

WORDS, DEEDS, AND BAPTISM:

EFFICACIOUS DISCOURSE IN ST. ERKENWALD

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In his book The Old English Verse Saints' Lives, Robert E. Bjork both analyzes the function and importance of direct discourse in Old English poetic hagiography and describes the close, natural connection between what he calls the "words-deeds theme" inherent in much Old English heroic poetry and in the saints' lives. Bjork asserts that the words-deeds theme belongs appropriately to an Anglo-Saxon culture that viewed words as acts, and even more to a Christian theology that equated Christ with the Logos and saw the saints as part of the body of Christ.¹ As Bjork writes:

. . . if Christians generally gave considerable attention to the "symbolic forms of human discourse" as they strove to serve God, it stands to reason that saints or representations of saints had to give fuller attention to every aspect of language. . . . Since one of Christ's major characteristics is his identification with the Logos, the Word, his saints should reflect that identification, something they can do in hagiography through their use of direct discourse.²

Many of Bjork's observations concerning the centrality of direct discourse in Old English hagiographical style apply equally well to the Middle English St. Erkenwald, a versified

saint's legend in which direct discourse accounts for nearly one half of the total three hundred and fifty-two lines.³ The power and the efficacy of words are central to an understanding of the theme and action of St. Erkenwald.⁴

The poem begins with what is commonly described as historical prologue, lines 1-32--a prologue which itself contains no direct discourse; we might notice, however, that the first four lines introduce both the Savior and the saint of this poem:

At London in Englonde noȝt fulle longe
 sythen--
 Sythen Crist suffride on crosse and
 Cristendome stablyde--
 Ther was a byschop in þat burghe,
 blessyd and sacryd:
 Saynt Erkenwolde as I hope þat holy mon
 hatte.⁵

The poet thus begins a survey of Christian history in Britain with St. Erkenwald and Christ, the Word made flesh, closely linked. As Arnold E. Davidson writes, ". . . the fourteenth-century poet's retrospective narration makes a seventh-century bishop almost a contemporary of Christ."⁶ The poet goes on to describe Augustine's work in a way that stresses language, the "verbal" work that Augustine had to do: he preached to the people, an act which "plantyd þe trouthe" (13); he called the pagan temples "kyrkes" (16), and "cheuely" he changed their names (18). In fact, the poet offers a brief catalogue that contrasts the old and the new, underscoring Augustine's acts of name-changing by linking the changes in names to the changes of the functions of the holy places:

þat ere was of Apolyn is now of Saynt
Petre,
Mahoun to Saynt Margrete oþir to
Maudelayne;
þe synagoge of þe Sonne was sett to oure
Lady,
Jubiter and Jono to Jhesus oþir James.
(19-22)

Augustine's words, i.e., his renaming, is the means by which the places are made holy, just as later in the poem Erkenwald's words are the primary means by which the good pagan judge is made "holy," and thus is saved.

As the poem proceeds, the mysterious tomb is uncovered and questions begin to arise in the minds of the workers. Coming just after the description of Augustine's work, the description of the reconstruction of Saint Paul's is particularly striking (37-46); the work is essential to the Christian community, but it has none of the transcendent power that Augustine's had (or that Erkenwald's will have). This fact is highlighted upon the discovery of the tomb--the mystery itself is phrased in terms of unintelligible, or inefficacious, words, words which the men consider and even silently mouth, but are unable to fathom:

And þe bordure enbelicit wyt bryȝt 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 schulde. (51-54)

Significantly, before Erkenwald's appearance later in the poem, the only use of direct

discourse, the type of discourse associated with the saints, is the generalized wondering in lines 97-100:

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

This early instance of direct discourse, however, is specifically undercut with the line, "Bot þat ilke note was noȝt for nourne none couthe. . . ." As Peterson paraphrases the passage, ". . . none could tell of any tale spoken of in the city, or written in a book, that mentioned the dead man."⁷ As he emphasizes the unintelligibility of the tomb and the lack of any story that will account for the preserved corpse, the poet in fact emphasizes the inefficacy of merely human language.

Direct discourse becomes truly helpful in this poem only when Saint Erkenwald enters, for the saint is God's earthly minister. Naturally enough, then, Erkenwald's first word-deed is a heartfelt prayer for God's help (121-125). The prayer is the first in a series of words used as deeds throughout the rest of the poem which ultimately enables the saint to solve the mystery; Erkenwald asks that God "fulsen me to kenne / þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres" (124-125), and the poet carefully emphasizes, in lines 126-127, the efficacy of the prayer:

And so longe he grette after grace þat
 he graunte hade

An ansuare of þe Holy Goste and
afterwards hit dawid.

The saint's prayer reminds us of the marvelling of men upon the mystery, and implies the necessary intervention of the omniscience of God. Erkenwald will, in fact, make this omniscience clearer with his next word-deed. The close connection of the Holy Spirit's answer and the coming of dawn further underscore both God's enlightening grace and the evident power of the words of the saint.

The second of Erkenwald's word-deeds is his own response to the Dean's summary of the mystery--a summary which puts the problem solely in the context of earthly terms and of its impenetrability to the human mind. Erkenwald's response recasts the mystery from a divine perspective, explaining how, though marvellous and inconceivable such a mystery might be to man, God's wisdom is more than a match for such a question:

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 myztes. (160-162)

The bishop's most telling lines, though, come at the end of this section; he insists that it is time for them to do their "dede" (169), which is to "glow . . . opon Godde and His grace aske" (171). Erkenwald even asserts in the following lines that:

I shal auay ȝow so verrayly of vertues
His
þat ȝe may leue vpon longe þat he is

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Lord myȝty,
And fayne ȝour talent to fulfille if ȝe
Hym frende leues.

Once again, the poet insists that the proclamation, which in the end amounts to words used to accomplish one miraculous deed, will have a particular effect on the people; Erkenwald's "informing" the people of God's power and "vertues" strengthens their belief. Words and deeds are inextricably linked. Speech is efficacious action.

Erkenwald then turns to the corpse and with his words causes the body to stir and speak. It is of particular importance that the bishop's first command to the body is "layne þou no lenger" (179)--"be silent no longer." The mystery of the preserved corpse is its silence, and this command for the body to speak is a powerful, direct call for it to join the realm of the living and, ultimately, the realm of the Divine, linking words and life:

And wyt a drery dreme he dryues owte
wordes,
þurgh e sum Goste lant lyfe of hym þat al
redes. (191-192)

The body speaks and begins to justify its former life and actions and to explain its current state; the speech begins with the judge telling Erkenwald "þi bode is me dere. / I may not boghe to þi bone for bothe myn eghen" (193-194), thereby underscoring the efficacy of Erkenwald's discourse. We may conveniently divide the rest of corpse's speech in to two distinct rhetorical functions: the first part of the speech, lines 198-272, serves as an explanation on the part of the corpse and which prompts discussion with Erkenwald; and the second, lines 283-308, is a

lament to God and a prayer for mercy, which moves Erkenwald to pity. Interjected in the corpse's "sermon" are occasional questions or directions from the bishop, interruptions which guide the speech. The explanation clarifies the mystery for the people, at least to a degree, but the second main part is the truly efficacious utterance. The lament of the judge moves Erkenwald and the others to tears in much the same way as Erkenwald's prayer earlier moved the Holy Ghost to grant an answer to the saint regarding the mystery at hand, and consequently Erkenwald is able to bestow on the corpse the grace of God through baptism.⁸

The lament prompts Erkenwald's final "word-deed," the pronouncement of the baptismal formula over the virtuous pagan judge:

By Goddes leue, as longe as I my³ t
 lacche water
 And cast vpon þi faire cors and carpe
 þes wordes,
 'I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and His fre
 Childes,
 And of þe gracious Holy Goste' and not
 one grue lenger;
 Þen þof þou droppyd doun dede hit
 daungerde me lasse. (316-320)

God, through Erkenwald's words and a single tear, brings about the salvation of the judge; thus, by the end of the poem we understand that the most efficacious words--indeed, in the divine context of salvation, the only truly efficacious words--are those pronounced with God's blessing or those designed to administer God's grace.⁹ Direct discourse in St. Erkenwald ends with a speech by the newly-redeemed judge that is purely a speech of praise and thanksgiving to God and to the bishop who

administered God's grace to the saved soul, the only direct discourse available at the conclusion of a story of salvation.

The poem, however, presents us with a final irony. The body ceases to speak--"Wyt this cessayd his sowne, sayd he no more" (341)--and, as we might expect, the resumption of silence signals the beginning of another mystery: the body rots, but the soul of the good pagan judge is once again removed (and remote) from the wondering crowd. The poet writes:

For as sone as þe soule was sesyd in
 blisse
 Corrupt was þat opir crafte þat couert
 þe bones,
 For þe ay-lastande life þat lethe shalle
 neuer
 Deuoydes vche a vayne-glorie þat vayles
 so litelle. (345-348)

The poet takes pains here to emphasize the uselessness of the body, the vanity of this world, and in doing so he underscores the new mystery that Erkenwald and the others must ponder. Instead of an inexplicably preserved body at which to marvel, they are faced with a rotted corpse that, on the one hand, reminds them of their own mortality and, on the other hand--despite the corpse's sermon and the miracle--forces them to recognize the mystery of salvation.

Walter J. Ong, in his book Orality and Literacy, speaks of the two-fold nature of the spoken word: words are at once powerful--they are events which create and change things--and powerless, insofar as they are dying even as they are brought into being, and as they are ultimately irretrievable.¹⁰ This inherent paradox within spoken language is exemplified by

St. Erkenwald. The only ultimately efficacious words are God's; human language (with divine sanction) may help to solve a mystery, to change names and thus purposes of places and things, and even to administer the rite of baptism and open the gateway to salvation. But divine words--or, indeed, the divine Word--are the only effectual and lasting discourse. The people of St. Erkenwald are thus left in silence at poem's end. The body rots (342-344) and the people, including the bishop himself, remain on earth as witnesses to a miracle but, as a consequence of what they saw, more conscious of their own distance from that state of divine grace that the judge knows when he says (332) "Ryȝt now to soþer my soule is sette at þe table." As Mary-Ann Stouck writes:

Whatever the strength of the conviction that the next world will indeed bring greater bliss than can be imagined on earth, we can only really know that to attain it necessitates the abandonment of all earthly beauty, and ultimately the corruption of the flesh. . . . The prospect of eternity is enhanced by an awareness of the relentless passing of earthly experience, but equally, the prospect of impending timelessness brings awareness of the preciousness of those things which are mutable.¹¹

The bishop and the people leave the scene joyful yet sad, delighting in God's deed but more mindful than ever of their own transitory human condition. As the narrator remarks, "Meche mournynge and myrthe was mellyd to-geder" (350). Saint Erkenwald's discourse is effective inasmuch as it is sanctioned as God's discourse, but human discourse is ultimately ineffective on

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its own. The ending of the poem dramatizes what amounts to the sobering realization of this fact.

NOTES

1. Robert E. Bjork, The Old English Verse Saints' Lives. A Study in Direct Discourse and the Iconography of Style. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985. 18.
2. Bjork 19.
3. St. Erkenwald cannot be described as a "saint's life" since it relates only one particular event in the life of its main character; admittedly, in this respect the poem differs from the poems discussed by Bjork. The difference, however, is immaterial to my argument: the words-deeds theme that Bjork outlines, with its essential stylistic connection to direct discourse, need not be confined to "complete" lives of saints (just as it need not be confined to Old English hagiography). A medieval English hagiographic text may relate one or many incidents, but the connection between words and deeds may well be evident either way--as I believe it is in St. Erkenwald.
4. The more important critical articles dealing with St. Erkenwald include the following: L. D. Benson, "The Authorship of St. Erkenwald," JEGP 64 (1965): 393-405; Arnold E. Davidson, "Mystery, Miracle and Meaning in Saint Erkenwald." PLL 16 (1979): 37-44; Allen J. Frantzen, "St. Erkenwald and the Raising of Lazarus,"

Mediaevalia 7 (1981): 151-71; T. McAlindon, "Hagiography into Art: A Study of St. Erkenwald," SP 67 (1970): 472-94; Vincent Petronella, "St. Erkenwald: Style as the Vehicle for Meaning," JEGP 66 (1967): 532-40; William A. Quinn, "The Psychology of St. Erkenwald," M E 53 (1984): 180-93; Mary-Ann Stouck, "'Mournynge and Myrthe' in the Alliterative St. Erkenwald," ChauR 10 (1976): 243-54; Gordon Whatley, "Heathens and Saints: St. Erkenwald in Its Legendary Context," Speculum 61 (1986): 330-63.

5. All citations from the poem are from Clifford Peterson, ed., St. Erkenwald (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1977).
6. Davidson 39.
7. Peterson 96.
8. It should be noted at this point that in one way Bjork's assertions about Old English poetic hagiography do not readily apply to St. Erkenwald. He argues, "Just as the saints' lives can be expected to manifest interest in the words-deeds theme, so can they be expected to show an appropriate immutability in the saints they depict. . . . Beyond life, [saints] rise above the mutable world . . . and their immutable discourse becomes the stylistic analogue to their spiritual state" (20). Bjork is right, I think, to make this observation about the title characters in the earlier saints' lives; however, Erkenwald is not what I would describe as an "immutable" character. He is in fact moved to tears by the corpse's speech:

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"And teres trillyd adoun and on þe tounge
lighten" (322). These tears not only are
symbols for the water of baptism, but also
remind us that Erkenwald is not at all
"beyond life" or above human compassion.

9. I would agree here with Whatley that in
this poem "mediation of the sacraments is
essential to the salvation of the benighted
pagan soul" (332). See his article for a
discussion of the two general opinions--the
one insisting on the primacy of the judge's
righteousness and the other emphasizing the
necessity of Erkenwald's
intercession--regarding the judge's
salvation and Erkenwald's role in it.
10. Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy. The
Technologizing of the Word. New York:
Methuen, 1982. 31ff.
11. Stouck 252-53.