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## A Reading of Death and Life

Lisa Belloni

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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A READING OF DEATH AND LIFFE

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Lisa Belloni

1977

APPROVAL SHEET

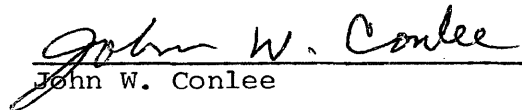
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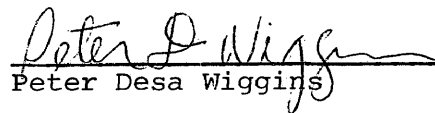
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Author

Approved, August 1976

  
John W. Conlee

  
Carl P. Daw

  
Peter Desa Wiggins

## ABSTRACT

In direct contrast to the de contempto mundi attitude which generally pervades medieval literature, in Death and Liffe there is an attempt to discover meaning in temporal existence. The intention of the Death and Liffe poet is not to bring the narrator to concurrence with the idea of abnegation of worldly things because they are evil and corrupting, but rather to explain to him the presence of such an anomaly as death, which occurs in the midst of the delightful things life has to offer; and further, to counteract, if possible, death's dire effect on these things. Thus, whereas the aim in other medieval poems dealing with the subject of death is often to cause the renunciation of things of this world in the minds of their audience, by instilling in them a fear based on an exaggerated idea of the power and importance of death, the aim in Death and Liffe is the alleviation or removal of this fear, through a careful defining and undermining of death's power over mankind, entailing an enforced limitation and reduction of its force and scope. This difference of purpose in Death and Liffe is the manifestation of a difference of outlook between its author and the authors of such poems as A Disputacion Betwyx the Body and Wormes and The Debate of Body and Soul, which hold in abhorrence the interests of physical nature and temporal life. These latter poems are far better expressions of the medieval ascetic ideal which sacrificed the physical to the spiritual and the temporal to the eternal. Unlike these poems, we find in Death and Liffe no conflict of interests between this life and the next. They are both simply parts of the continuum of existence.

A READING OF DEATH AND LIFE

Death and Liffe is a Middle English alliterative poem which exists only in a seventeenth-century folio manuscript named for its finder, Bishop Percy. The poem has received surprisingly little critical attention. As David Harrington has suggested, its relative neglect may reflect a tendency to study medieval poetry for essentially non-literary content, rather than "as poetry."<sup>1</sup> Since Death and Liffe excels "as poetry" rather than as a cultural document (it contains no historical references and makes no comments on contemporary society), it has perhaps suffered neglect in consequence of this tendency.

Harrington further hypothesizes that Death and Liffe may have received such cursory attention through having been "too regularly assigned to the poetic tradition associated with Piers the Plowman."<sup>2</sup> The predilection of medieval scholars to make these assignments and classifications is discussed by William Matthews, in his essay, "Inherited Impediments." Matthews argues that medieval writers, especially the lesser ones, suffer from the "obsession with the genres, the traditions, . . . The Medieval Mind, which blunts our sense of medieval individualities . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the reasons, it is certain that Death and Liffe has excited little critical interest. Moreover, the primary concern of the scholars who have discussed the poem has been the establishment of its date of composition and the identification of its sources. Because of the relative thoroughness with which these aspects of the poem has been

dealt, I will present here only a brief recapitulation of critical findings and opinions, after which I propose to study Death and Liffe "as poetry," as a consciously artistic production deserving close textual analysis.

Since Death and Liffe contains no historical allusions, efforts to date the poem depend entirely upon internal, chiefly linguistic and stylistic evidence; and since the poem exists only in a late transcription, the validity of even this meagre evidence is undermined. For these reasons, there is little or no critical concensus concerning the poem's date.

Bishop Percy states at one point that Death and Liffe could have been written as early as the time of Langland, and then later, that it was possibly written by the author of another poem found in the Folio, Scotish Feilde, which describes the Battle of Flodden in 1513. Professor Skeat, in the 1868 Hales-Furnivall edition of the Folio, concurs with this latter opinion.

Edith Scammon, in her 1910 monograph on Death and Liffe, gives the slightly earlier date of 1503 as the probable year of its composition, on the grounds of its direct indebtedness to Dunbar's poem, The Thistle and the Rose, written in 1503.

Hanford and Steadman, in their 1918 edition of the poem, place the composition of Death and Liffe before 1450, on the grounds of the greater similarity of its form to older alliterative poems,<sup>6</sup> as does Professor Luick.<sup>7</sup>

Mabel Day, in her preface to Gollancz's 1930 edition of

Death and Liffe, assigns the poem to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century, because it "inherits the spirit of the didactic allegorical school of the fourteenth century,"<sup>8</sup> a conclusion which is accepted by Banta in her 1966 dissertation.<sup>9</sup>

In A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, Utley claims Death and Liffe for the fourteenth century, on the basis of its "chanson d'aventure frame,"<sup>10</sup> while Matthews views such an assignment as the result of the favoritism shown by scholars for the fourteenth over the fifteenth century, dating it in the latter century himself.<sup>11</sup>

As can be seen in the foregoing discussion, anything like critical concensus concerning the date of Death and Liffe appears impossible. In any case, I feel it is a subject of secondary interest only, since the poem is a fine enough artistic production to appeal not only to the limited audience of a particular age, but rather to be accessible to any age as a dramatic and moving response to the timeless problem of facing the fact of death.



The purpose of the dream-vision which encompasses the debate between Dame Death and Lady Liffe is to give comfort and instruction to the poet-dreamer who finds it difficult to cope with the presence of death in the universal scheme of life. This is essentially the same problem as that faced by the speaker in the Middle English Pearl. In Pearl, however, there seems to be an immediate and pressing need for guidance and consolation in response to a personal, perhaps recent, loss of the speaker's, rather than the kind of general philosophical reconciliation with death in the abstract that is sought by the speaker in Death and Liffe.

The invocation to Christ which takes up the first twenty-one lines of the poem states the problem and the solution. Nothing in this world can withstand the onslaught of death:

For boldnesse of body nor blythenesse of hart  
coninge of clearkes ne cost upon earth,  
but all wasteth away & worthes to nought,  
when Death driuth att the doore with his darts keene.  
(7-10)

Therefore we must turn to the other world, to Christ, who suffered on the cross in order to redeem us from eternal death (the death of the soul), for aid and comfort against death:

Therefore begin in God to greaten our workes,

& in his ffaythfull Sonne that ffreelye him ffolloweth...  
(17-18)

But the dreamer-speaker is not satisfied with these traditional and intangible reassurances. Theological doctrine needs to be corroborated or substantiated in his personal experience. Hence the necessity for the dream-vision, in which he can witness, and, in limited fashion, participate in the dramatic representation of his dilemma and its resolution. The speaker in Pearl seems to feel the same necessity, but the more urgent and personal nature of his need demands a more active kind of participation. Thus in Pearl the dreamer is actually one of the debators (in fact, the antagonist or devil's advocate of the poem), rather than an onlooker, as is the speaker in Death and Liffe.

The narrator's troubled state of mind in Death and Liffe is indicated in line 38: "ddepe dreames and dright droue mee to hart." Either his determination to resolve his dilemma, or curiosity which will lead him to such a resolution, can be seen in Line 47, when he announces, "I will not kere out of kythe before I know more." Unlike the speaker in Pearl, who places too much confidence in his intellect and senses, trusting to his own feeble powers rather than to higher ones, we find that the speaker in Death and Liffe has the humility appropriate to the reception of instruction which is an integral part of the dream vision:

Then I kered to a knight, Sir Comfort the good,  
kneeling low on my knee curteously him prayed.  
I willed him of his worship to witt me the soothe. . .  
(118-120)

Thus, the dreamer is in the best possible state to receive the maximum benefit from his dream-vision: he is troubled, he is determined or curious enough to resolve the problem which is troubling him, and he has sufficient humility to be receptive to external aid in the accomplishment of its resolution.

The author of Death and Liffe differs from those of other dream-vision and debate poems in having an essentially non-critical attitude towards the world. For him, the world is a beautiful place a "world full of welth vunlye to behold" (line 45). The good things of this life, the "welth" of the world, are not to be despised, or shunned as evil temptations. Rather they are delightful and well worth having.

Scammon contrasts the concentration of interest on the aristocracy in Death and Liffe with the emphasis given the poor and working class in Piers the Plowman.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is because the poet in Death and Liffe is concerned with demonstrating the beauty and desirability of the things of this world, in order to make Death's conduct in depriving mankind of them seem the more outrageous, for which demonstration the life of the rich is obviously better suited than the life of the poor. Unlike Langland, the author of Death and Liffe is not interested in social injustices, or the abuse of temporal and spiritual authority in his society. The only abuse he is interested in exposing and rectifying is that practised by Death against all mankind, an abuse which he makes appear the more shocking and intolerable by casting into as positive a light as possible that against which it is

directed, namely, life. In an attack against this universal abuse, all smaller considerations of injustice are lost. Death is a foe common to all men, and all men are equal before Death: "shee spareth ffor no specyaltie but spilleth the gainest" (line 208).

The non-critical attitude towards the world on the part of the Death and Liffe poet is an indication not just of a difference in purpose, but of a basic philosophical difference of perspective, separating the work from that of other Middle English poets. He does not share Langland's widespread dissatisfaction, directed against religious orders, poets, beggars, false pilgrims, doctors, lawyers, courtiers, and much else. Nor do we see in Death and Liffe the unhappiness with the economic and political situation, or with the position and role of the poet in contemporary society, that is apparent in Wynnere and Wastoure. Most conspicuous of all is the absence in Death and Liffe of the criticism of temporal and physical pleasures, criticism which forms the basis of much medieval literature.

What is troubling the speaker in Death and Liffe is not the inherent worthlessness of things of this world, but their apparent meaninglessness in the face of the fact of death. They only become worthless "when Death driuth att the doore with his darts keene" (line 10).<sup>13</sup> His dilemma is thus quite modern and existential, though his solution is traditional and orthodox (! . . . be christened with creame & in your creede beleuee," in line 438).

There is a positive determination in Death and Liffe to discover meaning in temporal existence that is in direct contrast to the wholesale discarding of earthly life as a vain and futile affair, which negative determination generally pervades medieval literature. The intention of the Death and Liffe poet is not to bring the narrator to concurrence with the idea of abnegation of worldly things because they are evil and corrupting influences, but rather to explain to him the presence of such an anomaly as death, which occurs in the midst of the delightful things life has to offer; and further, to counteract, if possible, death's dire effect on these things. Thus, whereas the aim in other medieval poems dealing with the subject of death is often to cause the renunciation of things of this world in the minds of their audience, by instilling in them a fear based on an exaggerated idea of the power and importance of death, the aim in Death and Liffe is the alleviation or removal of this fear, through a careful defining and undermining of death's power over mankind, entailing an enforced limitation and reduction of its force and scope.

This difference of purpose in Death and Liffe is the manifestation of a difference of outlook between its author and the authors of such poems as A Disputacion, Betwyx the Body and Wormes and The Debate of Body and Soul, which hold in abhorrence the interests of physical nature and temporal life. These latter poems are far better expressions of the medieval ascetic ideal which sacrificed the physical to the spiritual and the temporal to the eternal. Unlike these

poems, we find in Death and Liffe no conflict of interests between this life and the next. They are both simply parts of the continuum of existence.

Hanford and Steadman see this lack of conflict between the material and the spiritual as the transcending of "the narrow bounds of medieval ascetic thought, in which all material things are evil and nature itself an ally of Death and Hell," by the poet, who has "unconsciously and half-accidentally adopted the more modern point of view, constructing out of purely medieval materials a work which constitutes a dim prophecy of the Renaissance."<sup>14</sup> While I agree that this aspect of Death and Liffe seems more modern and humanistic than medieval, I don't really understand the basis of the allegation that this perspective of the poet's is "unconsciously and half-accidentally adopted." It seems to me that the author of Death and Liffe is a conscious artist, and that Hanford and Steadman are in this instance laboring under an "inherited impediment" which causes them to view any variation from the "Medieval Mind" as accidental.

That there is such a divergence of philosophical perspective by the author of Death and Liffe from the traditional medieval outlook is unmistakable. The beauty of the poem is in large part the result of the harmonious blending of the two sides of human nature, the carnal and the spiritual, in their respective realms of existence, as temporal and eternal life. This is accomplished primarily in the figure of Lady Liffe, which is itself an incorporation of the physical

and the spiritual. She is spiritual life, "euerlasting Liffe that Ladye soe true" (line 444), and at the same time, she is a young and beautiful woman with "blisfull breastes" and a "naked necke" (lines 90-91). That Lady Liffe is a sympathetic representative of the interests of temporal life is evident in lines 292-300:

"Where ioy & gentlenesse are ioyned together  
 betweene a wight & his wiffe & his winne children,  
 & when ffaith & ffellowshipp are fastened ffor aye,  
 loue & charitye, which our Lord liketh,  
 then thou waleth them with wracke & wrathfffully beginneth;  
 vncurteouslye thou cometh, vnknowne of them all,  
 & lacheth away the land that the lord holdeth,  
 or woryes his wiffe or walts downe his children.  
 Mickle woe thus thou waketh where mirth was before."

But she is also man's spiritual instructor:

"If yee loue well the Ladye that light in the mayden,  
 & be christened with creame & in your creede beleue,  
 haue no doubt of yonder Death, my deare children . . ."  
 (337-339)

Lady Liffe is, in fact, no less than man's conductress to heaven:

"I shall looke you ffull liuelye & latche ffull well  
 & keere yee ffurther of this kithe aboue the cleare skyes."  
 (435-436)

That Lady Liffe is allowed to be the guardian both of man's physical and temporal interests, and his spiritual and eternal interests, is evidence that the author of Death and Liffe does not see these interests in conflict.

This lack of conflict is antithetical to the traditional Christian dualism of body and soul, things earthly and heavenly, (St. Augustine's City of Man and City of God), in

which the two sides of human nature are in continual and irreconcilable conflict, carnal and worldly interests being the dire foes of spiritual welfare, and needing to be constantly subdued and repressed with a view of their eventual elimination. The orthodoxy of this view is attested to by its presence in the writings of St. Paul, in the teachings of the Latin Church Fathers, and in hagiographic tradition.

Contrary to this orthodox opinion, we find the body being held in high regard in Death and Liffe, as is the physical world in which it resides ("the world full of welth vunlye to behold" in line 45). The body is neither sinful nor a temptation to sinfulness. According to Lady Liffe, whose position as everlasting life and intimate companion of Christ makes her an unimpeachable source, the body is innocent of wrongdoing: "'Why kills thou the body that neuer care rought?'" she asks Death in line 239. The idea of the body which is the seat of sensual pleasure, as good and innocent rather than evil and guilty, is totally at odds with the above-mentioned Christian doctrine.

The favour shown to the body in Death and Liffe is also diametrically opposed to the position accorded it in medieval literature generally. In The Debate of the Body and Soul, the body's pursuit of sensual pleasure is responsible for the eternal damnation of the soul (though whether the body or the soul is responsible for the license enjoyed by the body is not so easily determined). In A Disputacion Betwyx the Body and Wormes, the end reserved for the body



(being eaten by worms) is offered in proof of the ephemeral nature of sensual pleasure. This is the subject also of the thirteenth century moral poem, "Wen the Turuf is Thi Tour," in which the poet warns that, "Thi wel and thi wite throte/ Ssulen wormes to note," an ominous prediction which is just the opposite from that made by Lady Liffe to Death, when she says, "'shall thy bitter brand neuer on my body byte'" (line 288). The body of a beautiful woman and what happens to it when it meets with death forms the subject of both passages; but whereas the body of the woman presumably addressed in the first is not proof against the destructive effects of death, Lady Liffe's body is.

Seemingly aware of the heretical nature of this favorable view of the body, the Death and Liffe poet tries to establish a doctrinal base for it in Christian orthodoxy, with the premise that the body is the "handy worke of him that heauen weldeth" (line 245), and by maintaining that God's desire is the physical and material well-being of man, rather than simply his spiritual well-being.

"How keepeth thou his commandments, thou kaytiffe retch!  
Whereas banely hee them blessed & biddeth them thriue,  
waxe fforth in the world & worth vnto manye . . ."  
(246-8)

As the poem progresses, however, the poet seems to become less cautiously concerned with religious orthodoxy, separating himself from it not only as regards the nature and role of the body during life, but even on the question of what happens to it at death. The poet's espousal of the body's

cause is so encompassing that he cannot bear to consign it to destruction by death. Dame Death is bereft not only of her power over men's souls, but even over their bodies:

"Shee hath noe might, nay noe meane, no more you to greeue,  
nor on your comelye corses to clapp once her hands."  
(433-4)

This divergence from orthodox opinion on the subject of the body becomes another point of contrast between the author of Death and Liffe and the majority of his medieval fellow-writers, the latter following and forwarding the teachings of the Church in negating the claims of physical human nature. The most persuasive argument in medieval literature for the preference given the soul and spiritual love over the body and physical love is the permanence of the former and the mutability and destructability of the latter, as we see in Pearl (" at lelly hy te your lyf to rayse/ a fortune dyd your flesch to dy e," lines 305-6), and in Henryson's The Testament of Cresseid, in which "all fleschlie paramour" is described as "now grene as leif, now widderit and ago" (line 238). By denying the destruction of the body by death, this departure on the part of the author of Death and Liffe considerably increases the prestige of the body and its right to consideration.

Although it is apparent that Lady Liffe is an ardent supporter and promoter of the body's interests, because of her role as everlasting as well as temporal life she is not the evil, corrupting, and sinful force that life is usually pictured (for example, Lyf as an old, scapegrace rake, coming

in the train of Antichrist in Passus XXIII of Piers the Plowman). It is Dame Death, not Lady Liffe, who is identified as the enemy of Christ and ally of Satan ("dame daughter of the devill"). In Death and Liffe, the life force is rather "grounded in God" (line 289), the constant and intimate companion of Christ, whose "bower was bigged to abyde for euer" in "the tabernackel of his trew hart" (lines 383 and 382).

No more than does Lady Liffe embody the traditional medieval concept of the life force, does Dame Death embody the common medieval idea of death. The traditional concept of death as the well-merited punishment for Adam and Eve's transgression, justly ordained by God, is the role which Dame Death tries to project for herself in Death and Liffe:

"Itt is reason & right that I may rent take,  
thus to kill of the kind both kings & dukes,  
loyall ladds & liuelye, of ilke sort some;  
all shall drye with the dints that I deale with my hands.  
I wold haue kept the commandment of the hye King of heauen,  
but the bearne itt brake that thou bred vp ffirst  
when Adam and Eue of the earth were shapen. . ."  
(260-6)

She maintains that she fulfills a useful function as a chastening instrument, keeping men in a spiritually beneficial state of fear, so as to keep them mindful of God, and cause them to render Him proper homage:

"I haue not all kinds soe ill as thou me vpbraydest.  
Where I wend on my way the world will depart,  
bearnes wold be ouer bold bales ffor to want,  
the 7 sinnes for to serue & sett them full euer,  
& giue no glory vnto God, that sendeth vs all grace.  
If the dint of my dart deared them neuer,

to lett them worke all their will itt were little ioy."  
(307-313)

However, this is clearly not her role as it emerges in the poem. Death is at odds with God, who sides with her opponent, Lady Liffe, sending down Sir Countenance to intervene on her behalf, and command Death to cease:

"Cease of thy sorrow thy soueraigne comandeth,  
& let thy burnished blade on the bent rest,  
that my Lady Dame Liffe her likinge may haue."  
(222-224)

God must restrain Death, her will being in clear opposition to His own, Death wishing to continue her slaughter of Liffe's followers, but having no choice but to obey God's command:

Then Death glowed & gran for gryme of her talke,  
but shee did as shee dained, durst shee noe other;  
shee pight the poynt of her sword in the plaine earthe,  
& with a looke full layeth shee looked on the hills.  
(225-228)

Death reveals herself as indeed her father's daughter (cf, "'dame daughter of the devill, Death is thy name,'" in line 235), the foremost representative of her father's power in the world. She thus occupies a position corresponding to Christ's, Who is similarly the greatest champion of His Father's interests on earth. Just as Satan had resented the superior power of God (his closest counterpart in the universal scheme) so does his daughter, Death, resent it, jousting with her own counterpart, Jesus, as Satan had earlier battled against God.

Four separate but related contests have actually taken

place between two opposing sets of allies: Satan and God (in heaven); Death and Christ (on the Cross); Satan and Christ (in Hell); Death and Liffe (on earth). Attention in Death and Liffe is focused on the last three encounters, but only the fourth and final meeting of adversaries takes place within the confines of the dreamer's vision. The direct opposition of Death and Christ (their joust in Jerusalem), and Satan and Christ (the Harrowing of Hell) are only related in the course of the debate between Dame Death and Lady Liffe, rather than forming part of the action of the dream. They are historical rather than present events.

Within the dramatic limits of the dream-vision, Dame Death's counterpart is Lady Liffe, who, by an extension of hierarchical delegation, becomes the representative of Christ, and thus of God, against the power of Death, who represents Satan's forces in the present encounter.

In order to insure an effective recognition and acceptance of Dame Death and Lady Liffe in their representative capacities, they are given characters and histories which somewhat resemble those of their absent allies, Lucifer and Jesus, respectively. This resemblance of allies strengthens their mutual association in the minds of the audience.

The most prominent features of Death's personality are her enormous pride and hate, as they are Lucifer's:

"My Liffe (giue thou me leaue), noe leed vpon earth  
but I shall master his might, mauger his cheekes,  
as a conquerour keene, biggest of other,  
to deale dolefull dints & doe as my list;  
for I fayled neuer in fight but I the ffeild wan . . ."  
(315-319)

"I hate thee & thy houshold & thy hyndes all.  
 Mee gladdeth not of their glee nor of their gay lookes;  
 att thy dalliance & thy disport noe dayntye I haue;  
 thy ffayre liffe & thy ffairenesse ffeareth me but little;  
 thy blisse is my bale breuelye of others . . ."  
 (279-283)

Death's undoing is the result of the pride she takes in the greatest expression of her hate, namely her combat with Christ, just as Satan's undoing is the pride manifested in that greatest expression of his hate, revolt against God. As Lucifer had overstepped the bounds of his power in his battle against God, so does Death overestimate her power against Christ, in her debate with Liffe.

she sayeth, "Dame Death, of thy deeds now is thy doome  
 shapen  
 through thy wittles words that thou has carped,  
 . . . . .  
 how didest thou iust att Ierusalem with Iesu my Lord?  
 Where thou deemed his death in one dayes time,  
 there was thou shamed & shent & stripped ffor aye.  
 (361-362 and 368-370)

And just as Lucifer is banished to Hell by a victorious God, so is Death forced to retreat there by a victorious Christ:  
 "'Thou durst not blushe once back, for better or worse, /  
 but drew thee downe ffull in that deepe hell'" (lines 388-389).

Liffe is characterized by the opposite traits of love (she is called the "Ladye of loue" in line 121), and meekness (she is described as "meekely smiling" in line 68), which are the two most prominent traits of Christ's character. And as the banishment of Lucifer to Hell is paralleled by the similar banishment of Death, so is Liffe's resurrection of her followers at the end of the poem, who had been struck down by Death, paralleled by Christ's resurrection of the Old

Testament figures imprisoned by Satan, in His Harrowing of Hell.

The fact that Dame Death and Lady Liffe are given personalities and histories separates them from the personifications in most medieval allegorical literature, which tend to be mere abstractions, serving an instructive and illustrative function rather than being effective in their own right, as are Dame Death and Lady Liffe. In this respect, the latter are more like classical goddesses than medieval Christian personifications, having certain not inconsiderable powers of their own, which are nonetheless subject to a higher power, namely God, whose role as arbiter in Death and Liffe is reminiscent of Zeus's role as arbiter in the quarrels of the Greek gods. Hanford and Steadman remark upon this independence of being and power which makes Death and Liffe goddesses in a classical sense, rather than typical medieval personifications:

The poet represents Death herself, not as God's chastening instrument, but as a ruthless alien power . . . But Lady Liffe in the earlier part of the poem is obviously something more than a simple type of all that lives and is subject to the power of Death . . . she is herself a power, a goddess - exempt from chance and change. 15

Lady Liffe is classical in nature, first by virtue of her role as a sensuous Venus, a resemblance also noted by Hanford and Steadman.<sup>16</sup> This resemblance is made apparent in the description of Lady Liffe as an extremely beautiful and sexually desirable woman (" . . . her blisfull breastes bearnes might beholf, / with a naked necke that neighed her till," lines 90-91), and in her association with love in the

early part of the poem:

. . . euer laughing for loue as she like wold . . .  
(68)

Merry were the meanye of men that shee had,  
. . . . .  
Sir Liffe & Sir Likinge & Sir Loue also . . .  
(98 and 102)

She had ladyes of loue longed her about . . .  
(106)

. . . yonder Ladye of loue . . .  
(121)

A resemblance even more striking than that which Lady Liffe bears to Venus is that which she bears to Ceres (Greek Demeter), the Mother Nature of classical mythology, who in the literature of the Middle Ages corresponds to Natura, as in the De Planctu Naturae of Alanus de Lille, and who is the goddess responsible for all vegetable growth.<sup>17</sup> The analogous role of Lady Liffe can be seen in the following passages:

& as shee came by the bankes the boughes eche one  
they lowted to that Ladye & layd forth their branches.  
Blossomes & burgens breathed ffull sweete,  
fflowers fflourished in the frith where she fforth  
steppedd,  
& the grasse that was gray greened belue.  
(69-74)

"This is my Lady Dame Liffe that leadeth vs all;  
shee is worthy & wise, the welder of ioye,  
greatlye gouerneth the ground & the greene grasse."  
(124-126)

But however closely Lady Liffe resembles a nature goddess, she nevertheless maintains a separate and unique identity, through the establishment of Nature as a character distinct from that of Lady Liffe, thus giving Nature her own



"independence of being:" "' . . . neither Nature nor I  
 Lady Liffe ffor none of thy deeds / may bring vp our  
 bearnes . . .'" (lines 252-253). Similarly, though Lady  
 Liffe bears some resemblance to the Virgin Mary of the  
 religious lyrics,<sup>18</sup> Liffe's reference to Mary, in her  
 instructions for salvation near the end of the poem,  
 separates their identities: "'If yee loue well the Ladye  
 that light in the mayden / & be christened with creame & in  
 your creede beleue . . .'" (lines 437-438).

Thus, while Lady Liffe incorporates elements of both  
 these other female deities, she still retains her character  
 as a goddess in her own right. The effectiveness of this  
 aspect of her characterization is in her serving as a link  
 between the earthly mother (Mother Nature) and the heavenly  
 mother (Mary, Mother of God). In this, she has a role  
 analogous to that of Christ, who is the link between man and  
 God in his incorporation of human and divine nature.

In a like manner, Lady Liffe harmoniously connects  
 physical and spiritual love, in her double role as sensuous  
 Venus and consort of Christ. The fusion of these two kinds  
 of love is apparent in the juxtaposition of two such dissimilar  
 terms as "bower" (a lady's bed or love chamber) and "taber-  
 nackle" (a temple, or place of religious worship), in lines  
 382-383, when Liffe accuses Death of having "touched the  
 tabernackle of his Christ's trew hart / where my bower was  
 bigged to abyde for euer.'"

The function of Lady Liffe in this capacity of spiritual  
 mate of Christ can be seen as a usurpation of the Church's

role as the Bride of Christ. Viewed from this perspective, the description of Lady Liffe as a sensual and sexually attractive woman can be seen as corresponding to the similar description in the Song of Soloman, which, according to the orthodox explication of the passage, is a metaphorical description of the Church.

Lady Liffe also serves as a link between man and Christ, for the speaker is informed by Sir Comfort near the beginning of the poem that she has dwelt in his heart since his conception ("'. . . beffore thou wast borne shee bred in thy hart," line 128), and then learns from Liffe that she also dwells in Christ's heart, where her "bower was bigged to abyde for euer."

The occupation by Lady Liffe of this role as a link between mankind and Christ is a further usurpation of the Church's dominion. This coincides with the poet's divergence from Church teachings discussed earlier, and with the virtually non-existent role of the Church in the poem. In Death and Liffe we find no personified "Holinchurche," such as appears in Piers the Plowman, to instruct men for their salvation. In the scheme of salvation outlined in Death and Liffe, the Church takes no direct or major part, its only function in the poem being encompassed by a casual reference to christening and "creede" in line 438. In Death and Liffe it is Lady Liffe who intercedes for man (against death), and who serves as the necessary intermediary between mankind and the Christian deities (cf., the foregoing discussion). It is she, not the Church, who will

see men safely into heaven, as we see in lines 435-436:

"I shall looke you ffull liuelye, & latche ffull well  
& keere yee ffurther of this kithe aboue the cleare  
skyes."

The deputation of Lady Liffe to represent the forces of God on earth (discussed on pages 14-15) is still another instance of encroachment upon the traditional role of the Church, in which the Pope occupies the position of Christ's deputy in this world. In Death and Liffe it is Lady Liffe, not the Pope, who seems to hold the keys to the Heavenly Kingdom.

The effectiveness with which Dame Death, and especially Lady Liffe, function in their various and exceedingly important capacities is in large part due to the poet's conception of his two central characters as more than didactic media. This is apparent in their endowment with personal identities, which makes them dramatic personages, rather than the personifications typical in medieval allegory. This elevation from abstractions to dramatic personages is brought about primarily through the poet's ability to infuse a sense of life and individuality into the speeches of his characters, by a process of self-revelation on the parts of the principals. For example, though Death poses as the mere instrument of God's wrath, her enjoyment of her bloody occupation is so obvious as to make her suspect: "'I was ffaine of that ffray, my ffawchyon I gryped / & delt Adam such a dint that hee dolue euer after'" (lines 274-275). Passages such as the following convey a strong sense of Death's boundless, vindictive energy:



allegorical personification.

The fact that Lady Liffe and Dame Death have dramatic personalities gives the audience a more than theoretical or doctrinal interest in the outcome of the debate. The audience is involved in the fate of the characters, whose diametric opposition intensifies this involvement. A dramatic tension is created by the conflict of these extreme opposites, one demanding a positive, and the other, a negative response. Liffe is the protagonist, and Death her ever-unrelenting antagonist:

"Therefore, Liffe, thou me leaue, I loue thee but a little;  
I hate thee & thy houshold & thy hyndes all.  
Mee gladdeth not of their glee nor of their gay lookes;  
att thy dalliance & thy disport noe daynte I haue;  
thy ffayre liffe & thy ffairenesse ffeareth me but little;  
thy blisse is my bale breuelye of others,  
there is noe game vnder heauen soe gladlye I wishe  
as to haue a slapp with my ffawchyon att thy fayre state."  
(278-285)

The irreconcilability of their personalities and the principles they embody forbids the possibility of compromise or synthesis. There is only victory or defeat, two dramatic alternatives.

The tension arising from this fundamental opposition is maintained and augmented in individual lines and images. It is given a graphic and intense reality in a line such as 288, when Liffe tells Death, "shall thy bitter brand neuer on my body byte." The cold, unliving metal of Death's "brand" is juxtaposed to the warm, living body of Liffe. The dramatic tension of this line is the result of the possibility of contact between two such extreme opposites. The possibility becomes a reality in a line such as 381: ". . . thou prickedst

att his pappe with the poynt of a speare." The contact of such dissimilar points as the point of a spear and the point of a nipple (Death's and Christ's, respectively) likewise creates dramatic tension. These lines form "tableaux vivants" in their vividness of arrested movement, and attest to the poetic skill of the author.

Death and Liffe is an extremely carefully constructed poem whose structure is organic in the sense that it seems to grow out of and reinforce the central debate. The dialectical nature of the debate, in which Liffe is the thesis, and Death the antithesis, is reflected in an elaborate series of contrasting parallels. These are somewhat in the nature of incremental repetition, a technique whereby a situation, image or phrase is repeated with a crucial difference, as for example, in the following passages:

& as shee came by the bankes the boughes eche one  
they lowted to that Ladye & layd forth their branches.  
Blossomes & burgens breathed ffull sweete,  
fflowers fflourished in the frith where she fforth  
steppedd,  
& the grasse that was gray greened beliue.  
(69-73)

she stepped forth barefooted on the bents browne,  
the greene grasse in her gate she grindeth all to powder,  
trees tremble for ffeare & tipen to the ground,  
leaues lighten downe lowe & leauen their might. . .  
(192-5)

The action in each passage is essentially the same: the boughs of the trees bow down to both Liffe and Death, and the grass is changed beneath their feet. However, when Lady Liffe walks on the grass she brings it to life (gray or dead grass becomes

green or alive); whereas when Dame Death walks on the grass, she kills it (green or living grass is ground to powder). Similarly, the homage paid Dame Death by the branches of the trees differs from that rendered to Lady Liffe, in that it is given in fear rather than in love.

Such parallel passages occur throughout the poem, always with slight but crucial variations that make them mutually contrasting in the same way that Death and Liffe are contrasted. The following passages provide another example of this parallelism:

& ffishes of the fflood ffaine of her were;  
birds made merrye with their mouth as they in mind cold.  
(113-4)

fowles faylen to fflee when the heard wapen  
& the ffishes in the fflood ffaylen to swimne  
ffor dread of Dame Death that dolefullye threates.  
(196-8)

The joy of the birds in the presence of Liffe is turned to paralysing fear when Death arrives.

There is also the obvious contrasting parallelism of the courts of Liffe and Death, the first consisting of "blyth bearnes," and the second, of "sorrowffull souldiers." We see the dreamer's love of life in line 136: ". . . in likinge this liuinge (the longer the more)." This is balanced against the life-loathing of Death's followers in line 188: "all that were lothinge of their Liffe were lent to her court." Similarly, the gay expression of Liffe offsets the angry visage of Death, in lines 228 and 229: ". . . with a looke full layeth shee looked on the hills / Then my

Ladye Dame Liffe shee looketh full gay . . ."

The Medusa-like effect on the dreamer of the sight of Death's face is paralleled by the effect of the glory of Christ's godhead upon Death herself:

& I for feare of that freake ffell in a swond.  
 Had not Sir Comfort come & my care stinted,  
 I had beene slaine with the sight of that sorrowfull  
Ladye.  
(176-8)

"When the glory of his godhead glented in thy face,  
 then was thou feard of this fare in thy false hart . . ."  
(384-5)

In addition to this fear in Death's heart, we learn it is filled with anger:

". . . to these men of the mold marvell methinketh  
 in whatt hole of thy hart thou thy wrath keepeth."

Christ's heart, in lines 282-3, offers a contrasting parallel to the destructive and negative contents of Death's heart when Liffe speaks of ". . . the tabernackle of his trew hart/where my bower was bigged to abyde for euer." Death's heart, like Christ's is a receptacle; but whereas Christ's heart is a "tabernackle," Death's is a "hole;" and whereas Christ's heart is filled with Liffe, Death's is filled with anger. Christ's "trew hart" is also contrasted to Death's "false hart" (385). Likewise, Death's "red deeds," in line 399, recall Christ's "red wounds," in line 377; and the pain Christ suffers when Death "prickedst att his pappe with the poynt of a speare / & touched the tabernackle of his trew hart" (381-2) is recompensed by "the sorrow . . . ffull



sore att Sathan's hart" (395).

In line 387, Death loses the weapon she holds in her hand: "'thy fawchon flew out of thy fist, soe fast, thou thee hyed.'" Christ appears with a weapon in his hand in line 402: "'and all wounded he was, with weapon in hand . . .'" What Death has lost, Christ has gained.

Mary, as well as Jesus, offers a contrasting parallel to Death who is described as a "ravished bitch" in line 399. This is opposed to the image of the Virgin Mary in line 437: "If yee loue well the Ladye that light in the mayden . . .". The physical, sexual violation of Death is contrasted with the spiritual impregnation of Mary by the Holy Ghost.

In addition to these contrasting parallels there are other simply complementary passages which offset and balance each other. Thus the abstract statement of the uselessness of worldly treasures (knowledge, honor, happiness, etc.) in the face of death, made by the poet in the beginning of Death and Liffe, is made concrete by the examples given by Death in her catalogue of triumphs:

For boldnesse of body nor blytheness of hart,  
coninge of clearkes ne cost vpon earth;  
but all wasteth away & worthes to nought,  
when Death driueth att the doore with his darts keene.  
(7-10)

David dyed on the dints that I delt oft  
soe did Saloman, his sonne, that was sage holden,  
& Alexander alsoe, to whom all the world lowted;  
in the middest of his mirth I made him to bow;  
the hye honor that he had helped him but little.  
(333-6)

David corresponds to and exemplifies "boldnesse of body"

(through his exploits and prowess); "Saloman's" legendary wisdom illustrates the "coninge of clearkes;" and Alexander, "in the middest of his mirth," is the embodiment of "blythness of hart."

In a reversal of the foregoing mechanism of substantiation, Death's catalogue of triumphs in lines 326-45 is overturned by the list of those saved by Christ when He harrowed hell:

Both Adam & Eue & Abell I killed,  
 Moyses & Methasula & the meeke Aronn,  
 Iosua & Ioseph & Iacob the smoothe,  
 Abraham & Isace & Esau the roughe;  
 Samuell, for all his ffingers, I slew with my hands,  
 & Ionathan, his gentle sonne, in Gilboa hills;  
 David dyed on the dints that I delt oft;  
 (326-32)

hee tooke Adam & Eue out of the old world,  
 Abraham & Isaac & all that he wold,  
 David & Danyell & many deare bearnes . . .  
 (422-4)

Just as Death's boast of having overcome Christ is undermined by her act of submission in kneeling to Him, ("Yett I knocked him on the crosse & carued throughe his hart./& with that shee cast of her crowne & kneeled downe lowe . . ." lines 347-348), so too is her boasting catalogue refuted, since many of the figures claimed by death as among those she has vanquished have been rescued by Christ: Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac and David.

As the paralleling of the passages argues an organic structural basis for the two contrasting forces of Death and Liffe, so too the organic nature of the poem's structure can

be seen in the order in which the central characters of the poem are introduced, which follows the pattern of Christian existence: Lady Liffe (life); Dame Death (death); and Christ (resurrection and eternal life). The chronology of Death and Liffe is also significant, being the same as that of the Book of Revelation: "which is, and which was, and which is to come" (1:4).

The two central themes in Death and Liffe are temporal regeneration and eternal resurrection. Both of these can be seen in the larger idea of the victory of life over death, the former being the natural manifestation of this victory, and the latter its supernatural manifestation. In these two themes, we see the two sides of the character of Lady Liffe functioning, first as Natura, the regenerating goddess of this life, and second as Liffe everlasting, the resurrecting goddess of the afterlife, and the companion to Christ.

The theme of natural regeneration is most important in the first part of the poem. The poem is set in spring, the season in which nature renews itself and becomes alive after the death of winter: "Thus fared I throw a ffrith in a ffresh time, / where I sayd a sleepe in a slade greene" (lines 453-454). As does the Green Knight, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, another poem of regeneration, Lady Liffe appears dressed in green: ". . . comelye cladd in kirtle & mantle / of goodlyest greene that euer groome ware" (lines 83-84). Her advent on the scene causes the grass to become green: ". . . the grasse that was gray

greened believe" (line 73), and the world she governs is a world of fertile greenness: "'This is my Lady Dame Liffe that leadeth vs all; . . . greatlye gouerneth the ground & the greene grasse'" (lines 124 and 126).

The identification of Lady Liffe as a regenerative force in the natural world is established more or less explicitly in such passages as the above, where she brings to life the dead gray grass merely by walking upon it. This identification is made less obtrusively throughout the poem by the use of such words as "planted" in line 56 ("There was neither hill nor holte nor haunt there beside / but itt was planted ffull of people, the plaine and the roughe"), and "grounded" in line 289, when Lady Liffe says, "'I am grounded in God & grow for euermore.'" This last line connects the idea of natural or physical regeneration with that of spiritual renewal, thus uniting the two functions of Lady Liffe in her double role as promoter and protector of mankind's temporal and eternal interests.

It is in the fulfillment of this latter function of Lady Liffe that we find the theme of resurrection in Death and Liffe. The regeneration of nature in the early part of the poem is extended (to include humanity) and complemented by the resurrection of Liffe's followers at the end of the poem.

Then my Lady Dame Liffe with lookes soe gay,  
that was comelye cladd with kirtle and mantle  
shee crosses the companye with her cleare ffingers.  
All the dead on the ground doughtilye shee rayseth  
fairer by 2 ffold then they before were.

(446-450)

Lady Liffe is able to bring the dead men and women of her court to life, just as she had been able to bring to life the dead grass. The thematic transition from regeneration to resurrection is accomplished also in the transformation of Lady Liffe from the earthly queen of a medieval Court of Love, in which capacity she initially appears, to "euerlasting Liffe," Christ's consort, and a queen of heaven.

Besides forming a part of the action of the dream-vision, the theme of resurrection occurs in Liffe's recital of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, the incident described in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, but derived more directly by the author of Death and Liffe from Piers the Plowman.<sup>19</sup>

he leapt vnto Lucifer that Lord himselfe;  
 then he went to the tower where chaynes were manye,  
 & bound him soe biglye that hee for bale rored.  
 . . . . .  
 Then to the tower hee went where chanes were many;  
 hee tooke Adam & eue out of the old world,  
 Abraham & Isaac & all that hee wold,  
 David & Danyell & many many deare bearnes . . .  
 (416-418 and 421-425)

The subsequent rescue of Liffe's followers from Death, after the victory of Lady Liffe over Dame Death in the debate, complements this rescue of the Old Testament personages from Satan and Hell by Christ, after His victory over Lucifer in combat. Resurrection in both instances is the ultimate proof of the victory of the forces "grounded in God."

The binding of Satan and the resurrection of the faithful appear also in the Book of Revelation. The theme of

resurrection in *Death and Liffe* is carried out in part by the poet's paralleling of John's vision of the Apocalypse which precedes the Resurrection. Dame Death arrives upon the scene to the accompaniment of

. . . a noyse hard  
 as itt had beene a horne, the highest of others,  
 with the biggest bere that euer bearne wist  
 & the burlyest blast that euer blowne was  
 throughe the rattlinge rout runge ouer the ffelds;  
 the ground goggled for greefe of that grim dame.  
 (143-147)

The Apocalypse, in John's dream-vision, is similarly announced by the sound of trumpets and the quaking of the earth (Rev., 8). Following the sounding of the first trumpet by the first angel, the Apocalypse begins with, among other things, the destruction of all the green grass, a destruction which is echoed in Death and Liffe when Dame Death

. . . stepped forth barefooted on the bents browne,  
 the greene grasse in her gate she grindeth all to  
 powder.  
 (192-193)

In the Book of Revelation, the frightening destruction of the Apocalypse ends not with death, but with a promise of life for the faithful: the promise of the Resurrection, that "there shall be no more death" (Rev. 21:4). At the time of the second and final resurrection, death and hell are doomed for all eternity. In Death and Liffe, Dame Death is similarly damned (line 440) upon the occasion of the resurrection of Christ and the Old Testament figures.

In Death and Liffe as in the Book of Revelation, the life-giving powers of regeneration and resurrection are associated with the life-giving force of the sun. Similarly, in the thirteenth century religious poem, "Ci Doit Tu Penser de la Duce Marie," Christ's death is metaphorically described as the setting of the sun. The same association of Christ with the sun is made in line 407 of Death and Liffe, when he is described as casting "'a light on the land as beames on the sunn.'" Lady Liffe is likewise connected with the sun, as we see in the following two passages:

Shee was brighter of her blee then was the bright sonn  
(65) . . .

. . . with a naked necke that neighed her till,  
that gaue light on the land as beames of the sunn.  
(91-92)

This descriptive connection helps first to identify Lady Liffe as a regenerating force in nature, and second (after Christ is introduced into the debate, and the association made between Him and the sun), to establish her, with Christ, as a force of spiritual regeneration.

The association of Lady Liffe with the sun is connected to the poet's use of the traditional and Biblical significance of geographical directions as a thematic device. Lady Liffe and her followers appear from the south and the east:

I saw on the south syde a seemelye sight  
of comelye knights full keene & knights fful noble . . .  
(50-1)

There ouer that oste estward I looked

into a boolish banke, the brightest of other,  
 that shimared and shone as the sheere heauen  
 throughe the light of a Ladye that longed therein.  
 (57-60)

The south and the east are naturally associated with warmth (the heat of southern climates) and with life and regeneration (the rising of the sun in the east, the diurnal rebirth).

The appearance of Lady Liffe from the south and the east immediately and appropriately aligns her with these positive aspects of nature. The east has moreover a religious as well as a natural significance, evidenced by the placing of the altar always at the east end of a church. Lady Liffe is thus associated with the comfort offered by religion together with that proffered by nature.

Dame Death appears, with similar appropriateness, from the north:

In a nooke of the north there was a noyse hard . . .  
 (142)

. . . once againe into the north mine eye then I cast.  
 I there saye a sight was sorrowful to behold,  
 one of the vglyest ghosts that on the earth gone.  
 (150-2)

Death is immediately associated with Satan and hell, since hell lies in the northern regions, whence Lucifer was banished after his expulsion from heaven. The north is also associated with cold (the chill of northern climates), which is in turn associated with death.

The time of day is also used as a thematic device in Death and Liffe. The cycle of a day is a traditional and



natural medium for suggesting the cycle of man's life (cf., the Sphinx's riddle in the Oedipus legend). It is in the morning and early afternoon that Lady Liffe is ascendant (that is, during youth); noon, the prime of day (like the prime of life) is when Liffe reigns unchallenged:

Thus in liking this liuing (the longer the more)  
till that it neighed neere noone & one hower after  
there was tydinge and revell that ronge in the bankes . . .  
(136-8)

Dame Death appears on the horizon of middle age, in the middle of the afternoon:

Or itt turned from 12 till 2 of the clock  
much of this melodye was maymed & marde . . .  
(140-1)

In addition to these thematic devices, the double theme of regeneration and resurrection is perhaps suggested even in the title itself, where Liffe is announced after Death, a promise dramatically fulfilled in the poem.

A secondary theme in Death and Liffe concerns the maintenance of the established hierarchy. The poet's satisfaction with the existing order, discernible in the absence of criticism of secular and religious authority, as well as in his positive appraisals of the world around him, has already been discussed. It is apparent also in the support given throughout the poem to the prevailing hierarchical organization of his society and universe.

It is true that the author of Death and Liffe recognises a certain equality of all mankind within the large framework

of the two great common experiences of life and death. However, within the smaller context of society he maintains strictly the traditional distinctions of hierarchical precedence, ordering his catalogues from greater to lesser of the social scale:

. . . princes in the presse proudly attyred,  
dukes that were doughtye & many deere erles  
sweeres & swaynes, that swarmed ffull thicke.  
(52-4)

. . . comelye queenes with crownes & kings full noble;  
proud princes in the presse prestlye shee quelleth;  
of dukes that were doughtye shee dang out the braynes;  
(202-4)

". . . to kill of the kind both kings & dukes,  
loyall ladds & liuelye, of ilke sort some;"  
(261-262)

. . . shee calleth to her companye & biddeth them come  
neere,  
both kings and queenes & comelye dukes . . .  
(336-357)

The cosmic or religious hierarchy is maintained with equal care by the author of Death and Liffe. Lady Liffe and Dame Death are the ruling queens of their respective courts of followers:

. . . the crowns on her head was caruen in heauen,  
with a scepter sett in her hand of selcoth gemmes.  
Thus louelye to looke vpon on land shee abydeth.  
Merry were the meanye of men that shee had,  
blyth bearnes of blee bright as the sunn:  
Sir Comfort that knight when the court dineth,  
Sir Hope & Sir Hind, yee sturdye beene both,  
Sir Liffe and Sir Likeinge & Sir Loue alsoe,  
Sir Cunninge & Sir Curtesye that curteous were of deeds,  
& Sir Honor ouer all vnder her seluen,  
a stout man & a staleworth, her steward I-wisse.  
(95-105)

Yonder Damsell is Death that dresseth her to smyte.  
 Loe, Pryde passeth before & the price beareth,  
 many sorrowffull souldiers following her fast after:  
 both Enuye & Anger, in their yerne weeds,  
 Morninge & Mone, Sir Mischeefe his feere,  
 Sorrow & Sicknesse & Siking in Hart;  
 all that were lothinge of their liffe were lent to her  
court.  
(182-188)

Yet Lady Liffe and Dame Death, though queens in their  
 own right, are still bassals to God and Christ. Lady Liffe  
 willingly acknowledges Christ as her "leege Lord" (line 374),  
 while Dame Death is forced into unwilling acceptance of God  
 as her sovereign by the superiority of his strength:

"Thou warathefull Queene that euer woe worketh,  
 cease of thy sorrow thy souereigne comandeth,  
 . . . . .  
 Then Death glowed & gran for gryme of her talke,  
 But shee did as shee dained, durst shee noe other . . .  
(221-222 and 225-226)

Connected with the hierarchical structuring within  
 the poem is the motif of bowing, an act which is a symbolic  
 acknowledgement of superiority.

This motif occurs frequently throughout the poem. The  
 physical universe establishes itself as subject to both Liffe  
 and Death in this fashion:

& as shee came by the bankes the boughes eche one  
 they lowted to that Ladye & layd forth their branches.  
(69-70)

trees temble for ffeare & tipen to the ground,  
 leaues lighten downe lowe & leauen their might . . .  
(194-195)

Similarly, mankind, like nature, kneels to Lady Liffe,

acknowledging her sovereignty:

Kings kneeled on their knees knowing that Ladye,  
& all the princes in the presse & the proud dukes,  
barrons & bachelours all they bowed ffull lowe . . .  
(76-78)

The dreamer, too, puts himself under the tutelage of  
Sir Comfort with an act of bowing:

Then I kered to knight, Sir Comfort the good,  
kneeling low on my knees curteouslye him prayised.  
(118-119)

Sir Comfort, perhaps in acknowledgement of equality with  
the dreamer-prophet, his pupil, bows to him in return:

Then he lowted to me low & learned me well;  
sayd, "Be thou not abashed, but abyde here a while . . .  
(179-180)

This action recalls a comparable though converse acknowledgement  
of equality in the Book of Revelation, when the angel refuses  
to allow St. John to kneel to him.

And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship  
before the feet of the angel which showed me these things.  
9. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am  
thy fellow servant and of thy brethren the prophets, and  
of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God.  
(22: 8-9)

The use of bowing to acknowledge superiority of power  
is clear in the following passage when Death boasts of her  
triumph over Alexander:

"& Alexander also, to whom all the world lowted  
in the midst of his mirth I made him to bow . . ."  
(334-5)

Alexander was the most powerful man of his time, and all his world bowed to him; but Death was more powerful even than Alexander, and forced him to bow to her.

Perhaps the most significant use of bowing to indicate such superiority comes just after Death has boasted of her triumph over Christ:

& with that shee cast of her crowne & kneeled downe  
lowe  
when she minned the name of that noble Prince. (348-9)

Dame Death, in kneeling at the mention of Jesus, immediately gives the lie to her own boast by acknowledgeing Christ as the greater power. The entire universe recognises this supremacy in a similar act:

So did Liffe vpon land & her leeds all,  
both of heauen and of earth & of hell ffeends;  
all they lowted downe lowe their Lord to honor.  
(350-2)

In the foregoing discussion I have examined this neglected poem in terms of its purpose, characterization, structure, poetic technique, and themes and motifs, evaluating it on its merits as a work of art, rather than as an historical or sociological document designed to give us some insight into the medieval way of life, which is the fate of too many literary productions of the Middle English period.

It is beyond doubt that Death and Liffe deserves more attention than has been given, and that its author deserves greater recognition as an original artist. The

poem is grand in scope dealing with the single greatest dilemma facing humanity: the problem of reconciling the two fundamentally opposed, existential forces of life and death. Though the resolution of the problem in Death and Liffe is basically orthodox, its Christian doctrine is made vital by the compassion and artistic skill of the poet, which makes the poem meaningful to a modern, as well as to a medieval, audience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David V. Harrington, "The Personifications in Death and Liffe," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 68 (1967), p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, p.36.

<sup>3</sup> William Matthews, "Inherited Impediments in Medieval Literary History," in Medieval Secular Literature, ed. William Matthews (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p.11.

<sup>4</sup> W.W. Skeat, "introduction," Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript, ed. J.W. Hales and F.J. Furnivall (London, 1868), vol iii, p.50.

<sup>5</sup> Edith Scamman, "The Alliterative Poem: Death and Liffe," Studies in English and Comparative Literature, Radcliffe College Monographs, 15 (1910), pp. 105-108.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Hanford and John M. Steadman, ed., Death and Liffe: An Alliterative Poem, Studies in Philology, 15 (1918), p.245.

<sup>7</sup> K. Luick, "Die englische Stabreimzeile im XIV, XV und XVI Jahrhundert," Anglia, xi, pp.608-13.

<sup>8</sup> Mabel Day, "Preface" to Death and Liffe, in Select Early English Poems, ed. Israel Gollancz (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p.x.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa W. Banta, "Dream-Vision and Debate in the Allegorical Mode: A Study of Wynnere and Wastoure, The Parlement of the Thre Ages, and Death and Liffe," Diss. State University of New York at Buffalo 1966), p.98.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Lee Utley, "Dialogues, Debates, Catechisms," in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1972), vol. 3, VII, pp 698 and 707.

<sup>11</sup> Matthews, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Scamman, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> This is contrary to Banta's interpretation of lines 7-9 (" . . . all wasteth away & worthes to nought . . ."), which she says "suggests the wastes of the world" in a manner similar to the Prologue of Wynnere and Wastoure. These worldly things (strength, happiness, knowledge) are not, in fact, "wastes of the world," but its good things, which have, however, been deprived by Death of any enduring meaningfulness. (see Banta, p. 98).

<sup>14</sup> Hanford and Steadman, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>17</sup> The killing of Liffe's "children" (as she calls her followers in line 339), her complaint to God, God's



intervention on her behalf by way of Sir Countenance, and the restoration of her "children" to her, is reminiscent of the classical myth in which Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, is carried off to the Underworld by Hades. Demeter protests the abduction to Zeus, asking him to force Hades to allow Persephone to return. Zeus agrees, sending Hermes to Hades to demand Persephone's return, which Hades does with the same ill-grace and resentment that Dame Death betrays when commanded by God to cease her destruction of Liffe's followers. Sir Countenance is himself a rather classical figure, resembling Hermes in being a prompt and ready messenger, swooping down from heaven with the commission given him by God like Hermes sent forth by Zeus from Olympus. ("Hee was bowne att his bidd & bradd on his way, / that wight as the wind that wappeth in the skye," lines 216-217).

<sup>18</sup> Scamman, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> See Piers Plowman, C-text, Passus XXI, lines 283-286 and 361-368.

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## VITA

Born in Los Angeles, California, November 1, 1952.  
Graduated from Le Lysee de Los Angeles, June, 1969.  
B.A. Virginia Commonwealth University, June 1974. Enrolled  
in M.A. program, Department of English, College of William  
and Mary 1974-1975. Travelled in North Africa and Asia,  
from 1975-1978. Received M.A. College of William and Mary,  
1980.