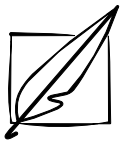

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The propagandistic narrative in *Saint Erkenwald*

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ABSTRACT

Saint Erkenwald is an anonymous Middle English alliterative poem whose genre has been long debated, that is whether it is an instance of romance, a hagiographical text or something else, without reaching a general consensus. As a matter of fact, the poem develops around three different themes, linked to each other only through the figure of the saint: England's past, the role of baptism and the translation of the Trajan legend into an English context, themes mirroring some of the main concerns of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, characterised by an emerging English feeling and pride. The present paper will analyse the poem from a completely different perspective, as a form of political and theological propaganda. Through examination of the linguistic strategies used in the narrative, it will show that the author aims to foster a civic unification, by means of consolidating the Christian orthodox view and incorporating the past of England.

Keywords: propaganda strategies, lexicon, collocation, Britishness, Middle English, Christianity.

1. Introduction: The poem and the manuscript

Saint Erkenwald is a Middle English poem of 352 alliterative verses, preserved only in the miscellany codex London, British Library MS Harley 2250, more precisely in folios 72v-75v. Although the codex is unanimously dated to around 1477, thanks to a colophon at f. 64v: "Explicit Speculum Christiani anno domini M^{o}CCCC^{mo}lxxvij, the composition of the poem itself is more debated: it is agreed to date from an earlier period, but the range oscillates between 1386 and 1420, depending on what scholars claim to be the occasion for the poem.

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Since the first edition by Carl Horstmann in 1881, most scholars and editors have regarded the poem as a hagiographic work, mainly because of the presence of an explicit heading recurring on each folio with the saint's name – *De Erkenwaldo*, *De San*^{c}*to Erkenwaldo*, *De Stō Erkenwaldo*, *De StōErkenwaldo ep[iscop]o* – and because of the predominant hagiographic character of the other texts contained in the manuscript. Indeed, the codex mainly consists of religious texts – *Memoriale Credentium*, some sermons taken from John Mirk's *Festial*, the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, the *Speculum Christiani*, the *Legend of the Rood*, the *History of the Invention of the Cross*, and the *Themata Dominicalia* and the *Tabula Diete Salutis*, excerpted from the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Dieta Salutis* –, and of several *vitae*, some taken from the *South English Legendary* (such as those devoted to St Martin of Tours, St John the Baptist; St Peter, St Alban, St Julian, St Julian the Hospitaller), and some connected to the legend of the Rood, such as the life of St Helena. Accordingly, the occasion to write a hagiographic poem devoted to this saint was individuated in the celebrations for the confirmation of the saint's feast day organised by the bishop of London, Robert Braybrooke, in the year 1386 (Gollancz 1922; Savage 1926).

Only more recently have other features of the poem begun to be appraised, in particular its references to historical (legendary and realistic) elements. Looking at the less explicit, but unquestionable, hints at the figure of the king, to the ecclesiological and theological debate on the role of the visible Church and the sacraments, others have postponed the *terminus ad quem* either to 1392 (Grady 1992) or the first decade of the fourteenth century (Nissé 1998; Camp 2013). However, its religious and hagiographical status has not been cast doubt on. At most the edifying figure of the saint has been considered to be instrumental to the author for pointing out his opinion on the role of the Church (Sisk 2007).

In the present paper, a new perspective will be proposed, in which *Saint Erkenwald* is aligned with the poems of both London, British Library, Cotton Nero A.x. and the Alliterative Revival. First, its categorisation as a hagiographic text will be questioned, showing that apart from its heading and its position within a miscellaneous manuscript of religious and hagiographical texts, the poem does not fit in with hagiographic text-types, neither *vitae* nor *miracula* nor *inventions.* As a matter of fact, the three main themes of the poem the critical and scholarly literature has identified (i.e. England's past and Christianisation, the role of baptism in the soul's salvation and the translation of the Trajan legend into an English context) actually mirror some of the main concerns characterising the late fourteenth-

and fifteenth-century England: the Celtic past and the English reign; the role of sacraments and the authority of the 'visible' Church; and the prestige of Latin, and of French language and culture in a context of an emerging English feeling.

Paleographically, the poem itself visually highlights two main sections by only using two capital letters: the former one obviously occurs at the beginning of the poem, the latter at line 177, dividing the historical excursus and the arrival of St Erkenwald from the revelation of the pagan judge and the salvation of his soul. Analysing the author's linguistic choices, *in primis* lexical but also syntactic strategies, informing the narrative scheme, we will demonstrate that the author uses a series of devices to take a stance and direct the audience's opinion towards two main issues, namely the Christian orthodox view, embodied in the sacrament of baptism, and the national (British and Christian) identity, that correspond to the two textual sections signalled by the capital letters. Accordingly, the poem functions as a form of political and religious propaganda, in a period when England was subverted by religious turmoil, linked to Lollards' movements, and political difficulties, such as the Peasants' Revolt and the Lords Appellant, for the establishment of Richard II's reign and maybe in favour of the elevation of the County Palatine of Chester into a principality by the same king (Curry 1979; Vezzosi 2019a, 2019b).

1.1 What *Saint Erkenwald* is about

After the first 32 lines that outline the history of the conversion of Britain, describing the shift from Britons' true belief (Christianity) to Saxons' paganism and the restoration of Christianity thanks to St Augustine's mission, the narration moves to the time of St Erkenwald, in particular to the phases of the destruction of the greatest pagan temple and the building of a "new work" at St Paul's. While working and digging on site, some builders came across a mysterious tomb, adorned with gargoyles, made of grey marble, and inscribed with a series of golden mysterious characters no scholar was able to decipher. Inside they found a beautifully preserved body, dressed in royal garments proper for a king, whose identity nobody – neither laymen nor church people nor monks – seemed to be able to recognise. To solve this puzzling enigma, St Erkenwald, the bishop of London, was summoned. Through prayers, he turns to the Holy Spirit, thanks to whose intervention the body is granted the gift of speech. A long section is devoted to the dead body's speech, in which St Erkenwald and the curious crowd

there gathered – as well as the contemporary audience – are told that he was a righteous judge who lived under the rule of King Belinus, that is in the fourth century before Christ, celebrated by his contemporaries and buried in a glorious fashion for his moral incorruptibility, but unable to enter heaven because he had not been baptised while in life and forced into a *lewid date* ('uncalculable period' l. 205). The whole crowd is moved to tears by his suffering, and so is the bishop whose tears casually fell on the body exactly at the same moment that the bishop is wishing to be able to administer baptism and therefore is reciting the formula "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost". Thus, baptism unexpectedly takes place and, as the audience understands from the judge's words themselves, the soul of the pagan judge is sitting at the heavenly table together with the holy souls and the angels. At these words, his material corpse and tomb instantly dissolve, leaving the audience in awe. The poem concludes with an ordinate parade with St Erkenwald at its head while St Paul's church's bells ring.

This short summary is essential to identify the main topics and participants the poem focuses on. First of all, four main characters are at stake: besides the most obvious ones – e.g., Erkenwald and the judge – London is also to be regarded as a protagonist, and so are its inhabitants. As far as the topics the poem is dealing with are concerned, there is no doubt about the centrality of baptism, thanks to which the judge's soul reaches its salvation. Its relevance is also stressed by the fact that the other protagonist, i.e., London, is undergoing processes described in terms of the administration of this sacrament. Next to this topic, the role of history cannot be ignored: while apparently the scene involves different temporal layers, the selection of deictics, adverbs, verbal modes and denominations level them into an a-temporal time and a-spatial place closely identifiable with the time and the place of the reader.

1.2 How propaganda is conveyed through discourse and stance

Propaganda operates as a potent tool in shaping public perception and influencing behavior, often embedded subtly or overtly within the way discourse is constructed and stance is expressed.

Discourse, in the sociolinguistic and critical sense, refers to how language is used in communication and how it actively constructs social realities. As Fairclough (1992) argues, discourse is more than a vehicle for communication; it plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms, values,

and power relations or in constructing truth (Foucault 1972). Propaganda strategically uses discourse to control narratives, framing issues in a way that aligns with the propagandist's objectives, through the choice of specific words, metaphors, or rhetorical structures. For instance, creating an us-versus-them dichotomy is a way to legitimize one viewpoint while marginalizing others; or using positive vs. negative qualifications, such as "barbaric invaders" vs. "brave defenders" in warlike contexts, creates a frame within which the audience is led to adopt a binary worldview.

Another key element in the effectiveness of propagandistic discourse is how stance is embedded within it, inasmuch as stance refers to the attitudes, judgments, and positions that speakers or writers convey about their subjects or interlocutors. According to Biber and Finegan (1989), stance encompasses linguistic markers of certainty, affect, and subjectivity, which can subtly influence an audience's perception of truth and authority. The way stance is articulated – through expressions of certainty, evaluative language, or emotional appeal – can make propaganda more persuasive. Du Bois (2007) highlights the interactive nature of stance-taking, where speakers position themselves not only in relation to the content but also in dialogue with the audience. This dynamic interplay allows propagandists to align themselves with the audience's values, reinforcing in-group solidarity and shaping collective identity. By calibrating their stance to match the emotional and cognitive expectations of their target audience, propagandists can subtly reinforce ideologies, making their messages more resonant and difficult to refute. For instance, the use inclusive pronouns like "we" and "us" can create a sense of collective identity. At the same time, a negative stance can be adopted towards those that are described through diminishing or negative attributes, such as "corrupt", "immoral" and so on.

In a propagandistic text, the interplay between discourse and stance is therefore crucial. Through a careful discourse structuring a seemingly coherent and authoritative worldview can be presented and through a strategic use of stance the appeal to shared values and an emotional response control can be assured. As Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) explain, the success of propaganda often lies in its ability to embed these elements seamlessly, making the message appear natural and incontrovertible.

Although most studies of propaganda, stance, and discourse structure focus on contemporary texts, analysing this medieval poem could reveal that the language used in this text can be explained from a propagandistic perspective and that propagandistic strategies have not changed significantly over time.

2. The Genre of *Saint Erkenwald*

One of the most significant literary genres in Middle English is surely the narrative of *exempla*, in particular of religious *exempla*, concerning saints, as proved by wills in which they are mentioned as a part of the inheritance (Long 2006: 52), by the circulation of devotional miscellanies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and by the fact that well-renowned authors, such as Geoffrey Chaucer (*Life of St Cecilia*), John Lydgate (*Lyfe of Seynt Margarete*), Osbern Bokenham (*Life of St Anne*) or John Capgrave (*Life of St Katharine of Alexandria*) among others, devoted themselves to this genre. More precisely, hagiographic works are classified into *miracula*, *inventio*, and *vita.* As the names themselves imply, *miracula* mainly deal with the miracles either done by the saints or related to the motivation underlying their canonisation and the *inventiones* focus on relics and their finding. They are often composed either to strengthen an established cult or to establish one. The *vitae* are characterised by some conventionalised narrative sections, such as the description of the saints' lineage (usually a noble and/or powerful family), life, and, more significantly, conversion and the account of the reason for their canonisation: the martyrdom they suffered or the miracles they performed or their role in defending and spreading Christianity. Supported by some formal features, such as the heading and the content of the texts contained in the manuscript through which the poem *Saint Erkenwald* was handed down, scholars have traditionally interpreted it as a hagiography. Some have held it as an example of a *miraculum* (McAlindon 1970), some as a case of *inventiones* (Otter 1994), and some others as a *vita* (Peterson 1977): "*St. Erkenwald* can more easily be read as a poetic rendering of an episode from a *vita* celebrating the intercessory powers evidenced by Erkenwald during his lifetime" (Sisk 2007: 95). However, they all agree in recognising that the poem is a peculiar representative of these text-types.

If the discovery of the sarcophagus shows a series of *topoi* proper to medieval *inventio* – such as the indecipherable inscription, the description of the excavations, the rhetorical figures and the figurative lexicon connected to the opening and closing of the sarcophagus and, finally, the discovery of the body – nevertheless, what is found is not the saint or something related to him, but *ay a freke faithles* (a man without faith, and therefore a pagan). In other words, the reader is not faced with the discovery of relics subject to veneration. Classifying it as a *miraculum* would be equally unusual, because the real miracle is the decomposition of the body and the royal insignia that had been "wonderfully" preserved for one thousand and three hundred

years: the dissolution of the earthly vestiges of the judge corresponds to the beginning of his soul's eternal life, as he himself tells the audience. In other words, it would be a case of a negative miracle, which leaves no trace on the earth, in contrast to the main feature of the genre of *miracula*, which are always motivated by the presence of relics, like *inventiones*. One could claim that the miracle is the baptism itself and the consequent salvation of the Judge's soul. It would still be unconvincing, because Erkenwald neither has control nor is aware of what is happening. The event – the tear – is random and not determined by Erkenwald's will (Kamowski 1995; Vezzosi 2019a, 2019b), as proved by the use of the verb *lenen*, which is the special predicate for giving or bestowing with God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, Fortune, etc., as agents (cf. MED sv. *lenen*) and of the subjunctive mood, which expresses a wish, a possibility, not a reality (Mustanoja 1960). Accordingly, Erkenwald is rather the intermediary of God's will than the conscious agent performing the sacrament (Vezzosi 2019a).

(1) "Oure lord lene, quaþ þat lede, þat þou lyfe hades
By goddis leue, as longe as I myȝt lacche water
& cast vpone þi faire cors & carpe þes wordes:
I folwe þe in þe fader nome & his fre childes
& of þe gracious holy goste – & not one grue lenger.
Þene þof þou droppyd doun dede, hit daungerde me lasse!"
W^{t} þat worde þat he warpyd þe wete of eghene
& teres trillyd adoun & one þe toumbe lightene:
& one felle one his face: & þe freke syked. (ll. 314-322)[1]

["Allow our Lord," said the man, "that you have life / by the grace of God, and as long as I can get water / and spread it on your beautiful body and say these words: / "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of his noble Son / and of the Holy Spirit full of grace" – and so be it". / After that even if you drop dead, that will hinder me a little!" / With those words, he spread the moisture from his eyes / and tears flowed down and shone on the grave / and one fell on his face and the man sighed.]

About Erkenwald, a well-documented historical figure, hagiographic works have flourished since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the anonymous *Miracula sancti Erkenwaldi* and *Vita sancti Erkenwaldi Londoniensis*

1 Every quotation of the poem is based on Horstmann's edition (1887). Translations are mine, if not otherwise stated.

episcopi[2] and later with John of Tymouth's *De Sancto Erkenwaldo episcopo et confessore* within his *Sanctilogium Angliae Walliae Scotiae et Hiberniae* and the seventeenth-century *The flowers of the lives of the most renowned saincts of the three kingdoms England Scotland, and Ireland* (1632). Like the more historical works, such as Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (vol. II §4-6 in Lapidge's 2008 edition) and William of Malmesbury's *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* (§ii.73.10-11 in Winterbottom's 2007 edition), those hagiographies remember Erkenwald as a famous bishop of London who founded two monasteries – the more important double-monastery in Bark directed by his sister Æthelburg and the one in Chertsey for himself –, and record the miracles connected to his holiness: that is, the waters of the river Yla went still and separated to facilitate the passage of the litter on which the body of the saint was carried during the transfer to the cathedral of St Paul's; and the thaumaturgic power of the saint's sedan chair or litter (and the wood of which it was made) during his body's removal when touched by the sick. The *Vita* also records the miracle of the two-wheeled chariot, which continued to roll down the road, despite having lost one. No hint to the narrative present in the poem is found everywhere else. However, this would not affect its categorisation as a hagiography. The problem is that, unlike the above-mentioned texts, the poem does not share a considerable number of scholarly established conventions canonically linked to the genre (Sanok 2019): it does not describe the lineage of Erkenwald, nor his vocation or mission, nor his life or his death, nor his posthumous miracles, as happens both in the *Miracula* and in *Vita sancti Erkenwaldi*, nor the reason why he is a saint, as his holiness is taken for granted from the beginning and throughout the poem. On the contrary, it is the pagan judge who, introducing himself, talks about his own descent, the period in which he lived (ll. 197-204), the context in which his faithful and rightful work was performed (ll. 207-213), the supreme justice inspiring his actions (ll. 227-229) and allowing his body and clothes to be kept intact and finally about his death and *post mortem* events (ll. 245-250). Accordingly, if any, *Saint Erkenwad* should be considered as the judge's *vita*, which is unsustainable because it would be totally anachronistic to claim that at the time some celebrated a pagan and secular saint.[3]

2 Whatley (1986) discussed in details both the editions of the *Miracula* and of the *Vita* and their sources.

3 The judge's episode recalls the well-renowned legend of St Gregory and Trajan (Vezzosi 2019a).

Other features make the poem difficult to categorise as a prototypical example of devotional genre and at the same time make it peculiar and exceptional: the presence of an initial historical excursus on Britannia and the description of the Christianisation of London, which are totally unmotivated in a hagiographic narrative, whereas something similar occurs in epic poems, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *Brut*; the indulging attention given to the discovery and the guise of the sarcophagus and the judge's appearance, the thorough characterisation of the Londoners by distinguishing them according to their jobs, social tasks and offices, and finally the unity of place (the churchyard of St Paul's in London) and time (a day in the period of the cathedral's (re)construction) of the entire narration.

The analysis of such peculiarities will disclose the propagandistic nature or mission of this poem that is saying its word about some of the major concerns of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century London and England.

3. The Baptism

As is clear from the summary, there is no doubt that the main episode is centred on the sacrament of baptism, namely on the Christian sacrament of baptism according to the very same judge's words – ll. 298-299: *Bot, mendyd wt a medecyne, ȝe are made for to lyuye: / Þat fulloght in fonte, wt faitheful bileue* [but, cured with a medicine we are made to live: that baptism in [baptismal] font in the faithful belief] –, a theme to which the second section of the poem, comprising the judge's revelation (ll. 177-309), the saint's intervention (ll. 310-320) and the judge's soul's salvation (ll. 321-345) is fully devoted. This episode of the judge has been unanimously considered to be a version of the renowned legend of the emperor Trajan and St Gregory (cf. Whatley 1986; Grady 1992, 2005; Kamowski 1995; Thijms 2005; Sisk 2007), which played a significant role within the medieval theological debate on the status of righteous pagans and on the concept of predestination. In particular, in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, it was a theme addressed to answer the theological and ecclesiological question on the role of the visible Church. According to Lollards and the Oxford theologian Wyclif, whose thought was central to the entire Lollard movement, salvation was granted only to the predestined, and therefore the visible Church had no role or power because only God could dispense grace. On the contrary, according to the dogma of the real presence, the orthodox position of the official

Church theorised the capacity of rituals and sacraments administrated by its clergymen to effect transformations in the state of being, and consequently both the necessity of sacraments, namely baptism, for the salvation of the soul and the importance of clergymen in their role as celebrants (cf. Coley 2008).

The version given in the poem apparently speaks in favour of an orthodox view, since the judge's salvation is seen as a consequence of the intervention of Erkenwald, who is a saint, but more significantly a champion of the visible Church. Looking at his lexical choices, it is clear that the poet wants to insist on the figure of Erkenwald as a bishop. First of all, he mainly referred to him as such (*þe byschop* l. 3, l. 105, l. 129, l. 142, l. 159; *bischop* l. 33, l. 111) and, less frequently, as a prelate or primate (l. 129, l. 137, and l. 104) or with the qualification as a saint (l.4 *Saynt Erkenwolde*), using, on the contrary, his own name without appellative only thrice (l. 32 *Erkenwolde*, l. 105 *Sir Erkenwolde*, l. 117 *Ser Erkenwolde*). Secondly, Erkenwald's actions, described in the poem, technically identify him as a clergyman and an officiant: in particular, the celebration of the Mass (ll. 131-132 *wᵗ his ministres þe masse he begynnes / Of sp(iritu)s d(o)m(ini)* 'with his minsters he begins the mass of Spiritus Sanctus', l. 137 *Tille cessyd was þe seruice & sayde þe later ende* 'Untill the service was finished and the concluding formula [was] said'), the prayers (l. 119 *al þe nyȝt hade naityd his houres* 'all night [he] recited his hours'; and the invocation (*bisechen*[4]) to God and the Holy Spirit (ll. 116-132) that appears to be essential for Erkenwald, that is for a human, to understand the mystery of the tomb and the intact corpse (ll. 122-125: *"Þaghe I be vnworthi", al wepande he sayde, / Thurghe his deere debonerte, "digne hit, my lorde, / In confirmynge þi cristen faithe fulsene [filsten?] me to kenne / Þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat mene opone wondres!"*). In other words, the reader and the listener is continuously reminded that the judge's soul is saved through the intervention of Erkenwald who, as an officiant and as a clergyman, performed the sacrament by pouring the water and pronouncing the words.[5]

The theme of the baptism is not limited to the stories of the wonder of the intact corpse and tomb of the pagan and righteous judge, but pervades the entire narration. The poem starts with a sort of synopsis that condenses the main steps of the Christianisation of Britain, metonymically represented by London. Once established the unit of place (l. 1: *At Londone in Englonde* 'In London, in England'), the past is evoked, apparently in

4 *MED* s.v. *bisechen* "[t]o say a prayer; pray (to God); pray (after, for sth.)", especially in combination with mercy, grace or help of God.

5 "[T]he poem argues that no matter how worthy the soul, the form of baptism by word and by water is necessary for salvation" (Kamoski 1995: 6).

chronological order according to Bede's account, but it is not the historical past of Britain/London, but its Christian one. Therefore, the narration starts with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, and continues with an enormous jump into Erkenwald's time when London was undergoing a process of Christianisation after the *adventus Saxonum*, whose paganism was imposed over Britons' Christianity. The re-conversion process (l. 13: *& conuertyd alle þe communnates to cristendame newe* 'and [Augustine] converted all the people to Christianity again') looks peculiar in that it is described as a re-naming and cleaning programme:

(2) He turnyd temples þat tyme þat temyd to þe deuelle,
& clansyd hom in Cristes nome & kyrkes home callid,
He hurlyd owt hor ydols & hade hym in sayntes,
& chaungit cheuely hor nomes & chargit home better:
Þat ere was of Appolyne, is now of saynt Petre,
Mahone to saynt Margrete oþer to Maudelayne,
Þe Synagoge of þe sonne was sett to oure lady,
Jubiter & Jono to Jhesu oþer to James.
So he home dedifiet & dyght alle to dere halowes,
Þat ere wos sett of Sathanas in Saxones tyme.
Now þat Londone is neuenyd, hatte "þe new Troie" (ll. 14-24)

[And he changed the temples that belonged to the devil at that time / and purified them in the name of Christ and called them churches, / He cast away their idols and brought saints into them / and successfully changed their names and bound them with oaths for the better. / What was Apollo's is now St Peter's, / Muhammad was changed to St Margaret or St Magdalene. / The synagogue of the Sun was dedicated to Our Lady, / Jupiter and Juno became Jesus or James. / Thus he rededicated [lit. dedicated and gave] them to the saints / that had previously been assigned to Satan in the time of the Saxons. / What is now called London was called "the New Troy"]

The choice of predicates to describe the conversion is meaningful: in order, *turnen*, *clensen*, *callen*, *changen names*, *chargen*, *dedifien*, *dighen*, and *nevenen*. First of all, it is striking that the conversion is represented through a series of acts that seem to exclusive concern the city, more specifically its religious buildings. Out of eight, five predicates either could or do refer to the actions performing the baptism which involve purifying (i.e. cleaning with water) from sin and giving a name: *clensen*, *callen*, *changen names*, *chargen*, and *nevenen*. One can justifiably argue that *clensen* is the prototypical verb for the sacrament: since its first attestation, the verb has shown a metaphorical

use, when it implies to make clean from moral dirt, i.e. sin or guilt (e.g. 971 Blickl. Hom. 35: *Þæt we* […] *ure synna clænsian* 'that we purge our sins], but in Middle English, it gets combined with rituals and ceremonies,[6] especially with baptism: e.g. c1175 Orm.(Jun 1)18171: *He þurrh fulluhht shall ben Off alle sinness clennsedd*. 'He shall be purged from every sin through baptism'; a1200 Trin.Hom.(Trin-C B.14.52)87: *Þat* [the rite of circumcision] *clensede þe man of sinne swo doð nu fulluht*. 'That cleansed the man from sin just as baptism does now'. The conversion itself is embodied by the act of naming: they do nothing but appoint a new name (e.g. *callen*). Which name to give is not relevant in itself, but it is sufficient that it changes and alliterates with the pagan one (i.e. *chancen names*). Renaming is not an end in itself but implies binding the renamed object, in this case, to an oath, an act of faith, as the use of the polysemic *chargen* suggests: *chargen* in its legal meaning is the predicate used in confession to bind by oath, to pun under oath or to promise solemnly (for instance on the Book or more simply by oath). In this perspective, also *turnen* assumes special nuances and triggers specific implications: although the physical movement is unquestionably among its first and predominant meanings, one cannot but associate its use in this poem with the abstract interpretation of *turning*, where the ends of the movement are the polar ends of Christianity and Paganism. Interestingly, this is how the verb is used in Laȝamon's *Brut*:

(3) c1275(?a1200) Lay.Brut (Clg A.9)14741: Þa iwende seint Austin vorð… þurh-ut Englelond & turnde hit to Godes hond.

[Then St Augustine went forth throughout England and brought it into God's hand]

In other words, the conversion is symbolically represented as a baptismal ritual, which culminates with the rechristening of the city: what was named New Troy is now called London. Intriguingly, similar parallelisms between the relation Christianity vs. Paganism and the act of renaming is found in *The Brut, or The chronicles of England*, where the arrival of the Saxon not only causes the abandonment of Christianity, but also the renaming of the land (*chaunge þe name of þe lande*) as 'the land of Engist':

(4) 1419 c. The Brut, or The chronicles of England. Edited from Ms. Raw. B171, Bodleian Library, cap. LIX, p. 55: in euery place lete caste adoune

6 *MED* s.v. *clensen*: "3. (a) To purify (sb.) by appropriate rites, make (sth.) ceremonially clean".

> cherche3 and houses of religioun, and destroyed Cristendome þrou3 þe lande, and lete chaunge þe name of þe lande, þat no man of his were so hardy after þat tyme to calle þis lande Britaigne, but calle it Engistes lande

In *Sir Gawain and the Green knight*, it is the same verb *nevenen*, used in the poem to express the christening of the city as London, that indicates the naming of Rome after Romulus – e.g. c1400(?c1390) Gawain (Nero A.10)10: *Þat bur3e he biges vpon fyrst, & neuenes hit his aune nome* 'he builds that town first and calls it after his own name'.

The metaphor of baptism is further strengthened at the end of the poem, when the judge's soul is safely sitting at the heavenly supper and informs St Erkenwald and the community of believers gathered around the judge's tomb.

(5) […] "oure sauyoure be louyd!
Now herid be þou, heghe god, & þi hende moder,
& blissid be þat blisful houre þat ho the bere in!
& also be þou, bysshop, þe bote of my sorowe[…]
Ry3t now to soper my soule is sette at þe table,
For w þe wordes & þe water þat weshe vs of payne
Li3tly lasshit þer a leme loghe in þe abyme,
Þat spakly sprent my spyrit w vnsparid murthe (ll. 322-335)

> ["Praised be Jesus Christ! / Now praised be You, O Most High, and Your Mother full of grace, /and blessed be that blessed moment in which it gave birth to you! / And also be you, bishop, the remedy for my sorrow […] Right now my soul is sitting at the dinner table, / for, with words and the water that washes away our sins, / a ray of light shines brightly down there, down in the abyss.]

After the tear has fallen on the judge's face, the audience (both in the poem and in reality) does not know what is happening to his soul. They only see his body's decomposition. In just one sentence uttered by the either disappearing or disappeared judge, the audience realises it: l. 324 *also be þou, bysshop, þe bote of my sorowe*. By selecting the word *bote,* the author actually evokes in the listener/reader's mind either concept of both remedy and salvation: as a matter of fact, *bote* primarily expresses the idea of profit or benefit and relief or remedy (from a source outside oneself), but, especially in collocation with *soul*, it can also mean both salvation – e.g. c1175(?OE) Bod.Hom.(Bod 343)96/7: *Þonne do we þæt to bote & to clænsunge ure sawlæ*

'Then we do that for the salvation and the purification of our soul' – and saviour – e.g. ?a1300 Suete ihu king (Dgb 86)9: *Swete ihesu, mi soule [vr. huerte] bote!* 'Sweet Jhesus, saviour of soul [heart]'. Thus, in this passage, the author explains that the pagan judge's salvation has been possible thanks to the baptism for which he expressively thanks Erkenwald literally defined as 'the remedy of his pain'.

Like *clensen*, *washen* too can have a figurative meaning, involving the idea of ritual purification from spiritual stain, often in combination with guilt, sin, evil, wickedness and so on – e.g. c1175 Lamb. Hom. 157: […] *heo werð hire solf waschen of hire fule sunnen*. 'she is herself washed from her impure sins' – to such an extent that during Middle English period they are often used as synonyms in binominal constructions[7] – e.g. 1340Ayenbite (1866) 112 *Þe herte þet is..yclensed and ywesse be zoþe ssrifte*. 'the heart that is cleansed and washed by the true Scripture'. Thus they can alternate in the baptismal formula as well as in the description of the ritual itself:

(6) (a1438) MKempe A (Add 61823)30/23: Þow seyst þe prest take þe chyld at þe funt-ston & dyppe it in þe watyr & wasch it fro oryginal synne

[You see the priest taking the child at the baptismal font and dip it into the water and wash it from the original sin]

a1400(a1325) Cursor (Vsp A.3)25720: Þou wasch [Göt: wis] us first of adam plight, In funt quen we were cristen dight.

[You clean us first from Adam's guilt in the font when we are made Christian]

It is unquestionable that *þe wordes & þe water* refer to the water used and the words uttered during the confecting of the sacrament, and so does the verb *washen*. Less clear it is why the verb here combines with *payne* 'pain' and what it means. *Washen* and *clensen* are never attested with words expressing the notion of pain. Moreover, the same Middle English word *pein*(*e*), usually expressing punishment and torments deriving from punishment, expands into the domain of suffering and sorrow but only in connection with the punishment Christ suffered for mankind on the Cross – e.g. a1400 Cursor

7 Binominals are one of the most recurrent strategies employed during the Middle English period to introduce new meanings, new words or new formations into the language (Vezzosi 2020). In this case, the figurative meaning of *washen* is actually a later development attested since the beginning of the Middle English period, but spread from the fourteenth century onward.

(Trin-C R.3.8)8099: *Peyne on þat tre suffre he shal*. 'he shall suffer pain on that tree'; (c1390) Chaucer CT.Pars.(Manly-Rickert)I.282: *Jesu Crist took vp on hym self the peyne of alle oure wikkednesses*.'Jesus Christ took upon himself the suffering/punishment of all our wickedness'; c1400(c1378) PPl.B (LdMisc 581)5.411: *Goddes peyne and his passioun* […] 'God's suffering and his passion […]'. Such an unexpected collocation cannot be casual, especially in a poem unanimously recognised to be the outcome of a refined and expert poet. It is not peregrine to imagine that the author structures the passage in such a way to remind the role of the baptism, that is to wash us of our sins, of the original sin, of which Christ took upon himself the punishment and because of which he suffers on the Cross.

In other words, the author through his lexical and stylistic choices makes sure that the general theme of the (ritual of) baptism encompasses the entire narration, by evoking it in the historical overview at the beginning, making it reach its climax in the central episode and recalling it in a sort of condensed catechism at the end. At the same time, he stressed the role of an external agent, responsible for the efficacy of the sacrament: St Erkenwald, the archbishop, representative on earth of God/Christ.

4. Time shifting in *Saint Erkenwald*'s narrative

One of the unexpected features of this poem is the apparent chronological accuracy in that the poet takes a lot of care in specifying the time reference for each event mentioned. Whereas there is a unity of place in that only one location is mentioned, that is London and more specifically St Paul Cathedral's foundation and parvis, the unity of time concerning the main episode – the discovery of the wonder and the salvation of the pagan's soul – is rather illusory. Not only does the narration develop around and include several facts comprising a time span of more than one thousand years, but the author also seems to adopt linguistic strategies that confound the various temporal levels into an a-temporal point of time in which the audience and the author might identify.

The discovery of the "wonder", i.e. the magnificent and intact tomb and corpse, neither clergymen nor scholars are able to understand or identify, is undoubtedly temporally located in the seventh century, because Erkenwald is a well-known historically important figure who lived in that time. As undeniable is that the burial of the pagan judge goes back to the fourth century since he himself said he lived and administered the (pagan)

law as a righteous judge during the reign of Belinus, the famous legendary king of the Britons, recounted by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

(7) Þe lengthe of my lyuing here þat is a lewid date,
Hit (is) to meche to any mone to make of a noumbre:
After þat Brutus þis burghe had buggid one fyrste
No3t bot fife hundred 3ere þer aghtene wontyd,
Before þat kynned 3our Criste by cristene acounte
A þousande 3ere & þritty mo & 3et threnene aght.
I was ane heire of anoye in þe new Troie
In þe regne of þe riche kynge þat rewlit vs þene,
The bolde Bretone ser Belyne, ser Berynge was his brothire –
Mony one was þe busmare bodene home bitwene
For hor wrakeful werre, quil hor wrathe lastyd.
Þene was I iuge here enioynyd in gentil lawe". (ll. 205-216)

[The length of my lying here, which is an unknown duration, / is too much for any man to calculate. /After Brutus first built this city, / it took five hundred minus eighteen years / before Christ was born, according to the calculation of the Christians, / [therefore I am lying for] a thousand and thirty years and three times eight more. / I was an heir of pain in new Troy, / in the realm of the rich king who led us then, / the brave Briton Ser Belinus, whose brother was Ser Brennius – / Many were the insults they exchanged one another, / for their ruinous war, while their hatred lasted. / It was then that I was made a judge here under a pagan law."]

In between, the poem records three fundamental facts happening in these thousand years: the Passion of Christ and the institution of Christianity; the *adventus Saxonum* (the arrival of Saxons), who made Christian Britons flee and imposed paganism, and St Augustine's mission, which re-established the Christian faith in the country, of which Erkenwald is a representative as a bishop and a saint.

(8) At Londone in Englonde, no3t fulle longe sythene
Eft Crist suff ride one crosse & cristendome stablyde,
Ther was a byschop in þat burghe, blessyd & sacryd:
Saynt Erkenwolde, as I hope, þat holy mon hatte.
In his tyme in þat tone þe temple aldergrattyst
Was drawene done, þat one dole to dedifie new,
For hit hethene had bene in Hengyst dawes
Þat þe Saxones vnsau3t hadene sende hyder.

> Þai bete oute þe Bretons & bro3t hom in-to Wales,
> & peruertyd alle þe pepul þat in þat place dwellide.
> Þene wos this reame renaide mony ronke 3eres,
> Til saynt Austyne in-to Sandewiche was sende fro þe pope:
> Þen prechyd he here þe pure faythe & plantyd þe trouthe
> & conuertyd alle þe communnates to cristendame newe. (ll. 1-14)
>
> [In London, England, not long / after Christ had suffered on the cross and founded Christianity, / there was a blessed bishop in that city and consecrated, / St Erkenwald, I believe, that holy man was called. / In his time, in that city, the largest temple, / was demolished, most of it, to build a new one / since had been a pagan temple in the days of Hengist / whom the hostile Saxons had sent there. / These drove the Britons out and took them to Wales / And they corrupted all the nations that they lived in those places. / It was then that this kingdom gave up its faith for many lawless years / until St Augustine was sent to Sandwich by the Pope. / Then he preached here pure faith and sowed the truth / and converted all communities back to Christianity.]

The selection of the historical facts and their arrangement are not casual. If the sequence is chronological, the sense of historical progressivity is not so straightforward. Although they are not interrelated, the strategies adopted present them as were they a consequence of each other, but in reality they were quite disconnected. The establishment of Christianity and Christ's Passion are syntactically linked to the following presentative clause through the adverbial locution *no3t fulle longe sythene* 'not long afterwards' which puts thematically near, if not temporally, the institution of Christianity and the seventh-century London with its bishop Erkenwald. Indeed, the London of St Erkenwald could not exist if Christ had not suffered on the Cross, because it is deeply Christianised. The arrival of Saxons is therefore described as an act of hostility: They are said to be *vnsau3t* 'hostile, aggressive, warlike', and accordingly their coming turns out to be an act of aggression and enmity. Such a view on the event would be totally obvious if it were seen with the eyes of a Briton or even a Christian Anglo-Saxon of Erkenwald's time, but more ambiguous for the author of the poem, who is a descendant of those Saxons. However, this apparent discrepancy clears itself in a Christian perspective, because the arrival of the Saxons causes a traumatic break in the history of Christianity on the island with the imposition of their pagan beliefs. The choice of *perverten* to describe the conversion to paganism is not neutral, because the image evoked by this verb is that of turning away from the right to the wrong direction, that is from the right to the 'uncorrect' religion. Such a reading might well reflect the point of view of

such a Christian as the fourteenth-century English author and is further confirmed by the antonym (*converten*) chosen to refer to what the Christian mission did. The juxtaposition of these two predicates ideally creates the image of a continuous path of Christianity, in which the author identifies himself, stemming from Christ's Passion, through the (Roman-) Celtic culture up to Erkenwald's time, broken by the Saxon paganism and restored by the intervention of St Augustine. The use of *renaiden* becomes accordingly less absurd: as pagan, Saxons could not possibly have renounced or disavowed the Christian faith, but this was what the Britons, subject of their reign, did.

Continuity is re-established by St Augustine's works, which re-semanticized the places of worship, attributing them a new function, symbolised by the new names alliterating with the previous ones. There is only one exception: in the case of l. 5 *þe temple aldergrattyst* it is necessary to uproot the previous building from the foundations, due to the powerful wickedness of the pagan deity it was dedicated to (l. 27 and l. 29) and named after (l. 28). To convey the idea of the total removal of the pagan past from the symbol of Christianity the predicates expressing destruction (l. 6, l. 37) are more frequent than those meaning construction (l. 5 *dedifie new*, l. 37 *buggyd efte new*).

(9) Now þat Londone is neuenyd, hatte þe new Troie –
Þe metropol & þe mayster-tone hit euermore has bene.
Þe mecul mynster þerinne a maghty deuel aght,
& þe title of þe temple bitan was his name,
For he was dryghtyne derrest of ydols praysid;
[…]
Now of þis Augustynes art is Erkenwolde bischop
At loue Londone tone, & the laghe teches,
Syttes semely in þe sege of saynt Paule mynster,
Þat was þe temple Triapolitan, as I tolde are.
Þene was hit abatyd & beten done, & buggyd efte new,
A noble note for þe nones, & new werke hit hatte. (ll. 25-38)

[What is now called London used to be called "the New Troy" / became the archbishopric and the capital forever. / A mighty devil owned the great cathedral yonder, / and the title of this corrupted temple was his name, / for he was the dearest lord among the worshiped idols, […] Now Erkenwald is the bishop of this province of Augustine, / in his beloved city of London and teaches law / and sits with honour on the episcopal seat of St Paul's Cathedral. / That was the Tripolitan temple, as I said before. / Then it was torn down and destroyed and built again, / a grand deal for the occasion, and the new work was called.]

Unlike the other pagan temples, no new name seems to be appointed to this new building, but "new work", that is, it seems to be remembered as the only building that has been reconstructed, and not just renamed. The reader has all the clues to infer rightly both that it was also rechristened and what new name was given: St Paul's (l. 28). One can wonder why the author is not so explicit in this case as he is in the others and simply records that this incredible work was called "new werke". The term "newe werke" was indeed very evocative in his time, evocative and therefore on no account accidental, because it was precisely the epithet used to designate the enlargement programme of St Paul's Cathedral commenced in 1256 and completed in 1314. Using this epithet, the author leads his audience to place the whole story ideally in his own era, and to identify themselves as descendent of the previous Christian rather that the Saxons.

A parallel temporal shift is brought about by the possible interpretations triggered by the time adverb in l. 25: *Now þat Londone is neuenyd, hatte þe new Troie* 'What is now called London used to be called the New Troy'. The point in time identified by *now* is indeed ambiguous, as it could refer both to the time of the actions narrated in the poem, i.e. St Erkenwald's time, and the audience's time, contemporary to the author, i.e. the end of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth century.[8] The name, New Troy, then recalls the legendary foundation of Britain by means of the mythical founder, the Trojan Brutus (from whom the names Britons and Britain were said to derive), which is also remembered by the judge (ll. 207-211). This legend was first recorded by Nennius in his *Historia Brittonum* and later by Geoffrey of Monmounth in the *Historia regum Britanniae*, but it was also a theme dear to the Alliterative Revival movement, as witnessed by its presence in such poems as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *Wynnere and Wastoure*. In the poem, the memory of London's ancient designation as "New Troy" (ll. 25, 211, 251, 255) is not merely a literary reference; rather, it serves to highlight the city's British heritage and to strengthen the sense of connection to a Celtic past within fourteenth-century England. The inscription placed in the cathedral, where similar dates were recorded, may have aimed to achieve the same effect:

> A sign installed in the cathedral sometime before 1366 measured the intervals between important moments in England's (and particularly London's) past and present. The intervals included, among others,

8 My theoretical reference is Bridgeman (2005).

> those since the foundation of London by Brutus (2,405 years), the foundation of St Paul's (741 years), the conversion of the English by St Augustine of Canterbury (751 years) and the death of Arthur (700 years) (Smith 1997: 161).

The audience of the poem, as well as the visitor in the cathedral, is confronted by the presence of history in the everyday: those temporal points of reference became an index of London's symbolic identity in which the fourteenth-fifteenth century English recognised their British roots. Not only was the judge a Briton but also the listener or reader of *Saint Erkenwald* as a Londoner was the heir to the Britons and to Christianity.

5. Conclusion

The way we construct our discourse reveals our stance, our perspectives and our intentions, but also "make[s] [words] mean what [we] want them to mean" (Taylor 1942: 555). In other words, through language a different perspective of an issue can be constructed and thus influence an audience's opinion or actions (Mull – Wallin 2013: 5). "Discourse constitutes society and culture", and at the same time it does ideological work (Fairclough – Wodak 1997: 271-280).

In the present paper, I have tried to show that the poem *Saint Erkenwald* cannot be simply considered as a hagiographic text. Thanks to a sophisticated use of content and grammatical words, the author offers a response for his contemporary audience[9] to some of the main concerns characterizing his time, and intends to strengthen his view. Two are the main topics on which the author's attention is concentrated, and which are highlighted by the use of the capital letters, as they flag a particular reading of the text. They mark the historical excursus of the (re-)Christianization of Britain and the section dedicated to the encounter with the right Judge and his salvation through baptism, so that the two parts are distinct yet at

9 In this perspective it appears to be totally justified that the people facing the miracle are depicted in detail and almost represent ach segment of the community of London in the fourteenth and fifteenth century: nobles (*mony a gay grete lorde*), lords (*lordes*), bourgeois (*burgeys*), functionaries (*clerke*), journeymen, apprentices (*laddes*), masons (*macers*), masons (*masone*) and excavators (*grubber*), heralds (*bedels*), workmen (*werke-men*),churchmen (*sextene*, *prepate*, *ministres*, *dene*, *bishop*), masters of various arts (*mony a masters mon of maners dyuese*), the mayor and his collaborators (*þe maire wt mony maȝti mene*).

the same time united. Thus, the first and clearest achievement is to assess the importance of the church's role in the administration of the sacrament, and of the baptism in an individual's salvation through his version of the legend of the righteous pagan and of the process of the Christianization of England depicted as a purification of the sins of paganism. Here the theme of baptism administrated by a representative of the institution of the Church (either St Augustine for London or St Erkenwald for the judge) pervades the entire poem by means of a special selection of words connected with or evoking the ritual of baptism. Thanks to an expert use of adverbs and temporal cross-references, the entire narration is temporally situated on shifting levels to such an extent that the historical Celtic past of England gets incorporated into the author's Christian present: thus the author makes his contemporaries feel themselves to be heirs of the Britons, as Christians, that is, carrying the same religious (and social) values. In this respect, *Saint Erkenwald* is in dialogue with several poems of the Alliterative Revival, in particular with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, allegedly written by the same author (Savage 1926).

In other words, the poem written at the end of the second quarter of the fourteenth century, that is at the end of Richard II's reign (Vezzosi 2019b, 2020), acts as a propaganda instrument to strengthen and form the national identity of the new English society based on the Christianity and its institutions, called into question by religious renewal movements, and on the continuity of the legacy of the Britons to cement and reinforce the present of the crown in peripheral regions such as Ireland and Wales.

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