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THE PARLEMENT OF THE THRE AGES

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Though it is commonly agreed that the poem has passages of writing as attractive as any in the alliterative tradition, and though such passages are sometimes anthologised, The Parlement of the Thre Ages is usually regarded as less than a complete success. Earlier critics, such as Sir Israel Gollancz, treated it as something which read like "a sort of summary of longer poems", or as a collection of conventional literary motifs loosely strung together. J.P. Oakden found it "faulty in construction" and Dorothy Everett saw "little sense of fitness or proportion" in its conduct. More recent critics have echoed these views: D.J. Williams complains of "a lack of proportion, in particular that the Nine Worthies take up too much space", and R.A. Waldron similarly remarks on "the looseness and lack of proportion" in the poem's construction. Anne Kernan sees the device of "bracketing" set-pieces, signalling where they begin and where they end, as characteristic of the poet's art, and presents an elegant analysis of the constituent parts of the poem. Of these constituent parts the lengthy section on the Nine Worthies irritates many readers, but it is the relevance (or lack of it) of the hunting prologue which causes most difficulty. Constance Hieatt finds this poem (and Wynnere and Wastoure) "confusing", particularly since the matter of the prologue seems to bear no coherent relation to the matter of the vision: "This omission of the figure of the dreamer actively participating in his dream may have significant bearing on the less satisfactory qualities of the two poems. For example, the actions and reactions of the dreamers in . . . other poems serve as unifying devices, relating the dream to the preliminary material in a way which is sorely lacking in both these cases". She does admit, however, that hers may be an unfair estimate of the poem, and "if we could be more sure of the meaning of the prologue - that is, of its connection or lack of it, with the dream that follows - perhaps the dream would appear in a totally different light".

It does not seem to me that the attractiveness of this poem lies in short passages of vivid writing, though these passages undeniably have their appeal. The poem's more lasting impact derives from a coherence of strategy, an acute verbal awareness, and a maturity of stance which I hope here to demonstrate.

I

Previous critics have suggested ways in which the prologue may
be read to provide a connection with the rest of the poem, but there is little agreement. As R.A. Waldron has demonstrated, the hunting prologue may be looked at in at least three ways: as "a kind of bait to the reader or listener, designed to engage his attention initially" so that subsequently he might be prepared to give attention to the less immediately attractive doctrine with which the poem ends, or "as a psychologically appropriate prelude to the dream", or as bearing a "thematic" relation to the material of the dream. With the exception of H.L. Savage, who sought a biographical relation ("our poet is evidently a poacher"), most critics have looked for a thematic appropriateness.

Several different symbolic interpretations have been offered but, curiously perhaps for a poem which is in parts so obviously non-naturalistic and allusive, none of these is entirely convincing. John Speirs goes to anthropology for a solution: "The dreamer . . . contemplates the three successive ages of his own - and everyman's - life. As the lawless green hunter or poacher - the Robin Hood or Summer King - of the prologue he is himself evidently still identifiable with the first of the three Ages". He also argues that killing a deer was a way of securing a vision (on analogy with Grail or Mabinogi legends) and a demonstration that the hero had arrived at manhood. But there is nothing to connect the narrator with any anthropological figure: he covers himself and his crossbow with leaves simply as camouflage because he is intent "one stalkynge" (21); he wants the deer, not to prove his manhood, but to eat, hence his appraisal of it as "a coloppe for a kynge" (33), his testing of the meat (70-1), and the care he takes not to ruin any of it (81-2); and he slumbers because he is tired ("for slepeles" 101) and it is his worry ("dowte" 102) about being caught by a forester which produces his dream, not the killing of the deer itself. Constance Hieatt, on the other hand, draws attention to "the bestiaries' frequent association of deer with longevity and regeneration" which "may have something to do with the problem of age" and thus with the subject of the poem's debate. She quotes a twelfth-century bestiary that states that even stags of a hundred years of age show no signs of senility, and after eating snakes stags shed their coats and their old age with them, and that eating venison can make men immortal and not subject to fevers. Some of these ideas certainly appear in Middle English poems. But no precise use of them can be established here.

Nor do interpretations based on patristic exegesis illuminate the poem significantly. D.E. Lampe has used the associations of the flowers, birds, and animals mentioned in lines 8-20 to substantiate a reading in terms of the sins which beset man at the various stages of his life. But symbolic explanations are unnecessary: the particular flowers, birds and animals are mentioned because they are part of the English landscape in Maytime. Nor does the hunting require a symbolic interpretation, though it receives one from Beryl Rowland. She interprets the ages of the disputants - 30, 60 and 100 - in terms of the common exegesis of the parable of the sower (Matthew xiii 3-8), ironically reversed: "The protagonists have sprung from the seed which fell on barren ground; their ages may represent degrees of perfection, but their activities reveal
how far they have fallen short and transgressed against God". And she reads the prologue back in these terms: "The action of the prologue is, in fact, an inversion of Christ's parable of the sower: a man goes forth to kill, not to give life". The hunting activity in the prologue certainly appears to be illegal. And there was a well-established tradition which classed hunters as sinful men. But the poet of The Parlement of the Thre Ages manifests no disapproval of hunting: his attitude is similar to that of the composers of hunting manuals (which parts of his poem closely resemble), that the killing and brittling of a stag is something which ought to be done efficiently and properly according to the best practices. The lines on hunting are perhaps best regarded as an example of what Geoffrey Shepherd calls "memorable instruction", though a number of Middle English poems which use a hunt as a narrative device, turn eventually to the theme of death.

The more empirical readings of The Parlement of the Thre Ages are on the whole more successful. Several critics, including D.J. Williams, propose a connection between the prologue and the dream in terms of a relation between the hunter and the disputants: "At first the connection between the hunting dreamer and the substance of his dream seems slight, unless we are to connect his activity with that of Youth. That connection is appropriate, but the dreamer also has something in common with Middle Age since his hunting is more practical in purpose..." R.A. Waldron develops this, comparing the dreamer with Elde "... in the last few lines of the Prologue, as he sinks back on the sunny bank, his labours over, and falls asleep in the sun", and maintains "... it could be argued that in the three successive stages of his adventure he prefigures each age of the composite Humanum Genus...

There is some truth in this, but the precise connections are difficult to establish. Though both hunt, the narrator is a poacher and Youthe a gentleman at one of his leisure activities. The narrator has no part in any of Youthe's other pastimes - jousting "Stoken in my stele-wede one my stede bakke" (200), or enjoying himself in courtly society with his arms about ladies, dancing or reading romances "Of kempes and of conquerors, of kynges full noble" (251), revelling in the hall, or singing "coundythes and carolles" (254) or playing chess. A similar point may be made with reference to Medill Elde. Though it may be that both he and the narrator are "practical" to some degree, the poacher is not concerned with "rentes", "reches", "mukkyng", "marleyng", "mendynge of howses" or any of Medill Elde's other activities (141-9). Nor is the poacher at all like Elde: he lies down not because he has been physically exhausted and ruined by the process of living (as Elde is, 154-5) but because he was heavy ("slome") for lack of sleep ("slepeles" 101).

Since it is difficult to sustain the view that the author intended the poacher to be identified with any of the disputants in the debate, it is perhaps worth considering that he intended precisely the opposite - to make him the dissociated, impartial observer of the debate, involved, if at all, in the whole question under discussion, but not too closely with any one aspect of it. Very little is known about the narrator except that he is a poacher,
that he has a crossbow, and a dog. About the physical appearance of Youthe there is quite a lot: he was well-made "balghe in the breste and brode in the sholdirs", long-limbed, and shapely (112-15). Medill Elde "rowmly was schapyn" (137); and Elde "croked and courbede" was white-bearded and white-haired, "ballede and blynde", "totheles and tenefull" (154-9). But about the poacher's physical appearance there is nothing. Similarly, Youthe was "gerede alle in grene, alle with golde by-weuede" (122), Medill Elde was "alle in rosette" (137), and Elde "alle in blake" (153); but the poet does not say what colours the poacher wore, only that he covered himself with leaves. In addition, the three ages are characterised by their postures - Youthe "on ane heghe horse" (111), Medill Elde "in his sete" (136), and Elde "lenyde on his syde" (152) - but none of these is typically that of the poacher. Once he is described as sitting (98-100) and once it is implied that he has been lying down (655) but usually - and unlike the three ages - he is on his feet. And, of course, nothing is said on the crucial matter of the poacher's age. Indeed, it looks as though the author wished to stress the narrator's apartness from the disputants. And perhaps making him a poacher is part of that strategy. The three ages are firmly located within contemporary society. As R.A. Waldron points out, Youthe is "... a courtier, while Medill Elde is a business man, one of the middle class ..." and Elde could complete the three estates as representative of the spirituality. But the poacher exists apart, outside the law, and uninvolved in any of their specific concerns.

But though the poacher is not to be associated narrowly with any of the disputants, he is involved in the subject of the debate as a whole, and it seems to me that the concerns of the prologue and those of the dream are essentially similar. "The progression of the poem is essentially thematic rather than narrative", says Anne Kernan, and proposes that it should be regarded as "an ordered series of variations on the theme of mortality". John Speirs puts this position more trenchantly: "The pageant he [i.e. the narrator] witnesses and the flyting he overhears in his dream produce a salutary recognition of his own mortality. The poem thus establishes a wise attitude to life - involving a recognition of death - by presenting an inclusive view of the human condition. The man's delight in the exercise and skill of deer-stalking and in wild nature, which seems itself to share and utter his delight, conveys the Pride of Life experience; and this is the cunning prelude to the debate of the Three Ages of Man and the Contemplation of Life in its relation to ultimate Age and Death. It is sophisticated art indeed. There is a compelling emotional logic of events in this poem ..." With much of this there is no reason to disagree. But valuable additional insights into the poem are provided by R.A. Peck who characterises the hunter as "careful" and also draws attention to the "elaborate defences" of the stag. It seems to me that the poem is about the temporary nature and the precariousness of living, and particularly about the transitoriness of those things which enhance the process of living - joy, satisfaction, ease, and a delight in physical and intellectual achievement. The narrator's experiences in the prologue and the argument
he dreams about teach him the meaning of mortality, and alert him
to his own human insecurity.

II

These subjects are skilfully raised at the beginning of the
poem. The opening consists of a conventional Maytime description
which could be endlessly paralleled. But there is an insistence on
the temporal setting of the poem ("monethe of Maye" 1, "sesone of
somere" 2, "as Dryghtyn the day droue frome be heuen" 6) which may
not appear to be important, but which becomes so as the poem
develops. The narrator is out early in a wood and his senses are
so alive to the attractiveness of his surroundings that his reason
for being there, so casually introduced, is easy to overlook:

... I went to the wodde my werdes to dreghe,
In-to be schawes my-selfe a shotte me to gete
At ane hert or ane hynde, happen as it myghte . . .

(3-5)

It is very easy also to miss the resonances of the phrase "my
werdes to dreghe". On one level it means simply "to try my luck"
at poaching a deer; but on another it suggests "to take a chance",
which he is doing, as it transpires, by being there as a poacher;
and on a third it suggests "to see what my fate will be", and his
dream will demonstrate this to him. 27

But here the subject is not developed or followed up. The
description resumes until, some dozen lines later, another dis­
cordant note is struck:

Hertys and hyndes one hillys bay gouen,
The foxe and the filmarte bay fledde to pe erthe;
The hare hurkles by hawes & harde thedir dryves,
And ferkes faste to hir fourme & fatills hir to sitt.

(17-20)

Contrary to what Speirs maintains, "wild nature" does not entirely
"share and utter" the poacher's "delight". 28 The breaking of day,
which gladdens the birds, brings danger for animals likely to be
hunted - as all these are, for one reason or another. There is
danger in particular for one stag which wanders too close to where
the leaf-covered poacher is concealed, a splendid animal "borely
and brode and of body grete" (32), with fine antlers. A "soar"
grazes to windward. 29 He is nervous and suspicious, keeping watch
for the stag lest anyone "in his slepe with sleghte scholde hym
dere" (36); he "woke & warned him" (35) and "waittede wittyly aboute"
(46). The stag too is alert: "he stotayde and stelkett and starede
full brode" (51). And alertness, it seems, is a condition of
survival. It is when he feels secure that he relaxes and bends to
his food, and it is precisely at this point that the arrow from the
poacher's crossbow hits him:

... at the laste he lousted doun & laughte till his mete;
And I hallede to the hokes and the hert smote.

(52-3)

For the stag there remains only brief flight and harsh death: "Dede als a dore-nayle doun was he fallen" (65). After this he becomes simply a carcase under the poacher's brittling knife.

The abrupt death of the stag - at one moment physically splendid with all its senses alert and shortly afterwards a lifeless dismembered carcase - obliquely introduces the subject of the poem. It is true that the author states no moral at this point and true that the remainder of the poem concerns the human condition, but essentially it deals with the same theme - the splendour and precariousness of living. Throughout the stalking episode the narrator is both physically and mentally stretched, but retains control over himself and his equipment. He proceeds skilfully ("wiesly" 40) and quietly ("stilly" 41). But when he has the stag in his sights the "soar" moves and the poacher has to undergo again the agonising process of waiting, and steel himself against distraction lest "Alle my layke hade bene loste bat I hade longe waytede" (49). But his bow-shot is accurate; the stag is efficiently located; and the brittling is done correctly, quickly, and carefully so that none of the meat is spoiled:

I slitte hym full sleghely and slyppede in my fyngere
Lesse the poynte scholde perche the pawnche or the guttys.

(81-2)

It is only after the stag has been cut up that another dimension of the poacher's need for speed and adroitness emerges plainly. What he is doing is illegal and dangerous. He is swift and careful because he is frightened. Because he cannot afford to be discovered and caught, he hides the meat so that "no fostere of the fee scholde fynde it ther-aftir" (94) and so that "no hunte scholde it hent ne haue it in sighte" (96). Then he gets away from the kill: "I foundede faste there-fro for ferde to be wryghede . . ." (97). On a purely naturalistic level the narrator's sleep, though surprising, is plausible, for he has risen early and expended considerable physical and nervous energy in stalking, killing, brittling, and hiding the deer. This accomplished, he feels confident he can relax. He sits in the warm sun and falls asleep. But his predicament is uncertain, and it is this uncertainty, "dowte" (102), that causes him to dream his "full dreghe sweuynn" (102). What his dream will teach, amongst other things, is that relaxation is inappropriate, for the human condition is fraught with uncertainty.

The poacher's dream opens with the statement that "thre thro men" argued ("threpden" 104, "moted" 105) and it appears that the audience is being offered a debate. The disputants are described in static, pictorial terms. Each in his way is perfect, in that each embodies those characteristics which most strikingly declare what he is meant to represent. Each is a separate entity, differentiated in physical appearance, dress, posture, accoutrements, and concern. And when Youthe and Medill Elde begin to argue, their differences are sharpened. The argument is about life-styles and
the sets of values which sustain them. Youthe believes in love and the deeds of arms done in the service of love (181), which Medill Elde says is "fantome and foly" (184) because it is not grounded in economic practicality: "For alle thy ryalle araye renttis hase þou none" (186). He recommends that Youthe should seek to acquire what is useful instead of that which is splendid and decorative:

_Bye the stirkes with thi stede and stalles thaym make:
Thi brydell of brent golde wolde bullokes the gete;
The pryce of thi perrye wolde purches the londes . . . _

(190-2)

Youthe rejects this suggestion as "feble" (195). He points out the limits of Medill Elde's materialism: "Bot thi golde and thi gude thou hase no god ells" (196), and in a long, impassioned speech he reaffirms his faith in the aristocratic life with its jousting, hawking, reading of romances, dancing and so on (195-260). He delights in the variety of experience, in energetic physical activity, in doing things properly (e.g. 240), in the whole ordered elegance of this way of living. Medill Elde, unmoved, takes this to be foolish, and, indeed, thinks he is himself foolish to argue with Youthe: "Fole es that with foles delys" (264).33

Formally this is a debate in that the disputants speak in turn and disagree, but it is a debate of a rather peculiar kind: neither disputant takes up the other's points; neither argues rationally or deceitfully; neither alters his ground. Nor can they change: their positions are not established by rational argument and cannot be destroyed by it. Medill Elde is right, in fact, to recognise the futility of the debate: "flyte we no lengare" (264). But neither Youthe nor Medill Elde seems to realise why the debate is futile, though it is implicit in what each represents and in what each says. The debate is pointless because they both argue as if their positions were unchangeable, even though their names and stated ages set them in a temporal sequence, and even though they recognise that they live in time and are to some degree conditioned by that fact (258-60, 262).

Elde's magisterial intervention renders explicit the non-static nature of the disputants and makes their debate redundant. He does not say he will refute them, only that he will put an end to their dispute: " . . . stynte þour stryffe and stillen þour threpe" (268). And this he does by insisting on a broader perspective, by twice setting the three ages in a linear temporal relation to each other. Presenting himself as an example (269) or "mirror" (290) he shows that he incorporates all that Youthe, Medill Elde, and Elde are or have been. And this is reinforced on a formal level in that his speech includes ideas and phrases which have gone before:

_And ther-to jonge and jape, and Joute was his name_

(134)

_While I was jonge in my Joute and jape of my dedys_

(270)
His renttes and his reches rekened he full ofte (141)
Reches and renttes were ryfe to my-seluen (282)

Of mukkyng, of marlelyng, and mendynge of howses (142)
Than I mukkede and marlede and made vp my howses (279)

Of purches of ploughe-londes, of parkes full faire,
Of profettis of his pasturs ... (145-6)
And purcheste me ploughe-londes and pastures full noble (280)

Croked and courbede, encrampeschett for elde;
Alle disfygured was his face, and fadit his hewe,
His berde and browes were blanchede full whitte. (154-6)
And alle disfegurede my face and fadide my hewe,
Bothe my browis and my berde blawnchede full whitte-
And when he sotted my syghte, than sowed myn hert-
Croked me, courbed me, encrampeschet myn hondes. (284-7)

And after the example of himself, and the instances of eminent men whom death has taken, appears another section demonstrating the relation of the ages:

Thou man in thi medill elde, hafe mynde whate I saye!
I am thi sire and thou my sone, the sothe for to telle,
And he the sone of thi-selfe, pat sittis one the stede.
For Elde es sire of Midill Elde and Midill Elde of 3outhe. (649-52)

And the logical implication of each of these sequences is a recognition of the inevitability of death (292, 653-4).

Elde shows that Youthe and Medill Elde were mistaken in implicitly assuming that their positions were unalterable. He shows that they are subject to time and that they should logically come to terms with the fact of death. Elde is concerned with death in general, but the particular aspect of it which he emphasises is its paradoxical certainty and uncertainty. Since death is inevitable it must come, but it is given to no human being to know when or how it will come. A powerful expression of this uncertainty appears at lines 293-4, where the poet makes use of the terminology of the "three last things":

I ne wot wiche daye ne when ne whate tyme he comes,
Ne whedir-wardes, ne whare, ne whatte to do aftire.

At 635-6 the paradox is stated as such:

... noghte es sekire to 3oure-selfe in certayne bot dethe,
And he es so vncertayne that sodaynly he comes.15

This part of Elde's argument warns that any feelings of security
which human beings may have are seriously misplaced.

His exempla, which are largely drawn from history, reinforce this notion but they do not simply repeat it. Though the Nine Worthies are usually cited to fortify arguments that death takes everyone, and though that is an important reason for their appearance here, they are also used to demonstrate something altogether more precise. Since they were essentially warriors, "the doghtyeste of dedis in thaire dayes tyme", their deaths show that "doghetynes when dede comes ne dare noghte habyde" (582-3). And each of the other sets of exempla also are specifically directed. The list of "wyghes pat were wyseste" (584) proves that "dethe wondes for no witt to wende were hym lykes" (611); and the list of "the prowdeste in presse pat paramoures loueden" (612) proves that death puts an end to pride and love too. And after his exempla Elde, in his familiar summarising manner, clinches his argument by repeating lines:

Sythen doughtynes when dede comes ne dare noghte habyde,  
Ne dethe wondes for no witt to wende where hym lykes,  
And ther-to paramours and pride puttes he full lowe ....  
Me thynke be wele of this werlde worthes to noghte.  

(631-7)

What his exempla stress is not simply that death comes to all, but that those things in which men might rightly take pride - valour, wisdom, love - are rendered as nothing by death. Since this is the case it follows that achievement is vain, because not lasting, and that pride in achievement like assumptions of security, is misplaced. And after this the predictable moral advice follows: since "alle es vayne and vanytes and vanyte is alle" (640) it behoves men to amend their "mysse", to repent and look to the health of their souls. Elde is as good as his word that he will put an end to the arguments of Youthe and Medill Elde, for his self-consciously long (585, 613) speech is effectively the last word. Thorlac Turville-Petre asks whether Elde's "statements [are] to be accepted without question". But in medieval debates, whoever argued his opponent or opponents into silence was held to be the victor, and to Elde's authoritative exposition there is no reply. He demonstrates conclusively that Youthe and Medill Elde are wrong to assume that their positions are static, or that the achievements in which they take pride are at all lasting. But the poacher has heard Elde's arguments too, and, since he is a mortal man like Youthe and Medill Elde, he has reason to ponder their implications. In fact, he has more reason, for he has already seen, in his own killing of the stag, an example of the way in which death can in an unwary moment destroy something in the splendid fullness of its life, despite all the precautions it might take; and now he has heard an authoritative, well-supported speech on the folly of putting a secure trust in human achievement. Despite this the poacher, though he is in a precarious position precisely because he is a poacher, is relaxed in sleep, satisfied at having stalked, killed, brittled and hidden a deer. The outcome of the dream is relevant to the poacher, for he has forgotten, in the enjoyment of his success, his own human
insecurity. And it seems to be the implications of what Elde has said which wake him out of his sleep.

As frequently in alliterative poems of this period, the end recalls the beginning: the opening line is picked up in "In the monethe of Maye thies mirthes me tydde . . ." (660). This gives the poem a rounded, elegant neatness. But it also emphasises the temporal setting of the poem, which is important in terms of its meaning. In the fiction of the poem a considerable amount of time has passed since the beginning, and by the end it is evening not morning: " . . . the sone was sett and syled full louge" (658). The poacher, it seems, has been altered by his experiences of the day. Though he is recognisably the same person with the same preoccupations, there are slight but significant differences between the poacher of the prologue and the poacher of the end of the poem. These differences are a measure of the wisdom the poem has to communicate, and the poacher's reaction to his dream provides a subtle, understated conclusion to the poem. Elde's final line, "Dethe dynges one my dore, I dare no lengare byde" (654), jolts his complacency. That he sees its relevance to his own situation is plain from the way in which he picks up Elde's word "lengare" in his own reaction: "when I had lenged and layne a full longe while . . ." (655). Not only the adjective "longe" but the cognate verb "lenged" both suggest that the poacher is more aware than he was previously of the temporal setting in which he and all men live. Because he realises that a day of his life has passed the poacher can see himself in relation to his dream, and can appreciate its relevance to him. The debate of the three ages dealt with the span of a human lifetime, Elde's exempla brought to bear the perspective of historical time, and both made the same point: because time passes, circumstances change, and thus inert self-satisfaction, however soundly based in splendid achievement, is foolish. So it is fitting the poacher should resume the alertness he had in the prologue: ". . . I wakkened ther-with and waytted me vmbe" (657) - a point the poet emphasises by reusing words used earlier ("wayttede" 49, "wayte" 99). For this poacher in particular, but for any man to some degree, alertness is necessary for survival. The dream about death's inevitability and unexpectedness alerts the poacher to a realisation of who and where he is. And just as the noisy approach of death makes it impossible for Elde to "byde", so the sound of the "bogle one a banke . . . blowen full lowde" (656) jolts the poacher out of his complacency. Whether this is to be read literally as a forester's hunting horn, or symbolically as death's trumpet is not clear. After such a dream the awakening poacher could be forgiven for investing the literal with some more threatening significance. But, however it is to be taken, it connotes danger, and prompts the poacher to throw off his sleep and renew his activity. Though death is ultimately unavoidable it is as well to try to avoid it as far as possible: "I founded appon fote", says the poacher, "and ferkede to-warde townn" (659), just as, and for something of the same reason, he had "foundede faste" (97) in the prologue from the scene of the kill.

The poacher leaves the wood with a sharper sense of his own existence. After killing the stag he had relaxed into complacency,
assuming (like Youthe and Medill Elde) that his condition was static and unalterable - assumptions which Elde incontrovertibly destroys. The poacher says nothing directly about his dream; and this is apt, for there is nothing to say: one does not avoid danger by talking about it. His closing prayer:

\[
\ldots \text{dere Drightyne this daye dele vs of thi blysse,} \\
\text{And Marie, } \hat{\text{bat is mylde qwene, amende vs of synn,}} \\
(664-5)
\]

seems to have been suggested by Elde's arguments for the need for penance (641-8). But for the rest the narrator understands well enough what he has to do, which is to be alert, to keep his wits about him, to shake off his sleepy complacency, and avoid danger as far as he can. He has to stand up, be a man, and come to terms with his human insecurity.
NOTES


2 Wynneere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages, Roxburghe Club (London, 1897); The Parlement of the Thre Ages (London, 1915), sig. A viii (from which I quote).


8 See A.C. Spearing's brief but trenchant remarks on the "shoddy formalism" of this section (Medieval Dream Poetry, Cambridge, 1976, pp.134-7).


13 Op.cit., Chapter 8. For a summary of the background to these ideas see Marcelle Thiebaux, The Stag of Love. the Chase in Medieval Literature (Ithaca and London, 1974) pp.40-3. Anne Kernan argues that "The poem bears no hint of the symbolic values attributed to the stag in these works (i.e. bestiaries)" (op.cit., p.257).

14 For example, Mum and the Sothsegger ed. Mabel Day and R. Steele, EETS 199 (1934), III, 11.26ff.

See Rudolph Willard, "Chaucer's Text that Seith That Hunters Ben Nat Hooly Men", Texas Studies in English (1947) pp.209-51, for the complex background to this idea.
Youthe has a "hauke appon hande" (111), Medill Elde has money-bags (139), and Elde has "bedis in his hande" (153) and says his prayers. On the significance of these things see Thorlac Turville-Petre, "The Ages of Man in The Parlement of the Thre Ages", Medium Ævum 46 (1977) pp.66-76.

Comparison has often been made with the argument in Wynnere and Wastoure 11.221-455.

Proverbial, see B.J. and H.W. Whiting, Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), F 425, and compare C 465 and F 422, 450. Medill Elde is using the familiar debating device of seeking to substantiate a point by means of the authority of a saying.

"The dream vision presents what the medieval audience would have recognised as a quodlibet; the debate between Youthe and Medill Elde serving as the abbreviated disputatio (an improvised exchange between two students) and Elde's long response as the determinatio (the master's reprise and logical ordering of the questions and arguments raised by his students)", (D.E. Lampe op.cit., p.182).

With lines 293-4 compare the thirteenth-century verse:

Wanne iche penche pinges pref
ne mei [i] neure bile be:
bat on is ich sal awe,
bat oper is ich ne wot wile day.
bat pride is mi meste kare,
i ne woth nevre wuder i sal fare.

(Carleton Brown, English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century, Oxford, 1932, No.12). With lines 635-6 compare St Anselm's paradox: "Nihil certius morte, nihil hora mortis incertius" (Meditatio vii). The concept had proverbial status in Middle English; see Whiting op.cit. D 96 for a vast collection of examples. On the tradition of the "three last things" see Rosemary Woolf, English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1968) pp.95-8.


The famous text on "vanity" is from Ecclesiastes i.2, xii.8. For the relation between this text and the three ages see particularly the fifteenth-century lyric beginning, "O vanyte off vanytes & all is vanite . . ." especially the lines:

lo! here comys 3outh with myrth & plays Ioly,
With-outen thougt ore care, fader & moderles,
Bot medyll Age thinks pat it was foly
And ner peynes hym-selue with werdly besynes,
Bot all his labour is to grete ryches -
Than commys Age & seys pat he must dyse,
Then he knew yoght & all was vanyte.

(Carleton Brown, Religious Lyric of the Fifteenth Century, Oxford, 1952, No.151 11.64-70). For the influence on the poem of "the spirit and form of Ecclesiastes and the commentaries on it" see Anne Kernan, op.cit., p.276.
38 Op. cit., p. 74. This is the point of view also of Speirs "... the total wisdom of the poem cannot be said to be exclusively that of Elde" (op. cit., p. 301).

39 "Whoever silenced his opponent, by forcing him into a position that he cannot argue himself out of, gains victory in the debate", (The Owl and the Nightingale, ed. K.G. Stanley, London and Edinburgh, 1960, p. 27). In that poem compare lines 391-410, 665-6; see also A Dispute between a Good Man and the Devil, 1.9.49-53 and The Boke of Cupide, 1.209.

40 In hunting manuals, and elsewhere too, appears the idea that the sport is a sovereign remedy against sleep and idleness; see Thiébault op. cit., pp. 76-80. But the poet appears to make no use of this idea.

41 For the analogy between the passing of a day and human life compare the fifteenth-century lyric "As I went one my playing . . ." especially the lines:

That one be morrov when hit is fayre & clere,
After none hit wendys awaye,
And commyth to the ny3t as hit was ere:
This word ys but a daye:
Soo for ry3t all owre lewyng heyre;
ffrow chyldwood vnto mannys degre,
Owre enddyng drawyt nere and nere -
This word ys but a wannyte.

(Carleton Brown, Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century, Oxford, 1952, No. 147, 1.9-16). It is notable that this poem is on the theme of "vanity".

42 Compare ibid, No. 149, 1.21: "I sey no more but be ware of ane horne". See also The Castle of Perseverance, 1.2806; Everyman, 1.843.