

A STUDY OF CONSOLATION POETRY OF THE

FOURTEENTH CENTURY

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO

THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS, PEARL,

THE PARLEMENT OF THE THRE AGES

AND SUNDRY MINOR POEMS ON DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Fourteenth-century man saw around him constantly the immediate prospect of death. Not only the high mortality rate and the universally public death-bed scene which had always been present, but pestilence and war emphasized the proximity of the dread messenger. Around him he saw sculpture and painting, in churches chiefly but not confined to them, depicting the horrors of death and judgement and he was accustomed to hearing sermons and verse which dwelt on the subject in lurid detail.

Death to fourteenth-century man was not so much fear of the unknown since the whole process was, up to a point, readily observable and thereafter authoritatively mapped out by the church. Although the departed soul may be destined for the joys of the Beatific Vision, nevertheless those left behind experience loss, uncertainty of the loved one's fate, the often traumatic physical sight of the death-bed and the unwelcome reminder that this is the fate that overtakes everyone. However joyous may be the wished-for reunion with God, one cannot help viewing reality. The cherished body becomes loathsome.

In the face of this terror, some form of consola-

tion is required, leading to resignation to the inevitable. The way fourteenth-century man looked at death is well illustrated in the enormous body of literature on the subject. From this plenty has been selected Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, a gentle work which keeps Death at a distance; Pearl, an anonymous work depicting the handling of grief at the loss of a child; The Parlement of the Thre Ages which deals harshly with its audience in order to teach its lesson and contains most of the themes which recur in the final chapter, where a small selection of didactic and homiletic poems is considered. All the writers are English but attitudes in Western Christendom show, at a cursory glance, the similarities one might expect from cultural and religious homogeneity. The selection was made to demonstrate both this unity of outlook and the various treatments of the theme of death.

The conclusion is a summary of the evidence from Chapters I to IV for the fourteenth-century attitude to death and a brief comparison with a modern work on the subject.

PREFACE

The medieval world has an unceasing fascination. Part of that attraction lies in the attitude of medieval man to his surroundings. A very significant part of his life concerned the Church and religious observance and belief. The greatest gulf between him and twentieth-century man may be seen in the response to something which preoccupies all, whether of the fourteenth or the twentieth century - death.

This study of fourteenth-century man's beliefs and fears as revealed by poetry of the age has been completed with the aid of my supervisor, Mr Brian Lee, of Cape Town University, and the financial assistance of the HSRC and the University of Cape Town. My sincere gratitude goes to them all and to my husband for his unfailing support. Finally, history must record my thanks to someone who has taken a great burden off my back with her industry and efficiency - Mrs. Avery, my typist.

ABBREVIATIONS

Chau R	Chaucer Review
EETS	Early English Text Society (ES : Extra Series, OS : Ordinary Series)
ELH	Journal of English Literary History
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MA	Medium AEvum.
MLN	Modern Language Notes
MLR	Modern Language Review
MP	Modern Philology
NM	Neuphilologische Mitteilungen
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association
PQ	Philological Quarterly
RES	Review of English Studies
SPEC	Speculum

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INTRODUCTION

Fourteenth-century man saw around him constantly the immediate prospect of death. It was apparent as an inseparable part of everyday life in the high incidence of infant mortality, in the grim records of mothers dying in childbirth and in the demise of well nigh everyone long before the biblically allotted three score and ten. Death in childhood was such a commonplace that two children in a family might bear the same Christian name, both having been given it to ensure its continuity. From a slightly later date than this study comes the case of the two Paston sons, both called John, born in 1442 and 1444. Both survived well into adulthood.

Looking at the subjects of only two of the works under review, we see that the Duchess Blanche had not attained her thirtieth year¹ and the Pearl maiden was not yet two years old; not even old enough to have learnt her Pater Noster and Creed.² Admittedly, the

¹ Discussed in Chapter 1.

² Gordon, E.V. ed. Pearl. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1953. (All references are to this text unless otherwise specified.) 1.485.

Dreamer-Narrator in The Parlement of the Thre Ages puts Youthe's age at thirty, Medill Elde's at sixty and makes Elde a centenarian, but Offord quotes various authorities to prove that these figures were literary conventions rather than factual figures.³

For the poor, the majority, who were so much less likely to enjoy the material requirements of life, longevity was so much the less assured. Few statistics are available and those mostly of prominent men, since the recording of the ages of women and of the lower classes as a whole was naturally considered unimportant. Of the four English kings reigning in this century, only two died natural deaths, and neither of them reached the age of seventy.

The lack of medical skill meant that death was often agonising. Relatively harmless conditions were incurable and, although scientific research into illness did continue, in the absence of anaesthetics, antiseptics and even a basic knowledge of hygiene, minor injuries proved fatal and even basic surgery traumatic. Herbal remedies from the goodwife were often efficacious but there were no strong drugs to alleviate the pain of the dying who, in today's taboo-ridden

³ Offord, M.Y. ed. The Parlement of the Thre Ages. EETS 246, 1959. (All references are to the Thornton text unless otherwise specified) p. 44.

society would be obliquely referred to as the terminally ill.⁴

Although Nature may have cured patients before the medieval doctor could kill them, a glance at Chaucer's Physician, practising at this time, leaves the matter doubtful.

In al this world ne was ther noon hym lyk
To speke of phisik and of surgerye
For he was grounded in astronomy. (ll.412-4)⁵

Under the circumstances of diagnosis by astrology the poor, who could not afford the physician's attentions, were probably better off.

Either way, resigning oneself to Death whenever illness appeared may not have been as weak-spirited as it seems. "Unfortunately little is known about the actual behaviour of ordinary medieval people when they became ill. There is evidence to suggest that they often overstated the seriousness of the case and claimed to see Death's messengers lurking at the foot of the bed even in mild, transient illnesses. Given contemporary levels of hygiene, diet and medical

4 Rowling, Marjorie. Everyday Life in Medieval Times. Batsford, 1968. chapter 9.

5 Robinson, N.F. ed. The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. 2nd ed. OUP, 1979. p.21. All quotations from Chaucer are from this work.

ignorance, this was not entirely just hypochondriac anxiety."⁶

With the advent of the Black Death into England in the fourteenth century a new and even more unpleasant ingredient was added to a situation which was indeed, sufficiently gruesome already. Feiling's account of its inexorable spread from Asia through Italy, France and finally to England in 1349 concludes, "No statistics exist to measure its horror. Three archbishops of Canterbury, 800 Norwich diocese priests, half the monks of Westminster died in a year.... The dead townsmen were shovelled two-deep into plague pits, while village churchyards had to take in another field. It bore hardest, no doubt, on the poor, and on monks in their cloisters, but it spared none, from the king's daughter down to the poet-anchorite, Richard Rolle."⁷ One of its victims, at a later visitation, was the Duchess of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt.

Some authorities claim that loss of life in Europe during that century amounted to half the population.

⁶ Finucane, R.C. Sacred Corpse, Profane Carrion : Social Ideals and Death Rituals in the Later Middle Ages. In Whaley, Joachim. ed. Mirrors of Mortality : Studies in the Social History of Death. Europa Publications Ltd., 1981. p.41.

⁷ Feiling, K. A History of England. Macmillan, 1950. p.235.

Some put it at one third but, whatever the actual figures, its effect on society, the economy and religion was cataclysmic. Since nobody understood the natural causes of the disease, the plague "was a new and striking terror in men's minds, a judgement that implied their sinfulness and therefore the threat of Hell."⁸ The symptoms of "hard tumours, burning fever, livid patches on the body, bleeding from the lungs" were awful to contemplate and the speed of death (within three days of the symptoms appearing) was "an inescapable warning of how speedily men might be called to their account."⁸

So far only those who died "peacefully at home" have been dealt with. The continued wars prosecuted by English Kings on the Continent and baronial and border skirmishes within the Kingdom in the fourteenth century gave even more scope to the possibilities of a ghastly end at a time when life was often nasty and brutish and almost invariably short.

"In medieval times and up to the eighteenth century wars (apart from those of religion) tended to be limited both in objective and extent, e.g. to the acquisition of a province or the resolving of a

⁸ Boase, T.S.R. Death in the Middle Ages. Thames and Hudson, 1972. p.98.

dynastic quarrel. The size of armies was also limited, and the life of the bulk of the population as a whole, despite the hazards of pillage and massacre, continued comparatively unchanged."⁹

Nevertheless, from Bannockburn in 1314, through the violent revolution of 1321 and onwards into the next century, the eventually futile war was waged over the lands of France and over Scotland whose independence was assured for another two centuries. Civil wars affected everybody, whether combatant or not and encouraged crime as brigands roved after the armies and took advantage of the lack of law and order.

Finally, in this catalogue of grim endings, come those whom the law did catch up with and who were publicly subjected to torture and mutilation for their crimes. The medieval traitor had to do penance in this life by being publicly humiliated before his cruel death. He was dragged through the streets, throttled, disembowelled while still living and his remains dismembered and dispersed about the kingdom where they would do most good - as a deterrent to potential imitators. The lesson was not always effective for, when Lancaster was executed in his own castle after the

⁹ Penguin Encyclopedia, 1965. under "War". English wars of the fourteenth century were predominantly not waged on religious grounds.

Battle of Boroughbridge in 1322, the northern parishes prayed to him as a martyr.¹⁰ Finucane ends an account of the execution of the traitor, William Wallace, by saying that "he had committed numerous crimes, so he suffered in numerous ways."¹¹

Those who merited such lesser punishment as the law, or their enemies, might prescribe could still undergo harsh incarcerations or mutilating tortures which could only hasten their demise. Nor must one forget the death reserved first for women and then for heretics. Though many victims were mercifully strangled by the hangman or stifled in the smoke, death by burning must have been one of the more horrible ends enforced by the authorities.

And, whether life imitates art or art life, the art of this period and that leading up to it, i.e. that art which was available to fourteenth-century observers, brought the facts of death inescapably before the living. In wall paintings and stained glass in churches, mural sculptures both inside and outside the edifice, altar pieces or memorial carvings within, the message was repeated for the benefit of all. No doubt much of the inspiration for the horrors of Hell came

10 Feiling, p.198.

11 Finucane, p.51.

from the events described above. The damned often seem to be suffering torments the nature of which is derived from medieval judicial torture.¹²

Those many churches which would have adorned the parishes of fourteenth-century England may seem bare and empty now. Reformation and Cromwellian ransackers did their best to make a profit out of destroying Papish idols. Stained glass windows seem to have borne the brunt of their vandalism and later sensibilities provided whitewash for many murals. Examples are legion but one well known to the writer is a Judgement scene above the chancel arch of the church of St Mary, Ware in Hertfordshire, which used to be just visible in outline at certain angles and in certain lights.

We must imagine rather the effect on the pious and generally simple or uneducated mind of biblical scenes such as those surviving in St Albans, Herts or, even more, scenes of the Last Judgement viewed in the flicker of candlelight on a dark winter's night when the grotesque figures carved on the corbels of the arches leered at the worshippers with further menace of what was in store for them if they did not turn from their evil ways before death overtook them.

12 Discovering Art : The Illustrated Story of Art through the Ages. London : Purnell, 1964. vol.4. p.33. The lower panel from the West Portal of Conques shows a demon with a bone-shattering club.

Artistic imagination and public demand did not stop here. Manuscripts, often commissioned by wealthy bibliophiles, were liberally adorned with the same religious subjects. Books of Hours and other highly decorated sacred works accompanied the rich at their devotions. So, whether rich and following the service in a gorgeously bound and lavishly illustrated missal or poor and surrounded by imaginative depictions of Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, the medieval worshipper enjoyed or suffered the omnipresence of the next world and its horrors or delights.

Whether the sculpture inspired the illumination or vice versa, such themes as the Danse Macabre, in which anatomically inaccurate representations of Death as a skeleton joined hands in a dance with various types from contemporary society, flourished all over Western Europe. It was most popular in Germany but many English examples were recorded, even if they have not survived to the present day.¹³

Both rich and poor, lay and cleric, had a further witness of the awful truth, so that what their eyes did not see, their ears would undoubtedly hear. Innumerable

¹³ Examples from Old St Paul's, the Tower of London, Croydon Archiepiscopal Palace, in Salisbury, Gloucestershire and Northumberland are recorded in Everyman's Encyclopaedia. J.M. Dent, 1931-32. vol.4. under "Dance of Death".

sermons on the theme of death and judgement have survived. Congregations were continually exhorted to prepare their souls for God's judgement with the encouragement of the rewards of Heaven or the threat of the agonies of Purgatory or Hell. Thomas à Kempis in De Imitatione Christi specifies that punishment in Hell will fit the sins committed in life and uses the common carrot and stick combination to bring sinners to repentance. "He þat 3it delitiþ to synne, it is no wonder þou3 he drede deþe & þe iugement. Neverþeles it is good þat, yf loue can not reuoke þe fro synne, at lest lete drede do it; for he þat puttþ behinde þe drede of god, may not longe stonde in good, but he shal sone renne in to þe fendes gnares"¹⁴ If one considers the frequency of churchgoing and the predominance of the subject in sermons, the medieval consciousness must have been supercharged with visions of the afterlife.

Verse on the same theme was another, probably aural, method of driving the vital message home. Some examples of this verse will be considered in the final chapter of this study. The poems selected represent a minute portion of the surviving verse on the subject of death. They divide into themes which recur time and again. Most of these deal harshly with their audience and much of what they say is disgusting to the modern

¹⁴ Ingram, J.K. ed. De Imitatione Christi by Thomas à Kempis. EETS ES 63, 1893.p.35.

age where the crude realities of death are neatly tidied away out of sight and television pictures of a corpse provoke outraged letters in the papers.

Admonitory verse of "the three living and the three dead" type is one of the less frequently represented although the visually similar Dance of Death was widely illustrated. Poems do not necessarily adhere to only one motif. A common theme, designated by its Latin tag, is the ubi sunt, which often uses the figures of the Nine Worthies to make its point (as in The Parlement of the Thre Ages). Memento mori poems vary from the "erthe upon erthe" type, with its extended punning, to the considerably less subtle urging to visit the grave or charnel house where the inmates, revolting to see in the physical corruption of death, taunt the onlooker with the promise that, "as I am so shall ye be". This text appears, in French, on the tomb of the Black Prince, in Canterbury Cathedral. Dialogues between the body and the soul press the same warnings: media vita in morte sumus - "in the midst of life we are in death". Another popular topos is the list of the proprietas mortis by which one knows that death is close to the body and all these contemplations lead one to disdain the transitory things of the world. Life is fleeting, no man knows when he will be summoned from this world to the next and, life being what it is, the only right and sensible attitude to adopt is the contemptus mundi, contempt for this world and this body

and a yearning to be relieved of both and rejoin God.

Healthy lessons were also to be drawn from the scene at the death bed. Preachers from early in the Christian era (vide Gregory's Gospel Homilies)¹⁵ had seized on this situation for examples to be avoided or emulated by their flocks. The phrase "he made a good end" could still be heard in popular speech until recently and probably continues to the present day. Ideally, the dying person should have made his peace with God before coming before Him in the next world. "Whan þat last houre cometh, þou shalt begynne to fele all oþer wise of þy lif þat is passed, & þou shalt gretly sorwe þat þou hast be so remysse & so negligent."¹⁶

Because death was seen as a vital transitional stage in existence rather than an end, and was the last point at which the subject could be observed by the living, the immediate circumstances were watched most closely. Nor were the dying carefully concealed from view lest their sufferings should affright the living. On the contrary, the death bed was a very public spectacle with strangers often entering the bedchamber to view the passing of the sufferer.

15 Gregory the Great. Gospel Homilies. Patrologia Latina. ed. J.P. Migne. 76.

16 à Kempis. p.31.

It was at this point that the dying claimed to see messengers of Heaven and Hell struggling for victory in the battle for the helpless soul. A miniature in a manuscript of the early fifteenth century illustrates the general idea very well. The dying man lies, naked and emaciated, on what appears to be a shroud, surrounded by skulls and sundry bones. He breathes out his last words to a severe God bearing a sword and frowning down on the unfortunate. In the top left-hand corner a similarly armed angel is swooping down and seizing a winged devil who has grasped the small, naked figure of the man's soul and is trying to make off with it.¹⁷

Contemporary art was no doubt a potent medium, the effects of which caused the invention of strange stories concerning the fate of evil-doers, as when alleged witches were confidently attested to have been seen hauled off to Hell by the Devil himself.¹⁸ The moment of death was a time of great peril. Demons graphically illustrated by the inexhaustibly inventive imagination of the medieval artist, lurked at the bedside, ready to seize the escaping soul and haul it

17 Master of the Hours of Rohan. The Dead Man before his Judge, from Les Heures de Rohan. c1420. Francastel, p. Dolphin History of Painting Vol. II The Middle Ages trans R.E. Wolf. Thames and Hudson, 1969

18 The case of the Witch of Berkeley, reported by William of Malmesbury.

down to the nether regions. Except at the death beds of those excommunicate or of unrepentant evil-doers, a guardian angel was also pictured in attendance to frustrate the machinations of the Devil's messenger.

The purpose of the public spectacle seems to have consisted in the desire of society to aid a fellow member during a crucial period of his existence and to give an example to those who would, sooner or later, reach the same stage themselves. When community integrity as opposed to individualism was still the standard approach to life, one assisted one's fellow man at death as at any other time - harvest, rejoicings or natural calamities.

Since death was a universal fate, it was only sensible that there should be instruction in how to go about it properly. "It is a curious fact that the literary tradition of the "art of dying well" can be traced back no farther than the early fifteenth century, to the Ars moriendi itself".¹⁹ However, the teaching is somewhat older. Books on the ars moriendi appear throughout Western Europe under such titles as La Science de Bien Mourir or Een Scone Leeringe om

¹⁹ Beaty, N.L. The Craft of Dying : A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England. Yale Studies in English, No 1 75. Yale University Press, 1970.p.1.

Salich te Sterven.²⁰ Not only must one study these manuals, or listen to the precepts laid out therein, on one's death bed (after all, time was limited) but the art of dying must be practised daily during life. "þou shouldist haue þe so in euery dede & euery þou3t, as þou3 þou shuldist dye anon".²¹

The Book of Vices and Virtues includes a section, not unlike a condensed version of one of these handbooks, entitled. "Here he techeþ virtues and first to lerne to dye."²² One of its meditation exercises is as follows: "departe þi soule fro þi body bi þinkyng; send þin herte in-to þat oper world, þat is in-to heuene or in-to helle or in-to purgatory, and þer þou schalt see what is good and what is yuele."²³ This is a rather advanced mystic exercise but is not spoken of as difficult or out of the way.

Although death was recognised as an individual activity; exhortation is in the second person singular

20 The latter brought to my knowledge by Prof E.Raidt, Department of Afrikaans en Nederlands, the University of the Witwatersrand.

21 à Kempis, p.30.

22 Francis, W. Nelson. ed. The Book of Vices and Virtues. EETS 217. London, 1942.

23 p. 70-71.

- "When pou seest pat a dedly synne mote so dere be bou3t..." (p. 71) the dying person could and should be assisted by the family and by the community at large. Respite from all or part of the purgatorial experience could be secured through the prayers of the living and by the intervention of Christ's mother and of the saints.²⁴

Belief in the efficacy of this form of aid was well attested by the large sums of money set aside for the burning of candles, the saying of masses and the endowment of chantry chapels where the saying of prayers daily "during the World" would theoretically ensure the care of the soul until Doomsday when there would be a new dispensation. For the less rich or less fearful a month's mind and a yearly obit were more reasonable requests to the surviving family. Many, especially the richer and nobler, made detailed provision in their wills for that time when they could no longer be in living charge of their affairs.

More details of the observances and ceremonies attached to medieval death for all types and classes can be found in R.C. Finucane's chapter in Mirrors of Mortality.²⁵ It is clear that the actions of medieval people

²⁴ Christ's mother as intercessor for the soul at judgement is dealt with interestingly and at length by Marina Warner in Alone of all her Sex : the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976. ch.21.

²⁵ See especially pp 47-49

indicate total conviction in the afterlife as laid out by the Church and a fear ranging from strong anxiety to utter terror that their souls were destined almost certainly for some term of punishment for sins committed in this life. The last words of those who were on the threshold of this life were also considered worthy of note: salutary to the living and propitious to God. "In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum" was popularly attributed on funeral monuments.

The Christian view of what happened to the soul after death is, in essence, common to most religions. In Egyptian tombs are scenes of a deity weighing a soul against a feather before pronouncing judgement. The iconography of this scene remains constant throughout the Middle Ages. The vision of the Last Judgement occupied a prominent place in churches, either on the tympanum where it was carved in high relief, or on the plaster of the chancel arch above the rood screen or in the windows of the east end.²⁶

Again, although the merit of reposing absolute trust in God's grace was preached, so was the terrible judgement to be meted out to the sinner. Medieval

²⁶ Discovering Art. p.33 shows the Last Judgement at Conques in France (11th-12th centuries). On p.135 in the same volume is shown the tympanum of the German Gothic cathedral at Bamberg.

preachers were well aware that the threat of hellfire brought sinners to God at least as readily as love of Him. "þe hare rennep, and þe greyhound rennep : þat oon for drede, þat oþer for gret desyr. þat on fleep; þat oþer chaseþ. þe holy men rennep as greyhoundes, for þei haue euere here eißen to heuene, for þere þei seen þe praie þat þei honten and chaseþ after;" and so on with the implication that all other men are hares who race along for fear. ²⁷ God is merciful but he is also just. "He is not quemed wiþ 3iftes, he receueþ non excusacions, but þat ri3t-wys is he shal deme."²⁸

The medieval mental picture of Heaven drew largely on the Revelation of St John. By the fourteenth century developing doctrine had, via art, influenced popular belief to view the immediate fate of the selected soul thus. The soul was portrayed as a small naked figure, carried in a cloth, somewhat after the manner of a person about to be tossed in a blanket, but kneeling in prayer.²⁹ Attendant angels bear it upwards. Earlier its destination would have been Abraham's Bosom where it would repose until Judgement Day but later the

27 Vices and Virtues. p. 74

28 à Kempis. p.33

29 In Discovering Art, p.69 there is a Spanish Romanesque example of Gabriel and Raphael bearing a soul aloft while on p.76 of the same volume two apparently lesser angels raise St Cilian and his parents moments after their martyrdom shown below.

figure of Abraham seems to have merged with the Godhead so that the righteous and the innocent (vide Pearl) attained eternal bliss instantly.³⁰

In writings, eternal bliss is not dwelt upon in the detail which its infernal counterpart enjoys. "In paradis þou schalt see al openly how vertues and goodnesse is y-3olde hi3ly in dede."³¹ Church art tends to depict worshipping angelic hosts and saints, together with the righteous at carefully graded hierarchical distances from Christ, who is usually the central or commanding figure and most commonly in his rôle of judge at the Dies Irae. The Virgin Mary is placed at his right hand, interceding for man, an important part of medieval doctrine. The resurrected dead rise from their graves and the elect raise heads and hands confidently to Heaven.³²

In the battle between good and evil, evil invariably is more gratifying for the artist. Imagination runs riot and the depictions of Hell and the damned have a liveliness unmatched by the worthier opposition. "Helle schal teche þe how God venge þe dedly synne...

30 1.675-6.

31 Vices and Virtues. p.71

32 A composite impression, but see Rogier van der Weyden's Last Judgement in the Hôtel Dieu at Beaune.

þere þou schalt see al þat herte hateþ and fleep :
 defaute of al goodnesse, and gret plente of al
 wikkednesse, brennyng fier, stynkyng brymston, foule
 stormes & tempestes, routyng ydouse develes, hunger,
 þryst þat may never be staunched, many manere of
 turmentrye, wepynges, sorwes more þan any herte may
 þenke or any tunge may deuyse, and euere-more wiþouten
 ende lastyng."³³

Such was the dramatic potential of this scene that it appeared on stage in the pageants. Actors grotesquely arrayed leapt out of a huge animal mouth representing the jaws of Hell, while other helpers provided the flames and smoke.³⁴ Boase makes two points about the use of graphic illustration. Symbolism can be defended because it was a "necessary concession to the weakness of mortal intellect" (p.19) and human kinds "morbid thirst for horrors" (p.21) encouraged details of the torments. "The gradual formulation of detailed theories about the afterlife is one of the obscurer processes of human imagination. The teaching of the Gospels was specific about spiritual survival but imprecise about its nature"(p.21).

33 Vices and Virtues. p.71.

34 The Jaws of Hell Fastened by an Angel. Discovering Art. p.75 and Duby, Georges. The Europe of the Cathedrals. Shira : Geneva, 1966. p.77. The Apocalypse.

However, by far the greatest part of mankind warranted neither extremes of treatment. Venial sins for which penance had been performed were impossible to avoid entirely and the Church early on recognised that the majority of the faithful were neither saints nor devils. So what could be done to provide a place for those not bad enough for eternal damnation nor so spotlessly innocent that they could ascend immediately to God?

The doctrine of Purgatory (from Latin, purgare, to cleanse), although current much earlier, was defined at the Council of Florence (1438-45) as being the destination of "the souls of the departed who die in a state of grace and yet have not fully expiated their sins at the moment of death".³⁵ Punishment was the deprivation of the sight of God but, for the average man who needed something more concrete to reflect on, the torments assumed something of the nature of Hell but with the additional knowledge that they would continue only until the soul was purged. "After "[reflecting on Hell]" go in-to purgatorye, and þere shalt þou see þe pyne of soules þat repent hem here in þis world, but þei were not al fully purched and clensed, and þerfore þey suffre now þere pyne for þe remenaunt of here/penaunce, al for-to þei ben clene and bri3t, ri3t

35 Everyman's Encyclopaedia. See under "Purgatory".

as þey were þe same tyme þat þey were taken out of þe fontston whan þei were cristned."³⁶

In theory, medieval man should have been able to face death with complete confidence. "ffor he þat loueþ god with all his herte dredip neiþer deþe, ner turment, nor iugement, nor helle, for parfit loue shal make to god a redy way & a sure comyng".³⁷ Up to the point of death the processes of existence were readily visible and thereafter authoritatively mapped out by the Church. However, while the Church promised, on the authority of the Scriptures, that the true son of the Church would attain the Heavenly Kingdom, there were obstacles in the way. No descendant of Adam could be wholly blameless except for the baptised infant whose original sin had been washed out and who had not yet had time to blot his copybook.

For those past this stage and those who survived into adulthood, and that was in the early teens at that time, "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be that go in thereat" (Matt. vii. 13). What it amounted to was that human existence and sin were inseparable. One often comes across the sentiment that the sooner one dies the

36 Vices and Virtues. p.71-72.

37 à Kempis. p.35.

better in order to avoid the inevitable. "And þerfore þei [holy men] haten þis lif þat nys but deef, and þei coveten bodily deef.... For deef is to goode men ende of al euel and a bigynnyng of alle goodnesse".³⁸

The reason for this continual emphasis on being right with God is brought out in the two devotional works from which I have been quoting. This life is transitory, as is everything in this world, and therefore not to be trusted. "This day a man is, & to morrow he apperib not". The chief terror the preachers harp on is the uncertainty. "For whan þou bygynnest to lyve, þou bygynest to dye, and al þi tyme and al þyn elde þat is passed deef haþ taken and holdeþ faste to hym; for þou seist þou hast fifty or sixty wynter; þat is not soth."³⁹

It is overwhelmingly this approach which informs didactic verse of the fourteenth century and not only verse but writings for wider public consumption in the form of sermons. Given the prevalence of battle, murder and sudden death from causes little understood and therefore all the more feared, such as the plague, it is a wonder that the spirits of the listeners bore up under the persistent attack.

38 Vices and Virtues. p.70.

39 Ibid. p.69.

In an age of technological prowess where many of the fears of medieval men are bogies to scare children and where priests and dogma have little or no hold on the vast majority of the population, the medieval approach may seem excessive. Critics, however, still manage to justify some of this excess while being out of sympathy with its main thrust. "They [medieval memorials] confront the predicament of morality in varied ways, at times with an excessive panoply of display, but never without a basic resignation to a divine purpose, whose justice stood beyond question. Unfortunately for Christendom, this justice was given visual form in terms of Heaven and Hell, represented with such genius that they long dominated all thoughts of the life to come. Medieval Hell may have been at times a useful deterrent; it was certainly the grossest incident in the debasement of things spiritual to anthropomorphic crudities."⁴⁰

The grossest of these crudities to modern sensibilities, imprisoned as we are in a fear of death probably greater, because largely lacking religious certainties, than our forbears', is the cult, if such it may be called, of the corrupt body. Tombs bear the effigy of the dead person on the upper layer of a two-tier structure. Beneath this figure, clad in all the

40 Boase. p.126.

trappings of earthly glory, lies a more or less repulsive corpse often spilling out of its shroud and in an advanced state of decay. "It is a strange preoccupation with putrefaction. The Church had preached the transcendence of mortal things, but there was in the fifteenth century in Northern Europe a morbid indulgence in disgust which answered some need now hard to understand."⁴¹ Perhaps the need was to accustom oneself to death and thus exorcise its worst horrors. The audience of the previous century who listened to the works selected for this study would have agreed that preparation was necessary even if they did not fully understand what need such excessive measures answered.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.106.

CHAPTER I THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

Having introduced this study with a prolonged description of the horrors of medieval life and the fears of the medieval mind, I turn first to a work written in a completely different mood. The Book of the Duchess is exceptional among the works selected for consideration in that it is the only poem whose author, subject and occasion are documented well enough to be almost beyond doubt. Chaucer records, in his retraction at the end of The Canterbury Tales, his regret for his "enditynges of worldly vanitees" (l. 1083), among which is a work of this name. In The Legend of Good Women he excuses himself to the God of Love by quoting the many works he has written, "in preysinge of youre name" (l.404), including The Deth of Blaunche the Duchesse (l.406).

The duchess is Blanche, first wife of John of Gaunt, son of Edward III and brother of the Black Prince. There were four outbreaks of plague in Chaucer's lifetime; that of 1369 claimed Queen Philippa as well as Blanche.¹ She died on 12th September after

¹ Kittredge, G.L. Chaucer and His Poetry. Harvard, 1970. p.37.

a marriage of ten years during most of which time her husband was abroad on the king's business.² He was in Picardy at her death and Chaucer was with him, having previously been in royal service as squire to Lionel, the second of Edward's seven sons.³

That the subject is Blanche, wife of Gaunt, is twice indicated in the text, firstly at lines 948 to 951:

"And goode faire White she het;
That was my lady name ryght.
She was bothe fair and bryght
She hadde not hir name wrong."

Then, right near the end of his dream, the Dreamer sees the hunting party making towards

"A long castel with walles white
Be seynt Johan! on a ryche hil" (ll.1318-19)

a verse which contains allusions to two of Gaunt's titles, his dead wife and his own name.

Lowes accepts these details as factual,⁴ Bronson in 1952 speaks of "Chaucer's elegy for Blanche"⁵ and

2 Bronson, B.H. The Book of the Duchess Reopened. PMLA, LXVII (1952), p.866.

3 Fraser, A. ed. The Lives of the Kings and Queens of England. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975. p.70.

4 Lowes, J.L. Geoffrey Chaucer. OUP, 1934. p.93.

5 op.cit. p.863.

Lumiansky considers there is "little room for doubt that Chaucer wrote The Book of the Duchess as consolation for John of Gaunt shortly after the death of his wife Blanche".⁶ Neither date nor subject is substantially questioned until Condren in 1970 suggested that, not only was the original subject Queen Philippa who died in the same year, but that Gaunt did not even appear. The Black Knight is an aspect of the poet, Chaucer, who would have been about twenty-four at the time (1.455), whereas Gaunt was about twenty-nine when his first wife died. Condren claims that the poem would have been appropriate for any anniversary of Blanche's death (p.196), that "Octovyen" is Edward III and that the poem was written in 1377 to ease the transition from the patronage of the then deceased King to the new power in the land, i.e. Gaunt.⁷

Palmer disputes the dating by producing a recently discovered letter which indicates that Blanche died in 1368 rather than 1369.⁸ Further evidence for this year is cited by Ferris who takes Stow's description of

⁶ Lumiansky, R.M. The Bereaved Narrator in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess. Tulane Studies in English, 9, (1959).p.5.

⁷ Condren, E.I. The Historical Context of the Book of the Duchess : a New Hypothesis. Chau R,5(1970-1).p.211.

⁸ Palmer, J.J.N. The Historical Context of the Book of the Duchess : A Revision. Chau R,8.(1973).p.257.

Gaunt's tomb which was in Old St Paul's as conclusive, although admitting that Stow elsewhere gives 1369 as the date of her death.⁹ The same John Stow records that the poem was written to commemorate Blanche¹⁰ whose birth date, according to Loschiavo, is suggested by evidence and probability to be 1347,¹¹ thus making her twenty-two as Froissart records.¹²

All this "evidence", however, when closely examined, amounts mainly to possibilities and to statements such as that by Palmer that "after that event [Gaunt's second marriage] the poem would not only have been a public insult to his new wife, but it could all too easily have been read as a satire on the inconstancies of human love".¹³ Although much of what these scholars already cited have to say is interesting, it is not, as a whole, conclusive given the social and political background against which our ancestors played out their lives. Fourteenth-century pragmatists would have found nothing unusual or insensitive in the activities of the marriage market implied by the early marriages and

⁹ S. Ferris, John Stow and the Tomb of Blanche the Duchess. Chau R 18.(1983-4) p.92.

¹⁰ Robinson. op.cit. p.266.

¹¹ Loschiavo, L.A. The Birth of "Blanche the Duchess" : 1340 versus 1347. Chau R.13,(1978),p.131.

¹² Ibid.p.128.

¹³ Palmer. p.259.

swift remarriages of the nobility.

As already mentioned, a further tribute to the Duchess of Lancaster, by Froissart, survives. He writes: "Elle mourut jone et jolie, / Environ de vingt et deux ans..." (ll.246-47)¹⁴. The lack of absolute precision in reporting age is quite common as is shown by other examples cited in the same article. The eulogy continues "gay, gladsome, fresh, merry, sweet, simple, of modest bearing, the good lady whose name was Blanche."¹⁵ The Black Knight tells the Dreamer that his lady was "of wel set gladnesse"(l.828), "hir wyt was set, ... upon gladnesse"(ll.992-3), and so on, and "goode, faire White she het"(l.949). White is, of course, punning on the Duchess's Christian name but, if we consider that set against her by Chaucer is a black knight who allegorises her loss into a chess game with Fortune, we see one of several underlying links in the work which superficially seems a little disjointed.

To many critics, the Black Knight's eulogy of his lady is primarily a stock description from courtly literature. Bronson,¹⁶ Kittredge¹⁷ and Tatlock¹⁸ all

¹⁴ Loschiavo, p.128.

¹⁵ Lowes p.93.

¹⁶ Bronson, op.cit. p.864.

¹⁷ Kittredge. p.55

¹⁸ Tatlock, J.S.P. The Mind and Art of Chaucer. New York : Gordian Press, 1966. p.26.

point out this specific instance of Chaucer's extensive borrowings from French courtly literature and Galway notes that the Black Knight's early service of love is all from Machaut except that it lasted "Sept ans ou huit".¹⁹ For some this derivative quality detracts from the work's sincerity, since how can one genuinely mean what one says when not only the sentiments but the words as well are culled from a previous writer?

We have no reason to believe that Blanche was anything but a charming woman and an ornament to the court but, even if she were not, on the basis of de mortuis nil nisi bonum, she could only be perfect of her kind. Her high social standing made any other response impossible, coupled with the code of conduct in operation at European courts in the fourteenth century. To describe her using the conventional phrases of fin amour was not to relegate her to oblivion as just another courtly lady, but to pay her that respect that was her due. Moreover, in using terms which would have been recognisably from a previous work, Chaucer is not necessarily being insincere or merely going through the motions at the behest of a rich patron. He is essaying a eulogistic memorial for the dead wife of a prince of the realm, within the bounds of fin amour but

¹⁹ Galway, M. Chaucer's Hopeless Love. MLN, LX, (Nov 1945). p.431.

with sufficient individual feeling and genuine consolation as may be consonant, perhaps not with the true feelings of the bereaved, but with the ideal feelings which such a man and his circle would think he ought to feel.²⁰

At this stage of his career, Chaucer was quite far apart from Gaunt in the social hierarchy. I do not believe the personal difference between them would have been as great as many commentators make out. C.S.Lewis, for example, says "the vagaries of dream ... render[] possible a more intimate picture of his patron's loss than would have been seemly on other terms".²¹ Spearing answers the question of why Chaucer uses the dream convention partly by saying that it allows an imaginary encounter between two socially diverse characters.²² In real life, such encounters would have been a matter of almost daily occurrence. Chaucer was certainly a useful man; what few facts we have of his employment by kings and lords tells us that, and he was undoubtedly an agreeable man who would be a popular companion to any prince. The criterion, however, is not

²⁰ Gaunt did provide for an annual commemoration and was buried by her side in St Pauls. (Condren p.196.)

²¹ Lewis, C.S. The Allegory of Love. OUP, 1951. P.167.

²² Spearing, A.C. Medieval Dream Poetry. CUP, 1976. p.54.

what is so but what is considered correct and Chaucer, the vintner's son, could not publicly presume upon any private marks of favour, or even on such public ones as his life pension of twenty marks, granted by the king in 1367, to pretend to any intimacy with the son of the king. 23

Until now, I have taken the traditional line that The Book of the Duchess was written by Chaucer in memory of Blanche of Lancaster for the widower who appears in the text as an inconsolable mourner. These assumptions have not gone unchallenged in recent years and, while adhering largely to the traditional views, I shall outline the contrary arguments. Chaucer's authorship has not come in question, but opinions vary as to its success as a work of art. Kittredge finds its charm in its artlessness or naïveté,²⁴ while Clemen treats it, together with all Chaucer's early poems, as merely a preliminary to The Canterbury Tales.²⁵ More enthusiastic is Preston: "Whatever his exact age when he composed The Book of the Duchess, Chaucer was beyond adolescence. [He was in his middle twenties ie. about ten years into his majority according to contemporary

23 See Robinson p. xix et seq.

24 Kittredge. p. 45.

25 Clemen, W.H. Chaucer's Early Poetry. (trans. C.A.M. Sym) Methuen, 1963. p. 1.

estimates.] If we read it after The Romaunt of the Rose, it is easy to perceive an assumed distinction of rhythm which is his first present to English poetry."²⁶

Since the poem seems to have been written for a genuine historical event, the temptation to see every detail in the light of autobiographical revelation has been too much for most commentators. This insistence that Chaucer, as narrator, must be telling the story of his own life is particularly strong in the case of the "eight year sickness". The Narrator does not know for sure why he is suffering:

"but trewly, as I gesse,
I hold hit be a sicknesse
That I have suffered this eight year."
(ll.35-37)

There are several schools of thought concerning the precise nature of his malady.

Critics before Sypherd plumped for a love sickness suffered by Chaucer himself.²⁷ Fleay declares that the sickness is married life and Death is the only physician who can cure it. Sypherd is hesitant about the biographical details and cites examples of conventional love poems which have much the same flavour. Chaucer's

²⁶ Preston, R. Chaucer. Greenwood Press, 1969. p.36.

²⁷ Sypherd, W.O. Chaucer's Eight Years' Sickness. MLN 20. (1905) p.240.

skill "gives even the veriest commonplace an atmosphere of originality and at times of personal significance".²⁸ Loomis concurs with the non-autobiographical school by referring to Gower's testimony that Chaucer made love poems when young. With these earlier critics Bronson, Lumiansky, Boardman and Boitani broadly agree. "An author who addresses an audience, ... and who introduces himself overtly as one of the dramatis personae in his work, must naturally expect that his physical presence will colour the self portrait We do not have to believe that Chaucer was suffering the extremes of unrequited love".²⁹ Boardman maintains that "the language and style of this passage "the opening inevitably call up the image of a rather typical courtly lover".³⁰ A cautious Boitani suggests that the "'I' of the poem is a writer who has suffered from insomnia for eight long years, presumably because of love."³¹ Being the simplest and most obvious explanation, it is also the most attractive even before we are told that the figure of eight years also occurs in Machaut's poem Le Jugement dou Roye de Behaigne, one of

28 Ibid. p.243.

29 Bronson p.878.

30 Boardman, P.C. Courtly Language and the Strategy of Consolation in The Book of the Duchess. ELH 44, (1977), p.570.

31 Boitani, P. English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (trans J.K. Hall.) CUP, 1982. p.141.

Chaucer's sources for other details in this poem.³²

The principle opposing school insists that the malady is an actual one genuinely suffered by Chaucer himself, but the object of his devotion varies. Galway put forward the Black Prince's wife, Joan of Kent,³³ against the strongest conviction of Stearns³⁴, Huppé and Robertson³⁵ and Condren³⁶ who plump for the love object being Blanche. Condren even redates the poem to accommodate his theory. Nevertheless, it seems strange that, if Narrator and Black Knight are in fact lamenting the same loss, the Dreamer gives no indication of either recognising the husband of his Lady, nor reacting to his mention of her name. Can this be explained away by the vagaries of dream?

Finally, I want to consider the possibilities of Huppé and Robertson's theory that Christ is the "oon physicien" and that the Narrator's problem is therefore that he has lost touch with God by his wrong attitude

32 Lumiansky. p.6.

33 op.cit. p.431.

34 Loomis, R.S. Chaucer's Eight Year Sickness MLN.59 (1944). p.178.

35 Huppé, B.F. and Robertson, D.W. Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories. Princeton University Press, 1963. p.33.

36 Condren. p.90.

to the death of Blanche. "The figure is one who is lost in the cares of the world."³⁷ If he is then he is getting the worst of both bargains for preoccupation with the world should at least imply some worldly pleasures, whereas:

"I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothing leef nor looth." (6-8)

Delasanta also rejects their contention that this grief is a sin. Christ said, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted"; (Matt IV:4). The other consideration regarding treating this poem as a purely Christian allegory is that Chaucer himself put it among his "endytynge of worldly vanitees" for which he implored God's mercy.

The figures of the Narrator and Dreamer, although their characteristics vary, are both "I", the first person narrator, and will therefore be considered together. This figure is typical of the apparently rather unsophisticated and slightly obtuse "Chaucer" who appears in, for example, The Hous of Fame and The Canterbury Tales. Kreuzer was one of the first critics to suggest, not only that the Dreamer was not "child-like" as Kittredge³⁸ would have it, or Patch's "poor

37 Huppé and Robertson. p.95.

38 Kittredge. p.45

dolt",³⁹ but that the Narrator is different from the Dreamer.⁴⁰ That the Narrator is "dulled by longsuffering" is undoubtedly so.

Yet this Narrator, this "mased thyng, / Always in poynt to falle a-doun" (ll.12-13) whose melancholy, he fears, will cause his death, is resigned to his fate, ("That wil not be mot nede be left" (l.42)) but can also indulge a gentle sense of humour at the thought of bribing Juno and Morpheus to let him sleep (ll.238-269). It has, several times, been suggested that, far from handicapping the Narrator in his rôle of consoler, his own wretchedness "is the plain truth of his patron's situation" which Chaucer can use to "make an appeal for a cessation of grief without the indelicacy of a more direct approach".⁴¹

Sympathetic modern scholarship too applauds the Dreamer's "sense of delicacy and propriety which keeps him from breaking in on the Knight's reverie with expressions of sympathy" which are clearly inappropriate.⁴² Bronson takes his alleged naiveté to consist

39 Patch, H.R. On Rereading Chaucer. Harvard University Press, 1939. p.29.

40 Kreuzer, J.R. The Dreamer in The Book of the Duchess. PMLA 66. (1951), p.546.

41 Lawlor, J. The Pattern of Consolation in The Book of the Duchess. Spec 31, (1956). p.635.

42 Kreuzer. p.545.

rather in "simplicity and freshness of statement."⁴³ So, if the Narrator-Dreamer is not "a little dull of understanding" as Lowes claims,⁴⁴ why is he portrayed as he is?

Parallels have been drawn between the Dreamer and the Black Knight (indeed Condren insists they are one and the same person at different stages of development)⁴⁵ in their individual suffering.⁴⁶ One knotty question is posed concerning the Dreamer's apparent lack of understanding, and partially provoked the accusations of obtuseness. Why does the Dreamer, having clearly heard the Black Knight declare that his Lady is dead, persist in pretending that he does not know why the Black Knight is mourning? The argument supported by Kittredge,⁴⁷ Lawlor,⁴⁸ Lumiansky,⁴⁹ French⁵⁰ and others is that the oversight is deliberate and gives the Dreamer the opportunity to draw the Knight on to his

43 Bronson. p.870.

44 Lowes. p.100

45 Condren. p.211.

46 Bronson. p.871.

47 p.53.

48 p.638.

49 p.9.

50 French, W.H. The Man in Black's Lyric. JEGP LXVI, (1957). pp.231-241.

eventually cathartic avowal of his love for an ideal woman. Dramatically, it permits the Knight to embark on the eulogy of the lady in whose memory the poem was written.⁵¹

When the Dreamer wakes up in the beautifully adorned chamber to the sound of bird song, his mood has changed markedly from that of the sufferer who fell asleep at the end of the story from Ovid. Clemen considers that the Dreamer appears well on the road to recovery at the beginning of the dream and is therefore more competent in that state to assist the Black Knight.⁵² Certainly the pitiful creature of the beginning of the poem has inexplicably gained vigour. He leaps out of bed, onto his horse and charges off to the stag hunt with every appearance of physical well-being and vitality.

"I was ryght glad, and up anon
Took my hors, and forth I wente
Out of my chambre; I never stente
Til I com to the feld withoute" (ll.354-8).⁵³

Though this seems to indicate a complete recovery of spirits by the Dreamer, or even that he is another character, not the Narrator, the ecstatic mood does not

51 Clemen. p.50.

52 Ibid. p.39.

53 Compare Aurelius in The Franklin's Tale. ll.1101-1170.

last long. Suddenly the Dreamer is brought back to earth, quite literally, and is walking again. A little puppy, too young to join in the hunt, approaches and, in the manner of a fairy tale or mythical guide, capers before him towards the next part of his dream.

The dog in the Bestiaries is always a good animal. In T.H. White's translation, priests are likened to dogs, who guide their flocks towards good.⁵⁴ Dogs are sagacious and faithful, they esteem their masters and the touch of their tongues heals wounds. Having more perception than other animals and being able to cure wounds, they are obviously ideal, symbolically, for leading one in need of comfort and healing towards one in the same plight.

Venturing into the depths of an idyllic wood, the Dreamer, who has now resumed the quiet and passive character of the Narrator, comes across a man in black whose mood mirrors the Dreamer's in nature, if not in intensity. Observing him, the Dreamer is instantly drawn to him in sympathy.

"for, by my trowthe,
Hit was gret wonder that Nature
Myght suffre any creature
To have such sorwe, and be not ded."
(11.466-9).

⁵⁴ White T.H. The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts. New York: Putnum and Sons, 1960. Under "dog".

Turning to the idea that this grief is unnatural; we have come across it before in the text; I quote a passage, concerning this very condition, from The Parson's Tale. "Now comth wanhope ... of to much outrageous sorwe, Thanne comth the synne of worldly sorwe, swich as is cleped tristicia, that sleeth man, as seeth Saint Paul. / For certes, swich sorwe werketh to the deeth of the soule and of the body also; for thereof comth that a man is anoyed of his owene lif. / Wherfore swich sorwe shorteth ful ofte the lif of man, er that his tyme be come by wey of kynde".⁵⁵ The sin which the Narrator is, with difficulty, staving off, and into which the Black Knight is in great danger of falling, if he has not already done so, is Accidia.

Not only is accidia a trespass against God but against his laws enacted under the rule of Nature, "the law of kinde". At the outset of the poem, the Narrator is given, by chance, a book in which:

"To rede, and for to be in minde
While men loved the lawe of kinde
This bok ne spake but of such thinges,
Of quenes lives, and of kings...." (ll.55-8)

Payne points out "the common emotional situation of the Narrator, Alcione and the Black Knight ... and their common subjection to the "lawe of kynde". The Narrator

⁵⁵ Person's Tale p.250-1. Introduction p.3. n.5.

is more or less aware of this subjection all along, Alcione learns of it at the instruction of Ceyx, and the Black Knight has temporarily forgotten it and must relearn it in the course of the dream"⁵⁶ (at the hands of the Narrator).

This word "kynde" meaning, amongst other things "nature ... natural disposition" crops up several times in the poem, and not by casual accident. I have already cited the occurrence at line 56. Earlier on, in line 16, the Narrator, describing his eight-year-long sickness says, "And wel ye woot, agaynes kynde / Hit were to lyven in thys wyse," thus introducing the idea of doing what is in accordance with Nature's laws as the correct modus vivendi. The Dreamer describes the Knight as his apparently fatal condition becomes worse (ll.447-9) and he becomes pale because the blood which should colour his face has fled to his heart, "To wite eke why hyt was adrad / By kynde" (ll.493-4). That such behaviour is displeasing to Nature we see at l.512. "Thogh Pan, that men clepe god of Kynde / Were for his sorwes never so wroth." Indirectly then, but unmistakably, Chaucer is pointing an accusing finger at the sort of life-threatening, "outrageous sorwe" to which the Black Knight has succumbed.

⁵⁶ Payne, R.O. The Key of Remembrance. University of Cincinnati, 1963. p.122.

As Fyler and Lawlor have pointed out, the consolation is not of an orthodox religious kind.⁵⁷ "Nature teaches the poet her law, and she forces the modern lover to come to terms with the golden past."⁵⁸ It is this coming to terms with the past which is the first step on the road to the Black Knight's cure. Far from being gauche in his approach or even comic as Bethurum claims⁵⁹, or inexplicably obtuse due to the irrationality of dreaming generally,⁶⁰ "[t]he adroitness with which the Dreamer draws out the Knight's story is an example of the most delicate tact."⁶¹

The Dreamer-Narrator's mood has already prepared him to be sympathetic to the Black Knight. One has failed to attain his lady while the other has won and lost and, under the terms of courtly love, absence through disdain or infidelity was more painful than true bereavement. They have, however, undergone such similar experiences as would make them fellows in misery. Bronson notes that the Dreamer externalises his

57 op.cit. p.533.

58 Fyler, J.M. Chaucer and Ovid. Yale University Press, 1979. p.66.

59 Bethurum, D. Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems. PMLA.74 (1959), p.513.

60 Tatlock. p.30.

61 Shelly, P.v.D. The Living Chaucer. Russell and Russell, New York, 1968. p.55.

private grief on to the Knight so that the dream is therapy for the Dreamer.⁶² It is clearly a symbiotic relationship then, for Bronson earlier picked up Kittredge's point that the Dreamer is dulled by long suffering but suppresses his own knowledge in order to afford the Knight a means of "pouring his sad story into compassionate ears".⁶³

By pretending astonishment at the Knight's grief at having lost a piece in a chess game (in which, incidentally, a Black Knight has lost a White "Queen"), the Dreamer is not obtusely believing that the Knight has really played a game of chess with Fortune and lost.⁶⁴ The Knight decorously conceals his true cause of grief under a figurative cloak. After all, the Dreamer, though sympathetic and acceptable, is yet a stranger to him. The Dreamer's approach allows the Knight to break through his reserve, indeed explanation and thus acceptance is almost forced upon him.

It is worthy of note that, while the Black Knight has thoroughly involved himself in the game of chess with Fortune, i.e. life, the Dreamer has done no such thing. As sleepless Narrator, he declines to play the

62 p.870.

63 p.864.

64 Ibid. p.873.

game (ll.50-1) and would rather read a book, thus foreshadowing the later Chaucerian narrator figure in The Hous of Fame, who praises love although he never took part:

"Although thou maist goo in the daunce
Of hem that hym lyst not avaunce" (639-40)

Thus the Narrator is one who lacks the experience of the Black Knight and has much to learn from him. It is in this spirit of eager student that we hear him asking the Knight to describe fully his loss and he will listen with as much understanding as one who is, as it were, only a spectator, may bring to the matter.

"I shal right blythely, so God me save,
Holy, with al the wit I have,
Here you, as wel as I kan." (755-7).

It is the well-known "auctoritee versus experience" debate.

The role of the Dreamer is not limited to a catalyst for directing the Black Knight's mourning into more profitable channels. We have seen him at the beginning of the poem in a similarly downcast state himself. Bronson took the view that this was "a wonderful leap of psychological insight".⁶⁵ Using dream mechanisms only formulated as such centuries later, Chaucer has taken a grieving man who shakes off

65 Bronson. p.870.

his own sorrow within his dream and transfers it to another dream character whom he proceeds to assist to come to terms with what is, in effect, his own grief. Thus, according to this argument, the Dreamer is in fact consoling himself.⁶⁶

As a piece of modern psychology it is interesting; more for the indication of Chaucer's insight rather than of his skill at carrying out his primary task of producing a suitable occasional poem. This method of gaining his goal is also skilful because the whole of the long introductory section concerning the restless, run-down Narrator and the story of Ceyx and Alcione, is building up the mood of loss and pointing the way towards, if not a solution, at least an acceptable attitude towards it. As Kittredge says, the mood of love, sorrow and bereavement is established by the prologue so that, by the time the Dreamer meets the Black Knight, he is in sympathy with his subject.⁶⁷

The use of the dream as a vehicle is so common in Chaucer that its specific purpose here could easily be overlooked. One of the conventions of the dream is the presence of some sort of guiding figure from, usually, the other world who is concerned with educating his or

66 Boitani. p.144.

67 p.40.

her charge in some way. Thus Beathuis' mentor, Philosophia, Dante's Beatrice or Virgil, the Eagle in The Hous of Fame and the Pearl maiden are all cast in the same mould.

The Dreamer is often taken to another place, often a location of the afterlife (Dante, the Pearl Poet) and learns truth in some way which often transcends earthly reasoning. The dreamer awakes refreshed in spirit as well as body just as we see the Dreamer at the end of The Book of the Duchess leaving his "mased" state and resolving on action.

"Thoghte I, "thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best, and that anoon" (ll.1330-3).

Spearing explains the use of the dream further. He picks up Clemen's point about the late Gothic style of art "shrouding the theme in exuberant ornament and disguise".⁶⁸ There is certainly a degree of disguising, especially if The Book of the Duchess is compared with say Pearl, but, in its contemporary readings, the subject at least must have been transparent enough scarcely to need the cryptic indicators at the end of the poem. No exuberance of ornament clouds the poem's outline either. The scenery and surrounds of the bed-chamber and the wood are beautiful and, though possibly "aureate", are not overdone.

Two further points that Spearing makes on this subject are that the dream allows two socially diverse characters (taking the Black Knight for Gaunt and the Dreamer for Chaucer) to participate on equal terms in this encounter and for feelings appropriate to the Duke to be expressed even if they were not his own. Both of these are largely imaginary problems since the two men would have been on relatively intimate terms anyway and, as far as we know, Gaunt did genuinely mourn his wife (see note 54). Chaucer's method does allow him to put the eulogy in the mouth of one from whom it is most appropriate and, indeed, flatters Gaunt by the suggestion that this is what he would say.

As an occasional poem dealing with the untimely and unpleasant death of a prominent person, The Book of the Duchess is remarkable in having very little reference to death. Various forms of the verb "deyen" and the noun "deth" are mentioned a total of twenty five times in a poem of 1334 lines, but they tend to be clumped together or used in phrases which are not really to do with the termination of life. Death and sleep are linked twice; once when Alcione falls into "the ded slepe" (l.127) and once when the messenger to Morpheus passes "a fewe welles / Came rennyng fro the clyves adoun / That made a dedly slepyng soun" (ll.160-2). Fear of dying for lack of sleep is mentioned three times by the Dreamer at lines 24, 223 and 240. Including two instances already mentioned,

variants appear six times in the story of Ceyx and Alcione.

The next mention of the word is not until the Dreamer approaches the Black Knight who makes "a dedly sorwful soun" (l.462), closely echoing the waterfalls near Morpheus' cave. "Deth" is mentioned by the Black Knight or in connection with him four times in the next twenty lines. He curses death between lines 577 and 588 which accounts for another five and between lines 689 and 691 he twice desires to die. Twice he declares that he would have died if his lady had not been merciful to him (ll.1188 and 1202) and, before confirming to the Dreamer that she is dead (l.1309), "he wax as ded as stoon" (l.1300).

Nevertheless, between lines 693 and 1188, which is almost wholly on the subject of the duchess, there is no mention of death. It is a passage devoted to life and to the life of a most admirable creature.⁶⁹ Lewis remarks: "[n]ot because the poem is a bad elegy, but because it is a good one, the black background of death is always disappearing behind these iridescent shapes of satisfied love".⁷⁰ It is in this way that the consolation is partly achieved.

⁶⁹ See Wimsatt, J.I. The Apotheosis of Blanche in *The Book of the Duchess*. JEGP. LXVI. (1967), pp.26-44. The Duchess is given many attributes of the Virgin.

⁷⁰ op. cit. p.169.

It is noticeable that no religious solace is offered to the Black Knight. Perhaps this is not really the task of a court poet and besides, it ill accords with the courtliness of the elegy. In spite of poems addressed to the Blessed Virgin in terms of fin amour, the relationship between Christianity and courtly love was always an uneasy one. Chaucer effects a divorce between them. Pace Huppé and Robertson and Delasanta⁷¹, there is no Christian consolation evident in the poem.

The flowers of consolation are culled from other fields. Instead of Christian example of doing the right thing, there is pagan example of what not to do. Chaucer uses a story from Ovid's Metamorphoses as the "romaunce" which the Narrator reads to "drive the night away" (1.49). The most downright piece of advice on resigning oneself to the death of a loved one is the instruction Juno gives to Alcione through the dream in which the body of Ceyx appears to her.

"My swete wyf,
 Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf!
 For in your sorwe there lyth no red
 For, certes, swete, I nam but ded;
 Ye shul me never on lyve yse.
 But, goode swete herte, that ye
 Bury my body, for such a tyde
 Ye mowe hit finde the see besyde;
 And farewell, swete, my worldes blysse!
 I praye God youre sorwe lysse.
 To lytel while oure blysse lasteth"
 (11.201-211).

⁷¹ Delasanta, R. Christian Affirmation in The Book of the Duchess. PMLA. 84. (1969).

As Payne says, "in a way the whole poem is a demonstration of Ceyx's short last speech to Alcione".⁷² The ten lines or so recall the pleasures of their union and a general regret that such joy is of short duration. By far the greatest part of it, however, is practical instruction to the mourning widow in simple and direct language that leaves no room for sentimental elaboration. He instructs her to give up sorrow because there is no sense in it (l.204) and tells her twice in different but unambiguous words that he is dead (ll.204-5). The command to wake is not literal - that she should awake from her dream - but that she should shake off the spiritual torpor of lamentation. Since Ceyx is dead, the only thing to do is to find his body, bury it then go on living.

Chaucer does not use the whole story from Ovid, in which the husband and wife are reunited by metamorphosis after death. This would be too easy a solution and it is not the consolation he wishes to offer his patron. He avoids this deliberately because John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster are not going to be supernaturally solaced in this world. Even to suggest it is to be insultingly facile. To bring death upon himself, as Alcione did through immeasurable grief, is sinful and the mourner can, at the most, be offered a

⁷² op. cit. p.128.

Christian assurance that he will rejoin his wife after his death, "by kynde". What the Black Knight needs is not a consolatory fairy story or distant promises, but something which will enable him to adjust to his loss here and now. Chaucer inserts the classical story, but only so much of it as is useful to him in his task, between two representations of unreasonable grief which is contrary to the laws of "kynde".

The Black Knight's sorrow is of a degree which startles even the Dreamer who, as the Narrator, has an eight-year acquaintance with incurable and potentially lethal grief. He is much moved by what he overhears of the Knight's doleful lament:

"And when I herde hym telle this tale
 Thus piteously, as I you; telle,
 Unnethe myght y lenger dwelle
 Hyt dyde myn herte so moche woo." (ll.710-13)

and obviously listens carefully to the Black Knight's words:

"Anoon ryght I gan fynde a tale
 To hym, to loke wher I myght ought
 Have more knowynge of hys thought,"
 (ll.536-8)

in order that he may help him.

At his first attempt, to preach a stoical attitude in the face of Fortune's blows, he brings reason to contradict the Black Knight, in the shape of a reference to Socrates who "counted not thre strees / Of nought that Fortune koude doo" (ll.718-9). This form of

consolation advocating dignity and acceptance has no force for the Black Knight. He accepts that Fortune was not unreasonable in taking his "fers" (ll.675-682) but reason will not help him accept his loss. By his response, the Dreamer knows he has lost him again to that lassitude in which he first found him (l.720).

His subsequent ridicule seems designed to rouse the Black Knight again. The Dreamer cites a number of mythological females who did away with themselves for unrequited love. Then he cites Samson killing himself, in the romantic medieval view, for love of Delilah. These were all "folys" and the Black Knight moreover runs the risk of damnation, but they did at least have some reason for their actions:

"But ther is no man alyve her
Wolde for a fers make this woo! (ll.740-1)

At last the Dreamer is making progress. As he sits down and promises to pay attention, the poem moves into a eulogy for the dead Duchess. The mercurial Black Knight is now calm and collected and does not break out into grief again in the course of the poem.

All participants in the poem know that the Black Knight mourns his dead Duchess, that is, the Dreamer, the Narrator, the Black Knight and the audience, but not all of them know of the other's knowledge. It is in this atmosphere of illusory ignorance that we listen to the Black Knight recounting his first venture into

courtly love and how a paragon among the ladies of the court caught his fancy. The same Fortune, whom he curses, brought him this chance just as she stole it from him.

In his article on The Pattern of Consolation in the Book of the Duchess, Lawlor cites "the happiness of requited love" as a theme of consolation. At first the Dreamer takes the Black Knight's outpourings to be a story of courtly love with mercy refused and then granted by the gracious dame who has inspired it. By his interruptions he has deliberately ignored the possibility of physical death. "Amour courtois knows the pangs of lovesickness, of enforced separation, and even of deprivation by death; but it considers no pain equal to that caused by infidelity."⁷³

In attempting to perhaps "bring the Knight down to earth", the Dreamer tries to get him to admit that his lady was supreme only because he saw her so. The Black Knight replies by assuring him that his opinion was commonly held to be so:

"nay, alle that her seyen
Seyde and sworn hyt was soo." (ll.1052-3)

In this manner the Dreamer both achieves a fellowship for the mourner with other men by showing, by

73 p.635.

implication, that all who knew this lovely woman share in his loss, and impresses on his memory the beauty and perfection which will ensure that remembrance of her will assuage the pain of that loss. Blanche is eulogised in the form of a heroine of romance and by the attributes of verse conventionally honouring the dead. Whether conventional or not is unimportant here. "Though we have little to stave off our sorrow at the mortality of such perfection, we at least can use the memory of its human exemplars as a defence against time and fortune".⁷⁴ One can almost construct a parody of the Wheel of Fortune but instead of Fortune in her chair put a figure of romantic love. Instead of the kings with their "regnabo, regno, regnavi" there are the Narrator, the Black Knight, Alcione and White saying respectively, "I would have died, I will die, I died and I died but live again in your memory".

Chaucer is remembering the Duchess of Lancaster as she should be remembered, in order to console her husband, and is also raising a memorial to a woman who "in her likeness to heroines of the Golden Age, defied the decadence of the declining world".⁷⁵ Thus the consolation is both personal and universal. The personal consolation for John of Gaunt who "is a reader [or at

74 Clemen p.53.

75 Fyler p.81.

least, auditor] of the poem"⁷⁶ is that which any outsider with an overview of the poem will receive. To say that the Man in Black receives no consolation is not only erroneous but misses the point. The poem was written to console a living person. Chaucer did not invent a grieving Black Knight so that he could then attempt indirectly to console this figure of fiction alone.

The eulogy for White must come to an end and the Black Knight remembers that this joy he had in life has gone. The transition comes abruptly after the Dreamer enquires as to her whereabouts. Suddenly, the fabric of fantasy which has kept the Black Knight buoyed up for the last few minutes collapses as he rejects artifice at last and declares, "She ys ded!" (1.1309). Nevertheless, it has succeeded in reconciling the Black Knight to the reality of his loss.

Dorothy Bethurum says "the dream offers a relief from reality in that the Dreamer escapes from his own sufferings; the knowledge of which he nevertheless carries along". (As suggested earlier, the Narrator's sufferings could be seen to have been transferred to the Black Knight.) "It offers a charming idealisation

⁷⁶ Ross. D. "The Play of Genres in The Book of the Duchess". Chau R, 19, (1984-5), p.2.

of love and a genuine expression of grief".⁷⁷ This is the view of earlier critics (Kittredge, for example⁷⁸) that the poem is charming and does convey a message of consolation. Clemen⁷⁹ and Fyler⁸⁰ accept that Chaucer is successful in his attempt to provide his patron with a message of hope in the midst of his despair. However, more recent studies suggest that no consolation is offered to the Black Knight himself, although both reader and Narrator go away satisfied⁸¹ and that the Black Knight is a poor specimen of a husband and courtly lover lamenting his dead wife. "One notices, for example, the Knight's unconscious irony as he praises the gentleness of his lady's language while letting out two oaths of his own." The two oaths in question are quite mild for Chaucer's day, ("by the roode" (1.924) and "by the masse" (1.928)) and we should recall that even the delicately mannered Prioress swore "by Seinte Loy" (General Prologue 1.120).

Condren further accuses the Black Knight of poetic incompetence and "unintentional use of double-entendre

77 p.513.

78 p.45.

79 p.44.

80 p.66.

81 Walker, D. Narrative Inconclusiveness and Consolatory Dialectic in The Book of the Duchess. Chau.R. 18. (1983-4) p.16.

in a situation where nothing could be more tasteless."⁸² As far as the poems go, we are dealing with a person completing a socially required exercise: a person moreover whom genuine feelings reduce to inarticulateness (ll.1199-1218). Surely nobody would suggest for a moment that, because fourteenth-century courtly lovers felt obliged to compose verses to their mistresses, therefore the Muse would automatically inspire their efforts. It seems unfair to expect high art from the Black Knight. The tunelessness of the poem (ll.475-86) echoes his jangled thoughts⁸³. As for the unfortunate construction possible on lines 1.019-23, this is surely a case of "honi soit qui mal y pense". Condren does not elaborate on his discovery of this humorous faux pas and one is left to imagine what he thinks Chaucer might mean.

However, if we accept that the Black Knight's verses do not indicate a talent for poetry, do we accept that the Narrator fails to offer him consolation? Rather than be led astray by such a question, it might be more appropriate to consider Chaucer's object which we may, not unreasonably, presume to be consolation in the face of untimely death. If this is the case then the other question becomes irrelevant to the

82 Condren p.205.

83 Walker, p.7.

poet's purpose. Chaucer's patron could read or hear the poem in its entirety as John of Gaunt, not as a figure in the Narrator's dream who, because he is part of the later action; cannot appreciate the situation of the Narrator and the retelling of the story of Ceyx and Alcione.

At the end of the Black Knight's account of his wife and the final revelation of her death there is a rapid transition away from the two under the oak tree back to the hunt and the castle. The passage reads:

"She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"
 "Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!"
 And with that word ryght anoon
 They gan to strake forth; al was doon,
 For that tyme, the hert-huntyng.
 With that me thoughte that this kyng
 Gan homewards for to ryde
 Unto a place, was there bysyde
 Which was from us but a lyte." (1.309-17).

I concur with Condren that the Black Knight and the "kyng" need not be the same person⁸⁴. Against Condren's arguments in favour of the "kyng" being Octovyen because the Black Knight (or Gaunt) was not a king and was not mounted, we have the argument that, if the poem was written later than 1371, John of Gaunt was nominally king of Castile and Leon, having taken the elder daughter of Pedro the Cruel as his second wife⁸⁵. As

84 p.258.

85 Palmer. p.258.

for the horse, the Narrator's own mount appears and disappears as required, according to the vagaries of dream.

Although nothing conclusive can be made of all this, it also seems probable that the Black Knight did not move from his tree. Certain pronouns, I feel, suggest and limit the sequence of possible actions. The Narrator and the Black Knight have been very close, sitting together in the wood, talking about the loss of the one's beloved wife. The Narrator has become detached from the hunt and the Black Knight wants no part of it.

"Y do no fors thereof," quod he;
 "My thought ys thereon never a del".
 (ll.542-3)

The Narrator, one of this pair separated from the hunt says, "They gan to strake forth" (l.1312), implying someone else other than those two. Moreover, in line 1317 he says the place "was from us but a lyte." If the "kyng" and the Black Knight were the same would he not have said "me" since by then the Black Knight would have left him and joined the rest of the hunt. Yet it is the Narrator who leaves the dream by waking. To all intents and purposes the Black Knight stays, pondering, where he is.

Let us, finally, leave the acerbic comments of

various scholars on the precise dating of the poem,⁸⁶ and even on the identifications of the various figures, and look at how the poem succeeds in its rôle of consolatory verse. The melancholy tone of the poem is conveyed at the outset by a first person narrator who is a long-term sufferer from a sickness which deprives him of sleep and thus threatens his life. This has caused a depressed state of mind and a fear of death (l.24). This narrator immediately invites our sympathy, not only for his obviously great suffering but also for his stoic resignation to it.

In his case, sleep is a necessary cure; not to sleep is against the law of "kynde" of which much is made throughout the poem. However, one can sleep too deeply. The messenger who passes through the "derke valeye" to find Morpheus' cave observes a landscape chilling in its desolation. There is no sign of animal life and nothing grows (ll.155-165) and the god's cave "was also as dark / As helle-pit overal aboute" (ll.170-1). Sleep as a vice is also implied in Ceyx's message to Alcione. "Awake," he says, "let be your sorowful lyf." When the Narrator awakes in his dream he is refreshed and ready for action. When Alcione awakes it is wilfully to die within three days. Morpheus can scarcely be roused from his perpetual slumber.

86 i.e. Condren versus Palmer.

The Black Knight is in a similar state. Though not actually asleep, he is unconscious of the outside world. He is dressed in black, the colour of night as well as of death and mourning, and he is sitting in the midst of a scene of life affirming nature, which he ignores (11.398-442). He remains quite unaware of the Dreamer's presence:

"I went and stood ryght at his fet,
And grette hym, but he spake noght."
(11.502-3).

His "spirites wexen ded" (1.489) and his pallor recalls that of the drowned Ceyx.

Now, whether this is a portrait of John of Gaunt or not, it is surely representing the chief mourner to whom consolatory sentiments are addressed and must therefore be intended for some manifestation of the Duke. Certainly, through the course of his conversation with the Dreamer, this figure finds a sort of consolation as his spirits are aroused by detailed recollection of his lost love.

This human contact seems to have a desirable effect upon him because he begins to open his heart although declaring that nothing can assuage his grief:

"No man may my sorwe glade" (1.563).

Unlike the Narrator, who could have been cured by one "physicien", the Black Knight is incurable. "Ne hele me

may no phisicien" (1.571). Nor can he find a remedy in classical medical authorities (1.572). Whereas the Narrator finds a cure for his sleeplessness in reading a story from Ovid's Metamorphosis, the Black Knight declares:

"May noght make my sorwes slyde" (1.567).

He continues in much the same vein for another hundred and more lines, bewailing his lot, cursing Fortune who has cheated him at chess, and repeating his wish for death. (1.573, 581, 586, 690). All this is very self-regarding but it has the merit of being turned to words more active and strong than those of his previous lamenting, while he believed he was alone. By the time the tableau breaks, with the Dreamer waking and the hunt returning to the castle, both Narrator and Black Knight have received curative and acceptable medicine and "Goode, faire White" has achieved apotheosis. One can reasonably assume that John of Gaunt was grateful to Chaucer for his efforts.

CHAPTER II - PEARL

The Book of the Duchess is unusual among medieval works in being written by an identifiable author for an identifiable occasion and most likely at an identifiable date. The next work in this study is precisely the opposite in having neither author, date nor occasion attributable. Names have been put forward but unconvincingly and the fact remains that this pearl is set with three other gems, probably by the same hand, in a unique manuscript written by one scribe and dating from the turn of the fourteenth century. With some dissension the dialect is agreed to belong to the North West Midlands¹.

These mysterious and vague surroundings have allowed the imaginations of many critics to run riot in an effort to pad out the flimsy body of fact. Since René Welleck summarised the state of play in 1933, many more arguments and counter-arguments have been bandied about.² Quasi-authoritative pronouncements on the poet,

1 Gordon. p.xliv.

2 Welleck. R. "The Pearl : An interpretation of the Middle English Poem." In Sir Gawain and Pearl : Critical Essays. Ed. R.J. Blanch. Indiana University Press, 1966. This collection of essays is very useful and varied. Further articles from it will be referred to as Blanch.

his life and intentions have reached a high pitch of frenzy and provoked retorts not less frenzied. In this study I shall cover some old ground by looking at the nature of the Pearl, who or what the Dreamer is, the nature of paradises, terrestrial and celestial, and such related subjects. I shall also trace how the singleness of the Pearl and the loneliness of the Dreamer converge at last in the unity of God.

On first reading the poem, I took it to be the lament of a father for a daughter, lost in infancy, who appears to him in a dream to teach him the error of his inordinate grief and to show him, for his comfort, that she has been safely received into Heaven. This simple acceptance of the face value of the book, unlike many tortuous interpretations, does not seem at odds with anything in the poem and is broadly in support of the view held by early scholars like Morris and later ones who appear intermittently to stem a rising tide of dissent³.

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3. Morris, R. Early English Alliterative Poems in the West-Midlands Dialect of the Fourteenth Century. London, 1864. followed by Welleck, op.cit. p.22; Cawley, A.C. and Anderson, J.J. eds. Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Dent. 1976. (p.ix), Wilson, Edward. The Gawain Poet. E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1976. p.1., Watts, A.C. Pearl, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss. PMLA. 99. (1984). p.26., and Johnson, L.S. The Voice of the Gawain Poet. University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. p.144. See also Conley, J. Pearl and a Lost Tradition. JEGP, 54. (1955). pp.332-47.

As a starting point, we must consider the narrator as our sole source of information and one, moreover, who confesses himself in an emotionally highly charged state.

".at dot3 bot prych my herte prange,
My breste in bale bot bolne and bele"
(11.17-18).

By the end of the poem, the narrator's mood has turned to quiet resignation, in which state he composed the poem. Although dealing with wild emotion, it is curbed by an extraordinarily strict structure. The poem's 1212 alliterating lines are divided into stanzas with a strict internal rhyme scheme; each stanza and each group of stanzas in each of the twenty sections is further linked by a motif word. Though highly artificial, this is neatly handled and does not intrude on the feeling of the poem. In the case of the Pearl Maiden's wordplay on "date" in section IX it adds to appreciation of the poet's skill. Elsewhere it is unobtrusive.

Whereas The Book of the Duchess is directed by the poet at another's grief and thence to all grief, Pearl is an exercise in self-help.⁴ It is not impossible that the poet fashioned genuine personal grief into a poem to console himself. As mentioned before, this is the

⁴ See also Moorman, C. The Role of the Narrator in Pearl. Modern Philology. 53. (1955) pp.73-81.

obvious reading and why should it be rejected on the grounds of being too obvious? Like the Black Knight of The Book of the Duchess, the Narrator disguises his loss by calling it a material thing rather than a person, but Blanche is never confused with a chess piece and there are sufficient indications that, in the same way, the pearl, lost in the ground, is a daughter, dead in infancy. Just as the Black Knight, out of delicacy or the sort of grief which cannot allow the truth to be named, disguises his loss, so does this Narrator.

The mood of the Narrator changes as he moves into his dream and then back from his vision of the Other World. This mood change does not appear unnatural to such strong grief but it also has the advantage of forcing on the action both physical and of the debate. Wild grief leads the Narrator to return to the "erber" on a late summer holy day and stand, grieving and wringing his hands, over his daughter's grave. He is here at an extreme of grief that refuses to find comfort. "My wreched wylle in wo ay wra3te". (1.56). Nevertheless, he is conscious of certain positive aspects of his loss.⁵ They do not console him and it is in an excess of passion that he casts himself on the

5 Ibid. p.75 on poem lines 19, 27 and 31.

ground and has his dream of the other world.⁶

His first reaction is a childlike joy at the beauty of the scenery for it is revealed to him in earthly terms of natural features brilliantly bejewelled in the manner of the Earthly Paradise. This beauty, he says, "[g]arten my goste al greffe for3ete" (l.86) and he continues in this rapture until he sights the Pearl Maiden across the stream in the land he has already labelled Paradise (l.137). The Poet-Narrator is not entirely caught up in this entrancement, or else by the time the poet put pen to paper he was a wiser man, for, although each new sight gives him more joy, he pauses in his account to remark ruefully that however much joy or sorrow Fortune sends to a man, he always expects more (ll.129-132). He is still very much an earthly creature.

The sight of the Pearl Maiden stops him in his search for a way to cross the intervening stream. He is struck by fear and wonder at the sight of his lost one. His torrent of speech following her greeting reflects again his earthly attitude of mind, but I shall deal with the Narrator's judgement hereafter. Having had his "property" restored to him, as he thinks, he virtually

⁶ The question of what sort of dream it is, in medieval terms, is dealt with by Wilson, op.cit. pp.15.ff.

disregards the import of the Pearl-Maiden's criticism. She has told him clearly that he is mad to lose his joy for a "rayscun bref" (1.268). His conditional love for God (1.285) and his inattention to her words provoke from her a sharper response.

It is not too much to liken the Narrator to a child who has lost a toy and, having seen it again, is denied it though assured that repossession is neither possible nor good for him:

"Why schal I hit bope mysse and mete?

...

Now rech I never for to declyne

Ne how fer of folde þat man me fleme "

(11.329-334).

Having tried demanding and met a strong rebuke he falls to self-pity and whines that in "blysse I se þe blyþely blent" (1.385) while he is "a man al mornyf mate" (1.387). He complains that the Pearl Maiden ignores this but, since he is here, he wishes to know about her new life. The Pearl-Maiden is glad of his new-found humility. Thus the Narrator's change of mood has continually provoked the move onto the next stage of the development of the poem.

Instead of listening quietly to her account he continues to interrupt her by protesting that her reward is too much for her deserts. The Pearl-Maiden speaks of kings and queens; the Narrator thinks at

once, in earthly fashion, of usurpations and dethronings. Although he has been told that God's decree is final and his striving against it a waste of time (11.345-348), he is still in revolt against a system which directly contravenes his understanding of right.

This mood of revolt remains when he questions her right to be married to Christ. He still expects her to live in a version of the Old Jerusalem, within a castle wall, but Jerusalem is in Judea and they are not in Judea, so where can she live? Her previous words have sunk in partly, for he makes a request instead of a demand, but it is couched in a way that makes it less than humble.

"I wolde þe aske a þynge expresse,
And þa3 I be bustwys as a blose,
Let my bone vayl neverþelese" (11.910-12).

He admits to a certain lack of the courtesy necessary to mix with the august throng of Heaven but is still confident of the granting of this favour.

His sight of the New Jerusalem gives him the same sort of pleasure as the gem-studded landscape at the beginning of his dream, but he is moved to pity at the sight of the wound in Christ's side. His mad rush to cross the stream ends in despair when he realises his impatience and contravention of God's will have achieved nothing and deprived him of "mo of his mysterys"

(11.1194). Thus, within his dream, the Narrator does not advance in understanding. His rashness of heart, his unwillingness to accept God's will, together with the negative qualities of childhood, make his mood change abruptly from joy to misery without comprehension of the overall plan.

The Narrator in the closing passage of the poem has pondered the meaning of his dream and absorbed the lessons his ghostly guide taught him. As he recalls his abrupt awakening, he admits:

"Hit watz not at my Prynce³ paye". (1.1164)

The moment of his acceptance of God's will is recorded in 11.1174-1176. In addition he is consoled by knowing the fate of his beloved child. Though he still uses words like "rewfully" (1.1181) and "doel-doungoun" (1.1187), his mood is now calm. He repeats the saying from lines 129-132 but this time recognises their truth:

"Bot ay wolde man of happe more hente
 þen mo³te by ry³t vpon hem clyuen"
 (11.1195-6)

This moodiness of the Narrator indicates also that his judgement will be poor, for he is demonstrably irrational, not perhaps in human terms, which make allowance for his inordinate grief, but in spiritual

terms where he continually mistakes the meaning of the Pearl Maiden. I have already mentioned the persistent "earthliness" of the Narrator's attitude and the poet gives this continual and subtle emphasis right through the poem by use of the figure of the jeweller and his pearl.

As Blanch has pointed out, the gem symbolism in Pearl is rooted in the lapidary tradition⁷ and that owes a lot to the vision of St John in Revelation and other biblical passages.⁸ However, listening to the poem from the beginning, there is nothing to indicate that the poet is thinking in other than precious jewel terms. One might be struck by the similarity of language at lines 5 and 6 to descriptions of paramours, but the suspicion does not necessarily cancel out the original lapidary impression. Further progress through the poem causes further suspicion that the "jeweller" is not mourning a "jewel" or that, if he is, his grief is inordinately violent.⁹ Yet, whatever the mourner mourns, the message is certainly that he mourns it overmuch for his own good (ll.55-6).

7 Blanch, R.J. Precious Metal and Gem Symbolism in Pearl. Blanch. pp.86-97. Like Blanch, I have used J. Evans and M.S. Serjeantson's English Mediaeval Lapidaries. EETS, OS 190, 1933, which will be referred to as Lapidary.

8 The breastplate constructed for Aaron in Exodus 28.

9 See lines 11, 15-18, 49-50.

The Narrator's dependence on material things for contentment is further emphasized by his reaction to the Earthly Paradise. Bird song and sweet scents have their part in his pleasure but it is chiefly the proliferation of mineral wealth and its brilliance which transports him¹⁰. The ease with which he has forgotten his earlier pain seems to show some measure of insincerity. This overwhelming grief is too easily set aside and the first thing he notices about the Pearl Maiden is that:

"Blysnande whyt wat3 hyr bleaunt " (1.163).

From now on the pearl he mourns and the being he perceives across the stream, merge into one another and the reader or listener must continually make adjustments in comprehension and values in order to appreciate the poet's symbolism. That I will take up later in considering the Pearl Maiden herself.

It is in his encounter with the beatified person of his dead child that the Narrator's judgement is seen to be most severely at fault. This is a device, no doubt, to help convey the message which eventually leads to the Narrator's consolation. Though the depiction of the Earthly Paradise is slightly dependent on

¹⁰ Lines 86 and 123-4.

other sources¹¹ and the New Jerusalem is largely out of Revelation, the poet has built a world which he can use most effectively to get his point across. For one thing, it is a Heaven seen in very terrestrial terms and this is not surprising for it is constructed on the imagination of a very earthly dreamer. The appearance of the Pearl Maiden, her country and dwelling are easily described in his terms as: "A mayden of menske, ful debonere" (l.162) : "By3onde þe broke, by slente oþer slade, / I hoped þat mote merked wore" (ll.141-2): "þat cyty of gret renoun, / Jerusalem so nwe and ryally dy3t" (ll.986-987). For another thing, this construction allows both Dreamer and Pearl Maiden to talk, each in his own terms, of the same thing while he slowly comes round to the right understanding of what those things truly represent.

Before he reaches this stage of enlightenment he must receive instruction. The Pearl Maiden provides this by rebuke and correction. "We understand that the maiden's comments have value.... By seeing his humanity fail when placed against the heavenly perfection of the

11 Patch, H.R. The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature. Cambridge, Mass, 1960. "The river barrier suggests something of the Latin visions, and the jewels in the stream and the fragment fruit remind one of the Garden of Eden, but the whole account is highly original" (p.190) and note to C.G. Osgood's edition of Pearl, Heath, 1906 pp.xxviii-xxxviii.

maiden, we are disabused of our pride in our human intelligence...."¹² Davenport see the Dreamer as a surrogate for the poem's audience, among other things "a representative of worldly limitation".¹³ We have seen that his perception of "pearl" is limited to a precious gem he can weigh, measure and possess, something that is his property. This possession he can transpose to his highly valued child. She neatly turns the idea by contradicting his assertion that his pearl is out of its setting, lost and decayed. Fate is not a thief and he is no courteous jeweller to say so (ll.257-276).¹⁴

The heedless dreamer persists in his view (ll.282-8). His sin, like Ben Jonson's over his son and namesake, "was too much hope of thee".¹⁵ Sermons were not only directed at covetousness of material possessions but "no þinge shuld be more loved þan God; for what þinge þat man or vymman loveþ most, þat þei vorshippe as here god, in as mucche as in þam is, be it wiff or

12 Sklute, L.M. Expectation and Fulfillment in Pearl. Phil.Q. 52, (1973), p.666.

13 Davenport, W.A. The Art of the Gawain Poet. Phil. Q. 52, (1973), p.17.

14 Notice that "courtesy" when used later in connection with the Virgin Mary seems to imply "grace" (in the religious sense). See Dorothy Everett Essays on Middle English Literature. ed. P. Kean. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955. p.89.

15 "On my Son" from New Oxford Book of English Verse. ed. H. Gardner, OUP, 1972, p.201.

childe, (my emphasis) / golde, silver or catell".¹⁶
 The folly of grief over the death of children is dealt with sympathetically and at length by Wilson, who makes the point that the use of the jewel is a skilful device since if "we knew at the outset that his grief was over a human being, our sympathy might blind us to his spiritual inadequacy".¹⁷

The faults which prompt the Pearl Maiden to say to the Dreamer:

"|y worde byfore |y wytte can fle" (1.294)

however are that he believes what he sees with his fallible, human eyes, and that he assumes he can join her in Heaven without permission and without the necessary preliminary - death. These errors of pride (sorquydry3e - 1.309) are joined to impatience. The Dreamer demands immediate satisfaction even if it goes against God's will. It is this fault which deprives him of further sight of the Holy City because he forgets the Pearl Maiden's warning:

"For dyne of doel of lure3 lesse
 Ofte mony mon forgos |e mo." (11.339-40)

16 Ross, W.O. ed. Middle English Sermons. EETS OS 209, 1940. PP.106-7.

17 op.cit. p.11.

and can only lament "[h]it watz not at my Prynce3 paye" (1.1164).

The advice offered to the Dreamer, and thus to the audience, falls roughly into four categories which answer the outbursts of the mourning man eternally and inexorably. His own reflections at lines 29-32 provide one answer to his mind. He accepts the text of John 12:24 which says that only by falling to the ground and dying can new wheat grow. Even looking at the beautiful scented flowers growing on his child's grave, he cannot make the necessary adjustment to seeing her symbolically in those terms. She has to point out to him the parallel:

"For þat þou leste3 wat3 bot a rose
 þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef.
 Now pur3 kynde of þe kyste þat hyt con close
 To a perle of prys hit is put in pref."
 (11.269-72).¹⁸

The other main piece of advice, or rather instruction, is to accept God's judgement. The Pearl Maiden dwells on this at length; a good enough indication of its importance. The anomaly of the didactic rôle of a baby daughter teaching her father has been raised and answered already, so I shall not go into it again.¹⁹

¹⁸ See also Spearing, A.C. Symbolic and Dramatic Development in Pearl. in Blanch p.104.

¹⁹ Means, M.H. The Consolatio Genre in Medieval English Literature. University of Florida, Humanities Monograph, No.26, 1972, p.58.

There is no filial deference in her answer to the Dreamer's self-pity:

"Deme Dry3ten, euer hym adyte,
 Of þe way a fote ne wyl he wryþe.
 þy mende3 mounte3 not a myte,
 þa3 þou for sor3e be neuer blyþe.
 Stynt of þy strot and fyne to flyte,
 And sech hys blyþe ful swefte and swyþe.
 þy prayer may hys pyté byte,
 ...
 For, marre oþer madde, morne and myþe,
 Al lys in hym to dy3t and deme." (ll.349-360)

Together with the figure of a wild animal thrashing about aimlessly to escape from a trap (ll.345-8), these strong terms ("Stynt of þy strot") capture the wild nature of the Narrator's grief. The link word in these stanzas is "deme". The Narrator thinks he is competent to judge by appearance but it is a form of pride to trust in his "one skyl" (l.1312). The Narrator realises the folly of resistance against the irresistible near the end of the poem:

"Lorde, mad hit arn agayn þe stryven."
 (l.1199).

The only thing we must strive to be is "precious perle3 vnto his pay" which brings us neatly back to the pearl of the opening line. Then the reader or listener must have understood the pearl to mean something totally different. Indeed, the interpretation of the whole poem lies in the way the shifting symbol of the pearl is reached. The Pearl Maiden herself has been

allegorically interpreted in numerous ways,²⁰ as has the meaning of the pearl which the Narrator mourns.

Although some suggestions of what the pearls represent are difficult to swallow,²¹ one should not automatically condemn any that are not totally outrageous. The medieval mind could take in and happily assimilate contradictions and absurdities, if based on sufficient authority. The entry for the pearl in the Peterborough Lapidary is a case in point:

CXIV. Margarita is cheif of al stons þat ben wy3t & preciose, as Ised seyb. And it habe þe name margarita for it is founde in shellis which ben cokelis, or in mosclys & in schellfyssh of þe see; þis bredyng is schellfyssh, & it is gendered of þe dewe of heuen, which dew þe schell fissh receyue. in certen tymes of þe 3er, of þe which dew margarites comen. Some ben cleped vnyons, & þey han a conable name, for þer is oonly one Ifonde & neuer ij togeder; and þe whi3t margarites ben better þen þe 3elow, & þo þat ben conceyued of þe morow dew ben made dym / with þe eyr of euentyde: hucusque Isodorus. Also some ben fonde which ben perced kenly, & þe ben better þen þat oper; and some ben persed by crafte, as Plato seyb. And þey ben best wy3t, cler & rownde; & þey han vertu of comfort by al kend þerof; and somme seyne þat þey comforten lymes & membris, for it clenseþ him of superfluite of humours & fasten þe lymes, & helpen a3en þe cordiacle passion & a3ens swonyng of hert, &

20 See Means op.cit. p.50 for a list of interpretations.

21 Such as their being material gems, bearing in mind ll.22-3 and the quotation from Bacon about precious stones "that have lost their Colours, may be recovered by Burying in the Earth" quoted by Kean, P.M. The Pearl : An Interpretation. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967. p.24.

a3ens febilnes of Flux by cause of medecyne, & Also a3ens rennyng of blod, & a3ens þe flyx of þe wombe, as plato seyþ. Also in plato is it seyð þat margarites ben gendred of þe morow dewe, & some more & some lesse, but it is trowed þat no margarite groweþ past halfe a fote. Also it is seyð þat when ly3tynge of þundri[n]ge falleþ, when þe margarite schold bred of þe dew þat it resseyueþ, þe schel closeþ þe most soden strengeþ & þe gendringes faileþ & is cast owte. Ðe best & most noblyst margarites comen owt of ynde & of old brytayn." 22

Thus, while one interpretation is best suited at any one time, other lingering interpretations and overlays of meaning should not be ignored with too much certainty. The allegory / elegy debate is, in medieval terms, therefore largely a matter of preference, for no interpretation need wholly exclude any other.

The pearl as precious stone with little more additional meaning than its natural attributes of whiteness and its "endele3 round" of perfection occurs a number of times. Pearls are part of the stream bed of the Earthly Paradise (1.82), where they add richness to the unnatural brilliance of that landscape, and they adorn the Pearl Maiden. Mention is made of them in this connection eleven times. Likewise the rest of the 144,000 who make up

the Lamb's retinue are pearl bedecked and the Lamb's "wede3" are pearl colour (1.1112). The gates of the New Jerusalem are each a pearl as well (1.1037).

The figurative use of pearls divides into two different applications. It represents the elect of God, both actual and potential, and also that which God awards them which is eternal life. Thus, working backwards, the "precious perle3" of the last line have it in them to become the pearls which the Pearl Maiden has already become. By calling his beloved dead child a pearl, the Narrator speaks more truly than he realises. When he likens his earthly jewel to a heavenly one he did appraise correctly.

The pearl representing eternal life is obviously the Pearl of great Price mentioned seven times²³ for which the merchant sold everything.²⁴ It is physically represented by the great pearl on the Pearl Maiden's breast (1.1221 et passim) and on the breasts of the 144 thousand virgins whom she accompanies. Not only is it white and perfectly spherical but, we remember from the lapidary entry previously given, "it is genderd of þe dewe of heuen".

23 Lines 732, 733, 744, 745, 746, 756 and 768.

24 Authorised Version Matt. XIII : 45-46.

The medieval debate concerning the fate of the souls of baptised children who had yet to perform any good works accounts for the questions that have arisen over the heresy of the poem. That the fate of his daughter's soul was by no means certain is indicated by the Dreamer's words at line 376:

"I wyste neuer quere my perle wat3 gon."

Part of the Narrator's consolation is to discover the actual fate of his precious jewel.²⁵ The problem of the interpretation of the parable of the vineyard is also discussed but I want to deal with it shortly.

The scenery which is the setting for the poem is, as mentioned earlier, largely derivative from the Bible and mixed medieval writings. Petroff brings all the "literacy antecedents" of the various landscapes together. The effect of the use of the enclosed garden is heightened by the dream having taken place on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin.²⁶ The hortus inclusus of the Song of Songs is read as the Virgin Mary and

25 Articles dealing with the orthodoxy of the poem include Fletcher, J.B. The Allegory of the Pearl. JEGP 20, (1921) pp.1-21., Robertson, D.W. The "Heresy" of the Pearl. MLN 65. (1950) pp.152-61., Sledd, J. Three Textual Notes on Fourteenth Century Poetry. MLN 55, (1940, p.381., Hillman, M.V. Pearl "Inlyche" and "Rewarde". MLN 56, (1941), pp.457-8. etc.

26 Petroff. E. Landscape in Pearl : The Transformation of Nature. Chau R. 16 (1981-2). Disputed by some. See note 1 to the Petroff article.

there are many more parallel readings cited by Petroff. The most interesting (p.182) is her link between the knowledge that Mary was received into Heaven and the Narrator's ignorance of the fate of his own child.

Other influences discernible in the scenery of the poem go back to the Classical idea of this world and the next being separated by a swiftly flowing river, an idea which is adopted into Christianity where Styx becomes Jordan. A general aura of the Celtic Otherworld is apparent as is a heightened and eternal version of this one, and a secular note is struck by the resemblance of the "erber" to the Garden in The Romaunt of the Rose. However, as Kean has pointed out, the homogeneity of medieval literature was such that the Pearl poet need not necessarily have read the works from which he appears to gain inspiration:²⁷ their language, themes and responses were part of the mental furniture of any educated man of the age.²⁸

The preliminaries to finding consolation are set in the first dream landscape which easily and immediately assuages his "doel-dystresse", as described earlier. Let me add one more to the proliferation of derivations and suggest that this forgetfulness par-

27 Kean, P.M. The Pearl : An Interpretation. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967. p.viii.

28 For a detailed comment on the "erber" see Luttrell, C.A. Pearl : Symbolism in a Garden Setting. Blanch. pp.60-85.

takes somewhat of the amnesia occasioned by quaffing the waters of Lethe or consuming the moly of the Lotus Eaters. In this case, the lightening of the Narrator's grief occasioned by the brightness of the Earthly Paradise is a necessary move to draw his mind away from his inwardly turned and profitless contemplations towards a state where he can grasp the meaning of the lesson he is about to be taught.

Once the lesson has been taught, the Dreamer is to be rewarded with a sight of the New Jerusalem to assure him that his pearl has attained a suitable setting. The view also extends and enhances the lesson, for the Dreamer can see from whence the border river issues²⁹ and also gain further illumination into the true spiritual value of the pearl as he sees further appearances of the worthy jewel in the construction of the City of Peace and the attire of the Lamb. The notable differences between the city of St John's version and the city described in the poem on the authority of John (the only time we do not have to rely on a fallible narrator for information) are laid out, with commentary, in Field's article.³⁰

29 Kean. op.cit. p.111.

30 Field, I. The Heavenly Jerusalem in Pearl. MLR 81, (1986), pp.7-17.

The uniqueness of the Pearl is emphasized in the first stanza. The lamenting Narrator, in his rôle as jeweller declares:

"Ne proued I neuer her precious pere."(1.4)

and

"I sette hyr sengely in synglere"(1.8).

The Pearl Maiden is first seen by the Dreamer where she sits alone and he says:

"I se3 hyr in so strange a place" (1.175) -

strangeness being unusual and therefore close to uniqueness. He greets her by enquiring

"Art þou my perle þat I haf playned,
Regretted by myn one on ny3te?" (1.242-3).

Why the Narrator is alone is a matter for speculation though, if one is being strictly biographical, there are indications of the absence of the child's mother.³¹ Maybe his loneliness is inserted here to emphasize not only the Narrator's sense of desolation at the loss of his "jewel" but also his inability to look outside himself for succour and instruction.

This loss has forced him to be at one with care:

31 See Bishop, I. Pearl in its Setting. Oxford, 1968. p.8.

"Of care and me 3e made acorde" (1.371)
(my emphasis)

and when she lived, they were united:

"And, quen we departed, we wern at on;"
(1.378)

It is obviously an imperfect unity, depending as it does on the "jeweller's" possession of his earthly "jewel".

The spiritual uniqueness of the Pearl (still as Pearl Maiden) is adumbrated in the Dreamer's initial rejection of the Pearl Maiden's queenship.

"Now, for synglerty o hyr dousour,
We calle hyr Fenyx of Arraby" (ll.429-30).³²

However, though the dreamer knows of the uniqueness of the Virgin Mary and cannot comprehend any additions to a uniqueness which will not cause dissensions (i.e. there cannot be more than one queen in heaven), he can grasp the Pearl Maiden's argument of the unity of the Christian Church by reference to St Paul:³³

"Al arn we membre3 of Jesu Kryst:" (1.457)

32 A unique bird, as is well known. Cf. The Book of the Duchess. 1.982.

33 I Cor. XII. 12.

The spiritual applications are still beyond his mind. The Pearl Maiden tries once more to demonstrate to him how:

"þe kyndom of God alyve
 Hat3 a property in hytself beyng" (ll.445-6).

She takes the parable of the labourers in the vineyard to show that an eternal value is indivisible. God's reward to his labourers is one penny however much work they have done. The Pearl Maiden has to explain the significance of the one penny to the outraged Dreamer who thinks, in earthly terms:

"þenne þe lasse in werk to take more able,
 And euer þe lenger þe lasse, þe more"
 (ll.599-600)

Again, the reward is but one penny because it must be something singular and indivisible to represent eternal life. It is also something precious and indivisible like a pearl: like the pearl for which the merchant sold all that he had and which the Pearl Maiden advises the Dreamer to take pains to purchase. (ll.743-4).

Towards the end of his vision, the Dreamer sees the throng in the Heavenly City, united around Christ (l.1114ff). The Dreamer is also "drawen to Godde3 present" (l.1193), but he was not yet worthy so his "ioye [which had been whole and single] wat3 sone toriuen" (l.1197).

Returning to the conscious state, the Narrator, who has up till now behaved as an individual apart from the rest of mankind, again joins his Christian brethren on earth:

"For I haf founden hym, boþe day and na3te,
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin

...
þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
þe preste vus schewe3 vch a daye.
He gef vus to be his homly hyne..."

(ll.1203-11).

The singleness of the pearl and the loneliness of the Narrator converge in the unity of God and His creation.

In this poem it is much easier to trace the path of consolation to its goal than it is in The Book of the Duchess. Bishop finds many of the topoi of Pearl in solacia from classical times.

Three of the commonest of the ancient solacia adopted by Christian writers are closely related topics : "death is the common lot of man", the necessity of submitting to Fate - or in Christian times to the Will of God; nothing can be gained by immoderate grief.³⁴

Other themes used in Pearl include the idea

34 Bishop. op.cit. p.18.

that life is a loan and that in the case of children, early death is a blessing because, by dying before they have had time to commit any post-baptismal sin, little children may be received straight into Heaven, just as the Pearl Maiden was. Perhaps because action helps to assuage grief, another theme of relevance is "the exhortation to the bereaved to imitate the virtues of the deceased".³⁵

Consolation through resignation to the inevitable features strongly in Pearl. The Dreamer's first error is to ignore this, as the Pearl Maiden points out.

"Bot, jueler gente, if þou schal lose
 þy ioy for a gemme þat þe wat3 lef,
 Me þynk þe put in a mad porpose,
 And busye3 þe aboute a raysoun bref;
 For þat þeu leste3 wat3 bot a rose.
 þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef."
 (ll.265-70).

One notices that "wyrde" (the old pagan Germanic fate) is first cited as the culprit cause of the Narrator's grief. It is "wyrde" (l.249) which has sent his jewel away and "wyrde" which the Pearl Maiden refers to at first (l.273) as the force the Narrator erroneously calls a thief. Thereafter, the force in charge of men's fates is always God and this usage is brought in by the Dreamer (l.285). Previously, although Paradise is

35 Ibid. p.19

mentioned (1.137) as is God's grace (1.63) and "a hy3 seysoun" in August (1.39), the only religious remark is a rejection of comfort from Christ (1.55). This seems to be a further indication of the wretched Narrator's turning from God in his misery. Only when he thinks a cure for his ills has come in the restoration of his "pearl" does he begin to return to God. In the same way, if one wished to speculate, as Petroff has done, on the actual incident that provoked the dream,³⁶ then we could as easily maintain that the Narrator is alone in the "erber" because everyone else has gone to mass and he cannot celebrate with them. He turns back to church with his fellows at the end of the poem.

The topos of the pointlessness of immoderate grief is not really considered separately. It is more the Narrator's resistance to the will of God which the Pearl Maiden criticises. Given her very happy fate in at once attaining the Beatific Vision, in theory all grief is foolish and this it was the message seems to be. The verse that Wilson quotes from the South English Legendary ridicules the folly of a woman weeping for the death of her child and it is in this light that one has to view Pearl.³⁷ The poet's tone is much kinder and more humane than the men who called it "gret folie" to

36 Petroff. p.182.

37 Legendary. p.1.

weep for "3unge children" but nevertheless, one has to accept, as the Narrator does, that the soul of an infant who dies after baptism but before it can commit sin, is in better case to attain heaven than any other human. The greatest relief the Dreamer enjoys is the knowledge that she is safely returned where she belongs - to God. Finally, the Pearl Maiden makes much of the text concerning the need for aspirants to Heaven to be as little children. This is the Christian equivalent of the injunction to imitate the virtues of the dead - a commonplace of pagan antiquity, "adapted by the Christian writers of consolation in the fourth century".³⁸

In Pearl, unlike The Book of the Duchess in the previous chapter or The Parlement of the Thre Ages in the next, consolation can be seen to be given. In some ways one feels that the demand to find some evidence of consolation is impressed upon these other two works. In Pearl, however, the poem bends quite happily to the yoke because it is so obviously designed to provide solace for a very real grief.

I have cited one of Ben Jonson's epitaphs already but a more appropriate one which contains much the same sentiments as the fourteenth-century poet's work is his

³⁸ Bishop, op.cit. p.21.

"Epitaph on my First Daughter".³⁹

Here lies to each her parents' ruth
 Mary, the daughter of their youth:
 Yet, all Heaven's gifts being Heaven's due,
 It makes the father less to rue.
 At six months' end she parted hence
 With safety of her innocence;
 Whose soul Heaven's Queen (whose name she
 bears)
 In comfort of her mother's tears,
 Hath placed amongst her virgin-train;
 Where, while that severed doth remain;
 This grave partakes the fleshly birth,
 Which cover lightly, gentle earth.

³⁹ Gardner, H. ed. New Oxford Book of English Verse.
 OUP, 1972. P.201.

CHAPTER III THE PARLEMENT OF THE THRE AGES

This poem of only 665 lines has not enjoyed the amount of critical attention from which the other two poems have benefited. Such consideration as it has attracted has not always been favourable but, although it is admittedly not in the same class as The Book of the Duchess and Pearl, its contents cast interesting light on fourteenth-century literature, especially on the poems of the last chapter, and on attitudes to death at this epoch.

The edition prepared by Sir Israel Gollancz in 1915 concentrated on the episodes of the Nine Worthies. (Many commentators have considered their inclusion inept or unbalanced in length.¹) Loomis has added to these analogous texts with eight other instances of the subject found around Britain and Europe. They all post date The Parlement of the Thre Ages.² He begins his article by saying his "researches have brought to his attention a number of others (examples of the Nine

1 Gollancz, I. The Parlement of the Thre Ages. London, 1915.

2 Offord, M.Y. ed. The Parlement of the Thre Ages. EETS 246, London, 1959. All references are to the Thornton text unless otherwise specified.

Worthies) ... some of which afford interesting comparisons with those published by Gollancz".³ The brief note before Dunn and Byrnes' anthology which contains an edition of the poem mentions some sources and analogues and presumes "the author based his own account of the Worthies on a wide acquaintance with romance literature and learned tradition".⁴ Many lapses which make this assertion debatable are mentioned in the course of this chapter.

Two literary needs are served in The Parlement of the Thre Ages by the inclusion of a retelling of the Nine Worthies' exploits. A recitation of doughty deeds was popular among lovers of romance, for its own sake, and Death's eventual victory over the invincible clearly demonstrated the transience of the world. To a number of critics, however, the account, which takes up close to half of the poem, is extraneous matter, carelessly and unnecessarily included and of slight merit.⁵

On a slightly different tack, Gollancz takes this and the following section on the illustrious departed

³ Loomis, R.S. "Verses on the Nine Worthies". Mod. Phil. 15, (1917-18). pp.19-27.

⁴ Dunn, C.W. and Byrnes, E.T. eds. Middle English Literature. Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1973. p.238.

⁵ See for example, Speirs, J. Medieval English Poetry. Faber & Faber, 1966. pp.299-300.

as "evidently an extension of the author's original scheme to write in the grand style a panegyric on 'The Nine Worthies'".⁶ Here he makes a number of unsupported and unsupportable suppositions, for one might, with more probability, suggest that the poet began a joyful account of deer-poaching and suffered a change of mood during composition. That is to say, we must examine the effectiveness of the text as we have it, rather than speculate about authorial intentions, and hypothetical changes of plan.

Another detractor says that "these pictures, delightful as they are, upset the whole balance of the poem and one surmises that by the end Youth and Middle Age would have forgotten the reason why Old Age was thus addressing them. The author's point of view is lost...".⁷ For one thing, the poem is short by medieval standards and an audience able to take in the three thousand lines of Havelok the Dane, the two and a half thousand of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight or the one and a half thousand of King Horn would consider this poem but light fare. Moreover, if the Nine Worthies were omitted and Elde illustrated his sermon with the snatches of wise men and lovers, the balance would

⁶ Gollancz. 3rd page of the Preface.

⁷ Oakden, J.P. Alliterative Poetry in Middle English. Manchester University Press, 1935. p.54.

swing from didacticism to entertainment with a lesson unhandily tacked on; a conclusion which would equally provoke adverse comment.

Whether the "disproportionately long account of each of the vanished/Nine Worthies" is "of decidedly less merit than the rest of the poem" or being, perhaps, "an interpolation by another hand than the original author's, it interferes with the symmetry of the poem" are matters which seem to depend on whether the poem is read as entertainment exclusively or as instruction.⁸ If its dual nature is admitted, then the problem of the Nine Worthies largely falls away.

"Some talk of Alexander and some of Hercules,
Of Hector and Lysander and such great names as
these..."

Only two of the names in this snatch of popular song regularly appear in the lists of the Nine Worthies, a group of historical or legendary heroes of surpassing military achievement. The final selection of three groups of three, each member of a trio having something in common with the others, is attributed to a form of old Welsh verse,⁹ but the use of the deeds of notable figures to extol the glory of one's race and thus oneself has a longer history.

⁸ Speirs. pp.299-300.

⁹ Offord op.cit. p.xli.

That the example of great men now perished in spite of all their worldly achievements was used to illustrate the transience of the world well before the final coalescing of the nine military notables is shown in a passage from the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, written about the third quarter of the second century of the Christian era. It runs as follows:

"Hippocrates healed the diseases of many; then failed to heal his own and passed away. The Chaldeans foretold many a man's death, then destiny overtook themselves. Alexander, Pompey and Caesar razed many cities to the dust, and on many a stricken field slew their tens of thousands, horse and foot, but at last they too went their way. Heraclitus, who discoursed so sagely, and so oft, on the world conflagration, filled with water, covered himself with dung, and died. Vermin ate Democritus: vermin of another kind took off Socrates."¹⁰

Of the many examples cited by Gollancz, Loomis and Offord the "earliest known treatment of the Worthies as a group" is that of the French poet Jacques de Longuyon.¹¹ The relevant verses of this work, Les Voeux

¹⁰ Jackson, J. (trans) The Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. World's Classics, OUP, 1906. p.15.

¹¹ Offord op.cit. p.xli.

du Paon, written about 1312, appear as number VI in the appendix to Gollancz's edition. This version became popular and was widely translated. There is speculation that the author of Parlement knew it and based his own poem upon it.¹²

When the poet claims "clerkes in the cronycle cownten þe sothe" (l.307) it is probably a waste of time to seek the particular chronicle for historical accuracy. The line is usually a filler or the popular medieval appeal to "auctoritee". A point that Offord makes is that Homer was despised in the Middle Ages and credence given to a couple of fictitious "eye witnesses" of the Trojan War called Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius ("Dittes and Dares", line 331).¹³

Leaving aside the question of influence and comparing various treatments of Hector, we see what a popular and consistent member of the group he was. In a Latin hymn attributed to the eleventh century he is the strongest or most powerful man of Troy,¹⁴ Thomas of Hailes gives him "a scharpe meyne".¹⁵ Phillipe Mouskes

12 Gollancz op.cit. 3rd page of Preface. The vow to the peacock is mentioned at line 365.

13 Offord op.cit. p.54.

14 "Ubi Hector, Troiae fortissimus?" Gollancz's first example.

15 "A Luve Run", l.5. Gollancz's third example.

in the thirteenth century gives "[1]i mieudres paiens" a massive physique and invincible fighting skills.¹⁶ De Longuyon provides more detail of the Trojan war plus the information that Hector slew twenty-nine kings and, he believes more than one hundred admirals and counts. His death is attributed to the treachery of Achilles.

These eleven lines are expanded, in Parlement, to thirty-two. Many more actors in the drama of Troy make their appearance and Hector's death at the hands of Achilles is dealt with in more detail. Like Falstaff's account of the thieves who attacked him, the number of slaughtered monarchs has grown, from twenty-nine to ninety-nine, but lesser victims are not numbered.¹⁷ The poet does acknowledge "Dittes and Dares" (l.331) but probably drew on other available accounts of this popular heroic story.

That the poet did not always slavishly follow de Longuyon is evident again in the seventy-odd lines devoted to Alexander's exploits. Elias and Enoch were pulled in from their exile in the Earthly Paradise apparently to mark the great extent of Alexander's conquests (ll.335-6). Thereafter our poet reels off a

¹⁶ Gollancz's fifth example. Phillippe Mouskes only gives three heroes but there is already the pagan, Jewish and Christian division.

¹⁷ Henry IV Pt I Act II sc iv.

list of the warriors involved in Alexander's Indian campaign and, having established who killed whom, married off the survivors. One favourite anecdote told of Alexander, that he complained of having no more worlds to conquer, is referred to by de Longuyon (ll.22-24) and ignored in Parlement. Both mention his death by poison. Again the later poem has expanded the account, this time from ten lines to seventy.

Since the poet dwells longest on Alexander, he must have had a particular liking for, or interest in him, or the sources he consulted were longer. The historical warrior was certainly a figure to catch the imagination of a society whose raison d'être was warfare. Dead in his early thirties after a phenomenal life of campaigning against the mightiest rulers of the known world, he had triumphed from such small beginnings. This account of his battles, in common with other descriptions of medieval warfare lacks variety and interest but the more chanting of names, and bald descriptions apparently dependent on alliteration seem to have satisfied audiences of the time.¹⁸ Proper names are not rigidly retained and the whole rather gives the impression of an incantation with words that no one

¹⁸ Eg. "Mody Meneduse" (l.347), "Sir Garsyene the gaye"(l.351). Gawain is always "the good".(l.475). Fozome and Fozanase apply to the same lady in adjacent lines (ll.356-357). This is probably not a scribal error.

pays much attention to any more. Nevertheless, the absence of conventional phrases might be noticed by an audience accustomed to the sort of repetition oral transmission requires.

When Shakespeare used the "Nine" Worthies in Love's Labours Lost he included Pompey, but the most common third member of the pagan threesome was Julius Caesar. The theme was never parochial although Godfrey of Bouillon sometimes gave way to Guy of Warwick and occasionally attempts were made to add a tenth worthy.¹⁹

Versions appear in England, Scotland and France and Guy for Godfrey may represent local loyalty. Hector, through Brutus, the mythological founder of Britain, and Julius Caesar through his conquest, have close connections with England as, of course, does King Arthur; Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon were more specifically French. Biblical characters could freely belong to any Christian culture. It is interesting to set this cosmopolitan hero-worship against its historical background and see a Western Europe which, even if its people fought amongst themselves, was strongly united in culture.

As part of this local pride, perhaps, our poet devotes most of his tale of Julius Caesar to his real

¹⁹ Loomis p.19. His first example suggests Robert the Bruce as a tenth.

or legendary English adventures. De Longuyon mentions Pompey and only three of his eleven lines are concerned with England. Judging by Offord's notes on lines 405 to 420 the poet knew of various traditions and tales about places linked with Julius Caesar. As always, the accretion of half-remembered events around one famous figure tends to be passed on uncritically throughout the medieval period; the effect again of the reliance on "auctoritee". The story of the long-lasting honey is not apparently questioned until the late sixteenth century when an alternative and more reasonable suggestion is made for its origin, if indeed it exists.²⁰ Other assertions, long held to be equally unlikely, have been found by later archaeologists to be based on fact.²¹

If one were to select three notable Jews surely Moses would have precedence over Joshua, but, of course, the criterion for inclusion among these "worthy" men is military prowess. Thus Joshua, a lesser statesman but a greater fighter, is first choice. Here our poet has again expanded on his source but has been led into an error which suggests but slight acquaintance with the Bible. De Longuyon correctly states that

20 Offord's note to line 413 on page 59.

21 In this case the Roman conduits in London. No one believed in Troy until Schliemann dug it up. See also Offord's note to lines 408-9.

Joshua "[p]arti le flun Jordain a travers droitement" (1.42), but the Parlement poet has confused this later biblical episode with the much more famous crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites fleeing from Pharaoh and Joshua has thus stolen Moses' thunder (Exod. XIV and Jos. III).

An anachronism which is by no means unique to this poet occurs in this same account where Joshua twice appeals to Jesus for help which, since the nature of Christ was a primary matter of dispute between Jew and Christian, is an especially odd if common error. Nevertheless, although the antagonism remained (cf. for example, Chaucer's Prioress' Tale), the Jews had been driven out of England two centuries before and our poet is not a serious chronicler, as we have already seen.

A sense of history and chronology seems to have been of little importance to many medieval and later writers. The Parlement poet conceives every character, whether living in Troy, Jerusalem or Aachen, and his society in terms of fourteenth-century Western European chivalry. Generally, we are given glimpses of a Trojan chieftain, a Macedonian warlord and a republican Roman, their tunics and sandals shed in favour of full armour and their strongholds sporting fourteenth-century battlements as they destroy each other on transposed

tournament grounds or battlefields.²²

Menelaus, for example, "girde ouer the walles" in the manner of medieval beseigers instead of taking Troy by the trick of the wooden horse. All the warriors are dubbed knights; Sir Troylus, (1.326), Sir Porus (1.368), Sir Sezere (1.405). Others than Charlemagne have twelve peerless knights, the French douze pers having undergone some strange transformations of meaning, as Offord shows in a note to line 521. A Knight, with all the good manners required of the tournament, bows to a superior before seizing his sword (1.370). Womenfolk are pursued according to the dictates of courtly love and the ladies respond in kind. The idea of Alexander making a special trip to take Babylon:

"by cause of Dame Cand[ac]e that comforthed hym
moste" (1.396)

is difficult to entertain. Furthermore, characters in medieval romance are seldom of lower rank than king. To fight mere tribal chiefs, which many of them historically must undoubtedly have been, would have been too ignoble. "Thies thre were Iewes full ioly and iustres full noble" (1.459) ends the section on the second trio.

²² For the medieval interpretation of classical epic see Hancock, E.A. "The Nine Worthies : their Influence on Culture from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries", Diss. University of Cape Town, 1985. p.92ff.

The remaining Jewish worthies are passed over lightly; David has twelve lines and Judas Maccabeus but eight. This compares with seven and nine respectively in Voeux. De Longuyon again emphasises the killing of tyrannical or otherwise unsatisfactory kings but gives little detail apart from names, whereas this poet expands on the combat with Goliath, gives three lines to the Uriah and Bathsheba episode and mentions God's intervention in David's fortunes a number of times (ll.442-453). He may have been following another source, even returning directly to the Bible. The information given in the few lines dealing with Judas Maccabeus is lifted straight from Voeux and then the three champions of Christendom follow.

Having briefly covered the Old Testament trio, the poet embarks on another of his and probably his audience's favourite characters, King Arthur. The Matter of Britain occurs in medieval literature too many times to mention. De Longuyon contents himself with the story of the giant of Mont St Michel who intended to add Arthur's beard to those he had collected from kings to make a gown (ll.68-71). The rest of the Parlement account has been culled from numerous Arthurian stories and contains the main ingredients of the legend; the Round Table, the company of knights, Merlin and the Siege Perilous, the treachery of Mordred and the return of the sword to the Lady of the Lake before Arthur disappears from human view.

As the poet now goes on to speak of Godfrey de Bouillon, the most recent addition to the group, we must assume he was careless or uncaring of logical sequence or that he wanted to end on a high note and that Godfrey, who really seems a little outclassed in this company, would have been an anticlimax. Perhaps no Godfrey romance was available to him. (De Longuyon keeps to correct chronology.) As a character from history, Godfrey does not rank high in interest, although his connection with the First Crusade may have prolonged his name in monkish chronicles. His life "coincides with the establishment of the cult of chivalry " which might also have influenced his inclusion.²³

He was a strong supporter of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV and, with his brother Baldwin, led a contingent of the army which set off for the Holy Land in 1096.²⁴ After the fall of Jerusalem in 1099, he was elected as leader of the nobles and ruled the city as "Advocate" (or lay protector) of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He died the following year and Elde's message of the transience of worldly things (amongst

23 Hancock. op.cit. p.vi. The original Godfrey romance, composed between 1163-1183 was that of William, Archbishop of Tyne; Godeffroy of Boloyne or the Siege and Conquest of Jerusalem. Colvin, M.N. ed. EETS ES64. rep. 1926.

24 R.H.C. Davis, A History of Medieval Europe. Longman, 1970. pp.280-282.

them fame) can best be brought home by the almost total oblivion into which his name has now fallen. Arthur and Charlemagne are still household names. Godfrey of Bouillon is not.

The last in this catalogue of worthies and one who enjoys almost as much attention as Alexander, is Charlemagne. As with Arthur and Alexander, a large part of the verse is devoted to the chivalrous knights under his command. Again like Arthur, accretions of doughty deeds overlay the factual monarch but with Charlemagne the historical records are easier to trace. The Matter of France has much in common with the Matter of England with the background of loyalty and treachery leading to the downfall of a great warrior.

With the death of Charlemagne at St Denis, Elde concludes his recital of famous warriors. Three of them, Alexander, Arthur and Charlemagne, he has dwelt on at length. Nevertheless, he has not allowed us to forget the reason he is telling these stores of "many modyere than I, men on this molde". Up to a point the Parlement poet's work corresponds very closely with the bare accounts given in Les Voeux du Paon. However, de Longuyon's only mention of death is that by unnatural causes, ie. not at natural term of life or in battle, and he draws no conclusions from his protagonist's deaths.

Looking at Parlement, on the contrary, we see that Elde never lets slip an opportunity to refresh his audience's mind as to his purpose. Any number of times he clearly states that he is not retelling these stores for our amusement but for our instruction. He begins with a statement of this intention (ll.295-99). "Sir Ector" falls foul of Achilles, who "with wyles and no wirchipe woundede hym to dethe" (l.312). The deaths of a number of other Trojans are also recorded. At line 400, Alexander;

"that perelis prynce was puysonede to dede;
pare he was dede of a drynke

....
And thus the worthieste of this world went to
his ende."

At the end of the short accounts of the three biblical characters the message is repeated:

"Of sicke doughety doers looke what es
worthen." (l.461)

Although Arthur's story does not permit him to die, he disappears from the sight of men (l.512). Godfrey of Bouillon, crowned king by this poet, if not actually claiming the title himself, "with the wirchipe of this werlde he went to his ende" (l.519). After stating that Charlemagne "dyede at his dayes tyme" (l.579), Elde concludes:

"Bot doughetynes when dede comes ne dare
noghte habyde" (l.583).

To say, in spite of all this, that the object of Elde's speech will be forgotten or that the poet uses the Nine Worthies theme ineptly, seems a very unfair and unjust comment.

Being closest to the fate of the Worthies in terms of age, Elde speaks with some authority and his listeners do not speak again once he has silenced them (1.266). Once or twice during his discourse he seems to be countering impatience in his listeners, but they hear him out without verbal interruption. After the account of the Nine Worthies, Elde says, "I schall schortly 3ow schewe and schutt me full sone" (1.585). Of the lovers he declares, "I schall titly 3ow telle, and tary 3ow no lengere" (1.613). These lines may be fillers in subsidiary passages but Elde does not feel the need of such quieteners during his telling of the exploits of the Nine Worthies. Either the poet had experienced restlessness from his audience or anticipated it. Another explanation can be found if the poem is taken at its word. It is supposed to be a "parlement" or "discussion" and, although the flyting match at the beginning between the three ages is lively, there is none of the continual give and take found in The Parlement of Foules, The Owl and the Nightingale or Wynnere and Wastoure. These assumed interruptions give a little dramatic interest but do not distract listeners from Elde's instruction.

Gollancz's other main topic was the authorship of the poem which becomes a fruitless exercise in imagination, rather like the search for the Pearl poet, given the paucity of clues. The serious philological studies of Steadman attempt to define a theory of common authorship but the poet or poets of Parlement and Wynnere and Wastoure is or are still unknown. Gollancz considers the poem a hybrid; a sort of poor relation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight by virtue of its closely detailed hunting scenes in the prologue to the dream and in Youthe's description of hawking. He also links it with another illustrious contemporary, Piers Plowman, and suggests that two contributions to the Alliterative Revival were made by the same poet, namely Parlement and Wynnere and Wastoure.

This is the contention disputed by Steadman.²⁵ The two poems are preserved in the same manuscript,²⁶ which artificially links them. The subject matter and the knowledge displayed about it differ considerably. The author of Parlement is very much the country mouse who knows his natural history and delights in the outdoor life while his town mouse contemporary is at home in

25 Steadman, J.M. The Authorship of Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Three Ages : A Study in Methods of Determining the Common Authorship of Middle English Poems. MP, xxi, 1923-24. pp.7-13.

26 That is, the complete Thornton text of Parlement.

London and deals with the abuses of the day.

"In respect to the use of rhetorical devices the two poems show a striking divergence The differences in syntax are even more significant In the use of tenses there is also a marked difference."²⁷ By studying both poems word by word, Steadman has isolated all these variations and a great dissimilarity in vocabulary as well which indicates that we are dealing with the works of two different poets. In conclusion, Steadman finds the assumption of common authorship "incredible".²⁸

Oakden reopened the conflict by suggesting that common authorship was not impossible given the change that the passage of years might make to a writer's vocabulary.²⁹ Having said that the matter is still sub judice, he concludes that both poems probably are by the same poet.

Offord admits the obvious parallels but points out that they exist within the whole body of poetry of the Alliterative Revival.³⁰ After all, the nature of the

27 Steadman, op.cit. pp.9-10.

28 ibid. p.13

29 Oakden, op.cit. pp.54-55.

30 Offord, op.cit. p.xxxiii.

verse form almost compels certain groups of words beginning with identical consonants to recur, particularly with poets of less talent or inspiration. The assumption of common authorship from strongly reminiscent language is therefore unreliable and hangs too much weight on the evidence. A later poet may have borrowed lines and phrases, thus giving an artificial similarity to works from different hands.

Turning again to the poem we find that Elde does not finish his lesson with the Nine Worthies but continues with further examples of the illustrious who yet have had to answer to Death's summons. The Parlement really is "a Widsip of the fourteenth century"³¹ in preserving names and the bare outline of stories often otherwise now lost to us or certainly not part of the mental furniture of the twentieth-century reader.

It is apparently Elde's intention to point out that no manner of man or woman will escape. In that case, one of each kind of famous person should have been sufficient, but the writer was evidently under the sway, firstly, of the medieval love of lists of names and, secondly, perhaps, of the sources he followed. Thus it is, possibly, that we have four "wyghes þat were wyseste" (l.584) and again they are selected from

31 Offord. p.xxxviii.

the pagan, Old Testament and Christian worlds.

The wisest pagan is Aristotle, closely followed by Virgil, both of whom have feats of alchemy and necromancy attributed to them. The process of accretion is well illustrated in the works quoted by Offord (p.67) where, once one writer has got hold of a particularly exciting and colourful anecdote, it is unquestioningly repeated by later writers until it assumes a pseudo-truthfulness of its own.

When dealing with Solomon, the poet lets Elde depart from his sermon. His final message about wisdom is that it is no shield against death (ll.610-11), nevertheless he calls Solomon:

"the wyseste in witt that euer wonnede
in erthe,
And his techynges will bene trowed whils .e
werlde standes." (my emphasis).

This seems to lend Solomon an immortality which contradicts Elde's assertion and it is notably absent from the Ware version. One possible explanation is that the information on Solomon appears in the Bible and the loss of that book before the end of the world - the extinction of God's word by accident or human design - was inconceivable. Solomon himself has, of course, gone the way of all men.

The connection of Merlin, a Welsh wizard, with the

story of King Arthur occurs early on. Geoffrey of Monmouth in his fantastic History of the Kings of Britain treats of Merlin's necromancy and advice, or powers of prophecy, employed in the British cause.³² That the poet was unselective in his association of stories with famous characters is plainly demonstrated in the two lines he gives to the story that Merlin first imprisoned a lady with whom he fell in love and then was hoodwinked by her by means of his own spells. Although this reflects poorly on Merlin's wisdom, the poet immediately assures us:

"Theis were the wyseste in the worlde of witt
 þat euer 3itt were." (l.610).

At the other end of the scale of wisdom, i.e. those in the grip of passion, are the great lovers of history, legend and the romances. A glance at the ten couples (some partners are implied if not named), shows how right Elde is in using their names as illustrations of mortality; even if some of them never lived out of the pages of literature, their exploits are now beyond even scholarly research. A glance at Offord's notes on this section reveals how ignominiously time has dealt with them.

32 Geoffrey of Monmouth. The History of the Kings of Britain. trans. Lewis Thorpe, Penguin Classics, reprint, 1980. Geoffrey links Merlin with Arthur although the two apparently never met. See note to page 282.

What is interesting is the way the poet draws to a climax with the increasing proportion of warning notes sounded amidst the recitation of famous couples. They become, in fact, a refrain whose urgency hurries us on to Elde's final words of advice. Each couple, or each woman, for the consorts of the last four are not named, is cited, followed by a half line on their fate, as follows:

"And Sir Tristrēm the trewe, full triste of
 And Ysoute his awnn lufe, in erthe are ^{hym-seleun,} þay
 bothe." (11.624-5)

Variants on this refrain are "now dethe has þam bo[th]e" (1.617); "now faren are they bothe" (1.619); "are bothe now bot erthe" (1.621) and "nowe grauen are thay bothen" (1.629). A particularly striking image of death and burial is found here and in many of the shorter poems. It is the picture of someone "creeping" into the grave, in this case "Cristabelle the clere maye" (1.623); a very humble act giving the impression of the proud brought low.

Almost as an afterthought, the poet uses a theme which will be dealt with at greater length in the next chapter.

"Whare es now Dame Dido was gwene of Carth-
 age?" (1.626)

he asks. The ubi sunt theme will be dealt with later but it is interesting to note an obviously popular topos present in yet another medieval poem.

Elde's long speech is not quite ended but, before looking at his peroration, let us consider the speaker himself and his two companions. The idea of juxtaposing a young man, a middle-aged man and an old man to illustrate the transience of life is a fairly obvious device and not original with this writer. "It is reasonable to suppose that the author of the Parlement would have been familiar with this traditional scheme of three ages."³³ Often medieval artists, in all fields, depicted four ages or seven ages, all numbers being significant to the medieval mind alert to the intrinsic symbolism of numbers.

The Parlement poet may have been moved to choose three actors in his dream-drama by recalling yet another theme of medieval literature and visual art which comes under the general heading of thoughts on mortality. Again, this theme will recur in the final chapter in various forms. Specifically here, the presence of figures of youth, middle and advanced age recall "the Three Living and the Three Dead" dialogues

³³ Turville-Petre, T. "The Ages of Man in The Parlement of the Thre Ages". in M.A. 46, 1977 p.69.

as Offord has pointed out.³⁴ She cites several instances of their appearance to which can be added "The Triumph of Death", putatively a work by Francesco Traini in the Camposanto, Pisa.³⁵ Amidst a busy scene, including some of the plumpest liberated souls ever seen in medieval art, is a hunting party, interrupted in their sport by coming upon three open coffins containing respectively a freshly dead body, a putrifying corpse and a skeleton. They gesticulate and gaze ruefully upon this evidence of their own mortality.

The visual quality of The Parlement of the Three Ages has proved the greatest attraction for its readers and the tableau of Youthe, Medill-Elde and Elde contributes to this. The poet very cleverly sets worldly attractiveness of appearance against the offensively ugly figure of old age. It is, nevertheless, from this latter source that we obtain moral instruction and this naturally leads to a revaluation of the way we look at Youthe and Elde and at life itself.

Superficially, Youthe is the most attractive of

34 Op.cit. p.xl. cf. Woolf, R. the English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages. Oxford : Clarendon Press. 1968. pp.344-366.

35 Pearsall, D. and Salter, E. Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World. London : Paul Elek, 1973. plate No 28.

the three men, as described by the Dreamer, but then he is the most closely allied in interest and outlook to his approving describer. They are both young and enjoy hunting and the leisure pursuits of the upper class. The dreamer obviously heartily approves of this man and his deeds. He is "fayrere than thies othire" (1.109) and "the semely[este] segge that I seghe euer" (1.135).

He is also dressed in a manner which makes him stand out from his fellows. In comparison to theirs is the richness and colourfulness of his garments and his horse's harness. This splendour "is significant of life resurgent"³⁶ being both the natural and symbolic colour of spring. Thus the Dreamer's dream and his waking world are linked. He feels the greatest empathy with the youngest of the three figures not only for the reasons already mentioned but because both are part of a glorious May time world of Nature at its richest. The Dreamer rejoiced in the stag he had skilfully stalked and killed, Youthe rejoices in the hawking and we are inclined to rejoice in the exuberance and colourfulness of this lively world.

After the description of Youthe, the appearance of a fat, elderly man dressed in dull clothes and clinging to his money bags is bound to suffer in contrast. He

36 Speirs. op.cit. p.293.

represents middle age and is portrayed unsympathetically. The Dreamer describes him counting his wealth and comments "alle his witt in this werlde was one his wele one" (l.149). Whereas Youthe is involved in and at ease with the world surrounding him, the miserly Medill Elde is alone, isolated from human company apart from scurrying servants. "One his golde and his gude gretly he mousedede" (l.140). He is a pivotal figure, for although our perceptions of Youthe and Elde change in the course of the poem, Medill Elde remains fixed as an unpleasant, grasping, unattractive figure.³⁷

Meanwhile an even more unattractive character is introduced. The appearance of advanced age is unpleasant in the extreme. In addition to pallor of skin, baldness and white hair, the effects of age have crippled and disfigured him. In a most descriptive line, he is:

"Croked and courbede, encrampeschett for
elde" (l.154).

His blindness, toothlessness and slobbering mouth (ll.158-9) are calculated to excite the narrator's youthful disgust and this shows in the next few lines

37 Turville-Petre, "middle age is seen as the pivot around which the extremes of life are balanced, the central point of life, the peak to which youth aspires (my emphasis) and from which old age hobbles sadly away". (p.66).

where Elde's prayers are presented in the guise of bitter demands instead of humble supplication. Our narrator's point of view shows us senility unattractive to the eye and rendered more disgusting by the "envious and angry" (1.163) manner in which Elde's prayers for grace are couched.

Studies have been done, concentrating on these three figures and the tradition into which they fit.³⁸ Early in the introduction, I mentioned that the number of years allotted to each age was conventional rather than representing actual years. Beryl Rowland sums up the arguments, followed by estimations of medieval man's life expectancy and concludes by quoting some writers, from Aristotle through the Fathers, whose systems vary considerably. Biblical exegesis provides possible parallels as does the Pythagorean number system.³⁹ The symbolic importance of these numbers has largely drained away for the modern reader who will view them as a strange exaggeration of the actual medieval life span.

Leaving aside the examples which do not tally with

38 Rowland, Beryl. "The Three Ages in The Parlement of the Three Ages". Chau R, 9, 1974. pp.342-52. Turville-Petre. op.cit. Speirs. op.cit.

39 Rowland. op.cit. p.345. Shakespeare uses 3 and 7; the latter as in As You Like It. II : 7.

the three ages in this poem, there is a parable of the sower whose broadcast seed yields thirtyfold, sixtyfold and one hundredfold when cast on good ground, (Matt. xiii:8), which is interpreted by Jerome and Radbertus as specifically relating to the Ages of Man.⁴⁰ The three numbers were "similarly sanctified by Biblical tradition" because Christ began his ministry at 30, Isaac produced sons at the age of 60 and the full term of life when the new earth is created is to be one hundred (Isaiah LXV : 17-20).⁴¹

By making use of such a well-established convention as this, the writer does build up a set of expectations in the mind of his readers. That these expectations are defeated, I take leave to doubt especially when there occurs later in Rowland's article the assertion "up to this point (i.e. the end of the description of Youthe) there is no indication that the Parlement is to be read as a moral work".⁴² On the contrary, the groundwork has been well done already right through the hunting prologue and the lapse of the Narrator into a dream in which three men are hotly disputing must have triggered a response in the mind of anyone in a medieval audience. Narrators lapse into

40 ibid. pp.346-7.

41 ibid. pp.345.

42 Turville-Petre. p.70.

dreams in order that they may receive instruction and thereby pass on knowledge to their listeners, as in Pearl. The appearance of the three men disputing (1.104) limits possibilities to a certain extent - the dream will take the form of a debate - and, even before Medill Elde and Elde are formally introduced, the description of Youthe as the first of the group of three goes far towards revealing his companions' identity.

Having said that the three figures are presented as on a stage in a tableau, one should briefly note their disparities.⁴³ While Elde lies on a bed (1.152 and 1.165) and Medill Elde sits in a chair (1.136), presumably in the middle of the wood, Youthe sits high on his great steed, looking down on his elders literally and metaphorically. Again, there is a subconsciously registered rightness about Youthe because his background is more in keeping with him than with Medill-Elde and Elde. Nevertheless the signs are there to dispute this and, however unlikeable Medill Elde may appear, his criticisms of Youthe are well-founded. For all his fine show he has nothing to support his extravagance. Elsewhere in medieval literature youth is severely criticised for being on pleasure bent without

⁴³ One is particularly reminded of morality plays such as Everyman.

a thought for the future; the latter both socially and morally damning.⁴⁴

The flyting match up to the point where Medill Elde gives it that name (l.264) has certain broad resemblances to another Middle English poem of the Alliterative Revival, Wynnere and Wastoure. They are both termed "a kind of ritualistic dramatic poem".⁴⁵ Medill Elde is a Winner and Youth a Waster according to this opinion which tends to set Elde further from his younger selves.

Elde does not actually join in the argument. While Youthe and Medill-Elde dispute, he is presumably stretched out on his bed, praying. It is only when Medill Elde angrily puts a stop to the argument with :

"Fole es that with foles delys; flyte we no
lengare!" (l.264)

that Elde intervenes. "From this point Elde's attitude is that of a preacher addressing his flock, arousing not argument but awareness of folly and of the need to repent".⁴⁶

44 Turville-Petre. op.cit. p.70.

45 Ford, Boris. ed. The Age of Chaucer. Pelican Guide to English Literature, 1963. p.34.

46 Offord. op.cit. p.xxxix. The common attribution of vices, to youthe, pride; to middle age, avarice and to old age, anger and envy seems to fall away here, at least in Elde's case.

cause of his condition which emphasises the inevitability of his fate and brings him close to the enigmatic Old Man of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale who can be interpreted, amongst other ways, as Death seeking Death.⁴⁷

His description of his two former selves and his own appearance is very close to the Dreamer's earlier description of the three.⁴⁸ So the Dreamer can be said to have described them accurately; here is a figure of authority echoing his words and we have already enjoyed his detailed account of the woods in May and the stag hunt. What is at fault is the Dreamer's superficial valuation of their worth and meaning. Later on we will see how blind he is to the underlying significance of the hunting prologue. We have to thank him for his undoubted ability to describe conscientiously what he sees but rely on other guides, such as Elde, and also on ourselves, to see the true meaning.

Traditional views of the ages as types with certain characteristics would also colour the medieval audience's perception of the three dream figures. Although the positive side of Youthe is shown, one is

47 See Robinson's note. op.cit. p.731. "The figure in Chaucer becomes rather a symbol of Death itself ..." etc.

48 eg. Compare l.134 with l.270. for Youthe; ll.140-145 with ll.278-282 for Medill Elde; ll.154-8 with ll.284-287 for Elde.

also conscious of the negative side and similarly with Elde. The Narrator points up the attributes which Elde shares with those in the description of old age given by Pope Innocent III. Nevertheless he cannot be said to be "velox ad loquendam, tardus ad audiendum". "For some time he remains an enigmatic figure who takes no part in the debate."⁴⁹

Once we have heard Elde out, our impression of him is quite the opposite of the Narrator's. From line 631, where his exempla end until he departs at Death's summons at line 654, his speech is like the rounding off of a sermon. He backs up his advice with quotations from Scripture, first in Latin then given in English which provides both unanswerable authority and comprehensible instruction. He concludes by pointing out to Medill Elde and Youthe that he is but an extension of themselves which he had earlier indicated when he invited them:

"Makes 3oure mirrours bi me." (1.290)

Elde's method has much in it of the medieval sermon. For those who object to the Nine Worthies for

⁴⁹ Turville-Petre. op.cit. p.73. On page 72 he quotes Innocent's De Contemptu Mundi as follows:

"Senex facile provocatur et difficile revocatur, cito credit et tarde discredit, tenax et cupidus, tristis et querulus, velox ad loquendum, tardus ad audiendum, sed non tardus ad iram, laudat antiquos et spernit modernos, vituperat presens et commendat preteritum."

example, there is the advice of Ranulf Higden, a cleric who died about 1364:

Expedit in principio predicatori ut, quantum poterit, Deo inoffenso, auditores reddat benevolos et aptos ad audiendum, et sollicitos ad exequendum."⁵⁰

Elde quietened his congregation by calling them fools and uses popular stories to win back their goodwill before spelling out his warning again.

Although it is not impossible that the Narrator-Dreamer had benefited from his dream,⁵¹ it seems unlikely in view of his calling the dream scenes "mirthes" (l.660). He neatly reverts to lines closely imitating those that began the poem which seem less "ironically inappropriate" than showing that he is still blissfully unaware. He is not so much a person undergoing an improving experience as a catalyst for the awakening of the conscience of the poem's audience and a warning of youthful carelessness. His final invocation is the usual formality. If one reads line

50 Owst, G.R. Preaching in Medieval England. New York : Russel and Russel, 1965. p.320.

51 As Turville-Petre claims, p.75. Does the horn summon the Dreamer to Death? Surely not. It seems more to awaken him to life. In practical terms, it has been suggested that his sudden rousing at the sound of the horn reinforces the idea of the guilty poacher. Savage, H.L. "Notes on the Prologue of The Parlement of the Thre Ages". JEGP, xxix. 1930. p.75.

664 as beginning "the", as in the Ware Ms., rather than "there", then the last two lines could be spoken by the poet and not by his narrator at all. I can see no firm evidence that the Dreamer has derived more from his dream than entertainment and this increases his likeness to a camera taking pictures which the audience must then interpret for its own use.

If various critics of the poems are right in asserting that medieval man carried in his head a far greater stock of symbolic meanings attached to nature, its flora and fauna than his modern counterpart, then the richness and variety the Narrator finds in the wood bears out the argument that he is very observant but not given to reflection upon what he sees. The symbolic meanings inherent in what the Narrator sees are most important and a look at those which are concerned with the poet's message may reveal that his choice and construction display more skill than he is usually given credit for.⁵²

Over one hundred lines are devoted to the hunt prologue; almost one sixth of the total poem. Dorothy Everett, generally not impressed by the poem, calling it "a mosaic of conventions" and seeing "little sense

52 Lampe, D.E. the Poetic Strategy of the Parlement of the Thre Ages. Chau R., 7, 1972-3 pp.173-183.

of fitness or proportion" in the "far too lengthy digressions on the Nine Worthies" and the appearance of imitation of Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and other poems, grudgingly concedes that there is "some good description" and "first hand observation" in the deerstalking and hunting scenes.⁵³

The hunting of the stag was both popular pastime and necessary for survival.⁵⁴ Hunting generally was a favourite subject for artists.⁵⁵ The stag himself featured regularly in the medieval bestiaries but his mystic significance seems to go back beyond the Christian period. The "stag was a regular messenger from the faery world and thus passed into Christian hagiology".⁵⁶ He symbolises Christ or repentant man⁵⁷ and appears in conversion stories such as that of Placidius who became St Eustace. A delightful illustration of the story shows the saint, looking remarkably like a representation of Youthe from the following

53 Everett, D. Essays on Middle English, Oxford, 1959. pp.50, 52 and 51 respectively.

54 Speirs. pp.290-1.

55 For example: Tallon, J.P. trans. Illuminated Manuscripts : Medieval Hunting Scenes. G. Bise after Gaston Phoebus (1331-1391). Geneva, 1978. Skinning and quartering the deer is shown on page 63.

56 Speirs. p.292.

57 McCullough, F. Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries. University of North Carolina Press, 1962. p.172.

century, halting his horse before a stag bearing the crucified Christ between a fine spread of antlers.⁵⁸

Stags were also popularly supposed to seek out and destroy snakes (a symbol of the Devil) and to assist each other when crossing rivers. They could heal wounds by eating a certain herb.⁵⁹ All this gave ample resources to the clergy to make use of the stag in Christian exegesis. Spiers notes earlier beliefs surviving in folklore of the killing of the stag "to secure a vision or dream-guidance" and to provide "a trophy proving that the hero had arrived at manhood".⁶⁰

The poet's purpose in using the stag and the hunt may have been partly to provide a good curtain-raiser to more serious matter, but he also has available the resources of this accretion of folklore and interpretation. The Narrator arrives at the maturity necessary before being exposed to further mysteries and also opens the door to the dream world where the lesson will be given. Nevertheless, refining too much upon basically pre-Christian thought is not a good idea in this

58 The Vision of St. Eustace, Antonio Pisano (called Pisanello) c.1440. National Gallery, London. in Pearsall and Salter. plate No. 62.

59 Ansell Robin, P. Animal Lore in English Literature. London : John Murray, 1936. p.106. White, op.cit. p.37 and McCullough. op.cit. p.172.

60 Spiers. op.cit. p.292.

very Christian poem.⁶¹

Hunting the stag is obviously the Narrator's primary purpose but, in passing, he observes other features of the forest.

"The primrose, the pervynke, and piliolle þe riche
 The dewe appon dayes donkede full faire,
 ...
 The cukkowe, the cowschote, kene were þay bothen,
 And the throstills full throly threpen in the
 banks,
 ...
 The fox and the filmarte þay flede to þe erthe
 The hare hurkles by hawes" ... (11.9-19).

"Consideration of the iconographic significance of ... this initial scene may demonstrate how it subtly announces a theme in preparation for the dream vision."⁶²

The primrose represents the transience of human life, the periwinkle death and the pennyroyal has curative properties to set against the first two. The daisy also has a positive attribute of faithful love, particularly in a religious sense. A similar balance between life-affirming and life-rejecting meanings is found in the three birds where the cuckoo, representing

⁶¹ But note the pagan survival of throwing a piece of gristle to the crows. Line 80 and note.

⁶² Lampe. p.175. The following paragraph sums up this part of the article.

lust, and the wood pigeon, representing romantic love, are balanced by the song-thrush, a symbol of steadfast love. Foxes, polecats and hares connote all manner of uncleanness and the fox is associated with the Devil. With this knowledge and similar observations we see how the poet builds up the meaning of the hunt and the poacher in the forest towards a foreshadowing of the message in the rest of the poem. It may be that this ingenuity is not entirely conscious on the part of the poet and that the traditional iconography is being used unwittingly. Nevertheless, it is there.

Since the Narrator seems, to me at least, a little obtuse in appearing neither to read the signs in his surroundings, nor to evaluate properly the dream or the characters within it, who benefits from the lesson undoubtedly taught? As audience, we have been treated to what is, in effect, a sermon. The poet, perhaps unconsciously, has reacted to a diet of clerical rhetoric by producing a poem cast in the same mould.

The action of the poem takes place over a full day, from dawn to dusk.⁶³ This parallels the life of

63 Peck, R.A. "The Careful Hunter in The Parlement of the Thre Ages". ELH 39,3, 1972. He confuses the chronology of the piece by thinking that it begins at dusk. Although line 6 seems to indicate the end of the day, the actions of the wildlife are of the early morning. Note especially how pleased the birds are that "the derke was done & the daye lightenede", l.16.

man from birth to death and the actors against this backdrop are three ages of man. Before they even appear the use of themes and symbols of hunting and life and death has adumbrated the subject of the poem. Elde is seen as the summing up and the summer-up of Life and the death of the stag at the hands of the skilful hunter foreshadows his own end at the hands of Death.⁶⁴ It has even been suggested that the horn which awakes the Dreamer is Death's summons.⁶⁵

We are moving into a harsher world than the one in which The Book of the Duchess or Pearl is set. In the former mourning is temporarily kept at bay by the recollection of a good life and in the latter there is consolation in the thought of the afterlife. Elde forces his younger selves to accept aging, death and decay in the harshest possible terms. He disparages the undoubted joys and pleasures of youth but youth is the narrator of the dream and takes us back in the end to the woods in May and the essence of life, thus slightly sugaring the pill and demonstrating the consolation of life's cyclical continuity.

64 *ibid.* p.334.

65 *ibid.* p.340.

CHAPTER IV - MINOR POEMS

English writing of the fourteenth century is still not unified in language or meter. A number of dialects persist and the Alliterative Revival maintains the old native poetic form against foreign end rhymes. The poems of the previous three chapters illustrate this persistent separation.

In spite of this linguistic separation, subjects and themes recur throughout the body of surviving verse on the subject of mortality. Getting down to greater detail, phrases and whole sentences recur in different poems. Alliterative poetry to an extent relies on stock phrases, but the shorter poems of this chapter are not in the old alliterative style and yet share many phrases with The Parlement of the Thre Ages.

Perhaps one should not refine too much upon the recurrent themes of the shorter lyrics which concern the universal problem of death. The fourteenth-century scene which provoked this, to modern minds, obsession with things eschatological was considered in the introduction. Treatment of the theme produces variations in dealing with it; for example, there is none of the classical carpe diem attitude in fourteenth-century

poetry.¹ The Christian ethic informs and unifies consolatory poetry of the fourteenth century.

Nearly all the poems selected for this final chapter come from Carleton Brown's collection of fourteenth-century lyrics.² They present most of the types that this study is concerned with and limit choice to poems which are contemporaneous with the longer works. Much of the most interesting medieval poetry on the theme of death is outside this time span. ("Where beth they, beforen us weren" is from the previous century as are "Now is mon hol and soint" and "Wanne mine eyhnen misten".)

Some poems contain nearly all of the topoi within the theme of spiritual preparedness for death and judgement while others concentrate on one aspect. The progression of thought is, very roughly, recognition, acceptance, repentance. Sometimes the subject of the poem is already aware of his mortality and sometimes he

1 Woolf, op.cit. "But a macabre reminder of death could in general hardly serve effectively as an injunction to renewed dissipation for those brought up in a deeply rooted Christian society That writers of the Middle English lyric should have eschewed the carpe diem theme is not surprising: it became in itself a convention, but was not one that could blend with theirs." pp.70-1.

2 Brown, Carleton. ed. Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952. Poems from this collection are denoted by their C.B. number.

still needs to have it pointed out to him. Thereafter he must accept his human, postlapsarian condition and finally make amends for his transgressions in this world and beseech God by penitential prayers and deeds for favourable judgement in the next.

It is not the purpose of this study to deal with sermons of this period but their close resemblance in method and subject to the penitential and homiletic poems cannot be ignored. In the same way as Elde's speech to Youthe and Medill Elde sounds like a pronouncement from the pulpit, many of the poems sound like priestly exhortations. If many sermons are not great works of literary art, they do cast some light on poems which take a lot of the background knowledge to the subject of medieval preparedness for death for granted.

What do these poems reveal about fourteenth-century man's attitude to death? The answer is, almost without exception, utter terror at the approach of a very real, physical being who is an inexorable enemy of man. For a contemporary and well-known view of this anthropomorphised Death, we only have to look to Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale:

"Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Death,
That in this contree al the peple sleeth,
And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,
And wente his wey withouten words mo.
He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence."

(ll.675-9)

Death as a thief is a commonplace. "Whon stilly dep wol on hym stele", man has no chance.³ "Noiper he stintes no strokes, / Bot ay prickes and prokes / Til he vnclustri al þe lokes / þat liif ligges vnder."⁴ The only dissenting voice from this opinion is from a poem which comes as a breath of fresh air amidst the cringing and breast-beating of the great majority of writing:

"Sum men seip þat dep is a þef,
And al vnwarned wol on him stele.
And I sey nay, and make a pref,
þat dep is studefast, trewe, and lele,
And warneb vche mon of his greef
þat he wol o day wip him dele."⁵

Such equanimity is, however, very rare.

Death is also inexorable and invincible. "Wel þou wost wip-uten fayle / þat dep hap manast þe to dye."⁶ Man's inability to withstand him is seen as somehow unfair. "þou ne myght a day, dede withstand allon."⁷

"Derne dep, o-pon þe 3ong
Wip þe to strive it is strong!
Y wold be wreken of mi wrong
3if y way wist."⁸

3 C.B. 106, 1.78.

4 C.B. 27, 11.57-60.

5 C.B. 101, 11.169-74.

6 C.B. 101, 11.157-8.

7 C.B. 81, 1.16.

8 C.B. 27, 11.67-72.

The illustrations to the Danse Macabre show very well the sort of figure this response conjures up. The skeletal leader, or leaders, of this Dance of Death seem to have provided the poet with his image. Death, the hunter, with his spear is a similar popular conception.

"þer nis no liif þat he wil lete
 To lache when him list.
 When he is lopen out of les,
 No pray noman after pes,
 For non giftes þat ges
 Mai no man til him trist."⁹

Reproach is also levelled at Death for his secrecy. He is "derne deþ" whom no man can outwit. A mother grimly lulls her baby to sleep with "deth ssal com wiþ a blast vte of a wel dimme horre".¹⁰ Another poem warns, "Deth is hud, mon, in þy gloue / Wyth derne dunt þat shal he proue".¹¹

Logically, the transition from this life to the eternal one is to be welcomed, but this does not make death any easier. "Scharp and strong is mi deying" says one¹² and the uncomfoting mother croons, "deþ þe sal

9 Ibid. 11.67-72.

10 C.B. 28. L.27.

11 C.B. 23. 11.31-2.

12 C.B. 53. 1.5.

be-tide wiþ bitter bale in brest".¹³ The answer to this anomaly must lie partly in the comparative ease with which one comprehends the physical compared with the difficulties of imagining the afterlife in spiritual terms. The Narrator-Dreamer in Pearl is a good example of the difficulty in seeing the Other World in any but concrete, physical terms.

In approaching this matter by contemplating death first, we have put the cart before the horse in a way because, before one can fear the horrors of death one must be made aware of its existence, nay, imminence. Hence the large number of memento mori poems using various devices to drive the message home.

"Remember thou art mortal" is a reminder used down the centuries to counter wordly vanity, not only that of Roman generals in their triumphs. One theme occurring regularly in this selection of poems, brings us back to The Parlement of the Thre Ages. Representatives of the Nine Worthies are mentioned at length in "Cur Mundus Militat" in a typical ubi sunt formula. The poet dwells on a particular attribute of each one and dismisses the seven examples with:

"Where ben þese woriþi þat weren here to-foren -
boiþe kingis & bischopis, her power is al loren."¹⁴

¹³ C.B. 28. 1.34.

¹⁴ C.B. 134. LL.21-2.

It is said in tones of surprise. Even these great men cannot resist death.

In the poem, editorially entitled "The Bird with Four Feathers" and starting in the manuscript, "Here bygynnith the tretys of Parce mihi domine" some famous characters reappear but move as subjects of exempla than strictly as part of the Nine Worthies drama. Sampson, David and Solomon are examples of men falling from grace through the sin of lust and Nebuchadnezzar through pride, but the first three are regular members of the Old Testament trio and were probably put together here because of the influence and popularity of the Worthies. "Ubi sunt was an important theme to the homilists and didactic poets on the medieval period. It had become the most distinctive weapon in their rhetorical armoury, a question which controls the answer, which makes its point more forcibly than any statement."¹⁸

Before Death comes, and his coming will be indicated by the proprietates mortis, he will give enough warning of his approach by the signs of aging in

¹⁸ Cross, J.E. "The Sayings of St Bernard and Ubi Sount Qui Ante Nos Fuerount". RES, New Series 9, (1958), p.6.

the body.¹⁹ God preserves the old to be mirrors to the young and so that wicked men may expiate their sins by acts of charity to the aged.²⁰ Again, there is a reflection from The Parlement of the Thre Ages when Elde advises his younger companions to make a mirror of him so that they may see their own future (ll.290-1).

Almost without exception, old age and the old are depicted as detestable and detested. "An Old Man's Prayer" is concerned not so much with repentance and pardon but with a comparison of his strength and beauty of former days and his present condition:

"Nou is marred al my meyn,
 away is al my wunne
 ...
 Nou y may no fynger folde
 ...
 A goute me haþ y-greyped so,
 and oþer eueles monye mo."²¹

Not only have strength and beauty gone (c.f. Parlement, ll.152-165) but even the servants and all younger people despise and avoid him:

19 Unfortunately, no suitable example of this topos seems to come from this period but see Gray, Douglas. Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972. p.194.

20 C.B. 101. LL.97-116. the idea of age as a mirror occurs again.

21 C.B. 6. ll.11...25.

"pat feyre founden me mete & cloht,
 hue wriep away as hue were wroht
 such is euel ant elde."²²

The tone of "An Old Man's Prayer" is very bitter in marked contrast to the "The Bird with Four Feathers".³ The young man out walking in the woods (not unlike the Narrator of Parlement) sits down and watches the birds including one which has lost its feathers. They represent, the bird lamentingly explains, the transitory gifts of youth, beauty, strength and riches which the penitent has sinfully misused and now grievously regrets. The younger man rejoices in the bird's warning and repents.

This penitent tone is the most common in the recitations of physical good lost in old age, but one poem has a kindlier, gentler message. "Against my Will I take my Leave" rehearses all the hopes and fears of the old man approaching death but concludes each point with a calm regret that he must now leave a world which he obviously found pleasant and enjoyable.²⁴ He remembers his life with pleasure and recognises that it must end. Comparing the wild rantings against the really harmless enjoyment of friends and company which

22 Ibid. ll.44-6.

23 C.B. 121.

24 C.B. 97.

appear in other poems, his polite thanks and farewells to "gode men alle ...3onge and olde ... grete and smalle" and his recognition of the positive side of "frendschipe & ... 3iftes goode"²⁵ are more indicative of a mature person who has made his peace with God and goes to his death with calm courage than the host of narrators who, having enjoyed the world now pretend they hated it.

Poets who write in this bitter and sometimes cynical vein²⁶ are less likely to be approaching death than to be attempting an exercise in self-mortification in deliberate or unconscious imitation of the pervasive sermon style. It is impossible to think that even fourteenth-century man, whose surroundings gave him good reason to anticipate the imminence of death, actually meditated upon his end twenty four hours a day and never enjoyed life. Rosemary Woolf considers the paradox of fear provoked by death-lyrics at the beginning of her chapter on Lyrics on Death.²⁷

Naturally, not everyone will find it in himself to

25 Ibid. ll.57-59 and 9.

26 The cynicism might have a clerical influence since most of the things decried are those that the clergy would have been obliged to renounce. In other words, sour grapes.

27 op.cit. p.67ff.

attempt contemplation of death. One's instinct is to avoid the awful. The young man walking in the forest is forced by the stricken bird to consider his old age. Less pleasant messengers come from beyond the grave and confront the unwilling living with the terrors of decomposition of the once loved body. Both in poetry, though not so much in this selection, and in sermons all the stops are pulled out to convince the hearer of the disgusting nature of his existence. "Here was the unailing cure for the flippant, as well as for human pride and self-complacency in general", says Owst who quotes a couple of sermon examples the second of which translates the words of St Bernard thus:

"What is man, he seith, but a stynkyng slyme, and after that a sake ful of donge, and at the laste mete to wormes."²⁸

This highly evocative picture provided many poets and preachers with ammunition for their didactic works. Old age was bad enough, but death and the return of the body of the earth from which it was made had infinitely more power to seize the imagination.

"Of erth & slame als was adam maked to noyes & nede".²⁹

28 Owst. op.cit. p.341.

29 C.B. 81. L.3.

The macabre delight taken in the prospect of the corpse falling prey to that odd creation of imaginative naturalism, the great flesh-eating worm, must have seemed excessive even to the different sensibilities of the fourteenth century. "þou þat art but wormes mete, poudir, & dust" apostrophizes one poet, while another promises, "þi fleschly foode þe wormes wol fye".³⁰ The blow to pride is dwelt upon and the putridness of the corpse, - "Fowl and stinkande is mi roting".³¹

Examples of this fascination with the corpse's fate are legion but one short lyric sums things up quite well, though it gives little idea of the unpleasant detail many of them indulge in.³²

"Wrecche mon, wy artou proud.
 þat art of herth I-maked?
 hydyr ne browtestou no schroud,
 bot pore þou came & naked.
 Wen þi soule is faren out
 þi body with erthe y-raked
 þat body þat was so rank and loud
 Of alle men is i-hated."³³

The language of these poems is, unpuningly, down to

30 C.B. 100. 1.65.

31 C.B. 53. 1.7.

32 Leaving nothing to the imagination is the dialogue quoted by Gray. op.cit. p.206-7.

33 C.B. 133. The favourite sentiment that even one's friends will reject one is glanced at tersely in the last line.

earth and figurative speech is little used.

Within the same family but often treated separately is, or are, the "Erthe upon Erthe" poem or poems since virtually the same verses crop up widely. Since the poem relies entirely on the punning use of the word "earth" it is not surprising to learn that it remains almost exclusively English.³⁴ The basic verse from the Harley ms. is short enough to be quoted in full:

"Erþe toc of erþe / erþe wƿ woh,
 Erþe oþer erþe to þe erþe droh,
 Erþe leyde erþe in erþene þroh,
 þo hevede erþe of erþe erþe ynch."

All this insistence on the worthlessness of the body demonstrates the dichotomy perceived between the spiritual part of man - the soul - and the material body. A further theme allied to the previous one is the Soul and Body debate in which each reproaches the other for having, respectively, not kept the body from sin or having imprisoned the good soul in the evil of a body.

It is always the much maligned body which is at fault, being, as it is, part of the despised world. Since the world is part of God's creation it might seem strange that the Christian religion treated it with

³⁴ Murray, H.M.R. The Middle English Poem "Erthe upon Erthe". EETS 141. London. 1911. p.ix. The poem quoted is found on p.1.

such contempt. Nevertheless it represented impermanence against the eternity of Heaven and all writers of didactic and homiletic verse seize on some aspect of the uncertainty to drive home their message, that God is the only immutable.

The latter message, which should be comforting, is all too often drowned out in the clamour of instances of the fickleness of this world. Writers frequently turned to nature and to the universally visible cycle of the seasons to illustrate the theme of the cursus annorum in relation to man's life. This usage goes back to the Bible; the passages on vanity from Ecclesiastes are made much of but the Song of Solomon also provides an example.³⁵

"Wher-to is a man more liche / þanne to a flour þat springes In may," enquires one,³⁶ while the penitent, making his way into the country from Peterborough, observes how "skr{y}nkeþ rose & lillie flour / þat whilen ber þat suet sauour / in somer þat suet tyde".³⁷ "[F]alewen shule þy floures", he warns four ladies to which one replies, "y falewe as flour y-let

35 II : 11-13.

36 C.B. 121. 11.229-30.

37 C.B. 10. 11.1-3 and 56.

forfare"³⁸ and, if we accept Reed's interpretation of a difficult line, all the green of spring and summer "faleweþ al bydene".³⁹

Not only the seasons provide a lesson in mutability. One cannot believe "þe waginge wiynd" or "letters written in þ'is"⁴⁰ and "[i]in snou3 and reyn is nou arest".⁴¹ Yet, while the fate of the body may provoke disgust along with fear, the passing of the seasons may lend another mood to reflections. "But there are other attitudes to transience and death, which seem not so much arguments appropriate to an occasion, seems an unwelcome limitation of human sensibility ... transience confers on things a poignant beauty and vitality."⁴²

There is always danger in excess and while one may respond to a sermon which makes the point:

"What ys lordshype and heynesse,
What helpth katel and rychesse
Gold and soelver away shal uáre..."⁴³

38 C.B. 6. l.90. c.f. C.B. 101. L.43. these "buyrde[s] so briht in bour" are "þritti wynter" old, like Youthe.

39 Reed. E.B. "Wynter Wakeneth At My Care." MLN, XLIII, 1928. p.83.

40 C.B. 134.

41 C.B. 106.

42 Woolf. op.cit. p.71.

43 C.B. 23. ll.16-18.

or shudder at the thought that after death:

"syker þou be þare es nane ...
Of al þi kyth wald slepe þe with, a nyght vnder
schete."⁴⁴

these anxieties fade after a longer or shorter time and the beauty and vitality of nature overcome grim thoughts about their transience. Although man does not return year after year so that, like Gawain, we could contend "thagh my hede falle on the stones / I con not hit restore"⁴⁵ yet consolation can be found if one accepts the Pearl poet's lesson that, just as grain has to die before more grain can grow, so man has to die before he can "grow" to heavenly status.⁴⁶

The true and lasting fear of death lies not in the loss of this world, nor in the pain of death itself but in ignorance. The three sorrowful things are:

"þat on is ich sal awe,
þat oþer is ich ne wot wilk day.
þat þridde is mi meste kare
i ne woth nevre wuder i sal fare."⁴⁷

44 C.B. 81. 11.35-6.

45 Waldron, R.A. ed. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Edward Arnold, 1970, (11.2282-3).

46 11.29-32.

47 Quoted in Woolf. op.cit. p.86.

The most hopeful of the poets alludes to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in urging his hearers to be always prepared:

"þou wost never whonne þi lord wol calle,
Loke þat þi laumpe beo brennyng briht."⁴⁸

Man shall "wonyen he not whare".⁴⁹ "Ho wot ... / Wher mon bi-comeþ whon he schal dye."⁵⁰ We have returned to Death, the unlooked-for thief.

With the lyrics on mortality we have entered a world quite different from the humane restraint of Chaucer and the comparative refinement of feeling found in the Pearl poet's discourse. Elde in The Parlement of the Thre Ages approaches the declamatory and terror-provoking methods of the anonymous poets who often wallow in the foul details of bodily decay.

The savage delight continues over several centuries to occupy the preacher and inform the poetry. With what result in terms of genuine and lasting spiritual preparation we naturally do not know. Reasons for an obsession which seems, to say the least, tasteless to us now came down to the difficulty of expressing things

48 C.B. 97. 11.43-4.

49 C.B. 97 11.43-4.

50 C.B. 106. 11.45-6.

spiritual, about which nothing can be known, if indeed, there is anything to know, to an audience or congregation capable largely of understanding only the concrete and physical.

We have to make allowances, amidst this deluge of death lyrics, for the fact that, being in the nature of religious works their survival, at the hands of the small body of literate people, the clergy, was assured far sooner than that of secular works. This inevitable imbalance tends to distort modern views of medieval preoccupations. Yet, even with the scales weighted against them, we have enough verse which does not fall into the didactic pigeon-hole, to be sure enough that medieval man's concerns were not exclusively eschatological. As Chaucer's Host requested so many would agree that they liked to hear both "som murthe or som doctryne".⁵¹

If most modern sensibilities recoil from this direct confrontation with reality, an attitude of determined ignorance is no less peculiar than one of determined concentration. A generality like this is not intended to imply that the one century is concerned with nothing but death and the other with everything else but, nor that the intervening centuries achieved a

51 Robinson. p.167.

fine balance. Shakespeare often deals with the matter in much the same tone as his fourteenth-century forebears. Hamlet dwells much upon his "quietus" and there are two famous speeches in Measure for Measure which echo old fears and hopes.⁵² John Donne, somewhat whimsically no doubt, tried on his shroud before actually requiring it. "Webster was much possessed by death" claims Eliot⁵³ and the medieval attitudes linger on in the words of Yeats:

"Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is."⁵⁴

The substitution of soul for heart turns these lines into an echo of medieval mysticism. These echoes are faint, however. It is in prose of an entirely different kind, more akin to the Ars Moriendi, that the problem of the "dying animal" is brought out into the open today.

52 The Duke's speech, "Be absolute for death" deals with the transience of life, the horrors of old age, the unreliability of worldly things. Claudio is not convinced. "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where; / To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot; / This sensible warm motion to become / A kneaded clod" etc (Act IV:sc i).

53 "Whispers of Immortality" from Collected Poems, Faber and Faber, 1974.

54 "Sailing to Byzantium" (ll.22-24), Gardner. p.821. From the same poem comes the line: "An aged man is but a paltry thing" which Elde would no doubt have agreed with.

CONCLUSION

While the poetry selected for this study does not, by any stretch of the imagination, cover the huge amount available, and does not even represent the major part of fourteenth-century verse on the subject of death, it does cover most of the themes pursued in the whole corpus. So what conclusions appear as a result of this gathering of poems? That question will, I hope, be answered after a summing up of the works and a digression to a modern work allied to them but from a different discipline.¹

This study has been concerned with works in the consolation genre and has lead on to other poetry which hardly seems consolatory in the comforting sense of the word.² The works discussed in the last two chapters appear to reflect most accurately the temper of the age. The same historian who wrote of the horrors of the Black Death goes on to say:

1 For bringing this work to my attention and linking it with the Ars Moriendi; I am indebted to Professor E. Raidt of Wits. It is Kübler-Ross, E. On Death and Dying. London : Tavistock Publications, 1969.

2 Consolation is an act of comforting and, although superficially not all qualifying for this genre, the poems selected offer a variety of attitudes which help their audiences to come to terms with death.

"A spiritual feverishness showed that men were unhappy. Wandering fanatics, scourging each other till the blood ran, passed through London. Monks broke from their cloisters, villeins ran off from their manors. Never was life more luxurious or dress more fantastic among the rich. All classes asked more wealth, higher wages, or profitable war: walking in a spiritual desert, finding no peace."³

This "spiritual feverishness" is very marked in the lyrics which follow the style of contemporary sermons. Such excessive religious fervour is quite absent from The Book of the Duchess and, although the writer of Pearl displays a deep religious faith, high drama, or melodrama, is absent from his experiences. He receives the vision, is comforted and returns to communion in the established church instead of indulging in fantastic displays of penitence and self-mortification. His action of casting himself upon his daughter's gravemound is a giving way to unbearable grief, not a dramatised penance for imaginary shortcomings.

Although we cannot know what prompted the other anonymous poets of this selection to put pen to paper, I venture to suggest that it was a different urging from that which inspired Chaucer and the Pearl poet. Chaucer, we can be almost certain, wrote an occasional

³ Feiling. p.235. Remarks to Youthe about his extravagance and all the criticisms concerning expensive fashions are probably a reflection of the "fantastic" dress of the age.

poem to console his patron and commemorate that patron's wife. From the evidence of the poem, the Pearl poet was working through his grief at the death of a small daughter. Did a particular death of a close relative or friend prompt these other effusions?

There seems to be little to suggest that they did. The Parlement of the Thre Ages is about Death in general and how Everyman ought to face it, and even the other poems written in the first person frequently substitute violence of language for sincere feeling. No mother would address her child as "a pilgrim in wikidnis ibor".⁴ If this is "An adult lullaby" as Davies terms it, then it is even more distant from human, individual occasion.⁵ In other words, while Chaucer and the Pearl poet were dealing with an actual death, their contemporaries were dealing with death generally in poems which were largely intellectual exercises. This is not to say that they were only going through the motions of being horrified at the inevitable consequence of human existence, or that they were insincere in their calls to turn to God.

Nevertheless, the family resemblance of each poem to another indicates a common school of thought. Parle-

4 C.B. 28. 1.25.

5 p.106.

ment may be a much longer poem and appears to be concerned with other subjects, but we have seen how themes and symbols of death permeate the texture of even the seemingly light-hearted prologue. The use of the Nine Worthies to illustrate the ubi sunt topos, Death as a sly hunter or thief against whose wiles no-one is proof and the miseries of old age are but three of the common themes which recur and recur.

However, if Parlement and the minor poems come out of the same stable, they do not share it with Pearl or The Book of the Duchess. Chaucer explores a form of consolation which involves a gradual revelation of loss. From the point of view of the audience the poem has to be taken as a whole because death is not mentioned until midway through the work and only confirmed at its very end. From Gaunt's point of view, being more attuned by the recent loss of his duchess and therefore more receptive to signs and, moreover, knowing in advance Chaucer's intention to honour the lady, the poem could be understood serially. Whether one hears or reads it a first or subsequent time has a great bearing on what one gets out of it. With the knowledge and expectation gained from a first reading, it is possible to concentrate on one aspect such as how one handles the untimely death of a beloved partner.

This is achieved in slow steps. Chaucer's Narrator has first to overcome his own loss, which is not to

death necessarily, and while doing this he encounters two other ways of meeting death. The first is, in Christian terms here paganized, a sinful way, against the will of God, and the second is potentially the same. This mourner, though, illustrates an alternative by redirecting his grief towards the production of a loving portrait of the woman he has lost. The sharp edge of unnaturally violent mourning is blunted and, since grief eventually exhausts itself, a temporary respite can aid the healing process.

The Pearl poet isolates his narrator (or himself?) from human contact and gives him a God-granted vision of his lost "jewel". Thus he is assured that his little daughter's soul is safe in Heaven and he receives instruction in the error of his perceptions of this life, the next and God's will for both. The message is heavily doctrinal, the structure strictly observed and the whole poem turns neatly back to its initial words which have now become charged with a different meaning.

The comparatively savage, no-holds-barred tone of the remaining works under consideration comes as a shock after The Book of the Duchess and Pearl. By sheer weight of numbers they seem to represent the outlook of the majority. On the other hand, their likeness to contemporary sermons and their haranguing tone indicates rather a homiletic purpose. In fact, they are sermons in verse.

Their ever more violent language and images; their harping on decay of the body; the contempt with which they treat God-created man and his world; what sort of idea of the love of God could this have given their hearers? The answer might lie partially in the social background. The advent of the Black Death, if not provoking, at least hastened far-reaching change in a society not squeamish or delicate in its everyday living. Excess may have fed on success and love of effect so that, where one preacher urged his flock to consider their ends, the next would urge the contemplation of the tomb and a third the rotting body. Poets seem to have come under their influence as well as that of the traditions of consolation poetry.

Before reviewing attitudes revealed by these various poetic works, it might be interesting to look at a study of death and dying written roughly six centuries later, Kübler-Ross begins:

"death has always been distasteful to man and probably always will be the ending [of life] is always attributed to a malicious intervention."⁶

The attribution to Death of a presence, a name and armaments, coupled with a poor reputation, upholds this statement as far as the fourteenth century is concerned.

⁶ op.cit. p.2.

She says later that one might conclude:

"that our great emancipation, our knowledge of science and of man, had given us better ways to prepare ourselves and our families for this inevitable happening."

This is not the case because "dying nowadays is in many ways ... dehumanized".⁷ We defend ourselves psychologically from modern, impersonal, violent death by trying to keep it at a distance, she concludes.

We are not directly concerned here with her suggestions on how to remedy an unsatisfactory situation in hospitals or her actual case studies but some of her passing remarks are interesting. She suggests contemplation of our own death and encouraging others to contemplate theirs.⁸ We may achieve inner peace "by facing and accepting the reality of our own death".⁹

Religion is not a primary interest in her study but she does make two points. Firstly:

"[i]n the old days more people seemed to believe in God unquestioningly; they believed in a hereafter, which was to relieve people of their suffering and their pain. There was a reward in heaven..."¹⁰

7 op. cit. p. 6.

8 op. cit. p. 12.

9 op. cit. p. 16.

10 op. cit. p. 13.

Consequently, with the loss of God, "suffering has lost its meaning". Towards the end of the book she speaks of religious patients. (She admits she offers no precise definition of "religious".) They, "seemed to differ little from those without a religion....The majority of patients were in between, with some form of religious belief but not enough to relieve them of conflict and fear".¹¹

The five stages the dying pass through are each dealt with in a chapter. The first is denial and isolation which the medieval mind had little chance to enjoy. One may however assume a real or imagined desire to ignore death or deny it in the apostrophes to men in the memento mori genre. The continual argument along the lines of "you may not believe it, but death is after you" are admittedly longer-term warnings addressed to the apparently healthy. Modern man, not commonly having in mind the picture of the Danse Macabre, must be more prosaic.

After denial, according to Kübler-Ross, comes anger. One can see this in the many instances of querulous demands for reasons why the individual has to die. These are most often complaints against death since the real "culprit" is God and one cannot safely

¹¹ op.cit. p.237.

reproach Him. Man complains that he has never enough time and that his death is unfair to which the theological answer is that, since God gave the life in the first place, it is His to take away especially since man, in the shape of Adam, has so misused it. Hence the idea that death is payment of a debt which gives rise to the use of legal language.¹²

The bargaining phase which follows is not apparent in the fourteenth century. Any idea that one could persuade God to act contrary to his will or that Death would disobey his orders is not to be thought of. However, we do remember Thomas à Kempis (p.18) that God "is not quemed wip 3iftes". This sort of statement quashes any idea of bargaining. Likewise Death will not be deflected from his duty. This certainly lends a gloating air to some poems:

"Mony a wiht wenes ful wel
 Out of þis world þei schal neur wende;
 ...
 Now trust riht wel þei schal be tenede,
 Ar bodi and soule a-two be torn.
 Of erþly ese þis is þe ende:"¹³

After the realisation that Death will not stay his hand comes a state of depression and this is very evident in the selection of poems. "Against my Will I

12 e.g. C.B. 101. 11.61-68.

13 C.B. 116. 11.49-55.

take my Leave" is the statement of someone forced and, although that poem shows acquiescence, it also displays a love of life and restrained sorrow at its approaching end. Those poems put in the mouth of old men often indicate this reluctance. "An Old Man's Prayer" is a picture of crabbed old age which might well be glad of death for, not only has his body grown loathsome but he is unkindly treated and scorned. That is not the case:

"Dredful dep, why wolt þou dare
 bryng þis body þat is so bare
 ant yn bale ýbounde?"¹⁴

The final division is that where acceptance is reached and the patient can die in peace. A great deal is made of this acceptance. In modern times it is an acceptance of death, an amorphous, faceless something which cuts one off from life. To medieval man it marked a resignation to God's will which should be a permanent state of mind rather than an occasional surrender. The poet to whom the world was dear but transient suggests:

"But leue we vre disputisoun,
 And leeue on him þat al hap wrou3t."¹⁵

Kübler-Ross is dealing mostly with the dying and

14 C.B. 6 11.86-88.

15 C.B. 106. 11.97-98. Elde has reached this stage. "Dethe dynges one my dore, I dare no lengare byde." (l.654).

little with those observing death except doctors, nurses and priests who have to deal with it professionally. (She does say that the presence of family can be helpful but their role is not treated in great detail.) The poems divide between those where the subject foresees his imminent death and speaks to warn others and those where he is less immediately involved and merely delivers a homily. (There are exceptions such as "The Bird with Four Feathers", which might be a cameo version of The Parlement of the Thre Ages, both of which have the Narrator instructed by a third party.)

Given the inevitable disparity between the twentieth-century medical work as an arbitrary selection of fourteenth-century verse, the evidence shows remarkably little change in man's attitude to death. Death was and is fearsome, but fourteenth-century man turned more readily to the support of friends and relatives and chiefly, as the poems show, to religious consolation.

Still, medieval man, with little excuse, feared death. Under the wing of the Church he should have felt confident and happy. Yet the evidence of his literature plainly shows the opposite. Two questions remain. Why did this fear exist and why was the whole business dealt with in so repulsive a fashion? The poetry reveals some facets of the answer and the background against which they were written some more.

Faith was not enough for most people to allay the fears of this adventure into an unknown land. The horrific visions conjured up by medieval stone masons and artists of the horrors of Hell must have played on the minds particularly of those weakened by illnesses preceding death. This fear of the unknown was enhanced by the very real fear that Heaven was not assured and for this the ministers of the Church were largely responsible.

The politics of religion is not part of this study but one cannot ignore the role of religion in any field of human activity at this epoch. A look at Chaucer's pilgrims shows how the Church permeated medieval life. The power of the Church undoubtedly played a rôle in the fear expressed in the literature of mortality. Doctrines of the afterlife grew up and were undoubtedly devoutly believed and, though the Pope and the Church came under fire a great deal in the fourteenth century, the clergy's power over ordinary people seems to have shown little sign of waning.

Friars might be attacked and sundry clerical abuses, but the Church covered herself by preaching that one bad priest did not make a bad church. (Chaucer balances his clerical rogues against the good Parson and the Nun's Priest.) Papal credibility waned during the Babylonian Captivity, but St Peter's successor still held the power to bind and loose and the only route to

the safety of Heaven lay through the Church. The power of this moral monopoly increased when it was so easy to transgress and thus fail the entrance requirements. In the highly charged atmosphere of the fourteenth century with such phenomena as the plague (almost an ally of the preacher in this respect) to deal with it is scarcely surprising that an institution such as the Church remained securely in control.¹⁶

But intellectually and practically, the success of the Church in gradually building up the picture of Heaven and Hell, of having them accepted as solid truths and then of inventing Purgatory, does sound a little farfetched to these more cynical and less religious times.¹⁷ Why were these inventions thought necessary?

Earlier on I said that the chief problem with Heaven and Hell is that we cannot really know anything about them. Nevertheless, it is impossible to guide a flock of simple, uneducated people towards God without some easily visualised carrot or stick. Even the

¹⁶ To add to Everyman's confusion were summoners who would find a sin in the most innocent act and Pardoners who claimed that God could be "quemed with 3iftes". Kempis.p.18.

¹⁷ On the invention of Purgatory, see Le Goff, Jacques. The Birth of Purgatory. trans. A. Goldhammer. University of Chicago Press, 1984.

mystics dealt in terms of fire and brimstone in Hell and these people must generally have been on a higher academic and intellectual plane than the average parish congregation. Although some of the prose works referred to in this study (e.g. De Imitatione Christi), display a mystic bent, the poetry on the whole causes a blockage in contemplation. Instead of building a path from this life to the next, the mind is forced to stay earthbound and can go no further than the evidence of the grave.

Just as there is the danger that a simple person, encouraged to worship the Blessed Virgin in front of a physical representation of her may end up praying to the statue or icon, so does the attempt to present the afterlife in terms that people can understand run the risk of being taken for fact. "Life" can only be visualised in terms of this life and what begins as a bridge to understanding becomes a dead end.

Medieval preachers seem to have fallen headlong into the trap. Since their listeners were human and fallible and the standards of conduct demanded were unrealistically high, they transgressed time and again. The only answer seemed to be to intensify the horrors and they piled Pelion on Ossa. Under this assault the original message got lost.

The state of society at the time explains to a

large extent why it was thought necessary to dwell on the physical unpleasantness of death. In some ways it seems to have been an expiation of man's sinful penance for the sinful state of man and scourging the mind may have been deemed to serve a similar purpose.

Because these poems tell their message so loudly, other poems of gentler tone may easily be drowned out. Amidst the exercise in penitence and horrors of the tomb lurk brigher and more cheerful thoughts. The poet of "Against my Will I take my Leave" departs from life unwillingly but resigned to God's grace. Another who declares "This World fares as a Fantasy" offers practical advice:

"But make we murie & sle care,
 And worschipe we god whil we ben here;
 Spende vr good and luytel spare,
 And vche mon cheries o ures cheere" (ll.111-114).

The material on which he has based this poem is the same as the most morbid poet had to work on but his conclusion is a much more cheerful one.

If the entire selection of poems in this study is balanced, the optimistic against the pessimistic, then one has to conclude that, in spite of strong opposition, optimism wins the day. Even in these violent days exposure to scenes of death must be far less than for medieval man so that the reverse of Kübler-Ross' state-

ment may be true. We fear death because we successfully keep its day-to-day appearance at a distance: medieval man, while still fearful, was accustomed to it by familiarity.

It was an age of religious excess seen in all forms of art so that we recoil with horror from things which did not strike medieval sensibilities as disgusting. A concrete example is public executions. If those sort of reactions could be transposed to literature and painting, we might have a truer picture of the effect they had on medieval man and on his attitude to death.

From Chaucer we have seen that the reality of death can be handled with the greatest delicacy; from the Pearl poet, with the greatest faith. The Parlement of the Thre Ages deals more robustly with the problem of facing death before it comes, rather than mourning its victims and the minor poems pronounce the reality, which has to be faced, in a variety of ways from quiet resignation to bitter loathing and terror. The decline of religion in the present century has meant not only the loss of Hell, which terrified medieval man, but also the loss of Heaven which reassured him.

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