quotations from *St. Erkenwald*.

in Northwest Midlands dialect and Cheshire is customarily assigned as the point of origin.

The poet who wrote St. Erkenwald was familiar with the essential facts about the bishop, suggesting that he may have had access to one of the earlier versions of Erkenwald's life which were not widely circulated. The poet may have been a cleric, thereby having access to a church library where he could have read one of the vitae. This theory would seem to be supported by the hypothesis that the Alliterative Revival was associated with the monasteries.³ As a poet of the Alliterative Revival, the Erkenwald-poet may have been connected with the nobility since patronage was integral to this poetic movement:

This movement can best be understood in relation to aristocratic patronage. Such patronage would explain the widespread dissemination of alliterative verse... as well as its ability to draw on a metropolitan richness of source-materials, since the nobility had estates all over the country and travelled remorselessly with their train of courtiers, officials, clerks (and would-be alliterative poets).... ⁴

It may be that St. Erkenwald was written under such an aristocratic patronage as polite literature.


The modern reception of St. Erkenwald is more certain: the poem has generally been viewed unfavourably and classified as inferior. This evaluation may be due in part to the approach critics have taken to the poem. Among the problems identified by Erkenwald scholars are difficulties with history, genre, chronology, and theology. The Erkenwald-poet's sense of history, for example, seems to the modern reader to be a confused mixture of historical fact and pure invention. The historical authenticity established in the opening lines of the poem is contradicted by the historically inaccurate story which follows them: there is no extant record of a miracle in which the bishop Erkenwald effects the salvation of a heathen. With what to some would appear to be a lack of originality or a lack of skill, the poet has copied the basic plot of the salvation of Trajan by Gregory the Great.

Perhaps the difficulties modern readers have had with St. Erkenwald may be attributed to what Jauss terms as "alterity," or the difference between the contemporary and modern reception of a medieval text. Alterity should not be equated with historical distance but might rather be accounted for by the change in man's universe:

...the medieval observer looked into and upon the starry sky at night, as if looking over the outermost wall of a city, while we look out;...the whole universe appeared as a bound ordering of spaces, already layered and populated with angelic essences, and filled with light and the music of the spheres, while we feel
Pascal's horror of the silence éternel de ces espaces infinis when faced with the endless, empty, dark, and mute universe.

St. Erkenwald is alter to a modern audience in several ways, which may account for some of the difficulties generated by the poem. The medieval concept of history, for example, and the modern concept are widely opposed. What the modern person views as fictional, the medieval person believed implicitly:

Nowadays we may not regard the miracle stories in precisely the same light as did Bede and his contemporaries; but we ought to treat them with reverent sympathy, for it was in such ways that they projected their own faith and hope upon the external world.

St. Erkenwald has also been rejected for its lack of originality. No doubt this is a prejudice of our modern times in which originality and individuality are exalted and "plagiarism" regarded with revulsion. The medieval writer thought nothing of borrowing from other works:

One is tempted to say that almost the typical activity of the medieval author consists in touching up something that was already there; as Chaucer


touched up Boccaccio, as Malory touched up French prose romances in verse, as La3amon works over Wace, who works over Geoffrey, who works over no one knows what. We are inclined to wonder how men could be at once so original that they handled no predecessor without pouring new life into him, and so unoriginal that they seldom did anything completely new.

Finally, it must be said that traditional forms of hagiography are alter to the modern reader. Even Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale has been called uninspired. Rosemary Woolf, in discussing the Anglo-Saxon saint's life best summarized the modern objection: "there is perhaps no literary form which is more likely to trespass upon the prejudices of the twentieth century....Nowadays anyone who likes the fantasies of science fiction...would be outraged by the saint's life."^8

If the meaning of St. Erkenwald lies in a sphere of understanding so removed from the modern reader, the problem is then how to bridge the gap. The solution proposed by this study is to reconstruct the expectations of the medieval audience whereby the "modern reader comes to value medieval literature precisely for its alterity, for the way in which it opens to him new possible worlds

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of experiences." A suitable starting place for the proposed method is the question of the poem's genre. If St. Erkenwald does not satisfactorily fit any generic category, the solution to the problem may be to change the way in which genre is defined. A possible solution is to redefine the concept of genre in terms of reception-aesthetics, that is, in terms of contemporary medieval audience expectations and reactions. Altering the way in which genre is perceived rather than trying to make St. Erkenwald fit a generic category provides an alternative approach to interpretation.

In order to determine the contemporary audience's expectations for the poem, the types of expectations should be reconstructed from examples of hagiography which might have been familiar to the audience or which the poet might have expected his audience to know explicitly or implicitly. Roughly contemporaneous examples from the South English Legendary and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales as well as adaptations of hagiographical material in the saint play, exemplum, and sermon will be considered. The poem can then be re-evaluated to determine in what ways these expectations are satisfied, changed, or frustrated.

Finally, a comparison of the poem's reception by its contemporary audience and its reception by a modern audience

will provide the means to analyse the poem's aesthetic value and determine whether St. Erkenwald is justifiably deemed inferior or deserves to be better appreciated.
Chapter One: The Problems of St. Erkenwald
from a Modern Perspective

St. Erkenwald is a poem which seems to have provoked more questions in modern scholars than to have provided answers. Erkenwald scholars have described problems with genre, history, time, plot, and theology in the poem which create the impression that the poet is ineffective in communicating his point and is therefore not very skilful. This chapter will be devoted to outlining the difficulties encountered by modern readers of St. Erkenwald.

Of all the difficulties associated with St. Erkenwald, perhaps the most perplexing and the most important is the question of its genre. St. Erkenwald has been variously described by Erkenwald scholars as a "legend" or "saint's legend" (McAlindon), "Miraculum" (Burrow), "miracle tale" (Whatley), or "hagiographic tale" (Reichardt). The variety of terms used to describe the genre of the poem indicates the problem modern scholars have had with specifying its generic identity. One solution to the problem, as

suggested by Reichardt, is to invent a new generic category, the "hagiographic tale," which is a compromise between the all-inclusive, episodic saint's life and the brief, didactic exemplum. The invention of new generic categories such as "hagiographic tale" or "miracle tale" indicates that St. Erkenwald is so unlike other pieces of hagiography that it requires a category of its own and that St. Erkenwald is a poem which crosses generic boundaries. Given the number of terms already employed, it might be useful to explore the terminology of hagiography and make some distinctions.

"Legend" is a term which has become generally synonymous with "saint's life" and the two are often interchanged.2 The Middle English sense of legende, however, has additional connotations.3 The Middle English legende is "rarely used as a generic designation for individual narratives."4 Rather, legende usually implied an association with a collection of legends such as Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda aurea. The second connotation of legende is that it is a portion of a life which is read in the liturgy. The association of legende


with collections and reading derives ultimately from the origin of *legende*, the Latin *legenda* 'the stories to be read or collected' from *legere* 'to read or read aloud' or 'to gather or collect.'

Lyf or *lyflade* and *passioun* are more specific terms than *legende*, used to describe a particular narrative. A *lyf* is all-inclusive, recounting the events in the life of a saint, a term which does not apply to St. Erkenwald. *Passioun* is a term which may be used to denote a specific hagiographical sub-genre of the narrative of a martyred saint, which also is not pertinent to St. Erkenwald.

The term *miracle* is somewhat ambiguous, as it may refer to the event itself rather than to the type of narrative. The *miracle* is not necessarily a discrete genre as it is "hardly ever specifically generic....[M]iracle refers to an event rather than to an oral or written account of the event." In its original sense, *miracle*, derived from the Latin *miraculum* 'wonder or marvel,' refers to an event. In the saint's life, *miracle* customarily denotes one act within

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6 Strohm, "Passioun," 158.

7 *Miraculum*: "a wonderful, strange, or marvellous thing, a wonder, marvel, miracle; wonderfulness, marvellousness." Lewis and Short.
the narrative which is not usually isolated from the rest of the lyf. Two examples in which miracle is used, but not necessarily in a generic sense, are Chaucer's Prioress's Tale and John Lydgate's Legend of Dan Joos. Both recount a miracle in which the Virgin intervenes on behalf of the believer. In the prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas, which follows the Prioress's Tale in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the host refers to the preceding story as "al this miracle" (B 1881). Lydgate prefaces the Legend of Dan Joos with a prayer that his "rewdenes thy myracle nat deface" (15). It is uncertain whether miracle in both instances is meant as a generic reference or whether the term denotes the miraculous event or perhaps both.

While Walter Schirmer classifies the Legend of Dan Joos as a miracle legend (Wunderlegende), he classifies Lydgate's St. Austin at Compton, which also recounts a miracle, as an experimental legend (experimentierende Legende). The miracle in St. Austin receives elaborate treatment by Lydgate: "the mannered style is carried to an extreme; the shorter narrative form is abandoned in favour of erudition

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and breadth of treatment." Lydgate also refers to St. Austin in the envoy as "this myracle remembryd many fold" (404). Again, it is uncertain whether the event or narrative is meant. **St. Austin**, which describes an encounter between St. Augustine and a ghost, bears a remarkable resemblance to **St. Erkenwald**. **St. Erkenwald** has more in common with **St. Austin** than with the **Prioress's Tale** or the **Legend of Dan Joos** and perhaps "experimental" is not an inappropriate term to describe **St. Erkenwald**.

The only term which is invoked in the text of **St. Erkenwald** itself is **cronicle**, specifically the "crafty cronecles" (44) to which the poet alludes as his sources. **Cronicle** is a term which suggests historical authenticity, perhaps an allusion to one of the drier Latin *vita* of Erkenwald which the poet might have read. Perhaps the poet's

use of *cronicle* might also have been an attempt to give a non-factual story credibility by invoking the term.

The poet appears to take pains to establish an atmosphere of historical authenticity by stating certain historically accurate facts, but then undermines his credibility with certain inaccuracies. Erkenwald is correctly situated geographically at "loue London toun" (34), which is consistent with Bede's account of Erkenwald in the *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*: "Tum etiam Orientalibus Saxonibus, quibus eo tempore praefuerunt Sebbi et Sighere quorum supra meminimus, Earconualdum constituit episcopum in ciuitate Lundonia" (4.6).11 The poet also accurately places Erkenwald away in Essex "an abbay to visite" (108), referring to the abbey at Barking of which Erkenwald's sister, Ethelberga, was abbess. Bede describes how Erkenwald established a monastery for himself at Chertsey and another for his sister at Barking:

Hic sane, priusquam episcopus factus esset, duo praeclara monasteria, unum sibi alterum sorori suae Aedilburgae, construxerat, quod utrumque regularibus disciplinis optime instituerat: sibi quidem in regione Sudergeona iuxta fluvium Tamensem in loco qui uocatur Cerotaesei, id est Ceroti insula, sorori autem in Orientalium Saxonum prouincia in loco qui nuncupatur Inberecingum, in quo ipsa Deo deuctarum mater ac nutrix posset existere feminarum.

11 *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 354-57.
It can be concluded, then, that the poet was not completely unfamiliar with the story of Erkenwald's life and wished to demonstrate his knowledge by stating the facts he knew.

An array of historical persons and events appears throughout the narrative of St. Erkenwald to contribute to the atmosphere of authenticity. The poet refers to Christ (2, 209), the Saxon Hengist (7), St. Augustine (12), Brutus (207), and the brothers Belyn and Berynge (Belinus and Brennius) who were rivals for the throne of Britain (213). Certain historical events such as the Crucifixion (2), St. Augustine's arrival in England (12), and the founding of Troynovant (207), also lend an air of credibility. However, not all of the poet's history is accurate according to modern standards.

The Erkenwald-poet indulges in invention by associating Erkenwald, who lived in the seventh century, with the rebuilding of St. Paul's Cathedral of the New Work, which did not take place until the thirteenth century:

Now of pis Augustynes art is Erkenwolde bischop
At loue London toun and the laghe teches,
Syttes semely in pe sege of Saynt Paule mynster
Pat was pe temple Triapolitan as I tolde are.
Pen was hit abatyd and beten doun and buggyd efte new--
A noble note for pe nones and New Werke hit hatte.

(33-38)

12 For the history of the Saxon conquest of the Britons see Bede's Ecclesiastical History, 1.14-15 or Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Brittaniae, 6.10-16; Augustine's arrival in England is recorded by Bede, 1.25; the history of Belinus and Brennius is recorded by Geoffrey, 3.1-10.
The obvious anachronism, however, offends only the modern, informed reader's sense of chronology.

Another discrepancy which has puzzled modern scholars is the poet's use of a specific date which appears to be meaningless. The pagan judge, when asked how long he had remained buried, replies:

After pat Brutus pis burghe had buggid on fyrste,  
No3t bot fife hundred 3ere per aghtene wontyd  
Before pat kynned 3our Criste by Cristen acounte  
A thousande 3ere and pretty mo and yet threnen aght.  
I was of heire and of oyer in pe New Troie  
In the regne of pe riche kynge pat rewlit vs pen,  
The bolde Breton Ser Belyn, Ser Berynge was his brothire.  

(207-213)

The date would appear to have been included for accuracy, but unless the error is due to a scribe (which is probable), the poet's meaning has so far proved indecipherable. Critics have invented ingenious calculations to arrive at a meaningful solution. Israel Gollancz and Henry Savage (following Gollancz) have proposed that "fife" be emended to "aght" and "thousande" to "thre hundred." The judge would then have lived in 354 BC \((300+30+(3\times8))\) and the date of the founding of Troynovant would have been 1136 BC \((800-18+354)\).\(^{13}\) Ruth Morse proposed that "fife" be emended to "four" and interprets the lines to mean that the judge lived in 382 BC \((400-18)\) and had remained buried for 1054 years.

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\(^{13}\) Gollancz, xxx-xxxiv; *St. Erkenwald: A Middle English Poem*, ed. Henry Savage (1926; Hamden, Ct: Archon, 1972) see note to lines 207-12, p. 41.
The date 382 BC is close to the date of the reign of Belinus (399 BC) and satisfies the calculation for the date of Erkenwald’s bishopric (AD 675-693) as AD 672 (1054-382). All of these calculations require a serious emendation of the text and some are involved and complicated. The point is that the date which the poet has provided has proven to be a source of confusion to the modern reader.

From the modern perspective, history in St. Erkenwald is a mixture of the accurate, what appears to be accurate but is not, and the poet’s invention. Establishing what is true and what is not in a tale which purports to be valid is a challenging task for the modern reader. What appear to be reliable reference points may turn out to be more frustrating than helpful.

In addition to the poet’s confusing sense of history, the modern reader must confront layer upon layer of time. The poem opens at the time of the event being reported, Erkenwald’s encounter with the pagan, then proceeds through a retrospective leading up to the event, beginning with the Crucifixion of Christ and progressing through the conquest of the Britons by the Saxon Hengist and the establishment of Christianity in England by St. Augustine. Throughout the narrative the reader is confronted with other time frames as the story alternates between the past and present.

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The encounter with the pagan judge brings the past into the present of the story and time is suspended as the pagan has existed in a kind of stasis not subject to time. The poet also brings together two separate time frames in associating Erkenwald with the New Work. In addition, the modern reader must contend with the distance between the purported time of the event (in the seventh century) and the poet's account of it (in the fourteenth century). Time and history in *St. Erkenwald*, then, do not function consistently with the modern notion of the functioning of time and history.

The carefully wrought historical atmosphere leads the reader to expect an authentic legend. However, *St. Erkenwald*, which seems to promise a valid legend, fails to satisfy the expectation. The plot of *St. Erkenwald* is probably an invention of the poet as there is no extant account of a miracle in which Erkenwald effects the salvation of a heathen. No direct source for the poem has been discovered and the extant lives of Erkenwald, from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the Latin *vitae* do not contain a miracle of this nature.  

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Erkenwald's posthumous miracles, such as those recorded by Bede, are usually confined to the miraculous healing power of the bishop's litter:

Etenim usque hodie feretrum eius caballarium, quo infirmus uehi solebat, seruatum a discipulis eius multos febricitantes uel alio quolibet incommodo fessos sanare non desistit. Non solum autem subpositi eidem feretro uel adpositi curantur egroti, sed et astulæ de illo abscessae atque ad infirmos adlatae citam illis solent adferre medellam. (4.6)

The poet disregards Erkenwald's miracles, substituting instead in essence the story of the salvation of Trajan by St. Gregory. Why the poet chose to associate this particular legend with Erkenwald has been the source for much conjecture, and many theories as to how the legend might have become attached to him have been proposed. Laura Hibbard suggested that Erkenwald had been confused with Erkenbald the Belgian who had become associated with the Trajan story. Erkenbald was said to have punished his nephew for violating a woman by slitting the boy's throat. Erkenbald, upon his own death, is rewarded by God for his righteousness. In the Alphabet of Tales, the English translation of the Alphabetum Narrationum, the story of Herkenwaldus (ccccxx) follows the

entry which describes an incident in which Trajan makes amends to a widow whose son has been killed (ccccxix). Both tales are chosen as *exempla* of justice: Trajan's to illustrate that "Iustitia eciam in proprio filio debet exerceri" and Herkenwaldus's to show that "Iusticia eciam exerceri debet in propriis parentibus." It is possible that some loose association between Erkenbald and Trajan arose from a confusion of these two stories. In the fifteenth century, Erkenbald and Trajan were also associated artistically: Rogier van der Weyden's mural in the town hall at Brussels, painted about 1436, depicts scenes from the legends of both Erkenbald and Trajan. The association between Erkenbald the Belgian, an *exemplum* of justice, and St. Erkenwald has lent support to the interpretation of the poem as a defense of the efficacy of good works.

In *St. Erkenwald* the character of the Emperor Trajan is transformed into an unknown pagan judge who has remained entombed for centuries as an undecayed corpse. It is upon this character that the reader's attention focuses. The poet's detailed and well-wrought description of the body and magnificent clothing captures the imagination and leads the


reader to wonder and conjecture as much as the fictional crowd of the poem does, "Quat body hit my3t be pat buried wos ther" (94). The marvel of the undecayed corpse initially misleads the reader into believing it is the miracle of the story.

_St. Erkenwald_ has been called "one of the most theologically puzzling works of the Alliterative Revival" and perhaps the greatest challenge presented by the poem is its theology.\(^\text{19}\) _St. Erkenwald_ has been the source for a theological debate among _Erkenwald_ scholars because of the issue which the poet has chosen to address: the question of the salvation of the righteous heathen. Some critics contend that the poet's intention is to confirm the efficacy of good works. Others have taken the opposing view and contend that the poem's intent is to show the necessity of God's grace for salvation. The issue is as theologically divisive to modern critics as it was in the poet's time.

An alternative view of the poem's meaning is that _St. Erkenwald_ was intended to show the necessity of the sacrament of baptism: "_St. Erkenwald_ is fundamentally about Baptism and regeneration."\(^\text{20}\) Russell Peck insists that the


structure of *St. Erkenwald* is based upon the number eight, which is symbolic, according to Peck, in the medieval period as the number of Baptism. The nature of the baptism which occurs in the poem has also been disputed since "to baptise the dead is...a pointless misapplication of the Sacrament."\(^{21}\) Whether or not the poet satisfies the conditions for baptism appears to be debatable.

In the final analysis the modern reader must assess the poem's success in satisfying the poet's implied purpose of "confirmynge pi Cristen faithe" (124). The poet's example of salvation would seem to fail in its objective as it "describes a unique rather than a typical case, so that its thesis cannot have any universal significance."\(^{22}\) *St. Erkenwald* seems to leave the modern reader with unanswered questions about baptism and salvation and in the end his final impression of the poem may be one of dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction.

\(^{21}\) Quinn, 182.

\(^{22}\) Quinn, 182.
Chapter Two: Redefining the Concept of Genre

In Chapter One the various generic descriptions which have been applied to *St. Erkenwald* and the terminology of hagiography which might be applicable were examined. Save for, perhaps, "experimental," the terms described were inadequate in arriving at a definition of generic identity suitable to *St. Erkenwald*. Perhaps part of the reason the poem seems to be confusing to the modern reader can be attributed to the lack of explicit signals regarding a generic context. For genre is the means to "establish for the reader, more or less precisely, what kinds of meaning he may expect to find in a text."\(^1\) The reader approaches a work with some sort of expectation about where the text is going as it is "unimaginable that a literary work set itself into an informational vacuum, without indicating a specific situation of understanding."\(^2\) Generic signals are usually the means for orienting the reader in relation to the text.

Perhaps the reason *St. Erkenwald* lacks a generic identity is not that a suitable generic category is wanting, but that the way in which genre has been defined is inadequate

\(^1\) Burrow, 57.

to describe the nature of the poem. The descriptions "saint's life" or "saint's legend" generally imply a classical notion of genres as static forms or abstract concepts to which a work must conform. The inflexibility of such a notion does not suit a work like St. Erkenwald which crosses generic boundaries. In the opposing view of the New Critics and formalists, the concept of genre is discarded as meaningless. The text exists autonomously in an "informational vacuum," detached from the author and historical or social circumstances. A third possibility, a happy medium "between the Scylla of nominalist skepticism that allows for only aposteriori [sic] classifications, and the Charybdis of regression into timeless typologies" ought to be considered.³ Such a possibility can be found in the theories of genre advanced by E.D. Hirsch and Hans Robert Jauss.

Hirsch proposes that genres may be alternatively viewed as "provisional schemata." ⁴ Once genres are defined not as meaningless labels or rigid categories but as "sets of intermediate rules or instructions which assist the reader in rightly interpreting a literary work, we have

access to all sorts of new ways of understanding or using genre." A less rigid definition such as this allows greater latitude in arriving at an understanding of the generic identity of *St. Erkenwald*.

The concept of genres as sets of "provisional schemata" or "sets of intermediate rules" roughly corresponds to Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations":

...every work belongs to a genre--whereby I mean neither more nor less than that for each work a preconstituted horizon of expectations must be ready at hand (this can also be understood as a relationship of "rules of the game" [Zusammenhang von Spielregeln]) to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception.

Jauss's "horizon of expectations" may be determined by considering the text "in contrast to the background of the works which the author could expect his contemporary public to know either explicitly or implicitly." The first step in the hermeneutic process is to determine the set of expectations generated by previous works which the audience could reasonably be expected to know. The second step is to


determine whether the new work effects a change in the "horizon." The notion of "horizon" implies 'that which is provisional' and 'that which is relative to the observer.' The basis of Jauss's Rezeptionsästhetik is the "reconstruction of the 'horizon' of literary expectations with which the contemporary audience approached a work (and...the kinds of 'horizon-change' which a work of art can require of its audience)." In this theory, generic identity depends upon the relationship between the audience and a work.

Knowing the units of expectation, the critic can evaluate the author's use of expectations, whether they are "varied, extended, corrected,...transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced." Genre, then, is "not something stable, but something that varies in the process of understanding. At first it is vague and empty; later, as understanding proceeds, the genre becomes more explicit, and its range of expectations becomes much narrower." The process of the alteration of the generic conception of a work corresponds to the second stage of Jauss's aesthetics of reception which he characterizes as "horizon change":

Generic shifts within literary works challenge audiences into constant refinement and redefinition of their generic expectations. Hirsch notes this phenomenon when he suggests that the crucial opinion about

8 Strohm, "ME Genres," 385.
10 Hirsch, 77.
genre is not necessarily the one with which the reader approaches the work, but rather the reader's "last, unrevised generic conception." The same phenomenon is responsible for the consequence to which Jauss refers as "horizon change."  

The effect a work has on an audience provides a gauge whereby to measure the "aesthetic distance," by which is meant "the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception results in a 'horizon change' because it negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time."  

The "aesthetic distance" may be used to form an evaluation of a work's aesthetic worth:

The way in which a literary work satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or disproves the expectations of its first readers in the historical moment of its appearance obviously gives a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value. The distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experiences and the "horizon change" demanded by the response to new works, determines the artistic nature of a literary work along the lines of the aesthetics of reception: the smaller this distance, which means that no demands are made upon the receiving consciousness to make a change on the horizon of unknown experience, the closer the work comes to the realm of "culinary" or light reading. This last phrase can be characterized from the point of view of the aesthetics of reception in this way: it demands no horizon change but actually fulfills expectations, which


are prescribed by a predominant taste, by satisfying the demand for the reproduction of familiar beauty, confirming familiar sentiments, encouraging dreams....

The closer a work comes to substantiating the existing "horizon of expectations," the less its aesthetic impact. Works which fall into this category are intended to satisfy the current tastes of the time and fall within the scope of popular literature:

If a text simply reproduces the elements of a generic structure, only plugs some other material into the preserved model of representation, and merely takes over the received topics and metaphors, it constitutes that stereotypical kind of literature into which, precisely, successful genres such as, for example, the chanson de geste in the twelfth century or the fabliau in the thirteenth soon sink. The limit that is thereby reached is that of mere use-value or "consumption-character." 

Such an example of "consumption-character" in hagiography occurs in the popular collection of saints' lives, the South English Legendary, in which the narratives have become formulaic and predictable for the most part, thereby satisfying the public's need for the familiar.

The other possibility is manifested in those works which require a "horizon change" from their audience, or in other words, contain a challenge to audience expectations.

It is not works which substantiate the existing "horizon of expectations" which are considered to be of aesthetic value in Jauss's Rezeptionsästhetik, but those works which surprise or challenge the reader with the unexpected. While the stereotypical text merely repeats the familiar, the masterwork seeks to alter the "horizon" of experience.

In considering the experiences which a text evokes, the "horizon of expectations" should be extended to include quotidian experiences and social circumstances, for "the reader of a new work has to perceive it not only within the narrow horizon of his literary expectations but also within the wider horizon of his experience of life." The wider scope of the "experience of life" ought to encompass the circumstances of the author and audience as well as the larger context of social function, in short, the "locus in life," by which is meant, "a typical situation or mode of behavior in the life of a community."

Genres are not only "social phenomena," they are also "historical phenomena" which live in time. Jauss avows the necessity of accepting the historicity of genres when he suggests that

literary genres are to be understood not as genera (classes) in the logical senses,

but rather as groups or historical families. As such, they cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described. In this they are analogous to historical languages, for which it likewise holds that German or French, for example, do not allow themselves to be defined, but rather only synchronically described and historically investigated.

Such a notion corresponds with J.A. Burrow's description of genres as "historical phenomena--sets of conventions which shift and re-form from time to time, not abstract categories into which any text from any period should fit."18

The diachronic relationship of texts may be viewed as a continuous "founding and altering of horizons" in which, "[t]he new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, alteration and reproduction of the borders and structure of the genre."19 "Variation and correction" result in a "horizon change" where new "rules of the game" may be introduced, whereas duplication marks the ossification of a genre.

Once the process of evaluating a text in terms of its "horizon of expectations" is complete, the question arises, how is the medieval text to be properly understood since interpretation is always conditioned by a modern perspective?

18 Burrow, 57.
19 Jauss, "Literary History," 17.
In reconstructing the expectations and reception of a text by its contemporary audience, the barriers to reception are removed for the modern reader and "in the process of active understanding, the contrast of horizons must be led on to the fusion of the past horizon of aesthetic experience with the present one." 20

In the application of the propounded theories, a suitable starting point would be to reconstruct the "horizon of expectations" which the contemporary audience of St. Erkenwald might have had. The expectations can be determined primarily from a study of material which may have been familiar to the contemporary audience: the saint's life, exemplum, sermon, and the saint play. Characteristics which may be considered are the mode of address, setting, characters, plot model, and social function. The poem can then be assessed in terms of its fulfillment, alteration, or frustration of audience expectations and ability to effect a "horizon change." The "aesthetic distance" between the preconstituted "horizon" and the "horizon change" provides a gauge by which to assess the artistic merit of the poem. Finally, the poem's reception among its contemporary audience can be compared to its modern reception and an understanding of the poem achieved through the "fusion of horizons."

Chapter Three: Reconstructing the Horizon of Expectations

While the audience of *St., Erkenwald* might not have been familiar with the details of Erkenwald's life, they would probably have been acquainted with some form of hagiography, and therefore it is that vast conglomerate of literature which is the probable source of the audience's expectations. The enormous impact of hagiography on medieval culture led the saint's life to be one of the most popular types of literature in that period, perhaps even more popular than the romance. The vernacular saint's life developed out of a long Latin tradition which was initially intended to record the lives and acts of the Christian martyrs. Gradually, the more fantastic elements such as miracles and tortures were emphasized and the merely factual gave way to the sensational.

The examples of hagiography which best represent the original intentions of the literature are the *Acta sincera*, documented evidence of the lives and acts of the early martyrs collected in 1689 by the Benedictine Dom Thierry Ruinart in his *Acta Martyrum Sincera*. Ruinart compiled 117 more or less authentic accounts from writers of the fourth and early fifth centuries such as Prudentius, St. Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, St. Augustine of Hippo, and Eusebius of Vercelli. The *Acta sincera* "display a marked effort on the part
of their authors to tell faithfully to the scattered churches the simple story of the martyrs' lives and deaths. They certainly represent the temperament of the earlier Christians in their avoidance of the crudely sensational and the unnecessarily controversial."¹ The Acta sincera are dry, sober accounts controlled by the principle of veracity.

While the restraint evident in the earlier accounts of the saints was eventually replaced by the "crudely sensational" as hagiography developed, the structure of the saint's life remained relatively constant. Perhaps one of the most consistent characteristics of the saint's life is its arrangement of events, which often includes the following: family origins, birth (including annunciation), childhood and upbringing (which may include a defense of faith, demonstration of piety, or conversion), miracles (which may also occur at any point in the narrative), circumstances of death, discovery of relics and/or body or inventio (including miracles effected by said discovery), translation of relics and/or body or translatio. Certain steps may be omitted, but in general the narrative is circumscribed by the events of birth and death (ab origine ad exitum) and follows a disjointed but chronological pattern in presenting events.²


² The pattern ab origine ad exitum is discussed in Reichardt, 7-10.
The earlier Latin lives written in England, such as the Life of St. Cuthbert by a Lindisfarne monk (eighth century), preserve the sequence of events established by their Latin predecessors, such as the works of Sulpicius Severus (early fifth century). For example, the earliest Life of St. Gregory written by a monk of Whitby (early eighth century) illustrates the normative birth-to-death pattern:

Born Roman, the son of Gordianus and Silvia....
For a long time he stayed in a monastery...(Chapter 1)

...at Constantinople he honorably represented the Apostolic See, where he clearly set forth his thoughts...(Chapter 2)

When Gregory was elected to the aforementioned pastoral care of the apostolic office by the people of God, he fled from it with so much humility that he searched wildly for any place where he could conceal himself. (Chapter 7)

Chapter 9 describes the miracle in which Gregory is visited by youthful angels. In Chapter 11, Gregory is elected Pope and then follows a string of disjointed miracles. The Life concludes with Gregory's death and the location of his body in accordance with the general pattern:

On March 12, as he approached death in the Church of St. Peter where he was bishop for thirteen

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years, six months, and ten days, he eagerly looked forward to the promise of the Lord for that most blessed of all prizes. Buried before the sacristy of his office, he sleeps in peace of body...(Chapter 32).

The pattern of events in the Life of St. Gregory is illustrative of the manner in which saints' lives were written and of the permissible latitude for the events which occur in between birth and death.

In the Middle English period, the vernacular saint's life flourished, as "It was not simply the appeal of the pious, but also of the marvellous and the remote....[S]aints' legends provided escape from insularity and the commonplace—a function that was later to be assumed by romance, and later still by film and television."4 Perhaps nowhere else in the Middle English period is the saint's life better represented than in the extensive collection of the South English Legendary (c. 1280). The medieval love of order and classification manifested itself in the formation of vast collections of saints' lives such as Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda aurea and the South English Legendary. The South English Legendary is a work known not for its artistic merits but for its representation of the mechanical fashion in which saints' lives were sometimes written. The pattern established by the Latin predecessors was continued intact

in the lives of Vincent of Saragossa, Lawrence, Agnes and Agatha, for example. The sensationalism of the miracles and tortures distances the lives of the South English Legendary from the more factual accounts of the Acta sincera.

Perhaps no one better understood the nature of the Middle English saint's life than Chaucer. The Second Nun's Tale shows Chaucer "capable of understanding the spirit in which legends ought to be written."\(^5\) Chaucer altered the life of St. Cecilia so little from whichever source he may have had, having ". . . doon my feithful bisynesse / After the legende, in translacioun" (CT, G 24-5). To Chaucer this meant foregoing his usual flair and adopting the sober tone appropriate to the saint's life. The Second Nun's Tale is meant to be a respectable story. Chaucer even adds an apology for his lack of ornamentation:

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Yet preye I yow that reden that I write,
Foryeve me that I do no diligence
This ilke storie subtilly to endite,
For bothe have I the wordes and sentence
Of hym that at the seintes reverence
The storie wroot, and folwen hire legende,
And pray yow that ye wole my werk amende.
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(G 78-84)

The Second Nun's Tale epitomizes the biography of a virgin martyr: origin and birth, defense of chastity, defense of faith (against Almachius), torments, martyrdom, burial.

\(^5\) Gerould, 240.
The audience has no doubt as to the nature of the tale they will hear, since the prologue clearly states that this is to be a "lif and passioun," and "even the medieval reader who had not encountered her (Cecilia's) particular story but who knew of saints like Katherine, Juliana, Margaret, Lucia, and Agnes would have had certain expectations about what would follow." Perhaps Chaucer wished to present a conventional legende in order to contrast the deliberate misapplication of the term, such as occurs in the irreverent Miller's Tale which promises to be "a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf" (A 3141-2).

The saint's life evokes the expectation of a particular series of events which form the plot model. The structure is dictated by the purpose of "accumulating evidence for the portrayal of exemplary sanctity." The plot reads as an enumeration of events or a catalogue intended to provide documentation. The result of such a structure is a lack of continuity and an episodic quality in which the narrative jumps abruptly from one event to the next. The aim of the saint's life is not aesthetic and thus there is "little attempt at narrative coordination or dramatic continuity."

6 Strohm, "Passioun," 166.
7 Reichardt, 10.
8 Reichardt, 10.
Within the overall plot structure of the saint's life certain patterns of events or motifs may occur. The audience of St. Erkenwald may have been familiar with motifs such as the miraculously preserved corpse or the discovery of a tomb or their variations. Both Savage and McAlindon described the motif of the undecayed corpse or miraculous preservation of a corpse. The body customarily belongs to a martyred saint, and the motif is usually employed in the following manner: "Although buried for many years, [the corpse] is likely to be undecayed in part or entirely, and its clothes too may be in immaculate condition; but if it has decayed, an exquisite perfume will probably issue from it, sometimes so powerful as to ravish the congregation of an entire church." 9

The widespread dissemination of the motif is attested to by the number of examples which occur. Savage describes examples from the *Chronica Majora* in the lives of St. Edmund, St. Edmund of Canterbury, and St. Alban. 10 McAlindon cites examples from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints*, Higden's *Polychronicon*, and William of Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England*. 11

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9 McAlindon, 474; See also Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 1955) D2167: "Corpse magically saved from corruption."

10 Savage, xxi-xxiv.

11 McAlindon, 474, note 5.
The motif of the undecayed corpse may be extended to include preservation of dissociated body parts such as the head or tongue. The life of St. Edmund the King in the *South English Legendary* describes an incident in which St. Edmund's head is cut off and hidden in a secret place, and after being found by a wolf, the head speaks.\textsuperscript{12}

Another variation of this motif occurs in Jacopo della Lana's commentary (c. 1330) on *Purgatorio* 10.73 of the *Divina commedia* of Dante, which describes the discovery of a coffin containing a preserved tongue:

\begin{quote}
Elli si legge che al tempo di san Gregorio papa si cavò a Roma una fossa per fare fondamenta d'uno lavoro, e cavando li maestri trovonno sotto terra uno monumento, lo quale fu aperto, e dentro era in fra l'altre ossa quello della testa del defunto, ed avea la lingua così rigida, carnosa e fresca, come fosse pure in quella ora seppellita.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Another motif with which the audience of *St. Erkenwald* may have been familiar is the discovery by a saint of a tomb containing a dead person (or persons), and the resuscitation of the person. This motif occurs in the life of St. Martin in the *South English Legendary*, the *Vita Quarta* of St. Patrick,


\textsuperscript{13} *Comedia di Dante degli Allagherii col commento di Jacopo della Lana Bolognese*, 3 vols., ed. Luciano Scarabelli, Collezione di opere inedite o rare 41 (Bologna: 1866) 2: 118.
and in the *Acta Iohannis* of the Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha. Of particular interest is the account of the life of St. Patrick as it combines resuscitation with baptism:

Quodam quoque tempore uir uenerabilis praedicandi gratia in quaedam regione ambulans sepulcrum mire magnitudinis uidit centum uiginti pedes in longitudine habens. Postulantibus autem fratribus eiusmodi monstrum uium uidere beatus Patricius signaculum crucis fronti inprimens et usitato more Deum uium deprecans centesimum annum in sepulchro habentem mortuum suscitauit. Qui Patricio interrogante se quando uel quomodo defunctus est quoue genere oriundus fuit ille sancto Patricio per omnia respondens baptizatus est, et iterum illum in sepulchro reclusit.

A variation on the motif of resuscitation and baptism is the release of a condemned soul through the tears of the living. Such a motif occurs in the life of St. Martin in the *South English Legendary*:

Seint Martin fond a Jungs man ded. Pat wel wip him was Pat bileouede on oure Louerd. ac icristned he nas Gret deol makede pis holi man. Pat he nere icristned er To his tumbe he 3eode & bad for him. & wep meni q.ter Po gan pis dede man. fram depe arise to lyue....

A more specific instance of the motif occurs in Chapter 29


15 Stith Thompson, E754.1.8 "Tears of living save soul."

16 *South English Legendary*, 485-86.
of the earliest Life of St. Gregory by a Whitby monk:

Some among us also repeat a story of St. Gregory which was told with tears by the Romans, of how the soul of the Emperor Trajan was laved or baptized—a tale marvelous to tell or to hear. That we say it was baptized would move no one; for no one will ever see God without baptism. But a third kind [of washing] is that of tears. 17

While it is not uncommon for a saint to weep on behalf of a penitent, the motif of baptism by tears, such as occurs in Gregory's Life, is quite rare in hagiography and would probably be unfamiliar to the audience of St. Erkenwald.

A motif which frequently occurs in conjunction with the finding of a tomb is the discovery of an inscription with golden lettering or an inscribed golden tablet. An example of this motif appears in Mandeville's Travels (fourteenth century):

And within the chirche of Seynt Sophie an emperour somtyme wolde haue biryed the body of his fader whan he was ded. And as thei maden the graue thei founden a body in the erthe, and vpon the body lay a fyn plate of gold, and thereon was writen in Ebru, Greu, and Latyn, lettres that seyden thus, Ihesus Cristus nascetur de virgine Maria et ego credo in eum; that is to seyne, Ihesu Crist schalle be born of the virgyne Marie and I trow in Hym. And the date whan it was leyd in the erthe was ii. m. yeer before oure lord was born. And yit is the plate of gold in the thresorye of the chirche and men seyn that it was Hermogene the wise man. 18

17 Jones, 116-17.

A variation of this motif is mentioned in a reference to St. Ignatius of Antioch in a fourteenth-century Middle English sermon:

Ensampull Þan fynde we here-of of Seynt Ignace, Þat nyght ne daye ne cesed neuer spekyng of loue ne of þe swetenes of Ihesu Criste; and no3the spake he but as was in ys herte. In tokenynge where-of, when Þat he was found ded and ys herte was departed, Þan was founde wrytten in ys herte with letters of goo^cj, "Ihesus est amor meus--Ihesus ys my loue."19

In versions of this motif, the inscription is usually a confession of faith along the lines of "credo in Christum." Whatley also cites examples from Roger Bacon's *Metaphysica* (c. 1250) and the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas.20

While it is unlikely that all of the above-mentioned material would have been familiar or available to the audience of *St. Erkenwald*, the endless variations and combinations of motifs indicate a number of possible sources. The plot of *St. Erkenwald* may be seen as a combination of various motifs adapted by the poet to suit his story, a typical device employed in saints' lives.

In addition to structure and motifs, the saint's life often exhibited other standard characteristics such as


communicative situation, setting, and characters. Since the saint's life was originally the testimonial of a witness, the mode of address remained that of a witness reporting events to the audience (or reader). A fairly common device was the direct address to the audience through interjections in the text. Such a device may be found in the South English Legendary in the life of St. Peter, in which the reporter chastises the audience: "Wy sitte 3e so stille. wi ne segge 3e amen" (260).

The hagiographer's treatment of setting is defined by the presence of the divine. Space is perfunctorily treated with a few geographical references, usually place of birth or location of body or relics. For example, in the life of St. Martin in the South English Legendary, the audience is told that, "Seint Martin was ibore. in pe lond of Tabarie / Wel 3ung he was ynorisched. in pe lond of Papie" (483). The hagiographer likewise does not care about time, for "Chronological, human time does not matter, it is only God's time which interests him, God's time where acts and only acts have significance." 21 The temporal and spatial settings of saints' lives are signlike, with reference only to events.

Characterization in the saint's life is also perfunctory. The saints themselves are unindividualized with little or no

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attempt at personal description and are therefore inter-changeable. Like the hero of romance, the saint is an idealized projection intended to exhibit exemplary behaviour and visible virtue in a man. The saint, as a representative of God on earth, often must confront another character who represents the fallible, human side of man's nature. Frequently, the saint is required to make a defense of faith, such as is done by St. Cecilia who is punished by Almachius because she would not renounce her creed. Another representation of human folly appears in the collective character of the fictional crowd. Often, the crowd behaves in an unruly and foolish manner, such as occurs in the Vita Erkenwaldi:

After Erkenwald's death at Barking Abbey, various groups lay claim to the body, including the Barking nuns, monks of Chertsey, and the clerics and citizens of London...Everyone gets hysterical, and the disturbance threatens to become violent as the funeral procession halts at a flooded river which blocks the path to London.  

The violence of the crowd and their frenzied actions are representative of the follies of humanity.

Another common component of the saint's life is an invocation or concluding prayer. Chaucer begins his life of St. Cecilia in the Second Nun's Tale with an Invocacio ad Mariam. Each of the lives of the South English

22 Whatley, "Heathens," 356.
Legendary ends with a prayer of the following sort: "Nou bidde we 3eorne sein Bartelmu. Pat hei apostel is / Pat we pe watloker þoru is bone. come to heuene blis" (384). The immediate function of the invocation or prayer is to commemorate the saint or to call upon the saint as a mediator.

The saint's life fulfills several social functions: it illustrates exemplary behaviour of the saints and thus provides a model for instruction, it provides an accessible intermediary with whom one could identify, and, in a broader sense, it confirms faith by revealing the presence of the divine in the world. The Whitby monk who wrote the Life of St. Gregory prefaces his account by summing up the purpose of the saint's life:

The Holy Catholic Church throughout the world for ever honors its doctores of all races, rejoicing that under the teaching of the Lord Christ they point the way to Him who should be glorified. It makes them known to posterity in memorable writings, "so that they might set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."  

The controlling function of the saint's life is edification, and no saint's life is written without this underlying purpose. The saint's life was originally intended to be read (legenda) on the feast day of the saint. The Latin lives were designed primarily for a monastic or clerical audience. As the saint's life developed, the audience

23 Jones, 97.
for which it was intended expanded beyond the "cloistered walls where the literature took its origin in Latin." The popular saints' lives, such as those of the South English Legendary, appealed to a lay audience as well as a monastic or clerical audience and, in addition to being edifying, were also entertaining. The saint's life also came into vogue in private devotions and patrons might have commissioned a collection of lives which catered to their particular tastes and was designed for their personal use. Saints' lives became a "medium for the instruction of the young in the ecclesiastical schools where they may have been used as school exercises in versification." The saint's life "thus reached a wide public by double means, not only through the services of the Church but also through the reading and hearing of them as polite literature."

The development and expansion of the saint's life was accompanied by the introduction of other forms which adapted material from hagiography. In drama, hagiographical texts were drawn upon to produce the saint play. In sermons, portions of saints' lives were used as exempla. Both the saint play and the exemplum, like the saint's life, were


25 Gerould, 14. See also Karl Young, The Drama of the Medieval Church, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933) 2: 311.

26 Gerould, 14.
associated with the Church.

The saint play would appear to have had its origins in the liturgical rituals of the Church, possibly beginning its existence in the same manner as the cyclical miracle plays, as embellishments on the "quem quaeritis" trope. As the saint play emerged as popular drama, the spoken form superseded the sung form, the comic elements of the play increased, and "the place of acting [was] transferred from the interior of the church to its precincts." The move from the interior of the church to the exterior, both physically and figuratively, may have been influenced by the popular form of preaching out-of-doors. The vernacular plays were "civic productions, gathering together townsmen or citizens and performers (e.g., minstrels) to stage dramas that would bring honor on the town or city at the same time that they might provide an opportunity for imaginative and devotional experiences.

There is a possible connection between line 133 of St. Erkenwald ("Wyt queme questis of pe quere wyt ful quaynt notes") and the trope "Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o Christicolae?" For a further discussion see Thomas Ryan, "'Queme Questis' in St. Erkenwald," English Language Notes 23 (1985): 1-3. For the theory of the "quem quaeritis" trope in drama see Young, 1: 201-385 and David Bevington, Medieval Drama (Boston: Houghton, 1975) 3-72.


For this theory see Owst, 478.
among their audiences. The saint play also satisfied
the medieval audience's passion for pageantry and
sensationalism but, like the saint's life, it was never
completely divorced from its roots in the Church or its
purpose of edification and worship.

The saint play may have contributed to the "horizon
of expectations" through plays which are based on an
isolated incident or through staging design. Examples
of drama based on a single incident are the twelfth-
century Latin St. Nicholas plays: Tres Filiae, which
depicts the rescue of three young women from prostitution
by St. Nicholas; Tres Clerici, in which St. Nicholas revives
three clerks murdered by an innkeeper and his wife; Iconia
sancti Nicolai, about a man who entrusts the protection of
his house to an image of St. Nicholas; and Filius Getronis,
which depicts the abduction of a young man, Adeodatus,
his captivity among heathens, and his miraculous liberation
by St. Nicholas. Each play is based upon a single miracle
from the life of St. Nicholas. It is unlikely that the Latin
St. Nicholas plays would have been familiar to a lay audience.

30 Clifford Davidson, introduction, The Saint Play in
Medieval Europe, ed. Clifford Davidson, Early Drama, Art,
and Music Monograph Series 8 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute

31 For a further discussion of the St. Nicholas plays
see Young, 2: 307-60.
and therefore would not have contributed directly to the "horizon of expectations." However, these plays suggest the type of single-episode model which may have been employed in the vernacular drama.

There are no extant English vernacular plays which illustrate the single-episode structure. Instead, an example from Continental drama is necessary to confirm the model. The Middle French Miracle de Saint Valentin (1367) presents "un miracle de Saint Valentin, que un empereur fist decoler devant sa table, et tantost s'estrangla l'empereur d'un os qui lui traversa la gorge, et dyables l'emportèrent."\(^\text{32}\)

The play dramatizes St. Valentine's conversion of Cato's son which angers Cato and causes him to behead his son and Valentine. Cato dies from a fish bone stuck in his throat and is dragged to hell by devils. It seems reasonable to suppose that similar models existed among the English vernacular plays.

The other way in which the saint play might have suggested a single-episode model is through staging. In the stage design of Saint Valentin "[e]ach scene, or mansion, is a self-contained structure or blackcloth [sic] and they are arranged in a semi-circle with the parloir, or

The action of various scenes takes place at different mansions, dissociating incidents from one another. While the saint play was not formally divided into scenes, the action was informally divided by the staging.

The single-episode model might have alternatively been familiar to a medieval audience from the use of saints' lives in sermons. A portion of a life might have been excerpted from a popular collection of saints' lives such as the *Legenda aurea*. An excerpt from the life of St. Nicholas in a fourteenth-century Middle English sermon illustrates the manner in which incidents from a saint's life were used as exempla:

> Now haue I tau3th you how,3e shall wake and preye; Pat is to sey, wake and slepe not in synne. And ban 3e shall preye to God with youre Pater Noster, for pat is pe beste preyour pat euer was made. And pis we fynde in pis holy confessour Seynt Nicholas, of whom pat holychurche makep mynd of as at pis tyme. In ys 3onge age, whils pat he was sowkynge, he begane to liffe and holy liffe and a good, and to vse grett abstinance, for as we rede in ys liffe pat euery Vedenesdaye and Frydaye he wold souke but ons on pe daye, and so helde hym contente. And whan he was more of age, ban he 3aue hym to wakynge and to preyours, pat God for is good lyuynge chase hym to be bishoppe.  

The author of the sermon, in using this particular incident from the life of St. Nicholas, may have been expressing his

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33 Two Miracles, 7. Backcloth is probably meant here.

34 Middle English Sermons, 57-8.
discontent with the Great Schism: "Wold God pat all
bisshoppes shuld be choson in pis maner now-a-daiies, and
namely pe pope, for pan we my3th be secur pat he were very
pope; and pan per shuld be non suche striffe as per is now
for pat office."35

In sermons, episodes from saints' lives were used
to illustrate either models of exemplary conduct or a
particular didactic point. The Alphabet of Tales, the
fifteenth-century English translation of the Alphabetum
Narrationum, is a collection of exempla which was used as a
reference work. In the Alphabet of Tales an incident from
the life of St. Macarius is used to illustrate how
"Humilitas sola diabolum confundit":

We rede in 'Vitis Patrum' how on a tyme when
Macharius went furth of his cell, pe devull come on
hym with a ley & walde hafe smeten hym, & he myght
noght. And pan he cried & said; "Thow Macharie!
Thow fastis oper-while, & I am refreshid with no
maner of meate; & thou wakis ofte-sithis, and I slepe
neuer. And yit pi mekenes alonele overcommys me."36

St. Gregory's exemplary behaviour as a child is described
in Gregorij Sancti (cccxliv):

We rede how on a tyme, when Saynt Gregur was a chyld,
our Lord apperid vnto hym, at his moder yate, in
liknes of a pure shipman, and askid hym his almos.
& he had bod xd in his purs, & he gaff hym vjd peroff.

35 Middle English Sermons, 58.
36 An Alphabet of Tales, 126: 255 (ccclxxi).
And belife after, pe same day, he come agayn, & askid hym mor; & pan he gaff hym toder iiiijd. And agayn evyn he come agayn, & askid mor; & he had no thyng at giff hym, bod a syluer dissch patt his moder had giffen hym potage in, & pat he gaff hym. And he was fayn per-of, & went his wayes perwith. And efterward, our Lord lete hym se be reuelacion, pat Hym self was pat shipman pat he gaff pat syluer dissch vnto.

Gregory's behaviour illustrates the scriptural lesson of Matt. 5.42: "Give when you are asked to give; and do not turn your back on a man who wants to borrow." 38

The exemplum provides an illustrative experience for the reader or listener to imitate, and thus, anecdotes and stories of the saints provide a wealth of experience from which to learn. The exemplum is meant to function as a narrative within a narrative and, therefore, was not intended as a self-contained text.

The saint's life, because of its prevalence in the Middle Ages, or the exemplum, because of its use in the sermon, would have reached a wide audience. Although only fragmentary evidence remains of the saint play in England, "Dramatic records from English sources which have survived do indeed indicate that the miracle or saint play may even have been the most important genre in the repertoire of the English medieval stage." 39 The importance of hagiography in

37 An Alphabet of Tales, 126: 237.

38 All biblical quotations from the New English Bible.

39 Clifford Davidson, "The Middle English Saint Play and Its Iconography," The Saint Play in Medieval Europe, 31.
medieval culture and society suggests that most people would have been familiar with one form or another of the saint's life, saint play, or exemplium, and it is these forms of hagiography which may have contributed to the "horizon of expectations" of the audience of St. Erkenwald.
Chapter Four: Re-evaluating St. Erkenwald

The poet of St. Erkenwald may have drawn upon the expectations generated by saints' lives or adaptations of saints' lives in saint plays or exempla. The brief exemplum or the saint play might also have suggested the single-episode plot model of St. Erkenwald. A comparison between the "horizon" of the expectable and the poem can be made in order to determine in what way these expectations are "varied, extended, corrected,...transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced." Through the process of comparison, the difficulties described in Chapter One will perhaps become more comprehensible. Expectations culled from literature outside hagiography or from sources in the medieval world itself, in short, from the larger context of the "locus in life," will also be considered.

One of the problems with St. Erkenwald identified in Chapter One is the poem's perplexing sense of history and chronology. However, the temporal and spatial setting of St. Erkenwald is consistent with the treatment of time and space in the saint's life. Geographically there are only two reference points in the poem, London and Essex--a perfunctory spatial setting. As in the saint's life, the action of St. Erkenwald exists in its own fluid temporality, perhaps a consequence of interaction with the
The contemporary audience of *St. Erkenwald* would not have been perturbed by the chronology of the poem.

The *Erkenwald*-poet's historical setting is a little more than perfunctory and is not wholly irrelevant to the story. The opening retrospective history parallels the main event of the plot in presenting conversions from heathenism to Christianity: St. Augustine's conversion of England to Christianity, the cleansing and rededication of the heathen temples, and the rebuilding of the "temple Triapolitan" as St. Paul's Cathedral. The poet's use of historical events is not unlike the structure of the saint's life which marks off events without attention to continuity. The resulting episodic quality is evident in the retrospective history. The poet also uses Christ as the main point of reference and the historical events stand in relation to Christ's birth or crucifixion:

At London in Englonde no3t fulle longe sythen--
Sythen Crist suffride on crosse and Cristendome stablyde--
Ther was a byschop in pat burghe, blessyd and sacryd:
Saynt Erkenwalde as I hope pat holy mon hatte.

(1-4)

After pat Brutus pis burghe had buggid on fyrste,
No3t bot fife hundred 3ere per aghtene wontyd
Before pat kynned 3our Criste by Cristen acounte

(207-209)

The poet may have been using a fairly common method of expressing time symbolically in reference to Christ.

Ruth Morse cites an example of this device employed by
Andrew of Wyntoun:

A thousand a hundreth and four score
And two yeris fully gane our
Before Christis incarnatioun
Off Troy was pe distructioun.

As in the saint's life, events and acts in *St. Erkenwald* take on a signlike quality determined by "God's time where acts and only acts have significance."

The poet's apparent lack of originality in appropriating the Gregory-Trajan legend would also not be unexpected to the contemporary audience as "plagiarism" and invention are the hagiographer's stock-in-trade. A similar circumstance to *St. Erkenwald* in which the legend reported is unrelated to the saint, occurs in an East Midland poem, *Celestin*:

"Although the story purports to concern a St. Celestin who died as pope in 432, it has nothing whatever to do with his actual career. Instead, it is an odd mixture of the themes of *Theophilus*, *Faustus*, and the *Seven Deadly Sins*."\(^2\) It is also possible that through motivations of local pride, the *Erkenwald*-poet wished to create a tale for a local saint in much the same way that "St. Christopher's life was transferred when it reached France to St. Savianus of Troynovant."

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\(^{1}\) Morse, note to line 205, 71; The *Erkenwald*-poet's reference to Brutus as the founder of Troynovant seems to be a convention of alliterative poetry. See Pearsall, *OE and Me Poetry*, 158.

\(^{2}\) Gerould, 228.
Troyes, who had probably lacked a history before." ³ It was also not an uncommon practice among hagiographers to invent new stories for saints, as John of Tynemouth in his Nova Legenda Anglie invented the miracle episode in which Erkenwald and his sister Ethelberga stretch out a wooden beam between them when building Barking Abbey. It is also interesting that even the legend which inspired the Erkenwald-poet seems to have been invented by the monk of Whitby who wrote the earliest account of the Life of St. Gregory. The medieval audience hearing a tale for the first time would have been delighted by the author who could tell them something new along with something old.

It is also possible, as Gordon Whatley suggests, that the earlier vitae of Erkenwald had a certain influence on the plot of St. Erkenwald, although the connection appears to be somewhat dubious. Certain elements of St. Erkenwald seem to be present in the vitae, such as a dilemma concerning a corpse: "Both in the vita and in the poem the focus of attention is a precious but problematic corpse. In the poem the problem is to discover the corpse's identity and his soul's resting place; in the vita the problem is to determine who will possess the corpse and where it will be laid to rest." ⁴ In the Vita sancti Erkenwaldi

³ Gerould, 36.

the deceased is the bishop Erkenwald himself whose body is fought over by the nuns of Barking, the monks of Chertsey and various townspeople. As in St. Erkenwald, the corpse of the Vita sancti Erkenwaldi causes "troubull in pe pepul" and as the various groups fight over the disposition of Erkenwald's body it might be said that "suche a cry aboute a cors, crakit euer-more" (109-110).

Perhaps part of the reason legends were easily transferred between one saint and another is the lack of characterization which the protagonist received. The "ready-made portraits of the martyr, the holy monk, the virgin, the confessor, the penitent, the holy bishop or pope" permit the hagiographer to interchange individual saints with one another. Erkenwald, as "holy bishop," thus assumes the role of Gregory in the legend with ease.

The Erkenwald-poet has also borrowed another character from hagiography, that of the collective character of the fictional crowd which is depicted as unruly and near-hysterical in the poem:

Quen tithynges token to pe toun of pe toumbe wonder
Mony hundred hende men highide pider sone.
Burgheys boghit perto, bedels and othire,
And mony a mesters mon of maners diuere.
Laddes laften hor werke and lepen piderwardes,
Ronnen radly in route wyt ryngande noyce.
Per commen pider of alle kynnes so kenely mony
Pat as alle pe worlde were pider walon wytin
a honde-quile. (57-64)

5 Boyer, 29.
The poet specifically describes the crowd as men of high rank, burgesses, young men, even the mayor, so that all the world is represented.

The fictional crowd of the poem is representative of humanity which attempts to fathom the divine, represented by the undecayed corpse. Throughout the poem the poet ridicules man's attempts to understand. Although the townspeople use every resource available to them, the identity of the corpse remains beyond their capacity to know:

Per is no lede opon lyfe of so longe age
Pat may mene in his mynde \textit{bat} suche a mon regnyd
Ne no\textbf{\textit{b}}ir his nome ne his note nourne of one speche.
Qu\textbf{\textit{e}}\textbf{\textit{p}}er mony porer in \textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{i}}\textbf{\textit{s}} place is putte into grave
Pat merkid is in oure martilage his mynde for euer,
And we haue oure librarie laitid \textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{e}}\textbf{\textit{s}} longe seuen dayes
Bot one cronicle of \textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{i}}\textbf{\textit{s}} kynge con we neuer fynde.

(150-156)

The poet also criticizes the "mony clerkes in \textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{a}}\textbf{\textit{t}} clos wyt crownes ful brode" who "Per besiet hom a-boute no\textbf{\textit{3}}t to brynge hom in wordes" when confronted with the mysterious tombe (55-6). All human means of understanding the "meruaile" are ineffectual as man's intellect pales in the face of the omniscient God, the "riche kynge of reson" (267). The precept that "To seche \textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{e}} sothe at oure selfe 3ee se \textbf{\textit{p}}\textbf{\textit{e}}r no bote" is forcefully rendered (170).

The inferiority of man's intellect is also demonstrated by the townspeople's inability to decipher to inscription on the casket:

...\textbf{\textit{b}}\textbf{\textit{e}} bordure enbelicit wyt bry\textbf{\textit{3}}t golde lettres,
Bot roynyshe were þe resones þat þer on row stoden. 
Fulle verray were þe vigures þer auisyde hom mony, 
Bot alle muset hit to mouthe and quat hit mene shulde.  
(51-54)

Similarly, the length of time the pagan has been entombed is "to meche to any mon to make of a nommbre" (206), reinforcing the point that such an event is beyond man's comprehension. In this case, the date is meant to represent nothing except 'a very long time' without human terms.

The poet deliberately attracts attention to the center of the conflict, the corpse, so that the reader, like the fictional crowd, might initially believe that the preservation of the body is the miracle. The audience and crowd, however, are sharply reminded by Erkenwald that,

"Hit is meruaile to men þat mountes to litelle 
Towarde þe prouidens of þe prince þat paradis weldes, 
Quen Hym luste to vnlouke þe leste of His my3tes. 
(160-62)

The marvel of the corpse gives way to the greater miracle of salvation.

The poet would also have his audience believe, again like the crowd, that the deceased was of royal stature. In the physical description, the poet alludes to the body's "rialle wedes" and crown and sceptre. One of the fictional observers supposes, "He has ben kynge of þis kithe as couthely hit semes" (98). Once again the limitations of man's mind are stressed, as this expectation is frustrated when the
deceased reveals that he was "Neuer kynge ne cayser ne 3et no kny3t nothyre, / Bot a lede of pe laghe pat þen þis londe vsit" (199-200).

The poet's skilfull description of the undecayed corpse draws the audience's attention to the splendour of the clothing and the rosiness of the flesh. In this set-piece comparable to the description of Gawain's accoutrements in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is the poet's style which appeals to the imagination:

(75-92)

By concentrating on the physical and material aspects of the scene, the poet emphasizes man's attachment to the corporeal world. The audience, believing in appearances,

focuses on the physical, visible "merwaile," instead of on the invisible, spiritual world. the human rather than the divine.

The discovery of the pagan's undecayed body in the sepulchre recalls the common hagiographic motif described in Chapter Three. The freshness of the face and flesh and the immaculate clothing of the deceased, evoke the expectation in the audience that here they have encountered the customary motif. The "roynyshe" letters also evoke the motif of the inscription which reads "Ihesus Cristus nascetur de virgine Maria et ego credo in eum" or some other confession of faith, reinforcing the expectation. At this point in the story, the informed audience member might believe that he knows better than the foolish townspeople "Quat body hit my3t be," because the undecayed body in the motif is, in almost all cases, a saint. The expectation is, however, reversed as the occupant of the tomb is not a saint but a pagan. Later, the poet will fulfill the expectation as the pagan is baptised and received into heaven.

In the exchange which occurs between Erkenwald and the resuscitated corpse, the audience learns that the deceased had been a judge in New Troy and had governed justly:

I wos deputate and domesmon vnder a duke noble
And in my power pis place was putte al to-geder.
I justifiet pis ioly toun on gentil wise
And euer in fourme of gode faihte more þen fourty wynter.
Þe folke was felonse and fals and frowarde to reule,
I hent harmes ful ofte to holde hom to ri3t.
Bot for wothe ne wele ne wrathe ne drede
Ne for maystrie ne for mede ne for no monnes aghe,
I remewit neuer fro pe ri3t by reson myn awen
For to dresse a wrange dome, no day of my lyue.
Declynet neuer my consciens for couetise on erthe,
In no gynful iugement no iapes to make
Were a renke neuer so riche for reuerens sake.
Ne for no monnes manas ne meschefe ne routhe
Non gete me fro pe heghe gate to glent out of ry3t,
Als ferforthe as my faithe confourmyd my hert.
Paghe had been my fader bone, I bede hym no wranges,
Ne fals fauour to my fader, paghe felle hym be hongyt.

The bishop then inquires of the pagan, how his body and
clothing came to be so well-preserved or whether he had
been embalmed, to which the pagan responds:

"Nay bisshop," quop pat body, "enbawmyd wos I neuer
Ne no monnes counselle my clothe has kepyd vnwemmyd
Bot pe riche kynge of reson pat ri3t euer alowes
And loues al pe lawes lely pat longen to trouthe.
And moste he menskes men for mynnynge of ri3tes
Pen for al pe meritorie medes pat men on molde vsen;
And if renkes for ri3t pus me arayed has
He has lant me to last pat loues ry3t best."

For his justness the pagan was rewarded by God with miraculous
preservation. Erkenwald then asks the pagan to speak of
his soul:

"3ea bot sayes pou of pi saule," pen sayd pe bisishop,
"Quere is ho stablild and stadde if pou so stre3t wroghtes?
He pat rewardes vche a renke as he has ri3t seruyd
My3t euel forgo the to gyfe of His grace summe brawnche.
For as He says in His sothe psalmyde writtes:
'Pe skilfulle and pe vnskathely skelton ay to me'.
Forpi say me of pi soule in sele quere ho wonnes
And of pe riche restorment pat ra3t hyroure Lorde."
This particular moment marks a change in the poem's perspective, for up to this point the concern has been for the pagan's body. Erkenwald's shift to the matter of the pagan's soul introduces the crux of the poem: have the pagan's good works also merited salvation?

The debate over the efficacy of good works in meriting a heavenly reward versus the absolute necessity of God's grace was a fiercely argued issue for many centuries. For implicit in that argument were questions of predestination and free will, which Chaucer summed up in the Nun's Priest's Tale:

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Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng,—
"Nedly" clepe I symple necessitee—
Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
To do that same thyng, or do it noght,
Though God forwoot it er that I was wroght;
Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel
But by necessitee condicongel.
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(B 4433-4440)

The two central figures of the debate in the fourteenth century were William Ockham and Thomas Bradwardine. The pivotal question of the argument was whether or not a good action was preceded by grace:

The place accorded to merit depends upon that given to grace and free will. If grace is not considered the beginning of all salutary activity, then a meritorious act will be regarded as the work of free will and a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, when grace is made the source of all supernatural reward, merit will be the
effect of grace and not its cause.\(^7\)

Such had also been the nature of the debate between Pelagius and St. Augustine of Hippo almost a millenium earlier.

William Ockham contended that man's will is capable of good without prevenient grace and that man can merit salvation through good works. In this Ockham aligns himself with the tenets of Pelagius (thus incurring the label "modern Pelagian"), which held that man could of himself perform salutary works without the infusion of divine grace. Ockham and the so-called modern Pelagians or sceptics made the distinction between merit de condigno, strictly the result of divine grace, and merit de congruo, which denied the need for prevenient grace. The basis of merit de congruo was God's potentia absoluta, for man under the omnipotent God can perform good works of his own will which He may or may not reward.

Bradwardine wrote his De Causa Dei contra Pelagium in response to the increasingly prevalent opinion among the schoolmen that man could merit salvation. Bradwardine saw this neo-Pelagian attitude as exalting man's place and detracting from the power of God. The basis of Bradwardine's arguments was that all good works are a result of prevenient

grace and therefore have no claim on salvation which is a gift of God alone. Augustine had similarly stressed prevenient grace and absolute predestination.

The impact of the debate on good works versus grace was such that it extended beyond the theologians to the realm of literature. Two problematic instances were most often cited in the debate: the heathen who has performed good works and the baptized child dying in infancy. The former example was employed by Dante in the *Divina commedia* and Langland in *Piers Plowman* while the latter was employed by the poet of *Pearl*.

In *Pearl* a young girl dies and appears in a vision to her father as a queen in heaven. He wonders how she could be a queen since she had been scarcely two years old when she died and had not the time to merit such a reward:

```
Pou lyfedy not two 3er in oure pede;     
Pou cowpe3 neuer God nauber ples  ne pray,     
Ne neuer nawber Pater ne Crede;         
And quen mad on pe fyrst day!           
I may not traw, so God me sped,          
Pat God wolde wrype so wrange away.     
Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,        
Wer fayr in heuen to halde asstate,      
Oper elle3 a lady of lasse aray;        
Bot a quene! Hit is to dere a date. 8    
(9.483-92)                              
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The father introduces the problem that a child cannot merit the same reward as a person who has performed a lifetime

8 All quotations from *Pearl*, ed. E.V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953).
of good works. In response, the maiden cites the Parable of the Vineyard (Matt. 20.1-16) in which each worker, whether he came early or late to work, is paid the same amount. Salvation, according to the Pearl-poet, is not a question of merit, "For per is vch mon payed inlyche, / Wheþer lyttel oper much be hys rewarde" (11.603-4), but is contingent upon God's grace. According to the maiden, both the righteous man and the innocent man have a place in heaven: "Pe ry3twys man schal se hys face, / Pe harmle3 hapel schal com hym tylle" (12.675-6), a paraphrase of Psalm 24.4. She also makes it clear that the righteous man is not saved as a matter of merit:

'Anende ry3twys men 3et sayt3 a gome, 
Dauid in Sauter, if euer 3e sy3 hit: 
"Lorde, py seruaunt dra3 neuer to dome, 
For non lyuyande to pe is justyfyet." 
Forpy to corte quen pou schal com Per alle oure case3 schal be tryed, Alegge pe ry3t, pou may be innome, By pys ilke spech I haue asspyd; Bot he on rode pat blody dyed, Delfully pur3 honde3 pry3t, Gyue pe to pass, when pou arte tryed, By innocens and not by ry3te. 

(12.697-708)

The heavenly reward of the innocent and the righteous is equal according to the Pearl-poet, and as the refrain of stanza-group XI states, "...be grace of God is gret inoghe."

Dante in the Divina commedia addresses the problem of the salvation of the righteous heathen with two examples: Trajan, who lived after Christ, and Ripheus, who lived
before Christ. In canto 20 of Paradiso, the eagle of justice explains to Dante how Trajan and Ripheus came to occupy the first and fifth position in his eyebrow:

La prima vita del ciglio e la quinta
ti fa maravigliar, perché ne vidi
la region de li angeli dipinta.
D'i corpi suoi non uscir, come credi,
Gentili, ma Cristiani, in ferma fede
quel d'i passuri e quel d'i passi piedi. 9
(20.100-105)

The case of Trajan, who occupies the first position in the eyebrow, is used to show that good works alone are not enough to merit salvation, God's special grace is required:

Che l'una de lo 'nferno, u' non si riede
già mai a buon voler, tornò a l'ossa;
e ciò di viva spene fu mercede:
di viva spene, che mise la possa
ne' prieghi fatti a Dio per suscitarla,
sì che potesse sua voglia esser mossa.
L'anima gloriosa onde si parla,
tornata ne la carne, in che fu poco,
credette in lui che potèa aiutarla;
e credendo s'accese in tanto foco
di vero amor, ch'a la morte seconda
fu degna di venire a questo gioco.
(20.106-117)

Trajan, in Limbo, is resuscitated in order that he might receive special grace, believe, and be saved.

In the salvation of Ripheus, who occupies the fifth

position in the eyebrow, the role of prevenient grace is emphasized:

L'altra, per grazia che da si profonda fontana stilla, che mai creatura non pinse l'occhio infino a la prima onda, tutto suo amor là giù pose a drittura: per che, di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura; ond' ei credette in quella, e non sofferse da indi il puzzo più del paganesmo; e riprendiene le genti perverse. Quelle tre donne li fur per battesmo che tu vedesti da la destra rota, dinanzi al battezar più d'un millesmo.

(20.118-129)

In canto 19, the eagle of justice explains the workings of prevenient grace which informs every good action:

La prima volontà, ch'è da sé buona, da sé, ch'è sommo ben, mai non si mosse. Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona: nullo creato bene a sé la tira, ma essa, radiando, lui cagiona.

(19.86-90)

All of Ripheus's good actions were preceded by grace and thus, he was saved "di grazia in grazia" by an infusion of faith to which "Dio li aperse l'occhio" and by baptism of the three virtues, faith, hope, and love.

Both Trajan and Ripheus must have faith to be saved, "quel d'i passuri e quel d'i passi piedi," as the eagle in canto 19 makes it clear that, "A questo regno / non sali mai chi non credette 'n Cristo, / né pria né poi ch'el si chiavasse al legno" (19.103-105).
The eagle also makes explicit the incomprehensibility of God's divine plan ("O predestinazion, quanto remota / è la radice tua da quelli aspetti / che la prima cagion non veggion tota!" 20.130-132) and the presumption of man in trying to fathom God's ways ("se la Scrittura sovra voi non fosse, / da dubitar sarebbe a maraviglia" 19.83-84).

Langland in *Piers Plowman* presents the problem of the righteous heathen but takes the opposing theological view to Dante and the *Pearl*-poet in the debate on the efficacy of good works. Langland's Trajan is an example of a righteous heathen saved solely on account of his good works. In passus 11 of the B-text (passus 12, C-text) Will has a momentary doubt about his own salvation and asks Scripture if it is not so that "*Qui crediderit et baptizatus fuerit salvus erit*" (B 11.124, C 12.57). As soon as Scripture has finished saying "*Misericordia eius super omnia opera eius,*" Trajan crops up to contradict her:

'Ye, baw for bokes!' quod oon was broken out of helle.
'I Troianus, a trewe knyght, take witnesse at a pope
How I was ded and dampned to dwellen in pyne
For an uncristene creature; clerkes wite the sothe--
That al the clergie under Crist ne myghte me cracche fro helle
But oonliche love and leautee and my lawefull domes.

---

'Gregorie wiste this wel, and wilned to my soule Savacion for soothnesse that he seigh in my werkes And after that he wepte and wilned me were graunted grace, Withouten any bede biddying his boone was underfongen, And I saved, as ye may see, withouten syngynge of masses, By love and by lernyng of my lyvynge in truth, Broughte me fro bitter payne ther no biddying myghte.  
(B 11.140-152)

Trajan is saved, not by grace, but by "oonliche love and leautee and my laweful domes" and "By love and by lernyng of my lyvynge in truth." Langland's Trajan is also saved without the formal intercession of the Church ("And I saved, as ye may see, withouten syngynge of masses") and "Noght thorough preiere of a pope but for his pure truth" (B 11.155). Trajan is also saved without being formally christened, as Ymaginatif explains to Will in passus 12, B-text (passus 14, C-text):

'Alle thise clerkes,' quod I tho, 'that on Crist leven Seyen in hir sermons that neither Sarsens ne Jewes Ne no creature of Cristes liknesse withouten Cristendom worth saved.'  
'Contra!' quod Ymaginatif thoo, and comsed to loure, And seide, 'Salvabitur vix justus in die iudicii; Ergo--salvabitur!' quod he, and seide no moore Latyn.  
'Troianus was a trewe knyght and took nevere Cristendom, And he is saaf, seith the book, and his soule in hevene.  
(B 12.275-82, C 14.199-206)

The C-text is more explicit in altering "Cristendom" to "bapteme." Trajan is saved solely because of merit, without resuscitation, formal baptism, or the prayers of Gregory, and was, it seems, admitted directly into heaven.
During the Middle Ages the problem of the salvation of the righteous heathen became the vehicle for the neo-Pelagian (Ockhamist) point of view. As the neo-Pelagian attitude took root, Trajan came to represent an example of a heathen saved irrespective of grace, as Langland's Trajan illustrates. The audience members of St. Erkenwald in encountering the theme of a pagan who has performed good works might have expected that they were about to hear once again, an account of the merit of good works. The Erkenwald-poet plays upon this expectation by focusing on the splendour of the pagan's 'reward' (the marvellously preserved body) and by devoting a lengthy passage to the pagan's good works. The description of the pagan's good works is an exemplum of righteousness, functioning as a narrative within a narrative. The audience is led to believe that the pagan's soul has likewise been rewarded and is established in bliss, which Erkenwald clearly believes when he says, "Forpi say me of þi soule in sele quere ho wonnes / And of þe riche restorment þat ra3t hyr oure Lorde" (279-80). The anticipated description of heavenly joy is dramatically overturned in a superlative reversal of expectation, for the pagan's soul is not in heaven, it is in hell:

My soule may sitte þer in sorow and sike ful colde, Dymly in pat derke dethe þer dawes neuer morowen, Hungrie in-wyt helle-hole, and herken after meeles Longe er ho þat soper se obir segge hyr to lathe. (305-308)
It must be remembered that the pagan's magnificent robes, crown, and scepter were rewards of the people of New Troy, not of God:

And for I was ry3twis and reken and redy of pe laghe
Quen I deghed for dul denied alle Troye.
Alle menyd my dethe, pe more and the lasse
And þus to bounty my body pai buriet in golde,
Cladden me for þe curtest þat courte couthe þen holde,
In mantel for þe mekest and monlokest on benche,
Gurden me for þe gouernour and graythist of Troie,
Purríd me for þe fynest of faithe me wytinne.
For þe honour of myn honesté of heghest enprise
Pai coronyd me þe kidde kynge of kene iustises
Per euer wos tronyd in Troye, opir trowid euer shulde,
And for I rewardid euer ri3t pai raght me the septre.

Preservation of the body, however, was God's reward for righteousness, a physical reward for an earthly merit.
The pagan makes it clear that this has been his only reward:

Quat wan we wyt oure wele-dede þat wroghtyn ay ri3t,
Quen we are damnyd dulfully into þe depe lake
And exilid fro þat soper so, þat solempne fest
Per richely hit arne refetyd þat after right hungride?

God has preserved the pagan's body as a reminder to men of their vainglorious belief in reward and attachment to the corporeal. For as the judge's soul ascends to heaven, the earthly reward crumbles before the eyes of the onlooking crowd:

Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid and faylide
And alle the blee of his body wos 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 opir crafte þat couert þe bones,
For pé ay-lastande life pat lethe shalle neuer
Deuoydes vche a vayne-glorie pat vayles so litelle.
(342-348)

The preservation of the body and its sudden decay to "powdere"
is a reminder to men that, "You shall gain your bread by
the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground;
for from it you were taken. Dust you are, to dust you
shall return" (Gen. 3.19). Man should remember his place.
Merit has no claim upon God and salvation is dependent
upon His grace:

For it is by his grace you are saved, through
trusting him; it is not your own doing. It is
God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is
nothing for anyone to boast of. For we are God's
handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to devote
ourselves to the good deeds for which God has
designed us. (Eph. 2.8-10)

The Erkenwald-poet emphasizes the necessity of God's grace
in the salvation of the heathen. It is only because Erkenwald
"grette after grace pat he graunte hade / An ansuare of pe
Holy Goste" (126-127). When the townspeople have exhausted
every means of understanding the "meruaile" Erkenwald
counsels them, "glow we alle opon Godde and His grace
aske" (171). It is also only "Purghe sum Goste lant lyfe
of hym pat al redes" that the corpse is able to reply
to Erkenwald.

In order to suit his theology the poet included
several important requisites for the salvation of the
pagan judge. The pagan is resuscitated before receiving baptism in the instant that Erkenwald prays, 
"'Oure Lord lene,' quop pat lede, 'pat pou lyfe hades" (315), and is rewarded with an official Baptismus aquae through Erkenwald's tears: "For pe wordes pat pou werpe and pe water pat pou sheddes-- / Pe bryt bourne of pin eghen-- my bapteme is worthyn" (329-330). As the motif of baptism by tears is rare in hagiography, it is unlikely that the audience would have recognized it in the poem. Therefore, to satisfy the conditions of baptism, the Erkenwald-poet has the bishop formally repeat the Trinitarian formula: "'I folwe pe in pe Fader nome and His fre Childes, / And of pe gracious Holy Goste'" (318-19). The ritual of the baptism reinforces the legitimacy of the event for the audience.

Unlike Dante's Trajan, the pagan judge is formally baptized after resuscitation. While the pagan lived before Christ, like Ripheus, and not after, as did Trajan, he is not saved in the same manner as Ripheus. Ripheus was given divine illumination (Dio li aperse / l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura," Paradiso 20.122-123) which informed his good actions ("ond' ei credette in quella, e non sofferse / da indi il puzzo piu del paganesmo; / e riprendiene le genti perverse" 20.124-126) and he was baptized by the three virtues ("Quelle tre donne li fur per battesmo" 127). The pagan judge did not receive such
foreknowledge of Christ, nor did he receive illumination at the Harrowing of Hell, since he specifically states that he was left behind:

I was non of pe nommbre pat pou wyt noy boghtes, Wyt pe blode of thi: body vpon pe blo rode; Quen pou herghedes hell-hole and hentes hom peroute, Pi loffynge oute of limbo, pou laftes me per. (289-292)

Presumably the pagan was condemned to the second limbo, that of the unbaptized. There are indications that the pagan receives God's special grace in the light which appears in the abyss: "For wyt pe wordes and pe water pat weshe vs of payne / Li3tly lasshit per a leme, loghe in pe abyme" (333-334). The pagan's "leme" is akin to Dante's "lume" ("light of glory") which Lucifer could not wait to have bestowed upon him by God but attempted to secure for himself: "E ciò fa certo che 'l primo superbo, / che fu la somma d'ogne creatura, / per non aspettar lume, cadde acerbo" (Paradiso 19.46-48). To attain to this grace is presumption, it is a gift of God whose ways are obscure to man: "'Where I show mercy, I will show mercy, and where I pity, I will pity.' Thus it does not depend on man's will or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9.15-17).

While St. Erkenwald owes a great deal to the saint's life, the crucial difference is that it (like Pearl, "See Peterson, 110, note to line 292 and Inferno 4.22-63."
for example) is dependent upon a theological point. Somewhat like the debates of Dante, the Pearl-poet, and Langland, St. Erkenwald uses a dialogue format for the central action of the poem with the direct speech of the characters taking over from the testimonial address of the witness. Erkenwald asks four main questions of the corpse: (1) Who are you? (2) Why are you thus attired? (3) Why are you thus preserved? (4) What of your soul? St. Erkenwald and Pearl together may be seen as an exposition of Psalm 24.3-4: "Who may go up the mountain of the Lord? And who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not set his mind on falsehood, and has not committed perjury." Like Pearl, St. Erkenwald is consoling, not by fostering the hope of salvation as a reward, but by showing that "pe grace of God is gret inoghe."

The struggle between reliance on human learning and trust in God which informs St. Erkenwald may be seen as a manifestation of the medieval preoccupation with contrasts found at every level in the culture: in the contrast between the "coarse, realistically-portrayed shepherds and idealized, otherworldly angels" in art; in the juxtaposition of the "grotesque gargoyles and lofty pinnacles" of the Gothic cathedral which was at once attractive and repulsive;

12 Both poems paraphrase Psalm 24.4: Pearl, "Pe ry3twys man schal se hys face, / Pe harmle3 hapel schal com hym tylle" (12.675-76) and St. Erkenwald, "'Pe skilfulle and pe ynskathely skelton ay to me'" (278).
in the contrapuntal music of opposing melodies; in the
chalieric ideal of gentleness and strength; in the
opposition of city and country, cosmopolitan and provincial;
in the struggles between secular and sacred, knowledge
and faith, man's works and God's grace.¹³

¹³ Bevington, 234.
Conclusion

In some ways *St. Erkenwald* is a work which fulfills what would have been contemporary audience expectations. In essence, the machinery of the saint's life is present in the poem: the temporal and spatial settings, the use of history, the borrowing of stories, the unindividualized characters, the use of certain motifs. These traits, in fact, are not solely confined to medieval hagiography but are also characteristic of most other types of medieval literature. The audience of *St. Erkenwald* would not have found the poem to be completely disconcerting. Therefore, the person who placed the poem in the manuscript alongside the saints' lives of the *South English Legendary* was not entirely in error. *St. Erkenwald*, however, differs from the saint's life in structure in that the narrative concentrates on only one episode, a plot-model which may have been familiar to both the poet and the audience through the saint play or the *exemplum*. By concentrating on a single event, the *Erkenwald*-poet is able to avoid the episodic quality of most saints' lives. The result is a dramatic tenor in the poem, with a sense of suspense as the mystery of the corpse's identity unfolds, with the climax in the baptism by tears, followed by a dénouement.
The generic identity of *St. Erkenwald* is dependent upon the traditional forms of hagiography (the saint's life, saint play, and *exemplum*) and yet the poem does not adhere to any specific genre.

*St. Erkenwald* does not fall into Jauss's category of works which exhibit "consumption-character" by merely repeating the expectable. While the poem satisfies some expectations it also requires changes in the audience's existing "horizon." The crucial difference which the poem exhibits is its subjugation to a theological point, not unlike *Pearl*. The poet accordingly adopts the question-and-answer format of a theological debate with the mode of address changing from the testimonial of a witness to the direct exchange between the principal characters. *St. Erkenwald* also demonstrates an unorthodox theology. However, it was a theology that went against the popular tide which was turning toward the increasing participation of man in his own salvation.

The *Erkenwald*-poet demonstrates a complete control of his material and audience in invoking certain expectations in order to frustrate or alter the manner in which they are fulfilled. For example, a lengthy passage is devoted to the pagan's righteousness in order to foster the expectation that the poet is presenting an example of the efficacy of
good works in attaining salvation. The expectation, however, is not fulfilled immediately as the audience is told that the pagan's soul has not been rewarded with salvation, but is in hell.

What particularly sets St. Erkenwald apart from most Middle English saints' lives is its stylistic artistry. The poet's evocative style in the description of the casket and corpse, for example, rivals that of the Gawain-poet in the description of Gawain's accoutrements. The poet also demonstrates his artistry in combining certain motifs in a unique manner in the plot of the poem. The plot of St. Erkenwald may be seen as a conflation of the motifs concerning the discovery, resuscitation, and baptism of a corpse, with two unusual variations added by the poet: the combination of the inventio/translatio of a saint's life with the motif of the discovery and resuscitation of a corpse by a saint, and the motif of baptism by tears. In both plot and poetry the Erkenwald-poet demonstrates a refined and accomplished artistry.¹

Perhaps, as in Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale, the poem's subdued tone was a recognition of the respect due the subject of the work. The Erkenwald-poet, like Chaucer,

¹ This study cannot do justice to the stylistic qualities of St. Erkenwald. For a fuller discussion on style, see Vincent Petronella, "Style as the Vehicle for Meaning" as well as T. McAlindon, "Hagiography into Art."
evidently understood the conventions of hagiography and worked within those conventions. However, he also sought to surpass them. According to Jauss's *Rezeptionsästhetik*, it is the masterwork which seeks to change the existing "horizon of expectations," and in some ways the poem succeeds in altering the "horizon." *St. Erkenwald* may not be a masterpiece on the scale of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but it is a small, masterful work with a subtle finesse worthy of appreciation.
Bibliography


