CHAPTER FOUR

SPIRITUAL, ARTISTIC, AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF DEATH: AUDELAY’S THREE DEAD KINGS AND THE LANCASTRIAN CADAVER TOMB

The previous chapter’s focus on the value of the Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead as a vehicle for commemorative perpetuation establishes a rich context for a discussion of the Middle English poem, the Three Dead Kings, which provides unique English evidence of a poetic narrative of this central iconographic motif. A lively and imaginative exploration of the complex of concepts evoked by the Legend, the Middle English poem emphasizes thematic elements that appear nowhere else in the verbal or visual traditions of the Legend, with a particular emphasis on the importance of cultivating a better prayerful relationship between the living and the dead, mediated through artistic patronage, both literary and visual. The Three Dead Kings also provides a compelling literary analogue to the extant visual versions of the Legend that mediate the death anxiety of aristocratic patrons by converting confrontation with mortality into an aesthetic object that generates fascination and thus visual attention. The artistic object, whether verbal or visual, thus perpetuates an identity in the social sphere beyond the biological deaths of both the artists and the patrons that bring it to fruition.

Three Dead Kings is directly implicated in the perpetuation of the identities of both John Audelay, and his patron, Lord Richard Lestrange, whose chantry at Hauhmond Abbey, Shropshire, Audelay occupied as he compiled his personal manuscript, Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Douce 302, in which Three Dead Kings is found. Recent criticism has emphasized the way in which Audelay’s manuscript serves as a vehicle for him to stage his own penitential drama, culminating in his death.1 Susanna Fein has demonstrated that each of the four major divisions of the manuscript end with death discourse, with the final section serving as the dramatic coda, in which Audelay includes several texts on “last things” before his own Con-

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clusion, a four-stanza penitential departure from his text that directly follows Three Dead Kings in manuscript, with only the Latin monitory poem Cur mundus militat sub vana gloria remaining.\(^2\) The manuscript provides an explicit, and in some ways overdetermined, example of an artist crafting his own ars moriendi by using his manuscript as both an exemplary “good ende” performed for the reader, and a demonstrative claim of his ownership of the manuscript, which Robert Meyer-Lee has likened to the chantry in which he worked.\(^3\) The manuscript commemorates Audelay, and thus contributes to his perpetuation, even as it does so under the sign of penitential humility. Much like Jean, Duke of Berry’s ostentatious humility, Audelay cannily connects his penitential death to an act of auto-commemoration that insures his “survival,” if in name only. Indeed, the manuscript betrays an intense interest in perpetuating his name, which appears 18 times, 16 of them in Middle English devotional poems, and twice in the manuscript’s final two stanzas. Indeed, a certain ambivalence marks Audelay’s manuscript, which, while stressing the humble example he presents of a penitential subject, nonetheless emphasizes Audelay’s confident and even self-aggrandizing style of self-presentation.\(^4\)

Audelay’s gesture of penitential humility is anticipated in the manuscript by the confrontation with mortality in the Middle English Three Dead Kings, the last of the “imaginative” poetic texts in the manuscript and a dazzling display of poetic skill, which in itself ought to attune us to the potential for undiscovered complexity. The poem’s ostentatious form has attracted scholarly attention, but until recently the poem has been discussed principally, and profitably, in terms of its relationship to other alliterative romances.\(^5\) Though the poem is occasionally ascribed to

\(^{2}\) Susanna Fein, “John Audelay and His Book,” Ibid, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), describes the four sections. She refers to this section as “Meditative Close,” and includes it in its entirety in her new edition of Audelay’s writing, Susanna Fein, Poems and Carols: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009); Whiting had omitted the prose passages from Rolle and the Latin poem.

