REVIVING CHRISTIAN AND DRUID IDEALS IN *ST. ERKENWALD*[1]

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ABSTRACT

The paper undertakes an analysis of the 14th-century alliterative poem, *St. Erkenwald*, reading it as a poetic call to spiritual renewal of the English society through a vivid reenactment of oldtime pagan and Christian traditions. In particular, the analysis focuses on the strategies of characterisation of the poem's double hero – the Christian bishop Erkenwald and his pagan counterpart, the anonymous judge, here interpreted as a druid. Together, the two protagonists are shown to form a complementary portrait of a model Christian leader. Arguments are provided for the druid hypothesis in the interpretation of the righteous pagan. The poem's great emphasis upon the Holy Spirit is also demonstrated, with some suggestions as to the date of the described miracle.

In medieval England of the late 14th century handling sin posed a problem not only for preachers but for poets as well, demanding from them a creative approach. The age of Chaucer has been described as moving "from a series of crises to a general sense of crisis" (Brown and Butcher 1991: 205). This was, among other things, a time rife with religious tensions and endemic corruption in the Church. As a result, the Church was losing its moral authority. The distribution of power between clerical and royal authorities had been constantly renegotiated through the repeated conflicts between English rulers and Roman popes (the Investiture Controversy, initiated by the Plantagenet successors of William the Conqueror, eventually leading to the Church's considerable dependence on the king under Richard II and to complete royal control of the Church under the early Tudors, see Chelini 1996: 42, 165, 377). The dissenting move-

ment of Lollardy claimed the sole authority of the Bible in matters of belief, denying that the study of the Bible should be reserved to clergy, and promoting Biblical knowledge in English among the laity. Not surprisingly, professional religious leadership came under attack in *Piers Plowman* and numerous poems against simony (such as *The Simonie* and *London Lickpenny*). On the other hand, literary attempts to restore ecclesiastical authority by reviving ideals from the past were equally numerous. Significantly enough, in the most important literary work of the period, *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sends the English society in capsule on a pilgrimage leading away from London, the centre of royal, parliamentary, and judicial power, to Canterbury, the shrine of the "holy blisful martir" (Chaucer 1988: 23). This symbolic journey suggests a need for true spiritual authority. We know that for Chaucer the pilgrim the journey was more than going to buy indulgences at St. Thomas's shrine for he describes himself as "Redy to wenden on *my pilgrymage* / To Caunterbury with *ful devout corage*" (Chaucer 1988: 23; emphases mine). The repetition within several lines of the same rhyming words in reverse order and the shift from the plural to the singular, *corages/pilgrimages* (Chancer 1988: 23, ll. 11-12), underscore the importance of an individual renewal of the heart in all members of the society. The theme of spiritual authority represented by a holy bishop is also central to the late-fourteenth-century romance, *Athelston*, which is concerned with issues of truth and justice against the background of Anglo-Saxon England, with particularly vivid evocations of London. In the same vein, an anonymous fourteenth-century verse narrative, the alliterative legend of *St. Erkenwald*, imaginatively recreates the atmosphere of the early English Church to unlock the deep-buried sources of spiritual vigour for its fourteenth-century audience.

Historical claims often provide the basis for authority in medieval culture, and so it is not surprising that the *Erkenwald*-poet seeks to rebuild the crumbling authority of the Church by vivifying its glorious past. The poem focuses on the figure of a holy bishop in a remote, pre-Norman-Conquest social environment, in which the authority of the bishop over his diocese was unquestionable. Elected by the clergy as well as lay citizens of the town in which he resided, a bishop of the seventh century was a true spiritual leader of the local Church. Under Richard II, by contrast, bishops were appointed by the king and nominated by the pope. In the age of Chaucer, moreover, most of the English bishops were absorbed in secular affairs, monopolising for instance the principal offices of the State. They were involved in administration, politics, and sometimes warfare. Consequently, they paid little attention to the deplorable state of their dioceses. They especially neglected the proper control of the Spiritual Courts, which was an important branch of their duties. Thus, during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, "Wat Tyler's men beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury on Tower Hill, because as Chancellor of the realm he represented the unpopular government. In

revenge, the fighting bishop of Norwich led in person the army that suppressed the rising in East Anglia" (Trevelyan 1967: 27). Responding to the crisis of episcopal authority in England, the author of *St. Erkenwald* constructs his narrative around the character of a saintly bishop providing proper pastoral care to his community of believers. The choice of Erkenwald for a hero is particularly meaningful in view of the fact that in his own time he was consecrated bishop in succession to simoniacal Wini (Farmer 1978: 134).

The poem is closely connected with London of the 1380s and "makes insistent and expert reference to London", being "redolent of the City, but especially of the area about St. Paul's – the shops in St. Paul's Churchyard (l. 88) and the Bishop's Palace (ll. 113 ff.)" (Salter 1983: 74-75). The narrator's apparent civic patriotism for his town is openly expressed when he speaks of *loue* (beloved) London (l. 34). The central event of the story is the discovery of a mysterious tomb in St. Paul's. It implies the image of the city as a Necropolis, or city of the dead, which co-exists with other evocations of London in the poem: the Polis, or city of the living; the Metropolis – the capital of the country and of the diocese; and finally a Triapolitan town, one of the three ecclesiastical centres of Celtic England (the other two being York and Caerleon). These different images and roles of London over space and time resolve themselves into two principal dimensions of the city's existence: the vertical, synonymous with history, the passage of time, the rebuilding of the ruins, and the digging into the earth; and the horizontal, associated with the living and bustling present and manifest in the centripetal movement towards London on the ground. By making the finding of a strange sepulchre its main episode the poem draws our attention to the point of intersection of the two dimensions, meaningfully bringing together the past and the present.

To begin with, the audience's attention is drawn to the crucial moments in London's history: the foundation of London as New Troy by the ancient Britons, the flourishing of the Celtic Church before the Anglo-Saxon invasions, the relapse into paganism under the Anglo-Saxons, and the re-christianisation of London by St. Augustine. The protagonist, "Ser Erkenwald" (St. Erkenwald: 108, 118), a historical personage of the seventh century, the fourth bishop of re-christianised London, is introduced as a faithful disciple of Augustine (ll. 33-34) and indeed a close follower of the crucified Christ Himself (ll. 1-2). These two references, together with the mention of the Celtic heritage, establish Erkenwald as a continuator of the most sanctified Christian traditions. When he appears in person in the story, he is portrayed as a remarkably mobile bishop, travelling about his diocese and therefore directly involved in its affairs. On this particular occasion, he is recalled from a pastoral visit in Essex, where he has been visiting an abbey (l. 108). His attitude may be interpreted both as "the Celtic predilection for itinerant ministration" (Stone 1971: 24) and, anachronistically, as illus-

trating the practice of a pastoral visitation introduced in the reformed Roman Church in the thirteenth century (cf. Chelini 1996: 233).

The poem intentionally blurs the boundaries between the different ages so as to revitalise the spirit of its contemporary audience by means of examples from the past. In particular, the rebuilding of St. Paul's connects Erkenwald's London with the poet's and his audience's London, where the renovations of the cathedral, undertaken in the mid-thirteenth century, were going on until the time when the poem was written, and were known as "the New Work" (Stone 1971: 20). Similarly, when the story introduces its central incident, the discovery of a marvellous sepulchre in the ruins of St. Paul's, it refers to the latter's rebuilding as the "New Werke" (St. Erkenwald: 38), as if speaking of the fourteenth-century project, but finishes the reference in Erkenwald's seventh-century England (l. 43). Through this narrative strategy of obliteration, the miracle of the tomb with its undecayed corpse is imaginatively translated from Anglo-Saxon London to Ricardian London. In addition, the tomb's late-Gothic ornaments (ll. 47-48) and its gold lettering (l. 51) resemble the sumptuous shrine of Erkenwald himself, which was constantly enriched throughout the fourteenth century (Salter 1983: 75). The poem variously merges its two protagonists, the Christian bishop and the pagan judge, to create a model leader.

The characteristics of such a leader are first delineated through Erkenwald's approach to the mystery of the tomb, tellingly contrasted with the helpless bewilderment of the entire London community. When the elaborately embellished sarcophagus is unearthed, all the Londoners gather around it to admire the wonder. The masons and pick-men working in the foundations of the cathedral are speedily joined by apprentices of manifold occupations. The citizens of all degrees and many types are present, from lads, through magistrates, up to the mayor himself. Their utter perplexity brings out the society's need for spiritual guidance. The poem especially emphasises the powerlessness of the learned: they seek information about the buried man in books and chronicles, ransacking the library for a long seven days and looking through the records of the dead – all in vain (ll. 101-104). They likewise fail to decipher the inscription upon the tomb (ll. 52-56).

Erkenwald's actions underline his total reliance on divine aid for the solution. Unlike the other citizens, who are attracted to the site by their curiosity and jabber to one another asking ceaseless questions (ll. 93-100), the bishop shuns company and conversation, commands peace, and shuts himself in his palace before even glimpsing at the marvel. He subsequently spends all night kneeling, weeping, and groaning before God in supplication, and never stops before he is assured of the Holy Spirit's answer. The poet has masterfully combined the moment of spiritual revelation with daybreak (l. 127) and the opening ajar of the cathedral door (l. 128). Erkenwald now joins the community – yet, not the clam-

our of the gossipy crowd but the harmonious worship raised by the noblest of the kingdom at the matins. Afterwards, he proceeds to celebrate the High Mass. The melodious singing of liturgical prayers is an expression of the saint's thanksgiving in advance and therefore of his confident faith. He also declares his faith publicly when he says that the Creator will unravel the mystery, making use of human ignorance to demonstrate His superiority and strengthen the Church (ll. 163-166). Erkenwald perceives himself as a humble instrument in God's hands, working for the benefit of the Christian community (l. 124, ll. 167-176). It is not until he is spiritually equipped that he proceeds to disclose the secret of the tomb by directly addressing the corpse and making it tell its own story (ll. 177-182).

The poem centres on the Holy Spirit in many ways. His work and nature are vividly illustrated by the bishop's actions, which correspond with the seven spiritual gifts discussed in Isaiah 11: 2: fear (*timor*), piety (*pietas*), knowledge (*scientia*), might (*fortitudo*), counsel (*consilium*), understanding (*intellectus*), and wisdom (*sapientia*). These gifts were fairly widely known in the Middle Ages as a sequence of Sundays from Septuegesima to the fourth Sunday of Lent was compared to them (Borgehammar 2001: 37). Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding underlie the bishop's speeches and dialogue with the dead man, and are implied in his being introduced as a teacher of God's law (l. 34). However, Erkenwald clearly does not trust in any worldly means of obtaining knowledge but, in total lowliness that illustrates his fear (*timor*), turns to God, taking counsel with the Holy Spirit (*consilium*), persevering through the night in prayer (*pietas*), and boldly acting upon the received word (*fortitudo*). In addition, he manifests at least some of the nine spiritual gifts distinguished by St. Paul: healing (I Cor. 12, 9) is manifest in the "medecyn" of Christ's salvation that he brings to the righteous pagan (cf. ll. 298, 331, 333); the working of miracles (I Cor. 12, 10) is apparent in the way the bishop wakes the corpse; and the discerning of the spirits (I Cor. 12, 10) is visible in his approach to the miracle of the undecayed corpse.

Furthermore, the poem contains an uncommonly large number of references to the Holy Spirit. Thus, the bishop receives an answer to his prayer "of the Holy Goste" (St. Erkenwald: 127). He celebrates the High Mass "of Spiritus Domini" (l. 132). His double reference to the "comfort" of God (St. Erkenwald: 168, 172) implies the third person of the Trinity, whom Jesus called "the Comforter" (John 14, 16 & 26; 15, 26; 16, 7). The corpse awakes and begins to speak through "sum lyfly goste, lant of hym that al reles" (St. Erkenwald: 192). The pagan voices his belief in Christ (ll. 195-196, 283-284, 289-290) supposedly through the power of the Holy Spirit, according to St. Paul's doctrine that "no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. 12, 3). Erkenwald baptises the righteous pagan in the name of the Trinity, emphasising

the "gracious Holy Goste" (St. Erkenwald: 319). As a result, the "spyryt" of the man leaps up from Limbo to Heaven (St. Erkenwald: 335-336) and his "soule" enters the state of bliss (St. Erkenwald: 345). The narrative is virtually permeated with the spiritual. The author is evidently knowledgeable about the Paraclete. He is aware that since Christ's departure God operates in the world through "the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit" (John 14, 26).

The spiritual dimension culminates in the bishop's compassionate love shown in response to the dead man's plight. St. Paul emphatically explains to the Corinthians that such charity is a much greater virtue than the best of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12, 31-14, 1). Erkenwald manifests this highest type of love when he sheds abundant tears while listening to the dead man's story. The tears prove to be so precious in God's eyes that a single tear falling on the man's face is enough to effect his baptism (ll. 323-324). This sacrament of Christian initiation is openly mentioned by the pagan as an object of his yearning to be "fulloght in fonte" (St. Erkenwald: 299). The bishop utters a baptism formula in response to this desire: "I folwe the in the Fader nome and his fre Childes/ and of the gracious Holy Goste" (St. Erkenwald: 318-319).

The centrality of both the Holy Spirit and baptism in *St. Erkenwald* may suggest the Vigil of Pentecost and Pentecost as probable dates of the miracle. It is noteworthy that in the early Middle Ages baptism was limited to the eve of Easter and Pentecost (Dudley 2001: 220-221). Emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the poem points to the latter festival. Also, in its opening lines the narrative situates Erkenwald not a long time after Christ suffered on the cross (ll. 1-2), which historically speaking does not make much sense, but in terms of the liturgical year suggests the time after Easter. This Easter season, or Eastertide, extended for fifty days and concluded with Pentecost Sunday, which celebrated the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. A High Mass was sung both on the Vigil of Pentecost and Pentecost, and on the three following days (Flanigan *et al.* 2001: 710).

The nature of this season, one of the four main seasons of the liturgical year, also called Paschaltime, closely corresponds with the story told in *St. Erkenwald*, which celebrates the passage of the pagan judge from Limbo to Heaven. Baptism, which means immersion, was a sacrament that admitted a believer to the Christian Church and enacted rebirth through both the Spirit and the baptismal water. The passage from death to life is underlined by the imagery used in the poem, like the contrast between the dark night (l. 117) and the morning light (l. 127) or the bishop's white horse. Such images are evocative of baptism as the neophytes were dressed in white garments. The reference to the High Mass celebrated by the bishop, including festal chants coming from the choir (ll. 130-133), confirms the probable occurrence of the event on an important feast-day.

Pentecost, called Whitsunday in English and so associated with the white colour, seems to be the most likely day also in the light of the poem's concern to bring together Christian and druid traditions. Thus, Arthurian romances, which draw upon Celtic materials in a Christian context, begin at Pentecost more often than at any other liturgical season. This suggests that this holiday must have been especially close to the hearts of Celtic Christians. Both Easter and Pentecost were moveable feasts, regulated by the paschal moon, or first full moon after the vernal equinox, which means that Pentecost was observed some time during summer, when pagan Celts used to celebrate their Beltane festival. The cardinal legate Otho, holding a council at St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1237, mentions an irrational fear, "imposed by a diabolical fraud" upon some people, of the children being baptised on the canonically appointed days, the eves of Easter and Pentecost (Dudley 2001: 221-222). This fear may be explained by some superstition going back to pagan beliefs. On the other hand, Pentecost may have coincided with Erkenwald's feast-day in some year – not his main feast-day, commemorating his death on 30 April, but perhaps his translation feast on 13 May (Farmer 134). This, in turn, may have been connected with the occasion for which the poem was composed.

In the narrative delineation of a spiritual leader the figure of the pagan judge plays a crucial role, completing the portrayal of the bishop. The latter, in his spontaneous demonstration of compassion, is a Christ-like character, suffering together with those who suffer, being *cum passio*, and thus embodying the Christian ideal of mercy, ultimately fulfilled by Jesus on the Cross. Christ is repeatedly referred to in the poem in terms of His redemptive Passion (cf. ll. 2, 182, 289-290), which is the ultimate realisation of divine mercy (cf. ll. 284, 286). Being a Christian bishop, Erkenwald is not only a beneficiary of that mercy but also demonstrates mercy himself when he feels and extends it towards the pagan. On the other hand, the judge repeatedly describes himself as "merciles" (St. Erkenwald: 300) and deprived of God's mercy (ll. 284, 286). His delineation illustrates another principal attribute of divine nature – justice. As he explains, he had been buried in a magnificent tomb and royal attire by his compatriots because, as principal judge of the pagan law, he had never deviated from right (cf. ll. 229-244). His body, in turn, has been miraculously preserved through the centuries by "the ruler of reason who recommends justice,/ And loyally loves all the laws of truth" (ll. 267-269, trans. Stone 1971). Together, the pagan judge and the Christian bishop represent the two poles of divine nature, mercy and justice. They correspond, respectively, to the first and second persons of the Holy Trinity, and to the Old and New Testament. Interestingly enough, both protagonists have been characterised as representatives of the legal systems in London (cf. ll. 34; 200-201) and itinerant ministers to their respective societ-

ies (ll. 108-112 and 211). In all these ways, their equivalence has been established.

In contrast with Erkenwald, however, the pagan judge remains a shadowy figure, a man without a name, though his characterisation is quite suggestive, allowing one to draw at least some general conclusions as to his possible historical identity. Being a master of the pagan law in pre-Roman Britain, he was part of the ancient Celtic world and, if he was a justice then, he must have been a druid, a member of the highly educated class of the Celtic society. In pre-Christian times it was the druids who were guardians of justice. The portrayal of the judge corresponds with what is known about their legal functions. According to ancient reports (as quoted by Ellis 1998: 155-163), a principal role of the druids was to act as judges in the Celtic law courts. Thus, Strabo remarks that the druids, regarded as the most just and righteous of all people, settled the weightiest of all legal cases. According to Julius Caesar, in turn, the druids were highly respected, as judges in private as well as public matters of disagreement, and their decisions were irrevocable. All this is implied in the depiction of the pagan judge: he says that he was "a lawyer in the legal system this land then used" (St. Erkenwald: 200, trans. Stone 1971) and that he used to "give counsel on weighty causes" (l. 202, trans. Stone 1971).

Furthermore, Irish sources concerning the ancient Celtic law mention the office of the principal judge of a tribe. Similarly, our protagonist confesses that he was "commissioned and made a master of the judges" (l. 201, trans. Stone 1971). Evidently, he was the principal judge of London. Another ancient author, Dion Chrysostom, emphasises the highest authority of the druids as judges, which surpassed even the authority of kings and princes. Likewise, the *Erkenwald*-poet endows his pagan judge with a power greater than that of a ruler. Twice the judge admits that he actually controlled the city under a prince of proud lineage: "this cite I yemyd,/ Vnder a prince of parage" (St. Erkenwald: 202-203); "I wos deputate & domesmon vnder a duke noble,/ & in my power this place was putte al to-geder" (St. Erkenwald: 227-228). Finally, Diodorus of Sicily testifies that the druids acted as mediators on the battlefield. Strabo confirms that they were arbitrators in wartime and were capable of reconciling enemies even at the last moment before the battle. By analogy, the pagan judge alludes to the brotherly conflict of the two British rulers, Belinus and Brennius, possibly implying his role as peacemaker between them (cf. ll. 213-216). At his death, he confesses, a doleful din was heard in New Troy because of the loss of such a just man of law. On the whole, his portrayal closely corresponds with the picture of druid judges that emerges from both Roman and Celtic sources: their main task was to protect the weak and the poor. Celtic law, on the whole, passed on orally from generation to generation, could elicit admiration of medieval

Christians as it was quite exceptional in securing proper care and maintenance to the sick and in the foundation of hospitals (Ellis 1998: 25-26).

The identification of the pagan judge as a druid is of course conjectural and arguable, depending among other things on what notion of the druid one holds. In this paper the argumentation presented by Ellis is followed (Ellis 1998: 7-38). According to him, the druids were not just pagan priests and priestesses but professional intellectuals of Celtic society. Apart from fulfilling priestly functions, they acted as philosophers, judges, teachers, historians, poets, musicians, doctors, astronomers, prophets, and political advisors. Although they are first mentioned in written documents only in the second century B. C., that is, four centuries after the first records about Celtic peoples, the druids belong, in fact, to the entire Celtic world, even though they are not always known by that name. With the coming of Christianity, the druids did not disappear but adapted to the new culture. Some of them even became priests of the new religion. Particularly in Ireland the druids were regarded as representatives of the same social class as Christian priests, but a similar transformation took place in other Celtic regions as well.

However, even if we accept Julius Caesar's statement that it is supposed that druidism first developed in Britain and spread to the continent from there, the hypothesis about the druid provenance of the pagan judge will not be undermined. In fact, such a hypothesis helps explain certain elements of the poem which otherwise may appear strange. From the start, the narrator manifests more than usual sympathy for "the Bretons", that is, Celtic Christians, combined with criticism of "the Saxones" (St. Erkenwald: 7-10). Whereas Bede, for instance, censures the native British, the Celts, for not trying to convert the Saxons, the *Erkenwald*-poet does nothing of the sort. Furthermore, the utterly incomprehensible letters on Erkenwald's tomb may be interpreted as oghamic writing, a secret alphabet invented in Ireland to record druid lore in the Gaelic, the oldest form of the Celtic language. At the same time, the extraordinary emphasis on the lack of any written records about the man buried at St. Paul's Cathedral reflects the Celtic religious prohibition of storing information in writing, and the resulting importance of oral tradition (cf. Ellis 1998: 9). The elaborate sarcophagus itself is reminiscent of Celtic stone carvings. The rich clothing of the pagan judge, the crown and the sceptre with which he is equipped, correspond with the high position of the druids in Celtic society, especially as he explicitly denies that he was either "king" or "cayser", or even "knight" (St. Erkenwald: 199). His apparel and regalia testify to the skills of Celtic craftsmen, whose metal products, woollen garments, especially mantles, jewellery, and ornaments were highly estimated in the ancient world (cf. Ellis 1998: 25).

In the light of the druid hypothesis, the equivalence of the judge and the bishop makes much sense. Both are types of religious professionals holding var-

ious functions connected with learning and piety in their respective societies. Erkenwald's authority is definitely reinforced by the analogy with the ancient man of law. The latter's impeccable adherence to justice is evidently something the Christian world could adopt from its pagan predecessor. At the same time, the fact that the pagan judge pays his tribute to Christ conveys superiority of the Christian religion, defined chiefly in terms of grace and mercy. The mercy of God is applied to the righteous pagan through the human compassion of Erkenwald and the citizens of London, who all weep while listening to his confession. The narrative is virtually punctuated with lachrymose imagery (cf. ll. 122, 220, 310, 311-312, 314, 321-323, 329-330), incarnating the ideal of mercy and culminating in the single baptismal tear. The poet also underscores the importance of the Church – a body of believers headed by a virtuous, sacramental priest. Furthermore, while the pagan arbitrator is deprived of any associations with the supernatural, Erkenwald functions as a Christian wonder-worker, wielding the supernatural power of the Catholic Church. Together, they constitute a complementary portrait of a model spiritual leader.

The recurrence of the epithet "new" bespeaks the poem's central preoccupation with renewal. The word is repeated thrice in the opening lines, in the privileged end-line position (ll. 6, 14, 37). Then it occurs in the old name for London – "the New Troie" (St. Erkenwald: 25), as well as in the reference to the rebuilding of St. Paul's as "New Werke" (St. Erkenwald: 38). A questioning of the nature of newness is thereby implied, and an inner renewal is suggested through the image of material renovations. The projected audience is guided to compare itself with the former London communities: the pagan's contemporaries in New Troy, described by him as the folk "felonse & fals, & frowarde to reule" (l. 231), and the Anglo-Saxons surrounding their bishop. The postulated renewal emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit and the authority of bishops. It amalgamates the Christian tradition of mercy with the ancient druid tradition of perfect justice, in accordance with the principle of *translatio studii*.

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