Conjuring the Dead in *St Erkenwald*

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The Middle English poem *St Erkenwald* is one of the most well-known literary artefacts of late medieval England. Found uniquely in BL, MS Harley 2250, the story concerns the discovery of a strangely preserved corpse in the foundations of St Paul's cathedral and the dialogue that ensues between the corpse and the eponymous Erkenwald, the incumbent bishop of London. While previous scholarship has mainly focused on the poem's final miracle, wherein the corpse—revealing itself to be that of a pagan judge—is baptized by Erkenwald's tears, little attention has been given to the initial conjuration formula uttered by Erkenwald, in lines 179–84, that compels the corpse to speak. The aim of this article, then, is to explore the narrative and thematic significance of Erkenwald's conjuration, contextualizing the bishop's speech act within the wider cultural practices of exorcism and apotropaic protection against demons and the dead. It will be argued that, rather than being a rote exclamation to move the narrative forward, Erkenwald's conjuration augments the poem's overarching theme of the efficacy of orthodox religious practice.

The dialogue between the living and the dead forms the dramatic centrepiece of the alliterative fourteenth-century poem *St Erkenwald.* Found uniquely in the BL, MS Harley 2250, a religious miscellany (*c.*1477), the poem captures an equally unique episode in the life of the eponymous seventh-century saint.[1] The narrative begins with the discovery of a preternaturally preserved corpse during the construction of St Paul's cathedral, in London. Neither the clerks of St Paul's nor the citizens of London can account for the corpse's identity and wonder vainly who it might be. Erkenwald, the bishop of London, is soon called in to help. Compelled by Erkenwald to speak, the corpse reveals itself to be that of a worthy pagan judge who lived in the reign of Belinus, and bemoans the fact that its soul was condemned to Hell as a consequence of having lived before the time of Christ. Moved to tears, Erkenwald 'accidentally' baptizes the dead man, ensuring his soul's salvation while the body itself crumbles to dust.

The aim of this investigation will be to analyse a critical but curiously overlooked facet of Erkenwald's encounter with the dead judge: the initial speech act that forced the corpse to reveal the truth about its identity and plight. Scholarship on *St Erkenwald* has tended to focus on the questions of how, why, and where it was composed. It has been suggested that the poem originated in 1386 as part of the overarching strategy by the incumbent bishop of

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[1] For a recent discussion of this manuscript, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'BL MS Harley 2250: A Fifteenth-Century Cheshire Miscellany', *Nottingham Medieval Studies,* 67 (2023), 229–46. For an overview of the literary history of the cult of St Erkenwald, see Eamon Duffy, 'St Erkenwald: London's Cathedral Saint and His Legend', in Janet Backhouse (ed.), *The Medieval English Cathedral: Papers in Honour of Pamela Tudor-Craig: Proceeding of the 1998 Harlaxton Symposium* (Donington, 2003), 150–67.

London, Robert Braybrook, to advertise Erkenwald's cult at St Paul's by reintroducing two feast days dedicated to the saint. However, not all scholars agree that the poem can be dated around the time of Braybrook's restitutions, with some suggesting that it could have been composed as late as the mid fifteenth century.[2] Given that the only extant version of the poem was written in a Cheshire dialect and yet displays an intimate knowledge of the London cathedral and its surroundings, it has been further argued that the author was likely a Cheshire-born clerk in the employ of St Paul's, tasked with producing the tale as part of an 'in-house celebration' of the saint.[3]

Alongside these more local concerns, the renewed interest in Erkenwald can also be seen as part of a wider orthodox response to Wycliffite and Lollard criticisms of the efficacy of the Church sacraments. The success of the judge's baptism offers a firm rebuttal to those who doubted whether the sacraments were absolutely necessary for the salvation of Christian (and, indeed, non-Christian) souls. Although, as Jennifer Sisk notes, the accidental nature of the miracle provides a vaguely 'heterodox subtext' to the poem—Erkenwald's contingent utterance of the baptismal formula occurring just as his tears fall upon the corpse (ll. 315–23)—the importance of sacramental language as a mechanism for salvation nonetheless remains a critical concern.[4] Where St Erkenwald falls on the thorny issue of universal salvation is, however, still open to conjecture.[5]

From debates surrounding its London origins, authorship, literary influences, and extant manuscript context, to its function as an expression of contemporary religious tensions, as well as its possible critique of the act of history writing itself, St Erkenwald has thus been approached from many different vantage points.[6] However, despite the revelation of the fate of the judge's soul forming one of the main areas of interest when interrogating the relative orthodoxy of the poem, there is a curious scholarly lacuna where the initial interaction between the bishop and the corpse is concerned.[7] Much more has been said about the conclusion of the dialogue and the judge's entry into heaven (i.e., the miracle itself) than about the quasi-mystical speech act—found at the very midpoint of the text—that precipitated the miracle in the first place:

> Then he turnes to þe toumbe and talkes to þe corce,
> Lyftand vp his egh-lyddes he loused such wordes:
> 'Now, lykhame þat þou lies, layne þou no lenger!
> Sythen Jesus has iuggit today his ioy to be schewyd,
> Be þou bone to his bode, I bydde in his behalue,
> As he was bende on a beme quen he his blode schedde,
> As þou hit wost wyterly and we hit wele leuen,

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[2] See for example, Lynn Staley, 'The Man in Foul Clothes and a Late Fourteenth-Century Conversation About Sin', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 24 (2002), 1–47 (at 24); Duffy, 'St Erkenwald', 155; Turville-Petre (ed.), *St Erkenwald: A Critical Edition*, 14.

[3] Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *The Clerical Proletariat and the Resurgence of Medieval English Poetry* (Philadelphia, PA, 2021), 265, 276, 296.

[4] Jennifer L. Sisk, 'The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*', *ELH*, 74 (2007), 89–115. On sacramental orthodoxy, see also David Coley, 'Baptism as Eucharist: Orthodoxy, Wycliffism, and the Sacramental Utterance in Saint Erkenwald', *JEGP*, 107 (2008), 327–47.

[5] Frank Grady, '*Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald*, and the Rule of Exceptional Salvations', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 6 (1992), 63–88.

[6] Marie Borroff, 'Narrative Artistry in *St. Erkenwald* and the *Gawain*-Group: The Case for Common Authorship Reconsidered', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 28 (2006), 41–76; Larry D. Benson, 'The Authorship of *St. Erkenwald*', *JEGP*, 64 (1965), 393–405; Eric Weiskott, *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History* (Cambridge, 2016), 126–47; Ruth Nisse, '"A Coroun Ful Riche": The Rule of History in *St. Erkenwald*', *ELH*, 65 (1998), 277–95.

[7] For the revelation that the judge's soul is in limbo, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, '*Saint Erkenwald* and the Judge in Limbo', *The Chaucer Review*, 58 (2023), 348–60 (at 353); Sisk, 'The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*', 95.

Ansuare here to my sawe, councele no trouthe!
Sithen we wot not qwo þou art, witere vs þiselwen
In worlde quat weghe þou was and quy þow þus ligges,
How long þou has layne here and quat lagh þou vsyt,
Queþer art þou ioyned to ioy oþir iuggid to pyne.'   (177–88)

Of course, this is not to suggest that the above passage has been completely ignored by critics. Eamon Duffy discusses the last of these lines ('Sithen we wot not … iuggid to pyne') and its structural similarity to contemporary deathbed penitential performances.[8] In this reading, Erkenwald's scrutiny of the corpse reflects the type of interrogations found in such pastoral texts as the *Visitatio infirmorum* (*c.* twelfth century) and the 'Seven Questions to be Asked of a Dying Man' (*c.*1470), where the dying are encouraged by the attending priest to reaffirm their faith and account for their sins.[9] Elise Wang also argues that Erkenwald's address to the corpse is based on an 'interrogatory format' often found in penitential manuals. Building upon Duffy's findings, Wang links the structural logic of lines 185–8 to the stereotypical 'quis' (who), 'quid' (what), 'cur' (why), 'ubi' (where), 'quando' (how long), 'quomodo' (in what manner), 'quibus auxilis' (by what help) checklists that became a mainstay of confessional practice from the Fourth Lateran council onwards.[10] Although unmentioned by Wang, it is important to note that variations of this 'quis, quid' checklist were often employed in contemporary *discretio spirituum* ('discernment of spirits') manuals to determine the validity of mystical visions while also forming the procedural basis for the orthodox interrogation of ghosts.[11]

But despite the attention given to the lines 'Sithen we wot not … iuggid to pyne' (185–8), the importance of the preceding six lines to Erkenwald's actions has often been elided. Sif Ríkharðsdóttir states simply that 'the judge is summoned from the dead to tell his tale'.[12] And while Allen J. Frantzen correctly notes that 'the proper subject of [the text] is not the dead, but the power that resurrects the dead', he pulls back from discussing how this relates to the invocation itself, content only to say that Erkenwald 'addresses the corpse [and] in effect restores it to life'.[13] David Coley makes useful inroads into analysing these earlier lines (179–84), but restricts himself to the observation that 'it operates in much the same manner as … sacramental formulae'.[14] Even Eamon Duffy does not go further than stating 'the bishop opens his questioning of the "corce" with an evocation of Christ on his cross'.[15] Pointedly,

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[8]   Duffy, 'St Erkenwald', 166.
[9]   For example, in the 'Seven Questions to be Asked of a Dying Man', uniquely found in BL, MS Lansdowne 762 (*c.*1400–1470), the dying person is asked to confirm the articles of faith; to acknowledge, feel contrition for, and indicate a desire to amend their sins; to forgive their enemies; to indicate a desire to make satisfaction; and finally, to reaffirm their belief that Christ died for their sins. This text is included in Edward Peacock (ed.), *Instructions for Parish Priests by John Myrc*, EETS o.s. 31 (London, 1902), 69–71. For a late medieval vernacular edition of the *Visitatio infirmorum*, see C. Horstmann (ed.), *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and his Followers*, vol. 2 (London, 1896), 449–53.
[10]   Elise Wang, 'The Bright Body: *St Erkenwald*'s Death Investigation', *New Medieval Literatures*, 23 (2024), 106–29 (at 122–3).
[11]   For the use of this checklist in treatises concerning mystical visions see, for example, Jean Gerson, *De probatione spirituum* (*c.*1415), in P. Glorieux (ed.), Jean *Gerson: Œuvres completes, vol 9: L'œuvre doctrinale (423–491)* (Paris, 1973), 180. For an English translation, see Paschal Boland, *The Concept of Discretio Spirituum in John Gerson's 'De probatione spirituum' and 'De distinctione verarum visionum a falsis'* (Washington, DC, 1959), 30. For an overview of treatises on the 'discernment of spirits', see Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 2006). It is only in the fifteenth century that we witness the circulation of *discretio* texts that had a more concerted emphasis on identifying ghosts, e.g., James of Paradise's *De apparitionibus animarum separatarum* (*c.*1454), ed. Christoph Fasbender, *Von der Wiederkehr der Seelen Verstorbener* (Heidelberg, 2001). For further scholarship on the use of *discretio spirituum* in the context of encountering the restless dead, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, tr. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, IL, 1998), 155–8.
[12]   Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, 'Voice, Materiality and History in *St Erkenwald* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*', in Louise D'Arcens and Sif Ríkharðsdóttir (eds), *Medieval Literary Voices: Embodiment, Materiality and Performance* (Manchester, 2022), 193–211 (at 202).
[13]   Allen J. Frantzen, '*St. Erkenwald* and the Raising of Lazarus', *Mediaevalia*, 7 (1981), 157–71 (at 159, 161).
[14]   Coley, 'Baptism as Eucharist', 343.
[15]   Duffy, 'St Erkenwald', 166.

Thorlac Turville-Petre's 2024 critical edition of the poem also does not dwell on the context-ual importance of these lines.[16]

Previous scholarship, then, has taken it for granted that Erkenwald has the power to command the dead man to speak—a power enacted through the authority of God—without considering the wider historical or literary context of the use of conjurations. In other words, the significance of the lines 179–84 as a *conjuration formula*—a set phrase that invoked the authority of God to compel and control unruly spirits—has yet to be fully recognized. Erkenwald's actions can thus be read against the wider apotropaic responses to demons and the restless dead found in histories, hagiographies, sermon stories, and contemporary ghost literature, as well as the practice of invok-ing spirits in the context of ritual magic. Building on Wang's observations that lines 185–8 re-present an 'idealised' interrogation, lines 179–84 should perhaps likewise be read as an idealized conjuration, a model for readers to emulate.[17] Erkenwald's expert and authoritative in-vocation of the corpse not only exemplifies late medieval techniques for assuaging potential supernatural threats, but, on a metatextual level, acts as further evidence for the poem's pretences to spiritual orthodoxy. If, as has been suggested, the conclusion to *St Erkenwald* affirms the effi-cacy of the words of the baptismal formula ('I folwe þe in þe Fader name and his fre Childes / And of þe gracious Holy Goste', 318–19a),[18] it is certainly telling that the judge's road to salvation begins with another type of formula—relating to the apotropaic control of spirits—the origins of which can *also* be traced to the baptismal liturgy. Holy words caused the corpse to stir just as holy words were able to render the body 'safe'. *St Erkenwald* draws upon tried-and-tested mechanisms for identifying and managing the unruly (and ontologically suspicious) dead.

EXORCISM AND CONJURATION

The term 'conjuration' derives from the Latin verb *coniuro*, meaning 'bind' or 'command'. Whether to quell, banish, or summon spirits, 'conjure' was used synonymously with 'adjure' (*adiuro*) or 'exorcize' (*exorcizo*) in Latin traditions. In the Vulgate Bible, the most commonly used term in the context of issuing commands in the name of God was *adiuro* (see, e.g., Acts 19:13).[19] As highlighted in an early eleventh-century version of the 'Ordinals of Christ' (BL, MS Add. 57337), a short treatise on how the various ecclesiastical offices related to the dif-ferent aspects of Christ's life, 'exorcism' and 'adjuration' meant essentially the same thing:

> He [Christ] was an exorcist when he cast seven demons from Mary Magdalene. 'Exorcists' [ἐξορκιστής], from the Greek, are called 'adjurers' in Latin. They invoke the name of God over catechumens and over those who have unclean spirits, adjuring that they leave through Him.[20]

> Exorcista fuit quando eiecit septem demonia de Maria Magdalenae. Exorcistae ex Greco in latinum 'adiurantes' vocantur. Invocant enim super catecuminos et super eos qui habent spiritum inmun-dum nomen Domini Iesu adiurantes per eum ut egrediatur abeis.

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[16] Turville-Petre (ed.), *St Erkenwald: A Critical Edition*, 94.
[17] Wang, 'The Bright Body', 108.
[18] Sisk, 'The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*', 101; Coley, 'Baptism as Eucharist', 331.
[19] Acts 19:13: Tentaverunt autem quidam et de circumeuntibus Judaeis exorcistis invocare super eos qui habebant spiritus malos nomen Domini Jesu, dicentes: Adjuro vos per Jesum, quem Paulus praedica ('Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out."').
[20] Cited in Peter Dendle, *Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon England* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2014), 105. For the synonymous usage of *conjure* and *adjure*, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park, PA, 1998), 129.

For his part, Isidore of Seville (*c*.625) specifies that conjuration ('conjuratio') is a Latin term taken from the Greek word exorcism ('exorcismus'), and that it is used mainly for rebukes 'against the devil' ('adversus diabolum').[21] Alongside vernacularizations of these Latin phrases (i.e., exorcize, conjure, adjure), *halsen*, meaning 'beseech' or 'implore', was a further English term used in the context of binding spirits.[22] Derivations of *halsen* can be seen across a wide variety of Old and Middle English texts, from Ælfric's declaration to Wulfstan, bishop of Worcester (*c*.1005), that 'Exorcista is halsiend se þe ræt ofer þa witseocan men ofer þa un-truman' ('an exorcist is an adjurer who reads over the insane and infirm'),[23] to the actions of the Abbot in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, who, when confronted by the miraculously singing corpse of the dead 'clergeon', conjured the child to explain how he was able to do so with his throat slit: 'this yonge child to conjure he bigan / And seyde, "O deere child, I *halse* thee"'.[24] As Peter Dendle notes, there are numerous, if frustratingly oblique, references to the ecclesiastical role of the exorcist in the early medieval period.[25] This said, the earliest extant use of exorcism formulas in the Latin West can be traced to the *Ordo Romanus XI* baptismal liturgy (*c*.600–700), a text that, ultimately, forms the basis of the modern baptismal ritual.[26] As part of the spiritual protection offered to those about to be baptized, a series of apotropaic prayers, including the exorcism of salt and water, were recited during the first scrutiny. One of these prayers, below, is an explicit command to banish the evil spirit—however literal, however metaphorical—from the body of the male catechumen:

> Exorcizo te, inmunde spiritus, in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti ut exeas et recedes ab his famulis Dei. Ipse enim tibi imperat, maledicte dampnate, qui pedibus super mare ambulabit et Petro mergenti dexteram porrexit.[27]

> I exorcize you, unclean spirit, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and Holy Spirit, that you go out and depart from these servants of God. For he commands you, accursed [and] damned one, who walked on the sea, and extended his right hand to Peter when he was sinking.

The formula for female catechumens is much the same, except that the damned spirit is instead adjured by '[He] who opened the eyes of the man born blind, and raised Lazarus from the tomb on the fourth day' ('qui cecu nato oculos aperuit et quatriduanum Lazarum de monumento suscitavit').[28] The function of exorcism formulas to grant protection from evil meant they could be repurposed for other situations where defence against the fiend was required, such as the expulsion of unclean spirits from the bodies of the possessed. The office of the exorcist formed an essential part of the early Church apparatus, with the earliest known rite of ordination for exorcists outlined in the fourth Council of Carthage (*c*.398) and the earliest known liturgy for curing demoniacs found in the eighth-century Gellone

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[21]   Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (tr.), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), 149 (VI.xix.55–6); W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Etymologiarum Sive Originum* Libri XX, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), vol. 1, n. p.

[22]   *MED*, halsen v.(1). See also Francis Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (Cham, 2016), 85.

[23]   Cited in Young, *A History of Exorcism*, 87.

[24]   *The Prioress's Tale*, VII, ll. 644–5, in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2008).

[25]   Dendle, *Demon Possession*, 104.

[26]   For fuller accounts of the Ordo XI liturgy, see Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 202. See also: Joseph Lupi, 'The Development of the Rite of Baptism', *Melita Theologica*, 39 (1988), 1–31; John F. Romano, 'Baptizing the Romans', in Line Cecilie Engh, Stefka G. Eriksen, Francis F. Steen, Christopher Prescot (eds), *Tools for Transformation: Liturgy and Religious Practice in Late Antique Rome and Medieval Europe* (Roma, 2019), 43–62.

[27]   For the full Latin Ordo Romanus XI liturgy, see Josep Urdeix i Dordal (ed.), *El Bautismo en la Roma Medieval: (Ordo Romanus XI)* (Barcelona, 1995), 14.

[28]   Urdeix i Dordal (ed.), *El Bautismo en la Roma Medieval*, 14.

Sacramentary.[29] Statements such as that made by Ælfric in a letter to Wulfsige (*c*.995), detailing how an exorcist uses an oath ('áþe') to compel wicked spirits ('áwyrgedan gástas') to depart, through the authority of the Saviour ('Hǽlendes'), suggests something about the inherent power that was ascribed to holy words.[30] Indeed, it is telling that in the traditional rite of ordination, the newly appointed exorcist is enjoined to commit the exorcism formulas to memory, emphasizing their importance.[31] Although it is not my purpose to summarize the complete history of exorcism and demonic possession in the West, nor detail the full circumstances by which exorcism rites became part of the wider apotropaic toolkit, it suffices to say that the schema first established in the *Ordo Romanus XI*—declaration ('exorcizo te'), address ('inmunde spiritus'), invocation ('in nomine patris… ') and instruction ('recedes ab his famulis Dei')—became the commonplace formula for managing spirits for centuries to come.[32]

As well as protecting the living from being possessed by demons, conjurations also proved effective against more extrinsic threats, that is direct, physical confrontations with supernatural beings. Evidence for the use of conjurations to quell encountered demons, ghosts, and other more ambiguous entities can be seen most clearly in late medieval *exempla* collections. Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* (*c*.1219–1223), for example, contains numerous short tales in which demons are confounded by invocations made in the name of God. In one such story, (V.56) Caesarius records how a bellringer was whisked away by a demon in the form of a black ox and deposited on the very top of the tower of Ysenberg castle. The demon demanded homage, to which the bellringer replied, 'I adjure you ('adiuro te') in the name of Jesus Christ to do me no injury, but to put me down without any harm to my body'. The demon then did as the man commanded.[33] In another exemplum from the *Dialogus miraculorum* (XI.40)—and one that bears a much closer narratological connection to *St Erkenwald*—a French moneylender died, after which her corpse swelled ('tumorem') to an enormous and terrifying degree. When the devil began moving the dead woman's arms in a parody of counting money, a local subprior, named Gerlac, was called in to exorcize ('exorcismis') the corpse and prevent the devil from tormenting it any further. Only after tying his stole around the corpse's neck was he able to successfully complete his exorcism and force the demon to flee.[34] Here, then, is clear precedent for the consternation caused by a dead body that did not 'act' in an ontologically acceptable way and needed to be managed by a cleric. In a similar way, Caesarius's tale (XII.4) on the exorcism of a devil from the body of a churchman who possessed a suspiciously beautiful singing voice, and how the expulsion of the *daemonem* led to the man's body collapsing into a putrid mess, is indicative of the fear that beautiful exteriors could hide devilish insides.[35] Finally, Caesarius's aside about a murderer whose body was said to have been mobilized by a demon for a year, until it was conjured to depart by St Patrick ('ad nutum sancti exisset') and then crumbled into dust, further highlights the belief that possessed corpses could have deceptively lifelike appearances, and that they were liable to disintegrate completely when the afflicting agent was expelled (XII.3). Although the

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[29] Young, *A History of Exorcism*, 45.

[30] Cited in Dendle, *Demon Possession*, 106.

[31] Cited in Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 229. This provision, from the fourth Council of Carthage, underwent very little amendment over the centuries. It is repeated almost verbatim, for example, in Dist.23 c.17 of Gratian's *Decretum* (*c*.1140) and Book 2, ch. 6 ('De Excocista') of Durandus of Mende's *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (*c*.1286).

[32] Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 131–3, notes that the 'declaration, address, invocation, instruction' schema for conjurations was also used by practitioners of necromancy.

[33] Joseph Strange (ed.), *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, 2 vols (Cologne, 1851), vol. 1, 339 (hereafter 'Strange'); and for the English translation, H. von Essen Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (eds), Caesarius, of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, 2 vols (London, 1929), vol. 1, 390 (hereafter *Dialogue*).

[34] Strange, vol. 2, 301; *Dialogue*, vol. 2, 271.

[35] Strange, vol. 2, 317–18; *Dialogue*, vol. 2, 292. See also Stephen Gordon, *Supernatural Encounters: Demons and the Restless Dead in Medieval England, c.1050–1450* (London, 2020), 172.

Londoners in *St Erkenwald* do not directly express a fear that the 'blisfull body' (l. 76) in their midst is a demon-in-disguise, and seem only concerned that no one can account for the dead man's identity (ll. 99–104), the lack of certainty when it came to disambiguating the meaning of wonders meant that a demonic causation for the lack of decay—at least for the reader—could not be immediately discounted, especially by readers conversant in the moral and onto-logical implications of supernatural sermon stories. Indeed, as summarized by Karen Sullivan, the interrogation of wonders in the late medieval period often fell into two distinct intellectual groups: 'rationalists' who attempted to typologize and demystify wonders, and 'contempla-tives', who saw wonders as inherently unknowable and proof of the majesty of God.[36] Simply put, although the poem itself does not offer an overt reading of a potentially demonic causation for the unnatural preservation of the corpse, the habitual belief that devils *could* act in such a fashion, as evidenced above, may have offered an alternative interpretation in the minds of the reading audience. This, then, can be seen as another instance of the poet's inter-est in the conflation of time, space, and community, with the contemporary, initially London-based readership invited to offer up their own (perhaps diabolic) reading of the won-der, enjoined to share in the same puzzling experience as the Londoners in the text.[37]

Later medieval exempla and sermon collections, such as John Mirk's *Festial* (*c.*1380s), *Jacob's Well* (*c.*1400–1425) and Arnold of Liège's *Alphabetum Narrationum* (*c.*1300, translated into English as the *Alphabet of Tales* in the fifteenth century), maintained a strong pastoral interest in stories of the supernatural, many of which were repurposed from earlier compendia such as the *Dialogus miraculorum*. From a narratological perspective, conjurations acted as the mechanism by which the 'truth' of the exemplum was reconciled in the minds of the listening or reading audience, dispelling any potential alternative readings. In alluding to the belief that the devil has power to harness dead bodies that had not been given the correct sacraments before death, Mirk provides an exemplum concerning a man who suffered a mortal injury dur-ing a brawl, but who died before being 'hosullud'. As such, 'þan com a fend and toke þis cors þat was not anoylud and ȝode into itte and so forth into þe toun'. It is only after being conjured by an anchorite to reveal why it had power over this particular corpse ('þis ankur coniured þis fende in þe vertu of hym þat dyod on þe cros') that the demon admitted that it was all a ploy to ruin the man's reputation in the minds of others, and that the dead man's soul was actually safe.[38] Likewise, a story in the *Alphabet of Tales* concerning a usurer buried in a monastic cemetery whose corpse used to wander from its grave at night, vexing many, exemplifies the orthodox belief that sacred ground rejected the bodies of inveterate sinners. 'Coniurid' by a holy man to reveal why he walked, the dead man confessed that he did so due to his sins, before helpfully suggesting that the monks would get respite, if 'ye wold bere my bodie oute of your closter'.[39]

Conjurations, then, acted as the first and last line of defence when confronted by trouble-some supernatural entities, for clerics and layfolk alike. Whereas the sermon exempla tend not to describe the actual mechanics of conjuration formulas but are content mainly to say that the entity was conjured to speak, longer literary texts from the later Middle Ages are much more detailed when discussing how the ghost or demon was made to reveal the truth of its

[36]   Karen Sullivan, 'On Recognizing the Limits of Our Understanding: Medieval Debates About Merlin and Marvels', in Dallas G. Denery II, Kantik Ghosh, and Nicolette Zeeman (eds), *Uncertain Knowledge: Scepticism, Relativism, and Doubt in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2014), 161–84.

[37]   For the poet's interest in the conflation of space and time, see Laura Varnam, 'Sacred Space, Memory, and Materiality in *St Erkenwald*', in Shanyn Altman and Jonathan Buckner (eds), *Old St Paul's and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 73–95.

[38]   Susan Powell (ed.), *John Mirk's Festial: Edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A. II*, EETS os 334–5, 2 vols (Oxford, 2011), vol. 2, 258.

[39]   Mary MacLeod Banks (ed.), *An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th Century Translation of the Alphabetum narrationum of Etienne de Besançon, from Additional MS. 25,719 of the British Museum*, 2 vols, EETS os 126–7 (London, 1904–1905), vol. 2, 472.

appearance. In the A-Version of *The Trental of Gregory* (*c*.1350–1400), the 'wonþur grysely creature' (l. 53) that appeared to the Pope while he celebrated Mass is made to reveal why it wandered, through the utterance of the following formula:

> He halsed hit: 'Þorow goddes myȝte,
> That þe fende he putte to flyȝte,
> And be þe vertu of hys blode,
> That for mankynde dyed on rode,
> Sey me sykerly þe soþe soone,
> What þou hast yn þis place to done!
> What ys þy cause, þou cursed wreche,
> Thus me at masse for to drecche'   (ll. 61–8)[40]

Suitably bidden, the ghost confirms its identity as Gregory's dead mother, who suffers in 'byttyr paynes' due to dying without confessing her sins (ll. 70–72). Although Gregory does not use the term 'conjure' in the A-Version,[41] it is the narrator who of course signposts that the ghost was compelled ('halsed') to speak, after which it was able to ask for efficacious trental masses to be said in its name. Similar formulas can be detected in the Middle English *Gast of Gy* (*c*.1350). Surviving in quatrain, couplet, and prose versions, the *Gast of Gy* is a vernacular retelling of the Latin *De Spiritu Guidonis* (*c*.1324). Ostensibly a letter to Pope John XXII, *De Spiritu Guidonis* details an encounter between the Dominican inquisitor Jean Gobi and the ghost of Gy of Corvo that took place on 27 December 1323, in Alès, Southern France, following a plea from Guy's widow that her home had become haunted by her dead husband's spirit.[42] In each version, Gobi—rendered in the Middle English as an unnamed prior—wields conjurations like a spiritual cudgel, browbeating the reticent and sometimes disagreeable ghost into taking part in the inquisitorial dialogue, to determine whether it truly was the spirit of Gy or something more diabolic. The Middle English version in couplets from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. poet. 175, is the most useful where the depiction of conjurations is concerned. After the prior recites an initial formula to compel Gy to answer all his questions ('I conjure thee, thou creature, / In the vertu of our Saveoure, / That es a God of myghtes maste, / Fader and Son and Haly Gaste, / That was and es and sall be ay, / That thou me answer, if thou may, / And tell me, what som I will crave, / Als fer als thou may power have.', ll. 211–18),[43] he immediately— and somewhat curtly—asks him whether he was an 'ill gast or a gud' (l. 235), before testing him on the orthodoxy of his pronouncements about the nature of Purgatory. However, it is later in the poem, when Gy appears reluctant to reveal the nature of the sin that was making his wife sick, that the prior uses an especially strident conjuration to make him reveal the truth of things:

'Thou creature, I conjure thee
Bi Godes myght and His pousté,
And bi the vertu of His body,
And of His moder, myld Mary,
And bi the mylk He souke swete,
And bi the teres scho for Him grete
When scho saw hir Son be slane,
And bi the halows everilk ane,
The certaine soth that thou me say
Of this mervail, if thou may,
Whi thi wife has all this payne.'   (ll. 1413–23)

The prior builds invocation upon invocation to coerce Gy into admitting that the wife's sickness and his own tormented state were due to an 'unkyndely syn' (l. 1426) for which they had both been shriven, but for which they had yet to complete full penance before Gy suddenly died.[44] After the prior issues a final conjuration to make Gy leave his wife in peace ('I conjure thee be God all ane / And bi His halows everilk ane, / If thou may schon, that thou sese / And lat thi wyf now lyf in pese', ll. 1865–8), the ghost says he cannot do so unless she leads a 'lyf chaste in wydowhede' (l. 1872) and sings 300 masses for them both (l. 1874). The *Gast of Gy* is an outlier where the sheer effort needed to tame the ghost is concerned, in a way that is perhaps reflective of 'actual' exorcistic practice. But it was a widely held belief that the restless dead—the purgatorial dead—needed to be conjured to reveal their sins and explain the provisions for their salvation. It is a belief that can be detected across a wide variety of literary works. The monkish compiler of the famed collection of Byland Abbey ghost stories (BL, MS Royal 15 A.xx, *c*.1400) confirms that the restless corpse of the son of Robert de Boltby from Kilburn could not confess its sins unless it was conjured to do so ('fforsitan exspectans si quis vellet egredi et coniurare eum suis necessitatibus succurrendo').[45] Similar sentiments can be read in Part A of *The Awntyrs Off Arthure* (*c*.1420), where Gawain, having been confronted by a wailing, gibbering corpse while out hunting in Inglewood Forest, 'conjured' (l. 134) the spirit to reveal why it wandered: 'As thou was crucified on Croys to clanse us of syn / That thou sei me the sothe whether thou shalle, / And whi thou walkest thes wayes the wodes within' (ll. 134–6). It is only after Gawain issues his conjuration that the spirit is able disclose its identity as Gaynor's mother (l. 160), reveal its sins ('luf paramour, listes and delites', l. 213), and, in an echo of *The Trental of Gregory*, ask for trental masses to be said in its name (ll. 218–21).[46] Similar to what will be discussed in *St Erkenwald* shortly, Gawain, as befitting the greatest knight of Arthur's court (ll. 12, 68),[47] shows expert discretion in immediately identifying the corpse as a soul in need of succour, emphasizing *why* it wandered, rather than dwelling on the ontological problem of *what* it was (i.e., human or demon).

In the various Latin and vernacular treatments of *Saint Austin at Compton*, a relatively late addition to the hagiographical legend of St Augustine of Canterbury, we see a combination of

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[44]   Readings of this passage have often taken the 'unkyndely syn' to be the sin of sodomy. See Robert S. Sturges, 'Purgatory in the Marriage Bed: Conjugal Sodomy in *The Gast of Gy*', in Rosalynn Voaden and Diane Wolfthal (eds), *Framing the Family: Narrative and Representation in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (Tempe, AZ, 2005), 57–78 (at 70).

[45]   M. R. James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories', *English Historical Review*, 37 (1922), 413–22 (at 418).

[46]   'The Awntyrs off Arthur', in Thomas Hahn (ed.), *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995), 178–228. The influence of the Trental of Gregory on Part A of the *Awntyrs off Arthure* has long been established. See, e.g., Takami Matsuda, 'The Awntyrs off Arthure and the Arthurian History', *Poetica*, 19 (1984), 48–62 (at 48); Hahn, 'Introduction to The Awntyrs off Arthur', in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, 169.

[47]   Leah Haught, 'Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*', *Arthuriana*, 20 (2010), 3–24 (at 6).

the above motifs. Here, Augustine is confronted by the corpse of the former Lord of Compton village, excommunicated for withholding tithes and who was wrongly buried in the church building. The dead man is compelled to leave his tomb after the bishop, while performing Mass, commands that anyone who had been excommunicated should leave. In the original Latin *narratio* (*c*. late thirteenth century), Augustine commands ('precipio') the corpse to tell him either *who* he is (if he is a former member of the community) or else *why* he has come to mock the people of Christ (if he is a devil).[48] John Lydgate's Middle English reworking (*c*.1420–1440) maintains Augustine's initial uncertainty as to whether the 'careyn' is being mobilized by the deceased or a demon ('In Jesu name, that lyst for man to bleede, / What that thu art trewly for to telle', ll. 223–4).[49] And much like the errant corpse of Robert de Boltby, the excommunicate is unable to speak or do anything until he is conjured to do so ('Withoute meevyng, alway stille he stood', l. 209). The formula used by Augustine to raise the priest who originally issued the excommunication, to enlist his help in absolving the dead Lord's sins, may only be given obliquely ('The deed preest in name of Crist Jhesu / He bad arise with woordys ful tretable', ll. 275–6), but it can be safely presumed that the 'woordys ful tretable' also included a conjuration.

While the above survey is by no means exhaustive—for brevity's sake I have omitted discussion of the use of conjurations by necromancers, who used the instrumental power of holy words in rituals to summon a chosen entity and compel it to do the practitioner's bidding[50]—it has been established that the practice formed part of the wider liturgical repertoire of those who *intentionally* came into contact with spirits. Whether priests performing exorcisms, inquisitors trying to discern the identity of ghosts, or, indeed, necromancers greedy for the services that only demons could provide, the formulas themselves were highly regularized and followed the same generic pattern. Conjurations also formed part of the habitual defences of layfolk who *unintentionally* encountered demons or the dead, as illustrated most prominently in sermon stories. With all this in mind, Erkenwald's command that the corpse identify itself in lines 179–84 of *St Erkenwald* is not just a rote exclamation to push the narrative forward, but a declaration of intent that had just as much liturgical weight as the baptismal formula that concludes the dialogue. In a similar manner to the ghost encounter in the *Gast of Gy*,[51] *St Erkenwald* provides a clear didactic framework for how to test or discern the identity of the ontologically suspicious dead.

CONJURING THE DEAD IN *ST ERKENWALD*

As indicated above, it is notable that the Londoners do not betray any concern about the potential diabolical origins of a body that was so fresh, so ruddy, that it seemed as if it was simply 'opon slepe' (l. 92). But this is not to say such a reading is not valid or did not enter the mind of the poet. As emphasized by Jean Gerson in his sermon *Collatio de Angelis* (*c*.1392), demons 'also speak in assumed bodies, whether these are formed from condensed Air … or whether they are recent corpses, preserved by demons from decay, stench, and

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[48]   Precipio tibi in nomine domini quatinus indices mihi quis sis uel cur ad illudendum populum christi huc ueneris, in E. Gordon Whatley, 'John Lydgate's Saint Austin at Compton: The Poem and its Sources', in Siân Echard and Gernot R. Wieland (eds), *Anglo-Latin and its Heritage: Essays in Honour of A.G. Rigg* (Turnhout, 2001), 191–227 (at 225).

[49]   John Lydgate, 'Saint Austin at Compton (c. 1420–40)', in E. Gordon Whatley, with Anne B. Thompson and Robert K. Upchurch (eds), *Saints' Lives in Middle English Collections* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2004), 224–37.

[50]   As noted by Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 127, 'conjurations are so centrally important to necromantic experiments that the art of necromancy … can even be referred to simply as the conjuring of spirits'.

[51]   For *Gast of Gy* as a didactic text on the nature of Purgatory and orthodox religious practice in general, see Takami Matsuda, *Death and Purgatory in Middle English Didactic Poetry* (Woodbridge, 1997), 62–7; Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 105–33.

discolouring'.[52] Thus, from a contemporary theological perspective—as well as a contemporary reader's—it was entirely feasible that the judge's fresh and ruddy corpse (l. 91) had undergone some sort of devilish interference. The first half of *St Erkenwald* borrows freely from *inventio* narratives of contemporary hagiography (i.e., narratives detailing the discovery and translation of holy relics), which likely accounts for the more measured reactions of the townsfolk.[53] As such, rather than showing fear, as one may presume from a similar situation in a sermon exemplum, the Londoners, bound by the constraints of a genre from which the poem will soon break free, approach the corpse as a *mirabilis* to be deciphered, the body being described as a 'mervayle' (l. 114) and a 'bolde wonder' (l. 106).[54] Unable to arrive at any conclusions, and unable to turn their *admiratio* into *scientia*, Erkenwald is finally called in to take charge.[55]

Although *St Erkenwald* should not be read as a *direct* response to contemporary debates surrounding the discernment of spirits—i.e., the fear that female mystics experienced demonic illusion rather than divine revelation[56]—its interest in *discretio spirituum* is nonetheless a key but similarly overlooked feature of the poem, one that is pointedly highlighted in the episode preceding Erkenwald's interrogation of the body. The ability to discern between good and bad spirits is, of course, one of the main spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:10, a passage that can be read alongside the exhortation in 1 John 4:1 to 'not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God' ('Carissimi, nolite omni spiritui credere, sed probate spiritus si ex Deo sint'). The discernment of spirits had been an issue of debate amongst theologians since the time of the early Church Fathers.[57] Influential scholars of *discretio* such as John Cassian (d.435) noted that humility was one of the main means by which the grace of spiritual discernment could be obtained. Recording the words of Abbot Moses in the *Conferences*, Cassian affirms that 'true discretion is not obtained except by true humility' ('Vera, inquit, discretio non nisi vera humilitate acquiritur').[58] Reason—the power of judgement—was the main practical outcome of discretion.[59] With this in mind, it is notable that upon being told about the marvel uncovered from the foundations of St Paul's, Erkenwald does not immediately go to view the corpse, but instead decides to spend the night in prayer. Locking himself in his palace, the bishop beseeches God to allow him to see the spiritual truth of things:

'Þagh I be vnworthi', al wepand he sayde,
'Thurgh his deere debonerte digne hit my Lorde:
In confirmyng þi Cristen faith, fulsen me to kenne
Þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres.'
And so long he grette after grace þat he graunte hade,
An ansuare of þe Holy Goste, and afterward hit dawid.   (ll. 122–7)

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[52]   Translated by Andrew Fogleman, 'Holy Instruction, Demonic Deceit, and the Body: A Translation of Jean Gerson's *Sermon on Angels* (Collatio de Angelis)', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 48 (2022), 147–77 (at 160).

[53]   See especially Monika Otter, '"New Werke": *St. Erkenwald*, St. Albans, and the Medieval Sense of the Past', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 24 (1994), 387–414.

[54]   Dominique Battles, 'Who (What) Lies in the Tomb in the Middle English *St. Erkenwald*?', *Studies in Philology*, 120 (2023), 391–438 (at 406). For further useful studies on late medieval theories of 'wonder', see Sullivan, 'On Recognizing the Limits of Our Understanding'; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Miracles and Marvels: The Limits of Alterity', in Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert (eds), *Vita religiosa im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Kaspar Elm* (Berlin, 1999), 799–817; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Wonder', *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), 1–26.

[55]   Bynum, 'Wonder', 7.

[56]   Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*; Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

[57]   For a useful overview, see Grazia Mangano Ragazzi, *Obeying the Truth: Discretion in the Spiritual Writings of Saint Catherine of Siena* (Oxford, 2014), chapters 8 and 9.

[58]   John Cassian, 'The Second Conference', in Boniface Ramsey (ed. and tr.), *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 90 (Mahwah, NJ, 1997); J-P. Migne (ed.), *Joannis Cassiani Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, Pl 49 (Paris, 1846), bk. 2 ch. 10, col. 537.

[59]   Ragazzi, *Obeying the Truth*, 125.

Echoing the discussion of discretion found in Cassian's *Conferences*, Erkenwald is very much aware that discernment is a gift that can *only* be attained through divine favour ('he graunte hade, / An ansuare of þe Holy Goste'). In a further allusion to traditional teachings on *discretio*, Erkenwald understands that it is only through true humility ('þagh I be vnworthi') that he will be granted the spiritual gifts to allow him to know ('kenne') the truth of the St Paul's 'meruaile'. Thus arriving at the tomb after spending the night in contemplation, Erkenwald confirms to the onlookers that true understanding—in other words, true discernment—is dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit alone ('Bot glow er all opon Godde and his grace aske … I shal auay ʒow so verrayly of vertues hise', ll. 171, 174). 'Wondering', the use of the base human senses to speculate on the unknowable, had not worked on this occasion. As the dean of St Paul's admits, no trace of the dead man's existence could be found in either collective memory or the written record (ll. 151, 155), leading to the half-hearted conclusion that, due to his finery, he must surely have been a 'kyng' (l. 156). Divine assistance was not only needed but necessary. An authoritative and unyielding conjuration was the tool by which Erkenwald could demonstrate his newfound spiritual understanding and ensure that the truth of the 'mysterie' could finally be revealed.

Turning now to Erkenwald's conjuration in lines 179–84, it is notable that the bishop's command deviates slightly from the typical sequence of declaration, address, invocation, and instruction. The declaration 'I bydde' (l. 181), meaning *command*, only occurs *after* the address to the corpse ('lykhame þat þus lies', l. 179), a reversal that can also be seen in the *Gast of Gy* ('Thou creature, I conjure thee', l. 1413).[60] Although not as strident as the Greek- and Latin-derived verbs *exorcize*, *conjure*, and *adjure*, the English verb *bidden* possesses the same persuasive power as *halsen*, another native term used in spirit conjuration.[61] In a very orthodox manner, Erkenwald states that he has no authority of his own but is merely a conduit for Christ's ineffable might ('Be þou bone to his bode, I bydde in his behalue', l. 181). Following this, Erkenwald invokes the Passion ('As he was bende on a beme quen he his blode schedde', l. 182), using a variation of an expression found in numerous liturgical and scriptural contexts (e.g., Colossians 1:20). Although, as expected, the main part of the 'instruction' occurs at the end of the formula, it is curious that Erkenwald's speech act begins with an instruction, too. Erkenwald first opens the corpse's eyes and shouts in its face to 'layne þou no lenger!' (l. 179), despite not yet having invoked any spiritual authority to make it do so. It is only later that he draws upon the power of Christ to deliver the actual order to 'ansuare here to my sawe, councele no trouthe!' (l. 184). After this, we arrive at the type of interrogative questioning seen in penitential manuals, contemporary *discretio* texts, and wider ghost literature (ll. 185–8). As Elise Wang has persuasively argued, Erkenwald establishes that because the identity of the corpse is unknown ('quis'), he needs to tell the bishop what he was in life ('quid'), why he lies there ('cur; ubi'), for how long ('quando'), and in what state his soul currently endures ('quomodo').[62] The telling point here is that Erkenwald does not attempt to determine the corpse's *ontological* identity—demon or deceased—but simply tries to ascertain what he was in *life* ('[i]n worlde quat weghe thou was', l. 186). Within the narrative logic of the story, Erkenwald, empowered by God-given abilities of discernment ('he graunte hade / An ansuare of þe Holy Goste', ll. 126b–7a), is completely aware that the preservation

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[60]   MED, *bidden*, v., 4b): 'To direct or urge (sb.); require, command'.

[61]   A similar use of the verb *bidden* can be seen in an exemplum from John Mirk's Corpus Christi sermon. Here, Mirk tells the story of a priest who conjures a black horse to explain why it knelt only on one knee before a dropped Host while the rest of the animals knelt on two: 'If þou be any beste þat may spekyn, I *bydde* þe in þe vertu of þis body þat here lyght þat þou speke and telle me why þou knelyst bot on on knee, whyl alle þeis oþer knelyn on boþe þere kneus' (italics my emphasis). The horse replies that it was 'a fende of helle' compelled to adore the Host against its will and would not have knelt at all if it was able. See Powell (ed.), *Mirk's Festial*, vol. 1, 160.

[62]   Wang, 'The Bright Body', 122–3.

of the corpse is not due to diabolical influence and so adjusts the parameters of his questions accordingly. Thus he elides the usual demand to know whether the mobilizing entity was a good or bad spirit, as seen, for example, in *Saint Austin at Compton*. Granted grace the night before, Erkenwald dismisses the theological possibility—framed by the observation that the corpse looked as if it had been buried only yesterday (ll. 88–91, 157)—that a demon could have preserved the body from stench, discolouration and decay. Despite the hagiographical signposting in the first part of the poem, it is possible that a reader conversant in contemporary demonology and knowledgeable of the general tenor of sermon stories could well have interpreted the wonder in this way. While Erkenwald's newfound spiritual awareness does not influence the success of the conjuration *per se*—analogue tales from this era confirm that the recitation of formulas usually sufficed in rousing a spirit—the gift of *discretio spirituum* certainly had an impact on the direction of the bishop's interrogations (ll. 185–8).[63]

But even if Erkenwald uses his gift of discernment to reject a demonological reading of the corpse, he is still unsure as to the actual spiritual status of the deceased, making a clear distinction between the present-day Christian community and the unknown community to which the dead man belonged. After invoking the Passion in line 182, Erkenwald pointedly says that while the corpse has been granted eschatological knowledge through death,[64] and therefore *knows for certain* that Christ died upon the cross ('þou hit wast wyterly', l. 183a), it is something that *we*—i.e., Erkenwald and the onlookers—wholeheartedly *believe* ('wele leuen', l. 183b). In a Thomist sense, Erkenwald makes a clear distinction between knowledge and faith, the former being a precursor of, but not always leading to, the latter.[65] To know of an event in an intellectual sense is different from assenting to believe the truth of it.[66] Hence, then, the later question concerning the belief system to which the corpse subscribed ('quat lagh þou vsyt', l. 187b).

The whole initial performance takes a heavy spiritual toll on Erkenwald, who, we are told, sighed and moaned ('syked') after delivering his final query as to whether the corpse suffered in its current state (l. 189). However, the bishop has no time to gather himself, as his words prompt an immediate response from the dead man. The exact nature of the reanimating force, the 'lant goste-lyfe' (l. 192) that stirs the body into speaking, remains obscure, especially since the judge subsequently reveals that his soul resides in limbo (l. 293).[67] The impersonal descriptors that the narrator uses to refer to the body ('ilke body', l.193; 'þe dede body', l. 225; 'liche', l. 314) and the distinction made between the body and soul by the corpse itself ('My soule may sitte þer in sorrow', l. 305, etc.), suggest a sense of ontological division that can also be seen in contemporary death lyrics and Body and Soul debates.[68] But the fact that the baptism has an immediate spiritual effect ambiguates the exact connection between the two and can be read as just another example of the innate unknowability of God's plan.[69] Either

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[63] Erkenwald's keen sense of judgement is also apparent in later parts of the dialogue, seen in the methodical way by which he first demystifies the material evidence (the presence of the crown and sceptre, the preservation of the flesh and clothes, ll. 222b–3, 259b–64), before turning to the more pressing concern of the location of the dead man's soul (ll. 273–5).

[64] Turville-Petre (ed.), *St Erkenwald: A Critical Edition*, 94.

[65] See the various arguments included in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q1, especially Art. 5, which includes the definitive statement that 'faith and science [knowledge] are not about the same things' ('fides et scientia non sunt de eodem'), cited from https://aquinas.cc/ [accessed 28 June 2025]. For a summary of the tensions between knowledge and faith, see James Kellenberger, *Religious Knowledge* (Cham, 2023), 41–9.

[66] *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q1, Art. 4, co. 'Faith implies assent of the intellect to that which is believed' ('fides importat assensum intellectus ad id quod creditor').

[67] For a summary of the 'goste of lyfe' debates, see William A. Quinn, 'The Psychology of *St Erkenwald*', *Medium Ævum*, 53 (1984), 180–93 (at 185).

[68] E.g. the death lyric 'Farewell, this world! I take my leve for evere', in Thomas G. Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics and Carols* (Cambridge, 2013), 276; or, for a Body and Soul debate, 'In a thestri stude Y stod', in Susanna Greer Fein (ed.), *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, 2 vols (Kalamazoo, MI, 2015), vol. 2, 78–87.

[69] Quinn, 'The Psychology of *St Erkenwald*', 190.

way, Erkenwald's interrogation succeeds in its goal of demystifying who and what was unearthed from the foundations of St Paul's: the corpse is simply that of a just pagan lawgiver permitted by God to 'last' in the grave due to His love of the righteous (l. 272) and whose only fault is to have lived before the coming of Christ. Erkenwald's conjuration, his expert wielding of divinely resonant words to force the corpse the speak, allows the judge to reveal his post-mortem plight to the startled onlookers. And with Erkenwald's final baptismal act, the dead man's soul is finally 'broȝt … to blis' (l. 340).

CONCLUSION

The conjuration formula (ll. 179–84) is a lot more central to the prevailing themes of *St Erkenwald* than has hitherto been appreciated. Taking into consideration the wider literary context of ghost encounters and the traditions of penitential enquiry, Erkenwald follows the established procedures for interrogating the strange and the wondrous dead. If the Judge's salvation at the end of the poem represents an acknowledgement of the efficacy of the baptismal liturgy, so the conjuration that begins the dialogue is also an affirmation of the inherent power of exorcisms and conjurations—formulae pointedly also used in the baptismal rite. My argument that such formulae formed an important and generally orthodox part of one's spiritual defences feeds into the discussions made by Christine Chism, David Coley, and Jennifer Sisk, amongst others, that *St Erkenwald* can be read as a response to, if not a direct rebuttal of, the increasing influence of Lollard teachings at the end of the fourteenth century.[70] The Lollard disavowal of the importance of the sacraments included, of course, the rejection of the baptismal liturgy.[71] The fact that conjurations originated as part of the baptismal rite to cleanse the catechumen from evil suggests that the poet's investment in the rhetoric of baptism is, at however far a remove, a lot more interwoven into the fabric of *St Erkenwald* than has previously been given credit.

But as Coley has shown, sacramental language suffuses the entire poetic landscape of *St Erkenwald*.[72] Conjuration formulas, as derivations of the powerful liturgical proclamations first used in baptism, and thereafter used to heal demoniacs and test the identity of spirits, formed part of this wider sacramental landscape. The fact that Erkenwald is able to compel the corpse to speak using a formula derived from standard exorcism liturgies speaks to the need for such established, orthodox techniques to successfully interact with demons and the dead. Only by conjuring the dead could their post-mortem needs be assessed; or, if the spirit turned out to be a demon-in-disguise, could it be successfully exorcised and prevented from harming others. If read didactically, lines 179–84 also provided readers with a template for subduing spirits that they could use in their own lives. Finally, it is through the expert use of liturgical language—conjuration at the beginning, baptism at the end—that Erkenwald, the pre-eminent London saint, is able to bring the wonder under authoritative control and repair the sense of socio-spiritual unity that the judge's discovery had so alarmingly disrupted. This, indeed, allegorizes a desire for social and spiritual restitution that was no less pressing in the London-based poet's own tumultuous time.

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[70] Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002), 42; Coley, 'Baptism as Eucharist', 347; Sisk, 'The Uneasy Orthodoxy of *St. Erkenwald*', 92.

[71] As summarized in J. Patrick Hornbeck II, *What is a Lollard? Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2010).

[72] Coley, 'Baptism as Eucharist', 342.